



How to do well in Counterfactual Debates

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Contents

- Part 0: Definition & Rules
- Part 1: Developing a Counterfactual
- Part 2: Common Mistakes (and how to avoid them)
- Part 3: Structuring Your Analysis

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Part 0: Definition & Rules



What on earth is a 'counterfactual'?

- **Dictionary definition:** “Thinking about what did not happen but could have happened, or relating to this kind of thinking”
- In BP: to **conceptualise** an alternative world with (or without) what is being debated
 - Ex. 1 “THR the rise of social media influencers”
 - Ex. 2 “THP a world in which organised religion does not exist”
- **Two archetypes:** ‘This House Prefers a world’ and ‘This House Regrets’

**Counterfactual debates are no
different to any other debate,
but you have to think a bit
outside the box!**



Rules governing counterfactuals

- **Government** has a burden to **envision and argue in favour of** the alternate world
- Backwards-looking characterisation (from a logical point of divergence onwards)
 - E.g. 1 “THR the rise of social media influencers” // Modern day
 - E.g. 2 “THP a world in which organised religion does not exist” // Argue from the past
- No fiat or arguments about transitions -- the two worlds exist separately of one another
- **Opposition** has to defend the **Status Quo**

Part 1: Developing a Counterfactual



How detailed should my counterfactual (CF) be?

- Consider the trade-off: **Detail** vs **Time spent**
 - **Strategic choice:** “Should I be spending my time doing something else instead?”
 - **Determine** how important a well-analysed CF is for your side
- **Characterisation:** Analyse the parts of the world that will **plausibly** and **non-trivially** change
- **Burden:** The more advantageous your CF is for your side, the more likely the other side is to contest it -> **spend more time proving your version of the CF**
- If the CF sounds trivial, you can assert it as long as you are being **charitable** to the other side



CFs in Top Half

- Prevents closing from using the absence of a CF as a 'missing link'
- **OG:** Start-of-speech framing
 - Can make the CF seem very **plausible** and **obvious** to the judges if you sound reasonable
 - Can set up a very strong **frame** for you that all other teams have to contend with
 - **Pre-empt** the other side
- **OO:** Outframing Government
 - You do not have to defend every aspect of the status quo if you can demonstrate that the CF is worse



CFs in Back Half

- Similar purpose as top half to an extent
- Few caveats:
 - Make sure it is compatible with your opening's analysis -- standard rules on contradictions apply
 - Use EVEN IFs if you have to redirect the debate from what your opening did
 - When trying to outframe top half, **spend time to charitably engage** with the other side to avoid 'falling out'

Part 2: Common Mistakes (and how to avoid them)



1. Asserting a counterfactual that will be contested

- e.g. This House Regrets the perception that soldiers are heroes
- PM: “In our world, people will obviously still treat veterans well. We will also have access to significantly more resources to investigate war crimes. This is good because [...]”
- **Assertions:**
 - Why are people likely to care about veterans regardless?
 - Why will the political capital exist to investigate war crimes now?
- You have to analyse the **likelihood** of your CF



2. Pushing unfair burdens

- e.g. THR the trend of central banks setting extremely low interest rates after the 2008 financial crisis
- **PM:** *Spends their speech explaining why low interest rates lead to bad economic practices*
- **LO:** “The Prime Minister did not provide a counterfactual. Therefore government have to stand by central banks not setting interest rates at all, which would be disastrous for the economy.”
- Is this a plausible CF? Even if DPM does not explicitly contest it, the judges are not very likely to credit it highly
- This leaves you vulnerable to (e.g.) CG analysing a strong counterfactual and winning. **Be generous!**



3. Asserting that the CF is favourable/preferable

- e.g. THR the ideological dominance of the left in the feminist movement
- PM: “[after reasonable analysis], we will therefore now have a more inclusive movement.”
- **Logical gap:** Why is inclusivity important? How does it affect individuals? Why should we value it?
- **Weighing:** Opposition are likely to try to prove why the CF involves a watered-down version of the movement that is less able to help its members. Why is inclusivity more important than this?
- **Impact and Weigh,** like you would with any other argument!



