Managed Convictions: Debate and the Limits of Electoral Politics

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Managed Convictions: Debate and the Limits of Electoral Politics

Darrin Hicks & Ronald Walter Greene

In response to Kathleen Hall Jamieson’s proposed agenda for future Presidential debate research, we recall the troubled relation between debate and conviction, which has fueled disciplinary and public controversy throughout the last century. Following a brief genealogy of three such controversies, we describe four models of debate as a cultural technology for managing the economy of moral conviction: debate as critical deliberation, debate as civic virtue, debate as social justice, and debate as game. We claim that reading Jamieson’s proposal in light of these technologies reveals a potentially disturbing fault line: if we fail to distance the aims and methods of Presidential debate research from the game-like status of contemporary electoral politics, her research proposal will be subsumed by the professionalized communication apparatus of managed democracy.

Keywords: Conviction; Affect; Citizenship; Cultural Technology; Managed Democracy

Kathleen Hall Jamieson’s essay reminds us that debate is one of the discipline’s foundational commitments, threading together its pedagogy, theory, and criticism. In her essay, Jamieson traces the unbroken scholarly tradition that connects past concerns about intercollegiate tournament debating with present concerns about Presidential debates, isolating three key domains for new research. The first two domains concern the audience: What do audiences learn when they engage with Presidential debates? And what factors mediate their responses? The third domain encourages us to better assess how candidates’ rhetorical performances forecast...
governmental policy and style. We can only second Jamieson’s call for future research.

Our own research focuses on moments when debate becomes a site of public controversy. We contend that debate is a cultural technology, i.e., a mechanism by which, potentially, to improve self and society. Because debate is always sutured within shifting imperatives of governance, assessing the significance of debate as a cultural technology requires a careful conjunctural analysis of those moments when debate becomes a public problem.

The pedagogical histories of intercollegiate debate constitute a particularly privileged site for such a conjunctural analysis because of the peculiar insights they offer into how liberal democracy imagines the proper disposition of a citizen-subject. We are concerned that Jamieson’s essay assumes too quickly that these controversies were resolved in the first issue of this journal. In this essay, we therefore revisit three moments when the practices of intercollegiate debate became an object of concern for the broader public, and then re-map Jamieson’s discussion of Presidential debates in light of four ways to construe the “technology” of debate: debate as a method of democratic decision-making; as a way to inculcate civic virtues; as a way to promote social justice; and as a game. Our purpose is to answer the following question: have the electoral politics embodied by Presidential debates become so captive to corporate interests that it is now difficult even to imagine an alternative, more democratic future?

The Debates About Debate

The value of intercollegiate debate has itself been debated for over a century now. Three episodes stand out. In the 1910s and 1920s, scholars questioned whether intercollegiate debate ought to be construed as a method of democratic decision-making or a strategic game. The 1950s and 1960s saw controversy ignite over the ethics of switch-side debating. And more recently, we have seen debaters transform debate itself into a site of activism, showing how debate’s norms elide the voices of minoritarian subjects.

What makes these three events remarkable is that each extended far beyond the coterie of debaters and their coaches and into the popular press, where they generated public controversies over the relationship between the university and the state, and over the politics of conviction. What responsibility does the university in general and the field of Communication Studies in particular have for inculcating democratic dispositions? Is debate an opportunity to argue truth to power, a method for testing the rationality of competing responses to public problems, or a theatre of conviction wherein advocates perform their beliefs in the hope of attracting adherents?

Debate: Instrument of Progressive Reform or Intellectual Sport?

In his autobiography, former President Theodore Roosevelt issued a stunning denouncement of intercollegiate debate. Intercollegiate debate, he argued, had
devolved into a mere game that encouraged students to speak without regard to what their “convictions are or to what they ought to be,” teaching them instead how to make “good arguments for either right or wrong as their interests bids them.” These students, he proclaimed, lacked the “ardent convictions on the side of the right” needed to combat injustice because they were being groomed to occupy the boardrooms, courthouses, and assemblies that promoted and protected it.

Two years later, *The New Republic* published an editorial echoing Roosevelt’s sentiments. The editorial lamented the fact that debate teams were taught to argue with equal vigor either side of the question. “Thus was proved the value of intercollegiate debating, which enables the student to espouse all sides of every question with equal conviction.” Intercollegiate debate, the editorial concluded, mimicked and, indeed, reproduced a dysfunctional two-party political system, “which makes it incumbent on our legislators not to consider the facts and accomplish the desired result, but justify a platform before an electorate of loyal partisans.”

