### Counterplans 101

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Counterplans offer an alternative avenue to solve all or part of the affirmative, usually one that avoids a disadvantage you have read that links to the affirmative plan but not your counterplan.

Let’s use a common real world example: your friend proposes going to McDonald’s because you’re both hungry, but you’ve heard the local McDonald’s is giving people food poisoning, so you counter with going to Chipotle. The Chipotle counterplan solves the hunger advantage, but avoids the food poisoning disadvantage. Game, set, match for the neg right? Maybe, maybe not.

In this series, we’ll discuss counterplan strategy for both the neg and the aff, but we’ll also focus on breaking down some of the debate jargon and theory that can make counterplans seem imposing.

This article is broken into 3 sections:

1) The Status of Counterplans

2) Counterplan Competition & Perms

3) Types of Counterplans

**Counterplans 101: The Status of Counterplans**

“What’s the status of the counterplan” is often one of the first questions you’ll hear in the cross-x of the 1NC. I’ve judged my fair share of debates where a bewildered debater turns to their partner for help after this question is asked. Fear no more, because after this primer you’ll know everything you need to confidently answer that question.

The status of the counterplan refers to whether or not the neg can kick the counterplan and go for the status quo (the world as it is now, without either the plan or the counterplan). Some of you might be thinking: the neg kicks out of disadvantages all the time, what makes counterplans so special? You can read 3 disads in the 1NC, after all, but a smart 2N knows to kick out of 2 and narrow down to just 1 of those disads by the 2NR. Nobody makes a theory argument about kicking disads. What makes counterplans different is they *diverge from the status quo*. All three of those disads are defenses of the status quo, but the counterplan offers a different path forward.

The negative normally defends the status quo, arguing the world is fine now, but the plan will make it much worse. A disadvantage is a typical defense of the status quo: uniqueness says the world is great, the link says the plan makes it worse. But what do you do if the [status is not quo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePiKE83sAIg)? You offer an alternative: a counterplan. But are you stuck with that? Have you abandoned a defense the status quo? That depends on the status of the counterplan. There are three statuses we’re going to talk about: conditional, unconditional, and dispositional.

**What the different statuses are**

A conditional counterplan is one the negative can kick at any time. Did the 2AC have good answers to the counterplan and you’d rather go for your econ DA and the status quo? Kick the CP. Did the aff have an amazing DA to the CP you never saw coming? Kick the CP. Are you just not feeling it? Kick the CP. Is it the 2NC? Kick the CP. The 1NR? Kick the CP. Even the 2NR? Kick the CP. Do you have 3 counterplans and they’re all conditional? Kick 2 in the block, maybe kick the last one in the 2NR. When the counterplan is conditional, the ball is in the neg’s court. The world is your oyster. Maybe you’ll go for the counterplan, maybe you won’t. There ain't [no strings on you](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJ8sAsLqDdA). *Conditional counterplans give the neg flexibility, but open the door to theoretical objections to the counterplan.*

Unconditional counterplans are the opposite. When a counterplan is unconditional it means the neg has given up the right to defend the status quo. The counterplan will be the world they call for, no matter what. Did the aff have a sick DA to the counterplan and you don’t have answers to it? Yikes. You better think quick, because you’re stuck with it. *Unconditional counterplans significantly constrain negative flexibility, but make theory pushes against the counterplan based on its status nonsensical.*

One important note here. There is one escape hatch left if you read an unconditional counterplan and you’re definitely losing it: topicality. Counterplan status is all about which worlds you’ll defend: the status quo, the counterplan, the kritik alt, etc. But you don’t have to go for substance against the aff. There’s a path to a W outside the status quo or an alternative picture of the world. If you beat them on a procedural argument (topicality), what world you’re defending is irrelevant. *You are still “going” for the counterplan, in the sense that you’re not defending the status quo, if you go for topicality*. You’re still bound to that world, not the status quo. But the procedural question of T comes before the substantive question of the plan vs the counterplan, so it doesn’t matter if you lose the CP if you win T.

Dispositional counterplans are pitched as a middle ground. A dispositional, or dispo, counterplan is one in which the neg can kick it at any time *unless the aff straight turns it*. Now hang in there, because this is where 90% of high school debaters get lost. *How do you straight turn a counterplan?* A straight turn is when you only read offense against a position. With counterplans, a straight turn is when you read any argument except a perm or non-status related theory argument (note: the “types of counterplans” section of this series will go more in-depth on other theoretical objections to CPs beyond their status). You might be wondering, but a solvency deficit is defense, right? Nope, a solvency deficit is a bucket of offense. A solvency deficit says the counterplan doesn’t solve the aff, which means the 1AC is just a bundle of disadvantages against the counterplan. Again: a straight turn on a counterplan is any combination of arguments except a perm or non-status related theory. Did you say perm do both? The counterplan isn’t straight turned, they can concede the perm and kick it. Did you say PICs are illegitimate? The counterplan isn’t straight turned, they can concede PICs bad, go for reject the argument not the team (more on this in a different section), and kick the counterplan. One more time: a straight turn on a counterplan is any combination of arguments except a perm or non-status related theory. Come back and re-read this section after you’ve finished this entire series. Counterplan theory can get a little complex at times, and I know this is one of them, but it’s worth it to learn.

Okay, so we (mostly) understand what a straight turned counterplan is now, but, why is dispo a thing? Like I said before, it’s pitched as a middle ground. Unconditional counterplans eliminate nearly all neg flex. Conditional counterplans, some argue, give the negative too much flexibility. Dispositional counterplans put the ball in the aff court: the aff gets the choice to sacrifice some extremely strategic arguments (the perm and theory) but in exchange gets to stick the negative with the counterplan, in effect, *choosing the 2NR they want to debate*. That is a pretty sweet deal for the aff.

**Which one should you choose?**

Okay, so now we know what different types of counterplan statuses there are. But, which one should you choose? When the 1A asks that inevitable question, “what’s the status of the counterplan?” (or the more efficient, “under what conditions can you kick the counterplan?”) what should your answer be?

