Who Are the E-Debaters?: An Review of 2020 Tournament Entries

By Peter Zhang

Introduction

So far, bid tournaments this season have been held exclusively online. While judging debate rounds certainly feel different through a Zoom window, the virtual platforms also affect who chooses to sign up for tournaments.

Plenty of factors could be relevant. One is that location no longer matters: you can compete at someone's tournament whether you're in the same county or across the country. Another is that the format potentially rewards debaters with better technology. Any number of other factors, like the economic hardship imposed by the pandemic or decreased support from schools, may also alter the composition of the competitor pool.

So, who are the e-debaters? This article takes a look at the data behind that question.

Dataset

I examined every tournament held from September to December of 2020 with a bid in LD, as well as their 2019 counterparts. After excluding tournaments didn't post entries (Scarvite) or weren't hosted in 2019 (Delores), the dataset included 27 tournaments [1]. For each of the remaining tournaments, I scraped information on Varsity LD competitors off the Tabroom entries page. Entries who didn't have a posted location were omitted from the geographic analyses. The dataset of entries is available here.

Participation

Here are some basic observations about the data:

- 1312 debaters competed in an average of about 2 tournaments in 2019; 1103 debaters averaged 2.77 tournaments each in 2020.
- The total number of entries increased by 17.5% from 2019 to 2020.
- Tournaments gained an average of 18 competitors this year.

The decrease in distinct debaters shouldn't be surprising. Teams could be having a tough time recruiting new debaters. Debaters themselves may have other priorities in their lives. And, competitors who enjoyed the social aspects of debate may have felt that tournaments were no longer worth it.

The increase in the number of entries is also predictable. With fewer logistical barriers, avid debaters should have greater access to tournaments. Moreover, many tournaments usually held early in the year have been postponed (e.g. St. Marks, Notre Dame), which might have concentrated interest in remaining, available tournaments.

Trend #1: There are fewer debaters, but they compete more frequently.

Tournaments

The increase in entries wasn't uniform across all tournaments. Twenty tournaments got more popular, but the competitor pools of seven unlucky hosts either shrunk or stagnated. The differences are drastic. The size of Valley's entry pool doubled (from 93 to 201) while JW Patterson's pool was halved (from 74 to 37).


Change in Participation from 2019 to 2020
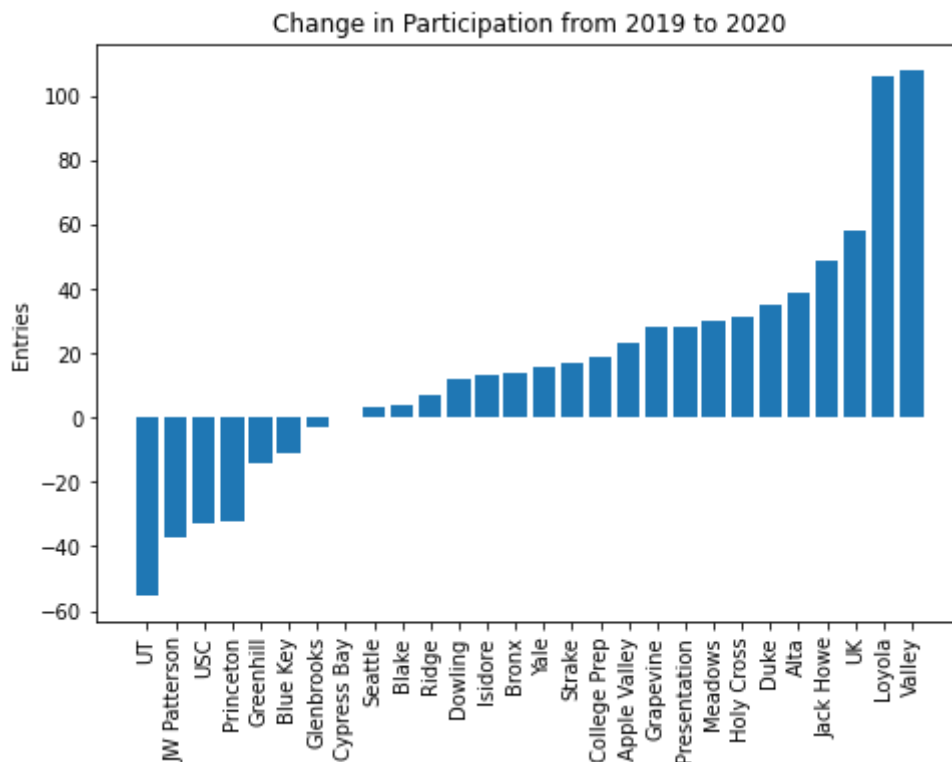
Competitive incentives help us explain the difference, and the trio of Alta, UT, and Princeton offers an insightful example. The three semis-bid tournaments were held on the same weekend in both 2019 and 2020. This year, UT and Princeton lost a third of their entries, while Alta's pool *increased* by nearly half. That's interesting enough, but take a look at where they ended up: UT at 100 entries, Alta at 109, and Princeton at 112 — roughly equal. The equilibrium is exactly what we'd expect if debaters were driven by competitive incentives, rather than logistical needs.