These condemnations rocked the young discipline of speech. In the closing pages of the first issue of this very journal, newly elected editor James Milton O’Neill responded to Roosevelt’s and the *New Republic’s* “thoughtless remarks,” remarks that, he claimed, rested on two “popular misconceptions in regard to intercollegiate debating.” The first was the assumption that intercollegiate debates ought to be judged on the merits of the propositions made. “The trouble with the other basis for decision,” O’Neill argued, “is that before the judges can determine which side is right—which side gets nearer to the truth—they must necessarily determine what is right—what the truth is. Of course, the truth to any judge is the side of the question that he [or she] happens to believe in.” To expect debaters to identify and then confirm the judge’s convictions renders debate meaningless, O’Neill contended.

The second misconception flows directly from the first: judges and spectators should not assume that the arguments made in the round reflect the debater’s personal convictions. Debaters advance positions they believe will win; they marshal the best available evidence to support those positions and to undercut their opposition. In short, intercollegiate debate is an “intellectual sport.” Like any sport, the level of skill shown best measures its value. At the heart of this controversy, O’Neill suggested, were competing notions of the proper mission of debate, and by extension the university. For Roosevelt and other progressives, the university’s role was to inculcate a commitment to, and the abilities required for, advancing social justice. For O’Neill, however, the university should remain politically impartial, directed towards means and not ends. Its responsibility was to equip students with the knowledge, skill, and fortitude needed to make their own mark.

The majority of the discipline’s scholars embraced O’Neill’s defense of debate. However, there was a small but steady stream of dissent, the most searching of which remains Douglas Ehninger’s. Ehninger believed that, as the gaming model took hold, debate would become more technical, more insular, and less committed to public reason. “Debating played as a game, even when it serves the highest standards of personal and social responsibility,” Ehninger submitted.
makes little to no direct contribution to the solving of mankind’s present and future problems. At a time when as perhaps never before all free men [and women] must stand together for their very survival, debating played as a game deliberately turns its back on our collective responsibilities.11

Ehninger did not argue that debate be yoked to a specific conception of the good, no matter how noble; yet he would not tolerate the instrumentalist’s severing of means from ends. Debate, for Ehninger, was a means of critical deliberation in service to the development and deployment of a critical imagination. Debating played as a game, he contended, blunted the edges of imagination, “holding it in a suspended puerility.”12 Gamesmanship would demand a steady diet of provocative proposals and force them through a narrow channel of apocalyptic reasoning, rendering them unusable for addressing public problems. The conduit between the debate chamber and elite positions in government, law, and business would produce a generation who simply assumed that politics is a game. Ehninger’s point is certainly not lost on Jamieson, who, with Joseph Cappella, contends that framing politics as a game produces a “spiral of cynicism” within the electorate.13

Debate and the Moral Economy of Conviction

The 1920s and 1930s saw a rapid expansion of intercollegiate debate programs. To accommodate this growth, universities began hosting open tournaments, requiring debaters to advocate both sides of the question, without regard for personal conviction. This practice was known as switch-side debate. It was taken up with little controversy until the announcement of the 1954 debate topic: the United States should diplomatically recognize the People’s Republic of China. The prospect of college students publicly defending “Red China” prompted Senator Eugene McCarthy to denounce intercollegiate debate as an instrument of communist propaganda. The commanding officers of both West Point and the U.S. Naval Academy thus suspended their debate programs, for fear that a cadet in military uniform taking a pro-recognition stand would confuse allies and provide fodder for propagandists in Moscow and Beijing.14 The Nebraska State Assembly passed emergency legislation barring colleges from fielding debate teams, followed by municipal bans in smaller cities like Roanoke, Virginia.15 As the controversy reached a fever pitch, the National Speech Association, led by Karl Wallace, defended both the choice of the topic and the practice of switch-side debating. Edward R. Murrow endorsed the Association’s report on his television program See it Now.16 In the New York Times Magazine, James McGregor Burns argued that the willingness of students to speak contrary to their personal convictions signified their commitment to free expression.17 Even President Eisenhower addressed the issue, saying “debaters should be allowed to argue any question troubling the world, including U.S. recognition of Communist China.”18 By the next fall, the controversy had dissipated, with all universities returning to debate the 1955 topic.