It depends on the judge. Most national circuit judges have [judge philosophies you can find online](https://www.tabroom.com/index/paradigm.mhtml), but that may not work on the local circuit. Local judges tend to be more conservative when it comes to theory (meaning dispo and unconditional counterplans may be safer), but that is not universally true, and most biases can be beaten back with a firm understanding of theory. So I have two suggestions for you:

1) Have your squad keep a judge book (a google document online so that everyone can see and edit it). If a judge votes you down on conditionality and says they’re not a fan, take a note. But be cautious, there’s a difference between you *losing* on conditionality and your judge saying they’re not a fan of conditional counterplans (and there’s a difference still between a judge saying they’re not a fan but you could have won it and a judge saying there was never a chance). You may often need to take insights from your teammates with a grain of salt, but it’s far better to have something to go on than nothing at all.

2) Learn to passionately defend conditional counterplans.

My answer to the question “what’s the status of the counterplan” is *always* the same: “the status quo is always an option.” This means the counterplan is conditional, *even in the 2NR* (more on this soon). I’m a passionate believer in conditionality, and I’m going to try to convince you to be one too. Let me pause for a second and say that most of the time I’m writing descriptively about arguments in debate, but now I’m going to be addressing counterplan status from a normative lens. I’m dropping the neutral act and admitting I’m going to try to persuade you about something. Not everyone, and certainly not all of your judges, is going to be as gung-ho as conditionality as I am -- that’s important to know. That said, condo is good, and here is why:

Let’s go back to the McDonald’s and Chipotle example from the intro post of this series. Imagine you’re the judge. The aff says, I’m a little hungry, let’s go to McDonald’s. The neg says McDonald’s gives you food poisoning, counterplan: Chipotle. The 2AC reads the E. coli DA against the Chipotle counterplan, and says their romaine lettuce is tainted. The 2NR goes for the food poisoning DA and the Chipotle CP, the 2AR goes for the E. coli DA to the counterplan.



​How is this a hard choice for anyone? Obviously Chipotle (but with sofritas)

Let’s say both the aff and neg are winning the vast majority of their DAs. As the judge (or, a person who is a little hungry), you’re completely convinced if you go to McDonald’s you’ll get food poisoning and if you go to Chipotle you’ll get E. coli. Not a good place to be right? If you vote for the aff, you’re gonna get sick. If you vote for the neg, you’re gonna get sick. I guess food poisoning is the lesser evil, maybe, so you vote aff? *No*! *No reasonable person would make that decision*. If I handed you that choice in real life, you would *choose to do neither*. Neither the plan, nor the counterplan. Logically, you would just stay home, because being a little hungry is wayyyyy better than getting food poisoning. You would *vote for the status quo*.

This is one of the best defenses of conditionality: logic. Conditionality keeps all of the options on the table. If the counterplan isn’t working out (Chiptole has an E. coli outbreak), that doesn’t automatically make the plan better than the status quo. If the negative wins their DA, whether it’s about food poisoning, the economy, or nuclear proliferation, *logically*, you wouldn’t just ignore the status quo as an option because the counterplan is worse than the plan. A logical person would weigh all their options, both the counterplan and the status quo, against the plan.

Affirmative teams like to go for an argument about advocacy skills against conditional counterplans. This goes something along the lines: debate teaches us advocacy skills, and the ability to willy-nilly kick counterplans teaches us poor advocacy skills because we don’t learn to fiercely advocate for our ideas. I think this argument is backwards for two reasons. First, I think it’s a pretty bad version of advocacy skills that teaches you to *dogmatically* back every idea no matter how wrong someone shows you it is. I believe one of the functions of debate is to get us to question deeply-held beliefs in the face of new evidence. The ability to admit you were wrong is a much better skill, and one more deeply needed in society, than the natural inclination to dig in and defend your original position in the face of new evidence that it’s flawed.

Second, I think it teaches the affirmative poor advocacy skills to only learn to defend their argument in the face of one voice of opposition. Think about President Obama and the Affordable Care Act. To get the ACA passed, Obama had to advocate for it in the face of opposition from the right and the left. Conservatives and blue dog democrats (moderate/centrist dems) voiced opposition to an expanded government role in healthcare, while simultaneously Democrats like Dennis Kucinich said the ACA was too weak and they wouldn’t vote for it without at least a public option in the bill. To get the ACA passed, Obama had to defend it from the left and the right simultaneously. He couldn’t bend his idea to make it more persuasive to one group, because that would alienate the other. That’s the type of advocacy skills conditionality teaches: how to advocate for your idea when you’re facing fierce opposition from two deeply divergent camps.

Now think about [the video that came out during Romney’s campaign against Obama](https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/09/secret-video-romney-private-fundraiser/), where Romney was secretly recorded trying to convince a group of millionaire donors that he was on their side. What he said to them when he thought no one else could hear eventually came out and it destroyed his campaign with the working class. That’s the kind of advocacy skills the aff wants when they go for conditionality bad: to be able to face off against one negative argument at a time, bending the aff to most persuasively respond to that strategy and not have to respond to every objection or alternative at once. Instead of that, I believe it’s the negative’s job to represent every constituency opposed to the plan, and the aff’s job to have a consistent defense of their plan that responds to the criticism of all comers.

That’s my brief defense of conditionality. But in addition to this pedagogical defense, you should choose to read counterplans conditionally because that gives you more flexibility. This isn’t Squirtle, Charmander, or Bulbasaur. There aren’t advantages and disadvantages to both. It’s a sliding scale that constrains negative strategy, with conditionality being the best for the neg and an unconditional counterplan the worst for the neg. You want to keep your options open. Think of that scene in every sports movie ever where the coach draws a game plan on a whiteboard with multiple lines leading in different directions. Those lines represent *reactive options*, if your opponent is weak in one area, that’s where you push forward. Constraining your strategy to just one option lets your opponent group all of their defenses in that one place: that’s a losing strategy. Conditional counterplans give you options to test your opponent’s defenses and then punch forward where they are weakest.

Also, Squirtle, obviously. All your friends are going to pick Charmander because they think fire is cooler and then you can dunk on them.

**“Judge Kick”**

I mentioned before that my answer to the question “what’s the status of the counterplan” is “the status quo is always an option.” This isn’t meant to be a dodge, I’m not avoiding the question. To say the status quo is always an option is saying the counterplan is conditional (I can *always* kick it and go for the status quo), but it’s also providing *more* *information*. It’s clarifying that the counterplan is conditional, *even in the 2NR*.

