

Synopsis of Problem Areas and Resolutions for 2023-2024

PROBLEM AREA I: AGRICULTURAL SUBSIDIES

Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially decrease its domestic agricultural subsidies.

The time is ripe for an agricultural subsidies topic. In 2023, the Farm Bill- the major legislation that outlines American agricultural policy- is being reauthorized. This means there will be an increase in literature related to the topic, and also provides topic uniqueness for what is currently allowed in American agricultural policy. There are obvious connections for all students to this topic, because all students make choices about what to eat and millions of students eat school lunches each year. Food is one of the largest expenses in the American household. There is also relevance to questions of food deserts, urban and rural farming, and the obesity epidemic.

Affirmatives could argue to eliminate particular types of subsidies (crop insurance, disaster preparedness, direct payments etc.), or to substantially decrease agricultural support through subsidies for particular crops. Students can access advantage ground that includes arguments about trade, international relations, the environment, and public health, among many others. However, literature mostly exists on a few key affirmatives, such as factory farming and corn, which means the topic won't be enormous for novices and yet still provides enough nuance for varsity students. On the negative, students can choose from a variety of counterplans such as caps/ limits, condition counterplans, removing trade barriers, and international actors. Negative teams also have access to substantial literature about why subsidies are good and shouldn't be decreased, such as the negative impact removal of subsidies would have on international relations and the economy. There are a substantial number of disadvantages that students could read, including a core topic disadvantage related to food prices which would be great for novice debates as well and addresses the nexus question in the literature. The strength of the farm lobby will also ensure a year of excellent politics debates. Students can also enjoy a wealth of interesting and relevant Kritikal literature that critiques American agriculture production from lenses based on race, xenophobia, capitalism, settler colonialism, and others. This resolution is elegant, simple, and grounded in the literature, and the nature of the topic has massively changed since the last time it was debated in high school (1986-1987) when factory farming was functionally nonexistent and the provisions of the Farm Bill were quite different. Not voting for agriculture would be a serious mis-steak.

PROBLEM AREA II: CLIMATE CHANGE

Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions in the United States.

Climate change is a pressing global crisis that is dramatically changing life on earth. In many ways, climate change magnifies other global risks: it makes disease spread more likely, decreases access to necessities like food and water, drives poor health outcomes and increases the global disparity between developed and underdeveloped countries. Despite the importance of the climate change debate, fewer than half of K-12 teachers discuss the topic with their students. When it is discussed, it is most frequently taught in science classrooms, which, although important, ignores the social, economic and political elements of the topic. A 2022 study by health scientists found that the lack of pedagogical focus on building sustainable solutions to climate change has created a culture of despair, and is gradually undermining hope among America's youth. Thus, a debate topic focused on the contributing factors, harm and solutions to climate change has the potential to address a significant pedagogical gap in our nation's educational system.

The topic requires the federal government to increase restrictions on greenhouse gas emissions. Affirmative teams could argue for an economy-wide carbon tax, a cap-and-trade system, limitations on fossil fuel production or industry-specific emissions restrictions (trucking, construction, airlines, data centers, etc.). The specific mechanism, restrictions, is a significant change from the status quo's incentive-based approach to generating renewable energy. This ensures affirmative inherency and negative uniqueness. In addition, the topic has a set of counterplans and disadvantages that are unified across the topic. Specifically, negative teams could argue that the affirmative insufficiently addresses global warming by focusing solely on the United States, hurts resource-exporting economies, or that the affirmative causes stranded fossil fuel assets in the United States. The resolution "builds in" a counterplan that would allow the negative to argue for economic incentives or tax credits to promote renewable energy, instead of a coercion-based restriction on emissions. The negative could also fiat international actors like China or Russia, or domestically fiat the 50 states. However, well-constructed affirmatives would have a durable answer to the states counterplan, in federal modeling advantages and border-adjustment taxes. There is also a wealth of critical literature. Several affirmative teams would use market-mechanisms to restrict emissions, which strongly links to the capitalism critique. Environmental critiques also abound, including eco-feminism, anthropocentrism, managerialism, settler colonialism, etc.

The climate change resolution meets three key requirements for a strong topic. It fulfills an important pedagogical gap, affirmatives are certain to remain inherent (and disadvantages unique), and there is a strong set of unique negative positions that apply to nearly all affirmatives on the topic.

PROBLEM AREA III: ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase fiscal redistribution in the United States by adopting a federal jobs guarantee, expanding Social Security, and/or providing a basic income.

Economic inequality permeates all areas of American life and has a profound psychological and material influence on American society. Economic inequality influences life expectancy, physical and mental health, economic mobility and educational attainment. Inequality multiplies across generations and generates disenchantment with politics and our entire system of government.

Contemporary times have been dedicated to understanding this important issue from multiple perspectives. Economists, political scientists, legal scholars, philosophers, and people from many other fields have discussed a wide range of causes and potential solutions to the inequality dilemma. Under the proposed topic, affirmative teams would fiscally redistribute resources in three areas: a basic income, federal jobs guarantee and expanded social security. Fiscal redistribution requires a process of tax and transfer of resources. In addition, each of those areas has multiple sub-areas that allow more affirmative specificity. For example, an affirmative could advocate a wealth tax to fund a universal or means-tested basic income. An affirmative could also advocate for a corporate tax to fund a larger Social Security payment or a lower Social Security age.

