

# A Coach's Notes<sup>1</sup>

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**This House would abolish superdelegates.**

## Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Do You Want It in Red or Blue?**

## Introduction

This is the Osterweis edition of the 2015-16 CDA season. Previous year's editions can be found through the [Training Materials](#) page on the [CDA web site](#). Accompanying this document are my notes from the varsity final round at Osterweis Tournament presented in two formats, transcript and flow chart.

These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students. So if you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

## Do You Want It in Red or in Blue?

My first job out of college I worked in the sales office of a large firm. They sold complex computer systems, so all new hires spent a large part of the first year going to training classes. Some of it was technical: basic computer theory and programming, how the products worked, how to configure systems. But a lot of it was sales training: how to talk with a customer, make presentations and persuade them to buy. Not the sort of thing you learn as a computer science major, but very interesting and very useful in my career.

In making a sale, the "close" is the moment you actually ask the customer to buy. There are a variety of techniques you can use to tilt the discussion in your favor. A movie or TV show that uses a salesman for comic or sinister effect usually has them using one of

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these techniques in a crassly manipulative fashion. But they can be used more subtly and to help a customer face the decision and act. These techniques even have names!<sup>2</sup>

Watching the Varsity final round at Osterweis reminded me of one of them. In the assumptive close you step past asking if they want to buy. Instead you move on to the details of the sale. For example, if I'm trying to sell you a car, I ask you if you want the red one or the blue one, or the standard or the custom trim package. By getting you to answer these questions, psychologically we're past the purchase decision and just settling the terms. Assuming the result you want and talking as if it is already fact can be very persuasive.

## **The Government Assumes**

Take a look at this brief outline of the Government case from the Varsity final round:

*Definitions: We interpret the motion in the obvious way, abolishing superdelegates to the Democratic and Republican presidential nominating conventions.*

*There are two possible ways superdelegates might act:*

*G1: Superdelegates vote the same way as primary voters, in which case they don't affect the choice of candidate. However, they do confuse the public, possibly reducing support for the party..*

*G2: Superdelegates vote contrary to the primary voters, in which case they possibly void the will of the voters and expose the party as undemocratic and elitist, also reducing support for the party..*

Before you read on, think about this for a minute and see if you can identify the assumption.

The Opposition lost this debate. I wasn't on the panel, but I spoke to one of the judges afterwards and his reasoning was similar to mine. But if you look at my flow, Opp did everything right according to the book. They presented their contentions, responded to each of the Gov contentions and replies, exactly what I tell my students to do.

And in this case exactly wrong!

The Gov case is based on the assumption that the purpose of the party nominating process is to pick the candidate that is the first choice of the party members who vote in the primaries. I'll explain how to argue against this in a minute, but unless you recognize this assumption and challenge it, it is very difficult beat the Gov case. If the purpose of the party is to nominate the candidate picked by the voters, then superdelegates don't add anything, and likely hurt the party. The two contentions become a tautology.

## **Let's Party!**

What is the purpose of a political party? One can argue, as Gov assumes, that it is to promote candidates the party members prefer. But you can also argue that a political party is organized by people looking to get government to enact a program they hold in common. To do that, the party needs to get their candidates elected, and there may be a difference between a candidate that can be elected and the candidate that most party members might prefer. To win the election the candidate usually must appeal to voters beyond the party faithful, and this should factor into the choice.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, [http://changingminds.org/disciplines/sales/closing/closing\\_techniques.htm](http://changingminds.org/disciplines/sales/closing/closing_techniques.htm)

Superdelegates may serve a useful purpose to keep the party on an even keel, tilting the process towards candidates who are more electable. They embody the purpose, values and history of the organization. Most superdelegates are current officeholders or party officials who are heavily invested in the party's long-term success. They have the experience and focus that primary voters—who may only pay attention briefly and superficially around voting dates—lack.

In comparison, consider how businesses or the military choose leaders. The most effective boss or officer may not be popular with their subordinates. But if you want to make money and win battles popularity is probably not the first thing you care about. Business and the military are inherently undemocratic, but that isn't to say that popularity is totally irrelevant. Morale and motivation have to be developed and maintained.

Similarly, a candidate (or manager or officer) needs some appeal to the party members in order to motivate campaign volunteers, donations and voter turnout. Superdelegates likely consider primary results in deciding who to support. It is also likely that primary voters, at least some of them, consider the general electability and not just personal preference in deciding who to vote for.

If you argue over the purpose of the party, you have a path that can support the continued existence of superdelegates. But if you accept the purpose of the party is to nominate the first choice of the primary voters, you're toast.