What’s that mean? It means even if I go for the counterplan in the 2NR, I want the judge to evaluate both the counterplan vs the aff’s plan and the status quo vs the aff’s plan. Did the aff win a perm? Well, kick the counterplan and evaluate whether the disad I went for as a net benefit outweighs the aff. Did they win a good DA to the counterplan? Well, kick the CP and evaluate whether the DA I went for as a net benefit outweighs the aff. In other words: “Even if I lose the counterplan, the DA still outweighs the aff.”

It’s become unfortunately common for people to erroneously refer to this as judge kick. I say erroneously, because the judge isn’t kicking the counterplan, I am. From the moment I said “the status quo is *always* an option” I had instructed the judge on how to evaluate the counterplan in the 2NR.

That said, you shouldn’t assume your judge is me. You should (1) tell the judge you can kick the CP in the 2NR when they ask the status, by saying the status quo is *always* an option, and (2) *explicitly* instruct the judge you can still kick the CP *during the 2NR*. The same logic argument to defend conditionality is the defense of “judge kick.” Revisiting the McDonald’s/Chipotle example, you wouldn’t choose to make yourself sick when you could just choose to do nothing. That is why, even if you don’t explicitly tell me to, I will always logically evaluate both the counterplan and the status quo, unless the affirmative gives me a good reason why not to.

In most debates I judge where “judge kick” comes up, the aff is usually objecting to it after the 2NR by making weak or non-arguments, and is usually doing so far too late. However, you should be on your guard: when the aff says “judge kick” bad, you should be ready to cross-apply defenses of conditionality, or, if that debate hasn’t happened, go for your arguments about logic.

Last, don’t say “the 2NR checks” in your condo good blocks. What this argument translates to is “we’ll make a decision about what we’re going for in the 2NR, so the 2AR only has to respond to one world.” Nope. Don’t let up the heat. “The 2NR checks” obviates the ability to go for both worlds in the 2NR, and you don’t want that.

Jumping back for a second, there is one other answer to the status of the counterplan question I like, and that’s: “anybody can kick it but you.” That answer also both communicates that status of the counterplan is conditional *and* that it’s still conditional in the 2NR. While this links to my discourse K about “judge kick,” it’s pretty funny so I’ll allow it.

**Legitimacy Meter**

I’m going to introduce a tool to help explain the perceived legitimacy of different arguments: the emoji scale. The emoji scale is a quick tool to help you get a general idea of what people think about the theoretical legitimacy of different arguments. This scale is *only* about theory, not about the efficacy of an argument. For example, an unconditional counterplan is completely legitimate, but not very useful for the neg. I’m also going to score legitimacy for two audiences: what I perceive to be the average opinion of the national circuit judge pool (“generally”), and myself. The local circuit is too difficult to pin down, that’s why you need your judge book. This scale is a shortcut, not the final word. The final word is your ability to debate and defend the legitimacy of your strategy (with the caveat that you should know your judge, and if they have one, *always* read their philosophy).

Without further ado, the scale:

😎 Totally legit

🙂 I like this, but someone could persuade me to vote against this

😐 This is fine. I'm not in love with is, but I don't hate it

😑 I'm beginning to question the legitimacy of this strategy, but more power to you if you win it

😣 I want to vote against this on theory, I will be angry if the other team doesn't go for theory

😠 26.5

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The scale applied to the arguments discussed in this section:

An unconditional counterplan

Generally: 😎

Me: 😎

Dispo

Generally: 🙂

Me: 😎

1 conditional CP

Generally: 🙂

Me: 😎

2 conditional CPs

Generally: 😐

Me: 😎

3 conditional CPs

Generally: 😑

Me: 😎

4 conditional CPs

Generally: 😣

Me: 😎

Infinite conditional CPs

Generally: 😠

Me: 😎

“Judge kick”

Generally: 😐

Me: 😎

That’s all on the status of counterplans. If you want to get more in depth on this, read [Roger Solt’s “The Disposition of Counterplans and Permutations: The Case for Logical, Limited Conditionality.”](https://gsqmgw2012.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/solt-logical-limited-conditionality.pdf) It’s a bit older, but it’s the original authoritative text on counterplan statuses. Keep reading in the series to learn more about other parts of the counterplan debate.

**Counterplans 101: Counterplan Competition & Perms**

This section is going to provide a brief primer on permutations, perm theory, and perm jargon. Perm strategy will be discussed more in depth with specific examples in the next section, “Types of Counterplans.”

Counterplans need to be competitive; they need to be mutually exclusive. If doing the plan and the counterplan at the same time would obviate the advantage of the counterplan, it’s not a winner. The name of the affirmative argument that challenges the mutually exclusivity of the counterplan is the permutation, or perm. When the affirmative perms a counterplan, they are generally arguing that doing both the plan and the counterplan resolves the net benefit to the counterplan. To win, the neg needs to win that *the counterplan alone* is best. If the plan + the counterplan is as good as the counterplan, that’s not a reason to vote neg.

One way to think of counterplans is as opportunity cost disads to the aff. In other words, the plan forgoes the opportunity to solve the problem in a better way. The perm tests the competition of the counterplan by exploring whether the CP is really an opportunity cost DA. If doing both is as good as the counterplan, then there was no opportunity cost.

Generally, perms are not advocacies. They are tests of competition. This is why *perms don’t need to be topical*. You’re not actually adding something to the plan, you’re exploring whether the counterplan is mutually exclusive – whether it’s an opportunity cost disad to the plan.

It's also worth noting that most counterplans compete through their net benefits. That is, there is a DA that links to the plan, but does not link to the *counterplan alone*. So often the reason why a perm will fail is that by including all of the aff, it still does whatever part of the aff linked to the DA. If the aff and the perm link to the DA, and the counterplan doesn’t, the counterplan alone would seem to be the superior option.

That’s how perms work in the abstract. Next, we’ll break down some perm jargon, and then in the next article we’ll explore applying perms to specific types of counterplans. The usefulness of perms will become far more clear when we talk about them with specific examples.

