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# COUNTERPLANS IN POLICY DEBATE

National Federation of State  
High School Associations



An Introduction to Counterplans on the Water Resources  
Topic by Rich Edwards, Baylor University



# WHAT IS A COUNTERPLAN?

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- A counterplan is a policy defended by the negative team which competes with the affirmative plan and is, on balance, more beneficial than the affirmative plan.





# RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE COUNTERPLAN

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**Specificity:** The counterplan text must be explicit

**Nontopicality:** Some theorists say the counterplan must represent the NON-resolution

**Competitiveness:** The counterplan must give the judge a reason to choose between the plan and counterplan.





# COUNTERPLAN SPECIFICITY

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## Sample Counterplan Text:

- **Example 1:** State counterplan: The 50 state governments will implement each of the protections of water resources mentioned in the affirmative plan: protecting wetlands, promoting safer agricultural methods, regulating fracking, etc.
- **Example 2:** Point-Of-Use Water Filters: The affirmative proposes to replace all water supply lines, whereas the counterplan proposes to have states provide water filters, while also banning federal funding for replacement of water supply lines using plastic piping.





# COUNTERPLAN NONTOPICALITY

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Though some judges will continue to think this is important, many contemporary debate theorists say it is NOT, for the following reasons:

1. The affirmative team is asking for adoption of the PLAN not the resolution.
2. Competitiveness provides adequate protection against abuse.
3. Ground is preserved, since the affirmative team had free opportunity to choose its position first from anywhere within the resolution.





# COUNTERPLAN COMPETITIVENESS

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**Mutual Exclusivity:** It is logically impossible to do both the plan and counterplan.

**Net Benefits:** The counterplan alone is more beneficial than the plan plus the counterplan (in practice this means that the counterplan avoids a key disadvantage offered by the negative).

**Other (suboptimal) Possibilities:** Resource competition,  
Philosophical differences





# MUTUAL EXCLUSIVITY

It is logically impossible to adopt both the plan and the counterplan.

**Example:** In the case of Counterplan Example 2: The counterplan proposes to ban federal funding for plastic supply lines. The negative would claim that it is logically impossible to both require and to ban supply line replacement.

**Problems with Mutual Exclusivity:** Usually the competitiveness argument based on mutual exclusivity is artificial because the text of the counterplan simply bans the plan. Often the affirmative team will suggest ways that the essence of the plan could be combined with the essence of the counterplan.





# NET BENEFITS

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“Net Benefits” competitiveness shows why it would be undesirable to combine the plan and counterplan; as a practical matter, there is some disadvantage to the plan which the counterplan does not link to. Technically speaking, “net benefits” means that the counterplan alone is more advantageous than the plan plus the counterplan.

In the Counterplan 1 example, the negative team would claim that even though it is logically possible to have both the states and the federal protect water resources, the counterplan alone is superior because it would avoid both the politics disadvantage and the federalism disadvantage.







# PERMUTATIONS

A permutation is an argument offered by the affirmative to demonstrate the non-competitiveness of a counterplan; it suggests a specific way that the plan and counterplan can be desirably combined in order to avoid the negative disadvantage(s).

Consider the following example: The affirmative plan calls for the replacement of water supply lines and the negative counterplan calls for state funding of point-of-use water filters. The affirmative permutation claims that the plan and counterplan can be desirably combined: Replacement of water supply lines, combined with the installation of point-of-use water filters, will be an even more optimal solution since the combination of the two would provide an even safer supply of drinking water.



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