In 1957, Richard Murphy reignited the controversy when he published a scathing critique of switch-side debate. Murphy contended that the practice directly
contradicted a foundational principle of rhetorical ethics: “a public utterance is a public commitment.” Murphy’s criticism drew the ire of rhetorical theorists and debate coaches. The majority repeated O’Neill’s defense: debate is a pedagogical game, not a simulation of public address; so while Murphy’s maxim is wholly appropriate for the legislature or campaign trail, it is inapplicable to the intercollegiate debate tournament. A. Craig Baird argued that Murphy had confused rhetorical and dialectical obligations. Debate is a species of dialectical argument, a mode of inquiry more than advocacy. The verbal commitments made in dialectical encounters are taken as conditional until they survive rigorous interrogation, much like scientific hypotheses. Restricting the scope of that interrogation to reasons comporting with the interlocutors’ personal beliefs undermines the integrity of the dialectical process. Sound conviction was the result of debate, not its prerequisite. Over the course of a season, debaters would examine the question from all sides; then, and only then, should they form personal convictions. Murphy replied that the questions students debated were not typical of dialectical encounters; they were civic questions, which have always been the domain of rhetoric. Debaters should form their convictions in the practice room, an open intellectual laboratory for exploring all positions. When ascending the platform, however, they should say what they believe and be prepared to stand by it until proven wrong. Murphy’s ethical maxim would remain essentially unchallenged until Dennis Day’s 1966 essay “The Ethics of Democratic Debate.” Day argued that the real threat to democratic life was the surfeit of conviction, the rise of “true believers” to power, from Christian crusaders to Hitler, from Stalin to George Wallace. The best means to combat fanaticism was to require students to argue against their convictions. Through rigorous training in debating both sides of a question, debaters become skilled in articulating the convictions of others. The result, Day argued, was a transfer of conviction: a disinvestment in the sanctity of personal belief spurring a fierce commitment to debate as a technology of democratic decision-making. Echoing Burns, Day argued that one’s willingness to embrace this technology demonstrated a genuine commitment to full and free expression, the commitment that differentiates liberalism from all varieties of totalitarianism.

The Politics of Performance

In 2013, Ryan Wash and Elijah Smith, representing Emporia State University, won both the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) and National Debate Tournament (NDT) national championships. As the second all-African American team to win the CEDA national tournament, and the first to win the NDT, Smith and Wash were the first team to unite the crowns. In the final round of the NDT, Smith and Wash embodied a “quare” politics, arguing that the normative bias of the debate community excluded raced and queer bodies.

From within the debate community, Wash and Smith’s position, while unique, was consistent with what Brian Atchison and Edward Panetta call “debate as activism,” a mode of debate “that argues that the appropriate site for addressing community
problems is individual debates." Wash and Smith contended that the debate community’s performance norms and method of argumentation could not accommodate quare alternatives. As Shanara Rose Reid-Brinkley argues:

Racially or ethnically different bodies must perform themselves according to the cultural norms of the debate community ... students of color are performatively whitened ... “Acting black” or brown is problematic because those performative identities are not privileged in terms of successful participation. In fact, they signify a difference, an opposite, a negative differential. It is not that the debate community actively operates to exclude based on race, instead it is an exclusion based on performance, in other words, how the differentially colored body chooses to style itself.

To make debate performance and style a topic of debate is to challenge the assumption that convictions must be transferred to the procedural logics of debate.

The final round between Wash and Smith and Peyton Lee and Arjun Vellayappan of Northwestern University was organized by a “framework” argument over which models of debate and argument were better or worse. The Weekly Standard’s headline announced its position: “Decline of Debate.” The Standard claimed that Smith’s and Wash’s strategy, which they call “sophomoric,” attempts to “win the game by attacking the rules of the game.” They were particularly taken aback by the judges’ decision for Smith and Wash, calling judge Scott Harris’s defense of his vote “one of the most solipsistic documents we’ve ever encountered.” The Weekly Standard fails to notice that the affirmative team’s purpose was to indict how debate’s logic of abstraction elides marked bodies.