**Perm Theory**

In this section, I’ll discuss the main theory arguments usually made against permutations. I’ll be bringing back the legitimacy meter to give you a general idea of how most judges feel about these arguments (and how I feel about them). Remember, the legitimacy meter is just about the *theoretical legitimacy* of an argument. You can refer back to the “status of counterplans” article if you need the key for the legitimacy meter.

A legitimate permutation is *all of the plan, and all or part of the counterplan*. If your perm includes all of the plan, and nothing more than the counterplan, it’s legit.

In short: generally: 😎; me: 😎.

A severance perm does *less than the plan*. If your plan ends arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and your perm only ends arms sales to Saudi Arabia, your perm is severance. It does *less* than the plan, so it’s severance. Severance perms are not winners, there are *almost no* circumstances where they are theoretically viable.

In short: generally: 😣; me: 😣.

An intrinsic perm *adds something found in neither the plan nor the counterplan*. If the aff expands commercial nuclear power to solve warming (March PF topic) and the neg counterplans to geo-engineer to solve warming with a prolif DA to nuclear power expansion as a net benefit, an intrinsic perm would do the plan, geo-engineer, and develop new safety protocols to solve proliferation. The new safety protocols are in neither the plan nor the counterplan, so that part of the perm is intrinsic. A more common example is the timeframe perm: do the plan, *then* the counterplan. *The timeframe perm is intrinsic because it adds the element of temporal sequencing*. Intrinsic perms are also not winners. There are *very few* circumstances where they are theoretically viable.

In short: generally: 😣; me: 😣.

Another argument you might occasionally hear is multiple perms bad. Unlike the two perms above, which are aff arguments, this is an arg the neg would make: the aff made multiple perms, that’s bad because it’s a time skew (I guess), you should reject them. This argument is not a winner. *Multiple perms are fine*. They are just a test of competition, not advocacies (see above). There’s also no good time skew argument. Good perms will take time to beat when the counterplan’s competition is questionable, but that’s because you have a suspect counterplan, not because the perm is illegitimate. Silly perms will be easy to beat in milliseconds, so there’s no time tradeoff.

In short: generally: 😣; me: 😣.

**Reject the Argument, Not the Team**

None of the above arguments rise to being a voting issue. I’m going to introduce an extremely important argument: reject the argument, not the team (or RANT for your [flow shorthand](https://wyodebateroundup.weebly.com/blog/flowing-101)). Reminder: a voting issue is a reason a team should lose the round. An argument can be illegitimate, but not a reason the team should lose. It’s just a reason that particular argument should be tossed out. When the defense wins an objection in court of law, the prosecutor doesn’t automatically lose the entire trial. They just can’t make that particular argument anymore. Rejecting a severance perm or intrinsic perm *remedies all of the harms it created*. The perm is bad because the perm itself is unfair, but it doesn’t affect the neg’s ability to debate on any other argument. Rejecting the perm remedies every reason why it was bad.

This implicates how you kick out of arguments when there’s theory args against them. When you have a judge you know is familiar with theory, *you don’t need to waste time justifying an illegit argument when you’re kicking it* (reading your whole multiple perms good block, or a bunch of PICs good args), just go for reject the arg, not the team- that’s 2 seconds or less.

Reject the argument not the team is a great (true) arg against almost every theoretical objection *except topicality and conditionality*, because those two theory arguments implicate other flows. An untopical aff affects your ability to debate the entire aff, you’ll have less prepared links for your DAs and so on. A conditional counterplan (according to the haters), affects your ability to debate every flow. So you can’t just reject those arguments, because the damage has already been done. But for everything else: RANT.

In other words, bad perm = VI: generally: 😣; me: 😣.

Everyone is pretty much on the same page that bad perms are bad, but they’re not voting issues, is what I’m saying here.

**Common Perms**

Perm do both is the most common perm by far. It’s virtually always legitimate, because it is all of the plan plus all of the counterplan. It’s the textbook definition of a legitimate perm.

Perm do the counterplan (or pdcp for your [flow shorthand](https://wyodebateroundup.weebly.com/blog/flowing-101)) is the second most common perm. Most often deployed against process counterplans, perm do the counterplan is the argument that *the counterplan is an example of how the plan could be done*. I’m going to discuss this argument more in depth in the “types of counterplans” section of this article, which will go into more detail on process counterplans and how to beat them. One solid path to victory against process counterplans is perm do the counterplan. For an alternative take on how to beat process counterplans on substance, make sure to read [Tyler Thur’s guest post](https://wyodebateroundup.weebly.com/blog/answering-process-counterplans-without-permutations-and-theory) on [Wyoming Debate Roundup](https://wyodebateroundup.weebly.com/).

The next section, types of counterplans, will discuss perms and CP competition in the context of particular counterplans.

**Counterplans 101: Types of Counterplans**

In this section, we’ll discuss a few common types of counterplans. I’ll be bringing back the legitimacy meter to give you a general idea of how most judges feel about these arguments (and how I feel about them). Remember, the legitimacy meter is just about the *theoretical legitimacy* of an argument. You can refer back to the “status of counterplans” section if you need the key for the legitimacy meter. In addition to the legitimacy of each type of counterplan, we’ll explore how CP competition and perms work with each example, and I’ll discuss a general picture of what aff strategy should look like against each counterplan. A general strategy will only get you so far, having a specific 2AC strategy against each counterplan is critical, but the general discussion will help you start thinking through counterplan strategy.

**PICs**

A PIC is a plan-inclusive counterplan. It does part, but not all, of the plan. Let’s use the arms sales topic as an example. If your aff ends arms sales to both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the negative can PIC out of the UAE and read a counterplan that only ends arms sales to Saudi Arabia. They can couple this with a DA to ending arms sales to the UAE, which makes the counterplan preferable to the PIC.

Plan: The United States federal government should substantially reduce Foreign Military Sales and Direct Commercial Sales of arms to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Counterplan: The United States federal government should substantially reduce Foreign Military Sales and Direct Commercial Sales of arms to Saudi Arabia.

Is this counterplan competitive? Let’s check.