4. Assuming that the CF world is too different

- e.g. TH prefers a world where people believe in determinism over one where people believe in free will
- **LO:** “If people no longer believe in free will, people will feel they have no agency. This means that they will no longer be incentivised to work for anything or maintain any relationships. Society would fall apart.”
- Most (debatable) motions do not involve a huge change to the world. This allows you to do analysis.
- Assume that the world is roughly similar to our current world to not be dismissed as implausible.
- **In this scenario:** LO’s argument is not robust -- people have other incentives to seek out (e.g.) security, material wealth regardless of whether they think they have free will. Why does it matter to people?



5. Claiming you are winning by virtue of having a CF

- **GW:** “We were the only team in this debate to provide a CF. Therefore we beat all the other teams.”
- While a CF helps your case become **comparative** and **more persuasive**, it is not valuable in itself!
- You must still engage with the analysis brought by the other teams, outweigh their metrics, prove a larger impact etc.

Part 3: Structuring Your Analysis



'Linear Flow'


what is linear flow

- the **linear flow** of an argument is how you get from Point A (the beginning of an argument) to Point B (the end)
- every step along the way is necessary, and **no steps should be wasted** on things that don't get you to Point B
- the flow will look **different** for each debate and case, but it typically resembles this:

problem/framing → why the problem arises →
analysis/mechanisms of change → impact →
weighing



Types of motions: 'specific' to 'generic'

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- **Specific events:** THR the selection of Joe Biden as the Democratic nominee for the 2020 election
 - **Trends:** THR the trend of central banks setting extremely low interest rates after the 2008 financial crisis
 - **Narratives:** THR the narrative of hook-up culture



'Specific' motions

- Usually about a specific event, trend, etc.
- Identify the **tipping point** between the two worlds and analyse it well
- Explain its **uniqueness**
- Provide specific **impacts** and **outcomes** resulting from this tipping point



'Specific' example

- e.g. THR the selection of Joe Biden as the Democratic nominee for the 2020 election
- “Joe Biden was elected on a wave of fear of Trump winning the re-election if the Democrats alienate the centre. This fear would have existed on either side of the house. There was always a trade-off between losing the energised left versus the moderate centre. If the other faction had won out, we would most likely have had Bernie Sanders.”
- “Joe Biden as an individual is somewhat trivial. The underlying structure of the Democratic party gives the nomination to whom can attract the most donors and win the most cities means that the Democratic party is always skewed toward moderates. Therefore, we would have had someone similarly moderate but with a less tainted past.”



'Generic' motions

- These usually address a broad and vague narrative, norm etc. that takes place over time
- **Consider:** How does the motion affect the average individual?
 - Think of concrete impacts on people's lives
- **Uniqueness & nuance**
 - What other narratives exist? How do they interact with the motion? Which arguments can be washed out?
 - Identify the **hidden actor**: who propagates this narrative? Why? How are they likely to act in its absence?
 - Which group of people is particularly prone to subscribing to this narrative? Why?



'Generic' example

- e.g. THR the narrative of hook-up culture
- “Due to the rise and wide availability of contraception people would be likely to seek out romantic relationships prior to marriage regardless. The question is whether they do so through dating and less committed relationships or a norm of hook-ups, the latter of which tends to be more short-termist and toxic.”



Attacking opposing arguments in CF debates

- Standard rebuttal and engagement still applies
 - Attack the truth of the argument, mitigate it, flip its end impact, etc.
- Teams very often:
 - a) Don't prove **uniqueness**: consider what other causes there are for the harms/benefits they describe
 - b) **Tunnel-vision**: fail to properly engage with your side of the debate or weigh. **Call them out!**
 - c) **Assert the counterfactual**: You can easily outframe them with a well-analysed, reasonable CF

Questions?