Media interest in debate peaked again in 2014, after Ameena Ruffin and Korey Johnson became the first African American women to win the CEDA’s national tournament, defeating two African American men, Rashid Campbell and George Lee. The two teams approached the final round using a similar political aesthetic, which Jessica Kraft dubbed the “alternative style,” a style of debate expressly committed to “hacking traditional college debate’s white privilege problem.” As the Atlantic’s expert witness, Osagie Obasogie, put it: “various procedures—regardless of whether we’re talking about debate format or law—have the ability to hide the subjective experiences that shape these seemingly objective and rational rules.” The “alternative style” refuses the claim that the rules, norms, and conventions of debate are off limits, since the rules themselves may be implicated in forms of exclusion. On the other hand, Kraft quotes Aaron Hardy, an assistant debate coach at Northwestern, who claims the “alternative style” has generated its own problems and rejects the claim that the enforcement of topicality and standardization of argument styles is biased toward whites. Ruffin replies that all arguments begin from personal experience and that the formation of a policy-only league would be akin to segregation.

According to Kraft, “critics” who she does not name contend that the argumentative style employed by black debaters shows they “lack the intellectual acuity to debate both sides of the resolution” and that educational benefits of research are harmed by the “alternative style” and fails to account for the research traditions cited by the performative resistance of the debaters. As Adam J. Jackson writes,
Towson and Oklahoma used scholarly work of people like Siadiya Hartman, Alexis Gumbs, and David Marriot and many others. The innovation in the delivery of the argumentation provides a more epistemologically accessible method to engage the high level theories of the scholars they are drawing from. The rapping and poetry is another way to navigate the intellectual contributions that are made by the scholars that they have used.35

As Jackson makes clear, the procedure/substance binary that underwrites the frame of both the *Weekly Standard* and Kraft essay fails to appreciate the performative difference the style enacts in the round. The *Weekly Standard* and the anonymous “critics” cited in the *Atlantic* essay defend topicality and a peculiar debating style, a style itself solidified in the 1970s, as invariant rules of debate that were not open to challenge. They aren’t. Recognizing this, the advocates of the “alternative style” challenge the rules and style of debate strategically, for political reasons.36

These performative challenges to debate practice are taking on an increasingly institutional character, incorporating the criticism of debate as a social reform strategy. As Shanara Rose Reid-Brinkley points out, the Urban Debate Leagues, inaugurated in the mid 1980s in Atlanta, GA, proliferated in the 1990s within the context of the “black/white achievement gap and the ‘acting Black’ hypothesis in media representation of inner-city students.”37 For Reid-Brinkley, media coverage of the Urban Debate League scripts the story as “Ghetto Kids Gone Good”—a narrative that renders the Urban Debate League an agent of educational and moral uplift, helping black students succeed in an inhospitable urban environment.38 This script has prompted Dayvon Love of The Leaders of the Beautiful Struggle to assert that the Baltimore Urban Debate League (BUDL) is itself “bound up in the non-profit industrial complex ... [It] is a top down, white controlled corporate social service entity.”39 For Love, the current leadership of the BUDL disconnects debate from the black community it claims to serve by maintaining control over the organization, relying on a philanthropic corporate model, and exploiting the labor of alums of the program.

As these recent controversies show, the question of the value of debate is bound up in the political and moral economy of conviction. For some, the practice of debate becomes suspect when it displaces conviction about the issues under discussion; it comes to resemble a sophistic game, removed from the political exigencies it should prepare students to engage. For others, however, the game of debate provides a safe space for role-playing voices and perspectives, providing the student with the resources necessary for identifying her own convictions as she develops a commitment to democratic decision-making. This position, too, is open to criticism, as the notion that debate is a safe space for role playing has been challenged for how it assumes a debate can appropriate the voice of the other.

**Technologies of Debate**

The value of debate, like that of other cultural technologies, is affected by how and to what ends it is deployed. Debates about debate reveal four ways that the technology of debate is invested with ethical and political value. Debate as a technology of critical
deliberation surfaces and captures conviction; debate as a technology for inculcating civic virtue translates and transforms conviction; debate as a technology for social justice develops and deploys conviction; and debate as a game subsumes it.

**Debate as Critical Deliberation**

Critical deliberation requires that convictions be translated into propositions, that these be subjected to critical interrogation, and, finally, that they be judged by an impartial third party. We want to focus on the demand that conviction be translated into proposition.