Perm do both would end arms sales to Saudi Arabia (all the counterplan) and end arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE (all the plan). This perm would *link to the net benefit*, because it would still end arms sales to the UAE, and the neg has a DA that says arms sales to the UAE are good. This perm loses in 1.5 seconds to the single sentence “perm do both still ends arms sales to the UAE, links to our UAE DA.”

Perm do the counterplan severs ending arms sales to the UAE, which loses in 1.5 seconds to the single sentence “perm do the counterplan severs ending arms sales to the UAE- severance is illegit because it makes the aff a moving target.”

Check: this PIC (like most PICs) is competitive.

Now, a separate question: is this counterplan legit? Let’s turn to the legitimacy meter. PICs:

Generally: 😎; Me: 😎.

Yep, PICs are pretty legitimate. You might think, “how can it be fair that they steal part of the aff?” Well, here’s the thing: you put that part of the aff in the plan text. Your plan is only 25 words (in this example, often it’s even less). You should be able to defend *every part* of your plan, and you should choose every part of the plan carefully. If something is in the plan, it’s *ridiculously predictable* that the negative will PIC out of it. The plan text is so small, it limits the negative’s PIC options severely. Thus, you should be ready for the few that apply.

The real game against PICs is solvency deficits. If you put the UAE in your plan, you better have a darn good reason. You need an argument why ending arms sales to the UAE is key to solve your advantages. All things equal, *you should be going for solvency deficits against PICs*, and *you should be putting a lot of thought into what you put in your plan*. Don’t put a single thing in there you can’t defend.

**Agent Counterplans**

An agent CP is a particular subset of PICs, I suppose: *it does almost all of the aff, except it changes the agent*. Common agent counterplans make the agent of the counterplan the Executive (perhaps through an Executive Order), the Federal Courts or the Supreme Court, Congress, or a particular agency of the federal government.

Are agent counterplans legit? You betcha: Generally: 😎, Me: 😎. See the PICs theory discussion above.

But are they competitive? That depends, on two things:

1) Did you specify the agent in the plan? If the plan text says “The Congress of the United States should” than a counterplan to have the Federal Courts or Executive do the plan is almost certainly competitive, on-face. Let’s think about the example of a Courts counterplan vs an Executive aff, with the politics DA as a net benefit. The neg says having the executive do the plan spurs controversy which collapses the President’s congressional agenda.

Perm do both would have the Courts and the Executive act, which means the President would still be taking a controversial action. Perm do both likely links to the net benefit.

Perm do the counterplan would have only the Courts act, which would sever the Executive part of the plan. Basically an auto-loss (of this arg) on theory.

2) But what if you didn’t specify the agent in the plan? Well now perm do the counterplan is a viable argument. If the plan text says “the United States federal government should” and the counterplan says “the Supreme Court of the United States should”, than *the counterplan is just an example of the plan*. The Supreme Court is *part of* the federal government, so this counterplan just specifies a particular example of the implementation of the plan. Perm do the counterplan (pdcp) says that’s not competitive.

However. *There may be other words in the plan the negative can garner competition based off of.* For example, there’s pretty good evidence that the Courts cannot establish law. So if the word establish is in the resolution, and in particular if it’s in your plan, the neg may make arguments that perm do the counterplan severs the word “establish” in the plan. That’s just one example of how the negative might use other words in the plan (not just the agent) to create competition for an agent counterplan.

So what’s the right aff strategy against agent counterplans? It depends a little. If you specified your agent, then we’re basically in a PIC debate. *You put something in your plan, you should be prepared to defend it, you almost certainly need to go for a solvency deficit*. If the agent wasn’t in your plan, you’re much more likely to be going for perm do the counterplan. *The more the counterplan is like the plan, the more likely you are to be going for a perm or theory. The more the counterplan is actually different than the plan, the more likely you need to go for a solvency deficit*.

However, in an agent counterplan debate, you can actually get some juice out of perm do both, depending on the net benefit. Let’s return to our Executive vs Courts example above, with a politics DA as a net benefit. The aff can go for the argument that the perm shields the link. In other words, if both the Courts and the President take the same action, the President can explain that their hand was forced by the Courts: they had to do the plan, because the Courts ruled it was constitutionally required. Therefore, they can’t be blamed for it. So, if you do just the plan, yes it drains the President’s political capital. And it is true that the counterplan alone does not hurt the President’s political standing- the Courts would get the blame. However, if both act together (perm do both) than the President can blame the Courts and preserve their political capital: *the perm shields the link*.

Therefore, the best approach against agent counterplans varies based off the locus of competition (the agent of the plan, other words in the plan), but includes a mix of solvency deficits and perm arguments.

**The States CP**

The states CP is a particularly common agent counterplan, especially on domestic topics. Your basic run of the mill states counterplan fiats that all 50 states (uniformly) enact the plan.

I loathe the states counterplan. As much as I love conditionality, I detest the states counterplan. Don’t get me wrong, I’ll still coach my debaters to read it. And the reason is that not everyone agrees with me. Is the states counterplan legit? It depends on who you ask.

Generally: 🙂/ 😐

Me: 😠

Here’s my brief beef with the states counterplan:

1. It’s utopian. The 50 states virtually never act entirely in unison to address a controversial problem. It’s also illogical, because there’s no actor positioned to choose between the states and the federal government (so the counterplan isn’t a true opportunity cost disad). See more on this argument in the section on international actor counterplans.

2. It distorts the literature to game solvency deficits. The federalism literature that advocates of the states counterplan point to in order to prove state vs federal government action is a legitimate controversy assumes *different implementation* by different states. This is the labs of democracy argument for federalism good- California and Texas are going to approach the same problem in two very different ways. But by fiating uniform implementation, the counterplan voids these differences to create a solution virtually identical to the plan.

3. It shapes topics and affs in anti-educational ways. If we have to beat the states counterplan, we tend to avoid domestic topics, and when we do pick them, most affs that get read are read because they have some unique angle against the states counterplan. They disproportionately involve the military because of the federal key warrants for those affs. Those aren’t intrinsically bad affs, but it means we’re ignoring a whole bunch of other important topics.