Tournament Entries
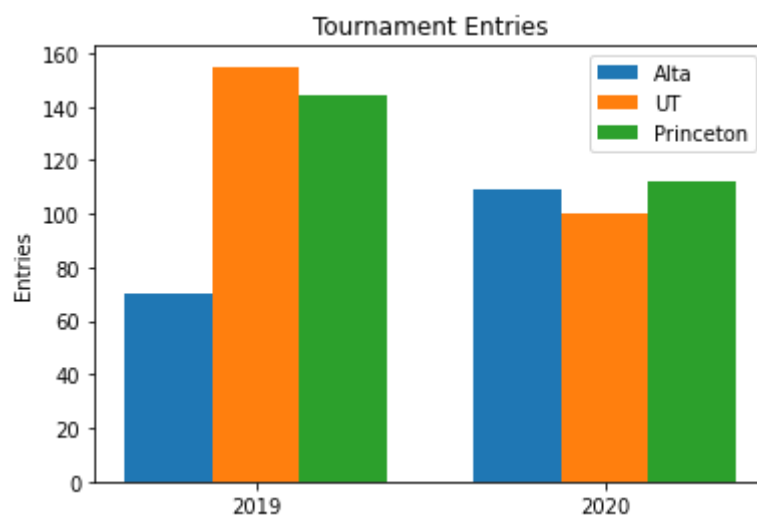
Two other case studies stand out. The first is Loyola: it tripled the size of its pool from 66 to 172. And it's a quarters bid! But what sets it apart is that no other tournaments were scheduled for that weekend, so debaters didn't have a choice. The second is Heritage and Bronx. What caused Heritage's entry pool to collapse? It seems like competitors fled Heritage (a finals bid) to compete

at Bronx (an octas bid), which offered 8 times more bids. When framed in terms of bidding capability, the 37 to 185 disparity seems a lot more reasonable.
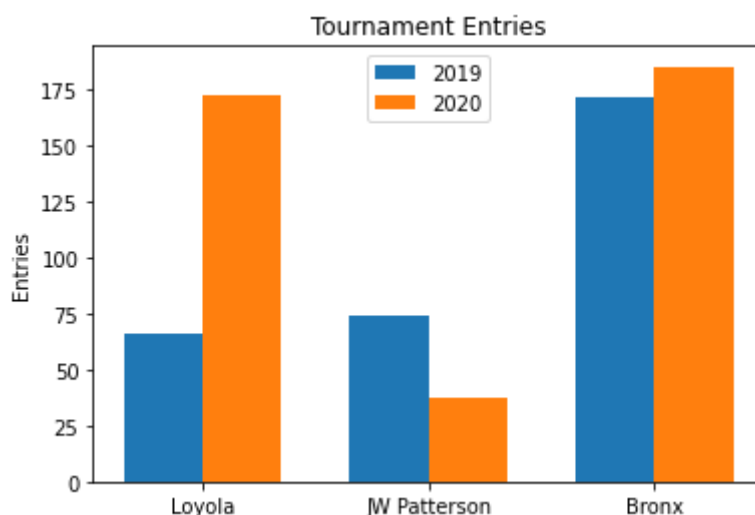

Trend #2: In the absence of logistical barriers, the size of a pool is driven by competitive incentives, a function of bidding opportunities and concurrent tournaments.

Geography

There are also significant differences in terms which states experienced the increase. Of course, in many states, circuit LD has no presence. For most of these states, this year hasn't changed that. This list includes Delaware, Kansas, Montana, Tennessee, Vermont, and Maine. But, some of these states saw their first competitors this year; we can welcome South Carolina, West Virginia, Hawaii, and Michigan to circuit LD.