Jamieson begins her discussion of the effects of televised Presidential debates by recalling David O. Sears’ and Richard E. Whitney’s finding that, while Presidential debates rarely change votes, they do affect how viewers feel towards candidates, thus steadying vacillation and helping to crystallize preferences. She emphasizes that these are “important and substantial changes.” Mapping the viewers’ passage from vacillation to crystallization, from indecision to conviction, is, to some extent, the objective of Presidential debate research. The unfolding of this process constitutes “debate learning,” which we now know is largely affective. Craig R. Hullett, Allan D. Louden, and Ananda Mitra found that viewers’ affective orientation predicted their attitudes towards Presidential candidates, their subsequent level of involvement, and, therefore, how much they learned. Moreover, they found that affective appraisals occurred prior to and steered cognitive assessments, and, importantly, these appraisals could not be coded as emotions; only a measurement of affective intensity predicted debate learning.

While there is consensus that viewers learn from Presidential debates, current efforts to expand this thesis, Jamieson argues, are hindered by at least two methodological challenges: the difficulty of constructing high-quality survey instruments to measure the qualities of debate learning, and the fact that respondents often misrepresent their experience. Of course, there are limitations inherent in any attempt to represent, let alone measure, affect via language. Because affect and attention operate to a large extent non-consciously, respondents find it difficult to verbally articulate their appraisals and delineate their attentional focus, which may help explain the inconsistency of survey responses and the inability to accurately estimate the composition of the viewing audience and their perceptions.

New research instruments have been developed to track the movement of affect and attention. Jamieson is well aware of these, as her use of brain-mapping technologies demonstrates. In this essay, she proposes “incentivizing a national random sample to carry personal tracking devices that capture coded media and programming signals.” While she offers little detail about these devices, we imagine they would collect “big data,” such as temporal and locational metadata, records of news websites visited and the length of time spent viewing them, and sentiment data drawn from social media posts. Even setting aside the considerable privacy concerns associated with “big data” (which, to be fair, Jamieson acknowledges), a question
remains: just how could the analysis of these data be used to understand debate learning?

In an electoral context, we imagine this data-collection technology would serve to dissect the viewing audience to a remarkable degree, classifying the data in sets of opposed pairings, such as sexual difference, racial composition, earned income, health status, party identification, and so on. The markers of attention and affect would be captured in definite form, most likely as duration and emotion, and correlated with the audience data. Finally, data points would be arrayed in relation to the rhetorical maneuvers of the candidates, their word choices, bodily comportment, and the argument schemes they employ. Such an analysis could help build predictive models and modes of affective modulation. However, the jury is still out on whether or not these models would simply mirror the techniques of affective capture and control used by the professional political communication apparatus.43

Debate as Civic Virtue

Debate has long been acclaimed as a technology of citizenship, a unique means for instilling the intellectual habits and capacities of a democratic ethos. For Day and the deliberative democrats, debate is a means for managing the moral economy of conviction. Debate trains citizens to transfer their affective attachments from a set of first-order moral convictions, which define particular conceptions of the good, to the ethical norms intrinsic to democratic debate itself, which comprise a set of second-order convictions, like toleration, reasonableness, and magnanimity.

This technology’s true power is to alter how citizens perceive first-order convictions. Citizens come to recognize first-order convictions from within the terms established by the economy of second-order convictions, i.e., as contingent: the product of particular discursive regimes and habits of socialization, rather than the expression of a universal moral or political truth. Over time, it becomes difficult to articulate convictions outside the dialectical logics of commensuration and competition that constitute the rhetorical framework of liberal political economy: democracy becomes legitimacy, justice becomes fairness, equality becomes opportunity, and alterity becomes subsumed in calls for inclusion. This framework precedes and conditions almost all public debates. It is, following Jacques Rancière, a means of “partitioning the sensible”: establishing the terms of engagement, setting performative expectations, and instituting criteria for assessing moral and political validity. 44 Those who can’t or won’t debate from within this framework are charged as enemies of democracy—dogmatic, overly partisan, even fanatical. 45

In televised Presidential debates, the convictions of both viewers and candidates are on display and up for grabs. Jamieson tells us that new media ecologies threaten to displace the viewers’ independent judgment of candidates and proposals; debates become events for partisan reinforcement, rather than opportunities for independent reflection. Contemporary debate audiences are immersed in multiple streams of running commentary that tell them what they are seeing, what it means, and why it matters. Many in the audience therefore stop carefully examining the candidates’
arguments, as this work is being done for them by a highly partisan and heavily financed commentariat. This commentariat traffics heavily in the rhetoric of conviction. It invokes second-order convictions like fairness and impartiality to undermine the legitimacy of opposing views, framing opponents and their supporters as zealous partisans. And it portrays politics as a battleground of first-order convictions, exhorting audiences to stand their ground. But these first-order convictions are defined in and through an economy of intractable opposition, less a set of moral beliefs that guide judgment than an affective bulwark against the threat of the Other. The audience is encouraged to abdicate independent judgment and to disengage anyone whose convictions run counter to their own.