That said, not everyone agrees with me, so it’s extremely unwise to go all-in on theory against the states counterplan (even in front of me these arguments obviously aren't auto-wins, you have to beat your opponent on them). You should have a diverse 2AC with solvency deficits (federal key warrants), theory, perms, even disads to state action.

Is the states counterplan competitive? This basically breaks down the same as other agent counterplans above. PDCP definitely severs the “federal” government in the plan, PDB links to the net benefit because it still involves federal action. However, there’s still potentially good perm shields the link arguments against certain net benefits. If the net benefit to states is the politics DA, ask yourself why the President would look bad doing an action if *all 50 states* had endorsed it.

There are variations of the states counterplan that are more theoretically legitimate, but those are far less common. Sometimes, people will attempt to write a counterplan that better reflects the literature, so they’ll fiat all the states do the plan but allow implementation to vary. This version of the states counterplan is less common because it’s far more susceptible to solvency deficits.

**Advantage Counterplans**

So far we’ve focused on counterplans that do part or almost all of the aff. Advantage counterplans generally do none of the aff, but try to solve the aff advantage(s) through a completely different take.

We’ve already talked about one advantage counterplan in the perm article in this series. Let’s go back to that example. The aff expands commercial nuclear power (March PF resolution) to solve warming. The neg counterplans to geo-engineer our way to a warming solution, perhaps seeding the oceans with iron or injecting sulfate aerosols into the upper stratosphere to increase the Earth’s albedo (reflection of sunlight) and cool the planet. Alternatively, the neg could take a different approach like implementing a carbon tax or a cap-and-trade system to solve climate change. There are a lot of different ways to solve almost any problem. The aff needs to not just say that nuclear power solves warming, but to beat the advantage counterplan, they need to win that nuclear power is the best or only way to solve warming.

Are advantage counterplans legitimate? As long as they use the same actor as the resolution/aff, definitely. There’s no counterplan more legit than the counterplan that tries to solve the same problem but a different way. Jumping back to the intro post, this is your classic Chipotle CP vs the McDonald’s aff. Generally: 😎, Me: 😎.

Are they competitive? Pretty much, yeah. Perm do the counterplan makes no sense because the counterplan has nothing to do with the aff. Perm do both (pbd) almost certainly links to the net benefit. When it comes to advantage counterplans, because they do essentially none of the aff, almost every DA the neg reads will be a net benefit. Think about the nuclear power example: if the neg counterplans to do geoengineering, they don’t expand nuclear power, so every nuclear power bad disad is a net benefit to the counterplan (accidents, waste, natural gas tradeoff, renewables tradeoff, etc). Perm do both would link to all of those disads, so it would be a loser.

So what’s the aff to do? Have a defense of your mechanism! You need to win that your mechanism is the only or best way to solve the problem you’ve identified (that’s your generic solvency deficit). You should also preemptively research alternative strategies and cut evidence that those strategies will fail (those are your specific solvency deficits). Carbon tax, cap-and-trade, geo-engineering -- those are all predictable alternative strategies to solve climate change, but there’s also a ton of literature that says they’re bad ideas and that they will fail.

One variation on advantage counterplans is multi-plank advantage counterplans. Sometimes teams will combine multiple ideas to solve one advantage or aff impact, having the USFG take 3 different actions just to solve climate change. Other times teams will combine advantage counterplans. Let’s say the aff has a warming impact and a hegemony good impact: the neg could read a counterplan with two planks (that does two separate things), one to solve warming and one to solve heg. The more impacts the aff has or the more ideas the neg has to solve them the quicker these planks can add up. Three, four, five, even ten plank counterplans are not uncommon.

Are multi-plank counterplans legitimate? Yeah people are pretty much on board with multi-plank counterplans. There’re just detailed and often creative alternative ways to problem solve. I’m on board with boosting our problem-solving skills.

Generally: 🙂

Me: 😎

The only wrinkle that gets introduced is when people say they can kick the planks independently. If you have a 10 plank conditional counterplan and you can kick the planks independently, you have 10 factorial conditional counterplans. That can irk some judges.

Before we move on I want to introduce two important arguments: one theory and one substantive.

The first is solvency advocate theory. This is the argument that if the negative cannot produce a piece of evidence from someone advocating for the counterplan, than the counterplan is unpredictable and illegitimate. I’m rarely persuaded by this argument. I would like to see debaters make the following arguments to respond to solvency advocate theory: first, it punishes creativity. It forces us to think inside the box of ideas that have already been established, instead of creatively problem-solving by generating new ideas and combining pre-existing ideas in ingenious and effective ways. Second, it doesn’t disadvantage the aff. If a high school (or even college) debater can come up with an idea that beats your aff, it means your aff was bad.

The second is the argument that the counterplan links to the net benefit. The essential reason to vote neg for a counterplan is that it solves all or most of the aff and avoids a bad thing the aff does. The argument that the counterplan links to the net benefit is the argument that the counterplan also does the bad thing the aff does. Think about our climate change advantage counterplans: specifically, the carbon tax. A carbon tax works by placing a fee on the burning of fossil fuels, incentivizing a shift to alternative fuels. But what if the fuel that’s incentivized by that fee is nuclear? Then a carbon tax also solves because it bolsters nuclear power, so it would link to every nuclear power bad DA the neg read (of course, the neg could creatively solve this problem by adding a plank banning nuclear power).

Now think about multi-plank counterplans and the politics disad. If the neg says the net benefit to an advantage counterplan is the politics DA, they’re probably wrong. If they say it’s a net benefit to an advantage counterplan with 7 planks, they’re certainly wrong. The link to the politics DA is that the plan is controversial. Here’s the thing though: almost everything is controversial. Carbon tax? Ridiculously controversial. Cap-and-trade? Same. Geoengineering? Sounds like the plot of a villain in a summer blockbuster. If you’ve got 7 planks in your counterplan, at least one of them is almost certainly at least as controversial as the plan, and then your advantage counterplan *links to your net benefit* (if your net benefit is politics).

**Process CPs**

Process counterplans generally do virtually all of the affirmative, but differ because they are not certain or immediate.

Counterplans in the umbrella of process counterplans include but are not limited to the consult counterplan, recommend counterplan, condition counterplan, and delay counterplan.