Across the board, states with only a handful of competitors grew their presence. Take a look at Arizona, DC, New Mexico, or Wisconsin. On average, states with fewer than 20 competitors in 2019 doubled the number of entries in 2020.
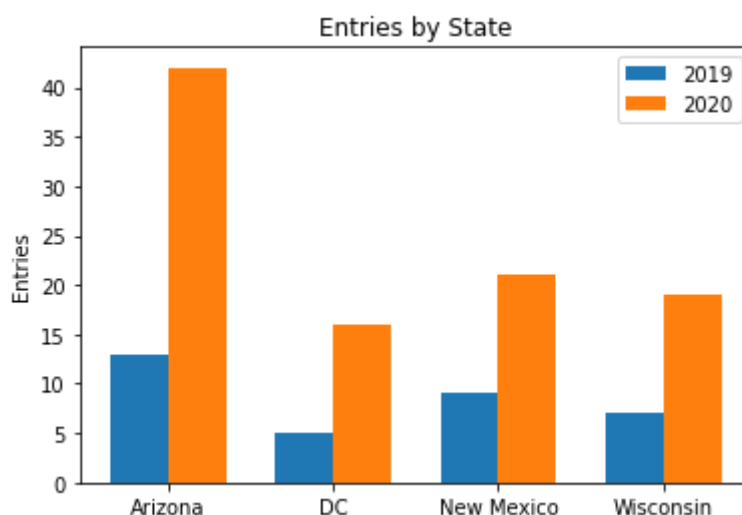
Among the larger states, by far the biggest winner was California, where entries skyrocketed from 528 to 840 (that change is, by necessity, omitted from the graph below). New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, and Texas were stable, while Florida, Iowa, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Washington saw moderate increases. Meanwhile, states like Alabama, Illinois , Louisiana, Nebraska, and Virginia — many in Southeast — saw fairly large declines in participation.

But, are these increases actually driven by debaters competing at faraway tournaments? Yes, and very much so.

I estimated the location of a given tournament or competitor from the [geographic centroid](#) of their state. With two sets of coordinates, I can estimate the distance [2] between a tournament and each of their competitors. It isn't very accurate, but it should certainly reveal if more West Coast debaters are competing on the East Coast.

The average competitor traveled about 350 miles to a tournament in 2019. This year, the average competitor was about 700 miles away from their host. Debaters from Texas, Utah, Nevada; New Jersey, Minnesota made the biggest leaps in distance, which makes sense — states that could usually depend on local tournaments have chosen to diversify.

On the other hand, the tournaments with the biggest increases in distance were UT, College Prep, Duke, Grapevine, Heritage, Jack Howe, Loyola, and Seattle — tournaments that are usually attended by locals and a handful of travelers have gone national. This parallels increases in the number of states represented at tournaments. In 2019, the average tournament hosted competitors from 9.37 states. In 2020, that number is now 17.07.

Trend #3: While participation are increased the most for established states, many states are beginning to attend tournaments when they hadn't before.

Inequality

While competitor pools have certainly become more geographically diverse, I suspected that they may also become more privileged, on average. I took the median real household income for each state and used it as a benchmark for the wealth of a state. I also took the median ACT scores of each state as a proxy to measure the quality of education. As you might expect, states on both coasts tended to measure the highest on these metrics.

Here, the change in geography drove most of the change. Increased geographic diversity tightened the spread of ACT and household incomes. If a tournament mostly drew competitors from a well-off state in 2019, then more competitors from less well-off states competed in 2020, and vice versa.
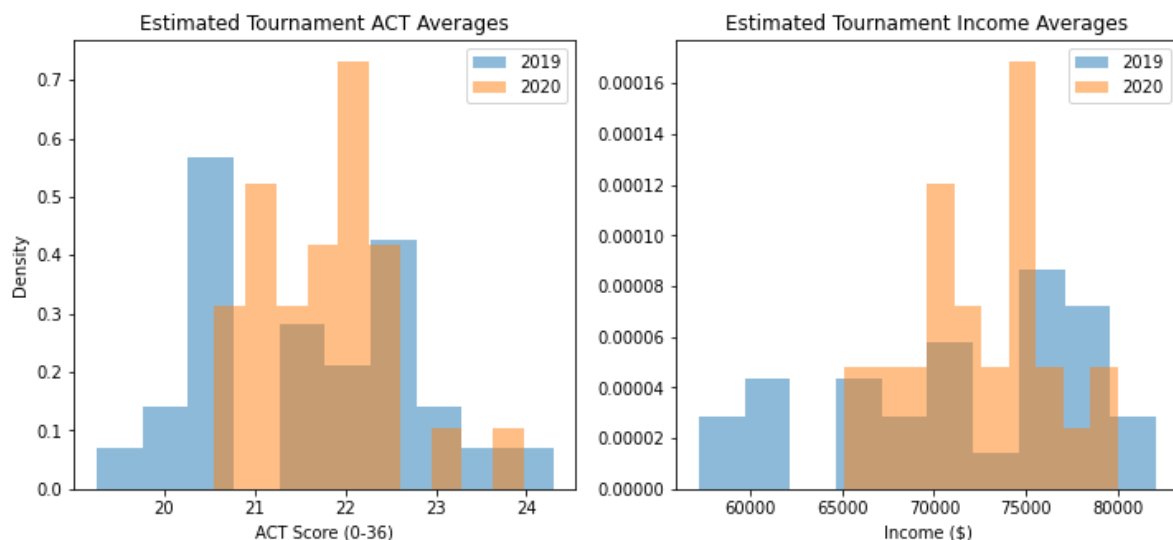