For candidates, the debates are platforms for displaying their convictions. But, as Jamieson argues, the candidates’ debate performances reveal more than they know and can control. As they speak and move, the candidates reveal how they think and act. Through a close reading, rhetorical scholars can “forecast the winner’s behavior in office” and how “the patterns of argument and evidentiary dispositions” revealed in the debates “carry over into decision-making and public justifications of it in office.” Jamieson turns to Nelson Polsby to enumerate the “managerial talents” a President needs “to stimulate a bureaucratic apparatus to bring forth alternatives”: the ability to select the appropriate policies, to persuade Congress and regulatory agencies to enact them, and to ensure those policies are actively pursued.

Jamieson contends that we ought to reformat Presidential debates so that they reveal even more of these “key dimensions of the capacity to govern.” What gives us pause is not the feasibility of Jamieson’s reading strategy, but that it is so firmly ensconced within a vision of politics as management. Any debate’s value, in this formulation, resides in its ability to reveal the differing abilities of elites to lead. However, debate, as our comrades in Emporia, Towson, and Norman have demonstrated, can be so much more.

**Debate as Social Justice**

From the perspective of social justice, debate should help develop the argumentative skills and convictions necessary to be, in Roosevelt’s words, “on the side of right.” What is unique about our current conjuncture is that the social justice motivation for debate education has been turned on the debate community itself. The racial politics of debate cannot easily be dismissed in the time of the first black President. The African American debaters practicing the “alternative style” make arguments from an intersectional standpoint, one that highlights the complexity of their bodies as raced, sexed, and eroticized. However, Presidential rhetoric, especially Obama’s, tends toward abstraction. For example, when asked by Politico during his re-election campaign to comment on criticisms that he had not done enough for the black community, President Obama, remarked: “I am not the President of black America. I am the President of the United States.” For Darrel Enck-Wanzer, President Obama’s comment is an example of antiracialism—a tendency to deny that race matters when discussing the presidency—that deflects attention away from race.
contrast to antiracism, the “alternative style” debaters use debate to promote expressly anti-racist politics. Moreover, as the Leaders of the Beautiful Struggle demonstrate, debate training and pedagogy are increasingly being used to build black capacity for self-determination.

One interesting point of convergence between Jamieson’s call for more research and the current controversy in debate is the recognition that debate performances have consequences to which scholars should attend. For example, we know that debates can “forecast communicative competence and habits of mind,” but we know little about the link between campaign deception and the ability to “forecast the winner’s behavior in office in meaningful ways.” Jamieson hopes that future research will take into account how “patterns of argument and evidentiary dispositions” translate into governing styles, and she notes how the format of Presidential debates often fails to reveal key dispositions necessary for governing. But future research will also want to keep in mind how the performative dimensions of procedures build in their own privileges. As Mary Stuckey notes:

The American Presidency is a site of political, social, and economic privilege. This fact is hardly remarkable, but it is important for what it means for our understanding of power—what it means, how it is exercised, how it is understood—has been inflected by upper class, straight, white male expectations and practices.

One should therefore ask how these expectations generate a performative repertoire and a political aesthetics that renders race and gender invisible.

Is it possible to create a more socially just form of Presidential debate? One might begin with who gets to participate in Presidential debates. At present, the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) is responsible for the format of Presidential and Vice Presidential Debates. The Commission is itself controversial. The Center for Public Integrity once described the Commission as "a largely secretive tax-exempt organization, created and run by former chairmen of the two major parties, funded by a small group of donors, and designed, it seems to exclude all third party candidates." The CPD’s use of a 15% polling threshold for participation is more likely to secure what Lisa Disch calls the “Tyranny of the Two-Party System” than it is to provide alternative parties and topics with fora for participation.

Debate as Game

Because intercollegiate debates are competitions, and because a winning team entails a losing team, the status of debate as a game has been both celebrated and criticized. Transforming debate into a game means using the glory of victory as a way to intensify a commitment to learning the moves of the game. Debate is a technology that subsumes conviction, rerouting it to a love of the game.