The consult counterplan does the aff, but only if someone else agrees it’s a good idea. On the college ‘cooperate with adversaries in space’ topic, a lot of people read a Consult Japan counterplan against space cooperation with China. The counterplan did the aff (coop with China) but only if Japan was okay with it. The net benefit was a Japan relations / proliferation DA. If we do the aff without consulting, Japan freaks out and militarizes. If we consult them, they’re less likely to do so. The consult counterplan can catch you in a nasty doublebind, because if you make a solvency deficit (Japan says no), you’re basically proving the link to the DA (Japan hates the plan).

The recommend counterplan fiats that some (likely politically powerful) group recommends the plan. On military topics, people often fiat the Joint Chiefs or Quadrennial Defense Review recommends the plan. They don’t *fiat* that the plan is implemented, instead they make solvency arguments that the recommendation by X group will lead to the adoption of the plan.

The condition counterplan is a lot like the consult counterplan: it does the aff, but only if someone else agrees to do something in exchange. [Quid pro quo, Clarice](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ynpm1a5lgBU).

The delay counterplan is as simple as it sounds. For example, a delay counterplan could do the plan after the 2020 election and claim the elections DA as a net benefit (Trump is losing now, plan causes him to win, Trump is bad, doing the plan after the election solves and avoids handing Trump a win).

Process counterplans will often have internal net benefits. These are impacts that are *advantages to the counterplan*, as opposed to *disadvantages to the aff*. Make sure you comprehensively answer the net benefits to these counterplans, not just the counterplan itself.

What these and other counterplans that change the process of the plan have in common is they compete on timeframe and certainty*.* That is, their answer to the perm (specifically, perm do the counterplan) will be that the aff has to be immediate and absolute, and the counterplan is neither of those things, so it’s different than the aff.

Remember, perm do the counterplan is the argument that *the counterplan is an example of how the plan could be done*. So in this case, the aff will be arguing that consult, delay, etc, are all just different examples of *how* someone could implement the aff.

Perm do the counterplan debates against process counterplans generally have two parts: *definitions* and *impacts* (just like a T debate). The neg will read definitions of the words in the resolution or the plan and argue that words like “resolved” and “should” mean the aff has to be immediate and certain, and the aff will need to respond with different definitions of those words. I often call this the *definitional arms race*- if the neg defines a word and the aff doesn’t, it’s a gotcha/game-over moment. Like a topicality debate, definitions aren’t enough though. You need impacts that explain why your definitions are better. In this way, the PDCP debate spills into a theory debate about process counterplans.

So are process counterplans legit? This depends *a lot* on the judge. Some judges think yes, some think no, others have a sliding scale. What I mean by that is that several judges are more persuaded a process counterplan is legitimate if the neg can show there is evidence that the process counterplan is germane to the aff. In other words, there’s literature about the aff in the context of the counterplan. This will often look like the negative making a counter-interpretation on theory: that process counterplans *with a solvency advocate* are legit, while others are not.

So, to the legitimacy meter!

Process counterplans without ev about the aff: generally: 😐; me: 😑/ 😣

Process counterplans with a solvency advocate: generally: 🙂; me: 😐/ 😑

So what’s the right aff strategy against process counterplans? Again, it’s a mix of solvency deficits, perms, and theory. For a thorough explanation of how to beat process counterplans on substance, make sure to read [Tyler Thur’s guest post](https://wyodebateroundup.weebly.com/blog/answering-process-counterplans-without-permutations-and-theory) on [Wyoming Debate Roundup](https://wyodebateroundup.weebly.com/).

**International Actor CPs**

International actor counterplans fiat a country other than the United States. Pretty simple, on face.

These counterplans are usually pretty competitive. Perm do both will usually link to the net benefit, because any disad to US action will be a net benefit to the counterplan. PDCP would sever the “United States” from the plan.

If you’re reading an international actor counterplan, you’ll need a high-tech theory block. Many judges are persuaded by the argument that international actor counterplans are illogical because no two actor can pick between the two. There’s no higher geopolitical power thinking, “hmmm, maybe I shouldn’t have the United States do this, because then I couldn’t have China do it to avoid this bad repercussion from US action.” Thus, the counterplan isn’t a true opportunity cost to the plan. On the democracy assistance topic, I coached teams to read an EU counterplan, and one argument we would make to trip teams up on the theory debate is we would read cosmopolitanism good / borders bad evidence to create a kritik of their theory interpretation. Is that a round winning argument by itself? Definitely not. But it did cause quite a few teams to stumble on the theory debate and divert them to a substantive strategy.

TL;DR: Generally: 😐, Me: 😑

How do you beat international actor counterplans? I hope you’re beginning to see the pattern! Your 2AC should have a healthy, diverse mix of solvency deficits, perms, and theory arguments.

Why perms, if I’ve already said they won’t get you super far against international actor counterplans? You always perm the counterplan: always perm do both, anyway. If you don’t perm the counterplan, the 2NC could read advantages to China (or the EU, etc) doing the plan. They could say Chinese action on the counterplan boosts Chinese soft power, and that solves important things. The best answer to this add-on to the counterplan is the perm, but if you haven’t read one, you’ll lose to new add-ons.

**Uniqueness CPs**

Uniqueness counterplans do one of two things:

1) Fix a (predictive) uniqueness problem on a DA, or,

2) Create uniqueness for a DA.

Let’s talk about both examples in the context of a politics DA.

You read your politics DA: Trump will get X passed now, the plan pushes X off the agenda, X is good.

The 2AC reads a thumper (predictive link non-unique) that says Trump is about to do Y, and that will destroy his agenda- triggers the DA in the status quo.

You can read a counterplan to have Trump not do Y. Then the DA is not triggered in the status quo.

That’s an example of a uniqueness counterplan to fix a predictive uniqueness problem for a DA. It has to be a *predictive*, or future, problem, because if the problem is something that already happened, the damage is already done. Fiat is cool, but time travel is not allowed.