Negative teams will have a wide arsenal of arguments at their disposal, such as arguments about workability, economic disruption, political feasibility, funding tradeoffs, or alternative ways to address economic inequality without fiscal redistribution. In addition, the negative would have a strong critique of using economics as the starting point for structuring societal changes and a critique of capitalism that is particularly strong versus the jobs and Social Security parts of the resolution.

The public education system portrays itself as a promoter of expanded opportunity, yet fails to focus on inequality and potential solutions. Unfortunately, such a discussion has been relatively sparse in high school debate. Although economic inequality has been an ancillary feature of some recent topics, it has not been the core focus since the 2009-2010 social services topic. This topic allows everyone the chance to debate systemic economic inequality, not solely programs aimed to mitigate absolute poverty.

A season of debate, focused specifically on economic inequality, can create an opportunity to fully engage with such an immense literature base and form fully developed opinions on issues that directly impact their everyday lives. According to Inside Higher Ed, doing so is a precondition for “healing the wounds of the past, generating social solidarity and rebuilding a more just society.”

PROBLEM AREA IV: LATIN AMERICA

Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its democracy promotion and/or military operations in one or more of the following: Plurinational State of Bolivia, Republic of Colombia, Republic of El Salvador, Republic of Guatemala, Republic of Honduras.

The case for debating about Latin America is based on the geographic proximity and interconnectedness of issues with the United States. The educational benefits transcend debate. It’s unfortunate that our students learn a lot about China and Russia, but not a region in our neighborhood. The last time Latin America was the topic in high school was during the 2013-2014 season, but the wording made the topic much narrower than originally anticipated and didn’t capture a core area of controversy in the region. The precarity of democratic and state institutions in the region make the topic area ripe for debate. The region has a vibrant literature base including everything from the nuanced problems of democratic institutions to great power competition; that combined with the fact that the Biden administration’s Latin America strategy isn’t a significant departure from the Trump administration’s strategy ensures a stable base for a topic.

“Democracy promotion” and “military operations” are well defined mechanisms that give the affirmative a litany of possible actions. Affirmatives will have the ability to discuss a diverse set of issues in the region from broad security questions to nuanced institutional dynamics. Specifically, they can increase capacity building assistance for democratic institutions, conditioning aid on specific democratic reforms, and constructive engagement through security assistance. Potential advantage areas include promoting democracy and regional stability as well as protecting the U.S. sphere-of-influence, and reducing cartel violence.

Similarly, these mechanisms will require the affirmative to directly act in the region, which ensures core negative ground regardless of the affirmative. The core set of generics and strong case arguments will allow for a level clash beyond the surface-level. Specifically generics include actor counter plans, the China sphere-of-influence disadvantage, stability disadvantage, and the imperialism kritik. There is also strong literature base around defining the topic mechanisms, which would allow for a meaningful topicality debate and enable a viable strategy for negatives to limit out topic-adjacent affirmatives.

PROBLEM AREA V: SOUTH ASIA

Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its defense cooperation with one or more South Asian countries.

A South Asia topic would make for an incredibly deep and accessible year of debates. South Asian students are an enormous population in policy debate, and a topic about the region is long overdue. The region consists of eight countries: India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Only one, Afghanistan, has ever appeared in a resolution. Students will primarily investigate three major foreign policy issues: strategies to contain China’s rise, tensions between India and Pakistan, and instability in Afghanistan. This limited core set is perfect for novices, who have heard about all of these issues in the news for their entire lives. The topic also addresses other important global issues like terrorism and Russia relations.

Affirmatives can take many innovative approaches to these major global issues. They could expand cooperation with India broadly to contain China, or in specific defense sectors like nuclear, cyber, and

space. American cooperation with India, Pakistan, or both could help address the long-standing tensions between the two. The Taliban's rise in Afghanistan motivates many possible American responses. The remaining South Asian countries each have one to two strong affirmatives that approach the same controversies.

On the other hand, the negative has a rich and reliable toolbox to counter military action. Disadvantages can discuss the downsides of containing China or the plan's detriment to other regional relationships. Counterplans can advocate non-military cooperation, conditions attached to our foreign policy, and unilateral military policies. Kritikal debaters can explore how anti-blackness, settler colonialism, and capitalism intersect with the region's legacy of colonialism. While some defense cooperation does exist now, it only makes both sides stronger. There's evolving and in-depth literature about the core controversies. Importantly, as affirmatives try to solve bigger issues in the region, other regional actors, like China, will respond in kind, thus strengthening disadvantages. And because the literature across countries discusses the same controversy areas from different angles, students that research those and develop nuanced negative positions will succeed.

While students will debate security cooperation with NATO this year, a South Asia topic would be extremely different. It's a completely separate area of the world with different regional politics. This topic has no restriction to emerging technologies, which will shape the affirmative on NATO. The political processes around bilateral cooperation differ from working with a multilateral organization. It's a brand new topic that would create a year of fantastic, well-researched debates.