In a previous essay, we noted how the game qualities of debating both sides can inculcate a post-conventional morality by distancing students from egocentric and sociocentric perspectives. Locating a model of moral development in the game of debate, we argued, created a pathway to re-think debate as training in deliberative
democracy. Can the game of debate embrace “communicative democracy” as well as it has been able to support debate as a model for promoting deliberative democracy?

We know that Jamieson believes that the sport metaphor generates a spiral of cynicism. One might infer, then, that her desire to mitigate the problems of partisanship, the performative disconnect between election rhetoric (promises) and governing, and the failures of the format of Presidential debates are designed to downplay the competitive character of the election. Her lack of a normative claim about debate is troubling, for if the constant framing of elections as a sport creates cynicism, then Presidential debates need to be treated in ways that disconnect them from the game perspective and/or they need to be reformed to counter the competitive character of the election. The normative assumption would seem to be that, if we improved Presidential debates, we might improve democracy.

The growing partnership between corporate interests and the State (or two-party system) suggests a fundamental shift in the idea of popular sovereignty: sovereignty resides no longer in the interaction between a people and its representatives, but in a global finance market. Sheldon Wolin argues that the capture of politics by the election cycle and corporate interests perpetuates what he calls “managed democracy”:

In contrast to organized well-heeled interests, who have power to spare, ordinary citizens have only the power allowed them by a process they cannot control. ... The paradox is that while in the abstract the demos has the authority of electing, it lacks effective power to control or set the terms of actual elections, including the regulation of campaign finance, television ads, and debate formats.

A more critical perspective on Presidential debates might reveal whether the game of Presidential debate can escape its capture by the managed democracy of electoral politics.

Notes


Greene and Hicks, “Lost Convictions,” 102–07.


Harvard Crimson, “Fearful Colleges.”


E. Patrick Johnson advances the concept of “quare” to foreground “the ways in which lesbians, bisexuals, gays and transgendered people of color come to sexual and racialized knowledge” in “‘Quare Studies,’ or (Almost) Everything I learned about Queer Studies I learned from my Grandmother,” Text and Performance Quarterly 21, no. 1 (2001): 2.

CEDA and NDT form the nexus of “policy” debate in the United States.


A key essay setting the terms of the critique of performance is Ede Warner, Jr, “Go Homers, Makeovers or Takeovers?: A Privilege Analysis of Debate as a Gaming Simulation,” Contemporary Argumentation and Debate 24, no. 1 (2003): 65–80. While not a tremendously active blog, also see http://resistanceanddebate.wordpress.com/ and for a more active community centric blog that takes debate as an object for community activism, see Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle at lbsbaltimore.com.

To summarize this debate as a “framework debate” or a debate about debate is a necessary shorthand. The arguments were very nuanced and deserve closer study, but a central element of the debate was whether or not the performative and argumentative assumptions of policy debate require the displacement/erasure of quare bodies. From another angle, the debate was one about which model of debate was more inclusive of the other model of debate. One can access the debate at NDT 2013 Finals—Emporia SW v Northwestern LV, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZrWfDIediU, retrieved August 14, 2014. Emporia State SW defeated Northwestern LV on a 3–2.


The Scrapbook, “Decline of Debate.”

The Scrapbook, “Decline of Debate.”


[34] The full passage from the Kraft essay: Critics of the new approach allege that students don’t necessarily have to develop high-level research skills or marshal evidence from published scholarship. They also might not need to have the intellectual acuity required for arguing both sides of a resolution. These skills—together with a non-confrontational presentation style—are considered crucial for success in fields like law and business.


[36] Ede Warner, Jr highlights how the critics confuse the role of rules and procedures with the gaming solution. Rules are expected to be invariant in the round, but procedures, of which Warner distinguishes between procedures of substance (topicality) and procedures of style that include “rate of delivery, note taking techniques, what qualifies as evidence, and other technical presentation issues,” are debatable in the round. “Go Homers,” 66.

[37] Shanara Rose Reid-Brinkley, “Ghetto Kids Gone Good: Race, Representation, and Authority in the Scripting of Inner City Youths in the Urban Debate League,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 49, no. 1 (2012): 77

[38] Reid-Brinkley, “Ghetto Kids Gone Good,” 78.


[57] On communicative democracy, see Iris Marion Young, “Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy,” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 120–36. It should be noted that Young would not likely support the game conditions of competitive debate. She is critical of argument as a style that displaces other styles of communication.