The second example of a uniqueness counterplan is one that creates uniqueness for a DA. Let me give an example of a DA that I cut for my squad: a politics DA about gun control. I cut phenomenal evidence that Trump’s PC with his base would enable him to get gun control passed. That because of his conservative credentials, *if Trump wanted to*, he could easily use his bully pulpit to get something like universal background checks through Congress. The evidence called it a “Nixon in China moment,” referencing how Nixon was able to open relations with the PRC because of his hard-on-China conservative credentials. If that finite PC with the base was spent elsewhere, if Trump blew his conservative credentials by pushing the plan, then he wouldn’t have any left for gun control.

Great DA, right? The only problem is Trump was never seriously pushing gun control. Problem, meet fiat. The counterplan to *have Trump push universal background checks* created a DA: Trump is pushing background checks (as per the CP), plan spends PC with the base that’s key to get it passed, background checks good. Now, we had to win the counterplan was fiating the Executive branch, and not Trump as a private actor (see below), but otherwise, this is a typical uniqueness counterplan.

Are they legit?

Generally: 🙂

Me: 😎

Are they competitive? Well, with the second example, that depends on the strength of the link. Think about perm do both vs the gun control counterplan. The perm does the aff but also puts gun control on the agenda. But the link to the DA says that Trump pushing gun control is necessary, but not sufficient: he also needs his conservative credentials intact. If the link to the DA is right, the plan burns those conservative credentials. So the perm does not shield the link, in this case. But it’s definitely an angle worth trying!

With the first example, the perm is irrelevant, because the counterplan is just fixing a uniqueness issue. You’d have better luck pushing the counterplan links to the net benefit. Maybe it’s true that Trump doing Y would be controversial, but I bet it would be also be controversial if he changed his mind and didn’t do Y, not the least because it would be a flip-flop. It might anger different people, but it could still produce a controversy.

How do you beat a uniqueness counterplan? Well, first remember: uniqueness counterplans aren’t trying to solve the aff. They’re usually bolstering a DA. You should explore to see if you can get a W on perm shields the link or the counterplan links to the net benefit, but mostly you should just beat the DA.

**2NC CPs**

2NC counterplans are just that: counterplans read in the 2NC. Uniqueness counterplans are often read in the 2NC, because they’re responding to a new 2AC argument against the disad. 2NC counterplans are also often read to deal with add-ons (new affirmative advantages). Maybe you read a multi-plank advantage counterplan, and you’re going to add a new plank to solve the add-on.

How legit a 2NC counterplan is often depends on it’s function.

2NC UQ CP: generally: 🙂; me: 😎

A new PIC, agent, or process CP in the 2NC: generally: 😠; me 😠

Advantage CP to solve an add-on: generally: 🙂; me: 😎

There are two specific functions worth isolating and talking about.

The first is *adding a new plank to an existing CP to fix / fiat past a solvency deficit*. I don’t think this counterplan is bad because it’s in the 2NC, but I bet that it makes the original counterplan a lot more theoretically suspect.

The second is *counterplanning out of a straight turn*. Remember the USMCA politics DA? Let’s say the neg read a USCMCA good DA: it will pass now, the plan de-rails it, USCMA solves energy security. Then the aff straight impact-turns and says USMCA is bad for 6 different reasons. The 2NC doesn’t want to deal with the impact turn debate, so they *counterplan to not pass USMCA.* The counterplan obviates the impact turns, because it fiats in a non-unique for neg to kick the DA on. Like with the previous counterplan, my problem isn’t that this counterplan is in the 2NC (though reading the “escape hatch” counterplan pre-emptively in the 1NC can increase its legitimacy in the eyes of some judges, by making it more predictable). My problem is that it obviates straight-turns. If this counterplan is legit, the aff can never straight turn, and I rather enjoy the strategic dynamic of straight turns.

Escape hatch counterplan: generally: 😑; me 😣

**Object Fiat CPs**

Object fiat is when you fiat the object of the resolution (object in the grammatical sense, ie, not the subject). So if the resolution were: Resolved: The United States should offer security guarantee to Iran, counterplans that fiated that Iran (like Counterplan: Iran should end its nuclear weapons program) are object fiat.

Object fiat is super cheating: generally: 😠; me 😠

The one thing I want to say here is that object fiat is about the resolution, not your advantage. If someone is fiatting something to solve the object of your advantage, it’s probable they just have a legit advantage counterplan.

**Word PICs**

Word PICs, or discourse PICs, PIC out of a word or phrase in the plan, but because the word itself is rhetorically problematic or violent, not because it changes the substance of the aff. The neg will usually substitute a word that is supposed to mean the exact same thing. A few years ago when Afghanistan was in the resolution, people would counterplan to label Afghanistan “Khorasan”, with a critique that Afghanistan was a name imposed by colonizers. You can often generate solvency deficits to even the small differences. For example, Khorasan might have once described an area similar to Afghanistan, but not exactly the area currently known as Afghanistan, and that label certainly isn’t recognized by the Afghani government, which might disrupt negotiations. Even small solvency deficits are usually enough to beat word PICs, because *the PIC doesn’t solve the net benefit*. Okay, so the USFG doesn’t call Khorasan “Afghanistan” one time, in the plan text, but that plan is a drop in the bucket of the millions of times US officials will say Afghanistan, before, during, and after negotiating the plan. The PIC doesn’t fiat we never call Khorasan Afghanistan, it just does it one less time (if it did fiat that, it would lose to a clever perm). So I think you can beat word PICs on substance, but theory is also an okay option. Very few judges actively like word PICs.

Generally: 😣

Me: 😑

**Private Actor Fiat**

Private actor fiat involves non-government entities. Like a company, or a person. It’s a no go.

Generally: 😣

Me: 😣

**Concluding Thoughts**

There’s a couple of things I haven’t covered yet. It seems to be more common on local circuits to argue counterplans have to be topical. I addressed why this argument isn’t true of perms in the perm section, but it’s also not true of counterplans. Counterplans can be topical, or not. The neg isn’t constrained by the resolution, their goal is to offer a better policy than the aff. Whether or not the counterplan is topical is immaterial to whether the counterplan is better than the aff.

I also skipped over that some folks will argue no neg fiat- that the neg just doesn’t get counterplans (“there’s no neg resolution”). This argument rarely gets any traction unless it’s dropped (and usually not unless it’s dropped twice).

But, that’s 10,000+ words on counterplans, and I’m gonna call it a day.