However, the weighted average shifted upward for both metrics. The average household income increased by $811 from 2019 to 2020; the average ACT score rose by 0.079. I conducted a significance test on the averages, using a two sample z-test the ACTs and incomes of the 2019 entries and 2020 entries as samples. The difference in ACTs scores was slightly significant (p = 0.0465); the difference in income was highly significant (p = 0.000546).

These increases aren't large, but overall, wealthier and better-educated states are sending more debaters to tournaments. All of this makes sense if we keep in mind which states grew the most over the shift: states like California, Massachusetts, and Washington.

Trend #4: While cross-tournament differences have tightened, e-debate seems to slightly favor well-off states.

Schools

Finally, I take a look at the teams which sign up for tournaments. In 2019, 19.9% of entries signed up as the only competitor from their school. This year, that proportion has risen to 25.3%. In fact, the size of squads seems to be generally declining. The average team size in 2019 was 2.96, while the average team in 2020 had 2.79 members.

Frequency of Team Size
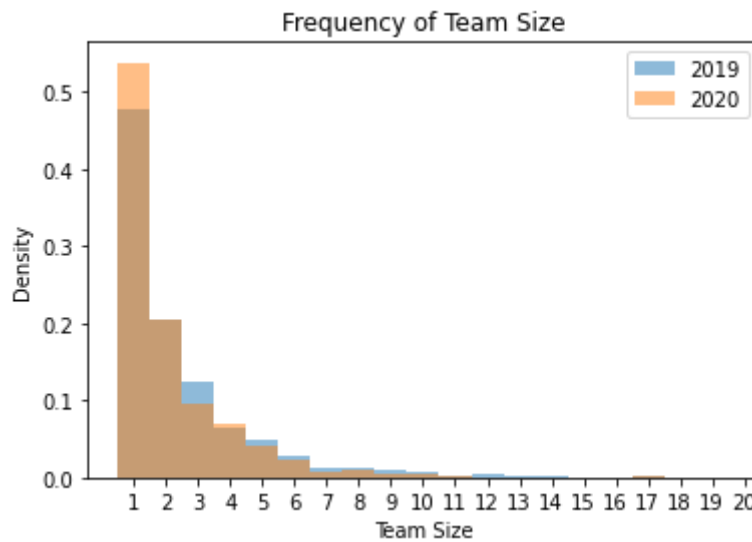
Plenty of factors could explain the trend. Lone wolves might find it easier to sign up; there's probably less need for teammates; some tournaments have introduced entry caps.

Trend #5: More lone wolves and smaller teams are competing.

Conclusion

Based on results from tournaments this year, overall participation seems to be weathering the virtual environment. While competitors are more geographically diverse, that might be skewed towards wealthier states. At the same time, more lone wolves are competing, and debaters are signing up for tournaments based on bid potential.

You can argue about whether these changes are net good or bad — I won't make a case for either. But, with the TOC slated to be held virtually, e-debate seems to be here to stay, at least for the rest of the season. And that means that questions about who is debating, and how they are affected by the online format, are important to consider.

The following are some limitations and potential improvements to this analysis:

- I omitted tournaments that were held in Fall of 2019 that were postponed this year, which likely underestimated participation in 2019.
- Some entries either omitted or falsified information (why did Princeton say they were from Maine?). I rooted out some obvious errors, but a more detailed review could be helpful.
- Estimates for location wealth, and education were all based on state-level data. More granular data, perhaps drawing on information about schools, could greatly improve the accuracy of the analyses.
- The pooled z-test assumes two independent samples. In reality, the 2019 and 2020 samples are likely to be fairly correlated, which means the standard error may be an overestimation. As a result, the p-values are probably conservative.

A big thanks to Raul Larsen for maintaining his very helpful TOC Calendar.

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1. The full list of tournaments includes: Alta, Apple Valley, Blake, Blue Key, Bronx, College Prep, Cypress, Dowling, Duke, Glenbrooks, Grapevine, Greenhill, JW Patterson, Holy Cross, Isidore, Meadows, Nano Nagle (Voices), Princeton, Ridge, Seattle, Strake, UK, UT, Valley, Yale. ↵

2. I calculate the distance between two latitude and longitude pairs using Haversine Distance. You can more about that here. ↵