### ***What Opp Argued***

Opp presented two contentions which capture the ideas about political parties just discussed:

- O1: Superdelegates fulfill the purpose of the primary to get the best candidate.*
- O2: Superdelegates prevent the rise of populism.*

Isn't this what I just said?

Well, it could have been. Opp never explains who the "best" candidate is, or challenges Gov's hidden assumption. Superdelegates are one of many mechanisms that exist in political systems to make it hard for a popular but otherwise unqualified candidate to succeed (assuming that is what populism means).

But Gov is sitting in an unassailable position based on an unstated assumption, and these two contentions appear weak unless that assumption is exposed and challenged. According to Gov, the "best" candidate is the one party voters choose, consistent with democracy, something most assume is always good. Isn't a popular candidate just the proper expression of democracy?

As I said at the beginning, in this round Opp does everything right in terms of the standard approach to debate. They present their contentions, they respond to each Gov contention, they reply directly to Gov counterarguments. But this debate really isn't about the contentions. For Opp it can't be about the contentions if they want to win. The debate is about the purpose of political parties and how best to fulfill that purpose. But Opp has to be listening carefully and directly attack Gov on that issue.

## **What Opp Should Have Said**

The correct Opp strategy would have been to adjust its case on hearing Gov's contentions, and using the two Opp contentions in support. The biggest mistake I see Opposition or Negative teams make is to present the case they prepared prior to entering the room. The Opposition case must always be reconfigured to confront what the Government presents in the first constructive speech.

For this motion and Gov case a better LOC might have gone something like this:

*Mr. Speaker, we agree with Gov that superdelegates add nothing if the purpose of the party nominating process is to select the candidate primary voters like best. But that is not the purpose of the party or its nominating process. Gov makes a false assumption and that false assumption invalidates their entire case.*

*A political party is a group of people with similar goals for government. They can only achieve those goals if they can get their candidates elected, and not just as President, but at all levels of government. Therefore the best candidate is one who appeals not only to the party members, but also to enough of the general electorate to win, and, even better, help other party candidates win at local, state and Federal levels.*

*Superdelegates perform a balancing function. They are current elected officials and party officers who embody the party's purpose and have political expertise. They cannot by themselves select the party's candidate, but they can tilt the process towards a more generally acceptable candidate. Note, Mr. Speaker, that if you agree with this argument regarding the purpose of a political party, then the entire Gov case falls, because it is based on the false assumption that the purpose of the party is simply to follow its primary voters.*

*How do superdelegates help the party? We have two contentions: first, the most popular candidate among the primary voters may not be generally popular. Superdelegates can choose a trailing candidate who is more acceptable, or help guide a convention where no candidate has a majority. Second, superdelegates can prevent the rise of populism, where a candidate with unacceptable views—racism, xenophobia, fiscal irresponsibility—but who appeals to a strongly partisan faction in the party, seeks the nomination.*

Note the last paragraph is a short version of the two contentions Opp presented in the round. In this formulation they have greater impact, because the purpose of superdelegates has been clearly defined. They provide advantages to the Opp side that do not occur on Gov. But the focus of the debate will be the arguments in the three prior paragraphs: why do political parties exist? Whoever wins that argument will carry the round.

## **False Dichotomy**

Some might say that the Gov case presents a “false dichotomy” or “false dilemma”, a standard logical fallacy. This depends on how you define that fallacy. A superdelegate can only vote for the choice of the primary voters or vote for someone else, though if there are many candidates in the primary the choice may be more complex.

Superdelegates may also have other roles beside their vote, an issue that I don't discuss here and neither team raised in the final. As presented, the dichotomy arises because of the hidden assumption that the party nomination should always follow the primary voters.

I prefer to analyze it using sales techniques because that is something unfamiliar to most debaters. We are often in a position of trying to sell—persuade—someone to buy

something, like a Gov or Opp case. It might be worth your while to take a look at the literature on sales techniques and see if there is something you might be able to use.

### ***Knowledge Helps***

There are few substitutes for knowledge in debate. A good debater must spend time researching potential topics and following up on topics past. The parent or teacher who made you use a dictionary to look up any word you didn't know rather than tell you the meaning taught you a very valuable lesson, if you were smart enough to learn it.

I write these commentaries with several advantages over you: education, age, experience, wider reading, more debates and debaters. I took a political science class on voting theory in college, so I'm familiar with things like Arrow's Impossibility Theorem and the Condorcet criterion/paradox. The modern presidential election process is mostly history to you but was current events for me.

For example, superdelegates and the modern primary system date back to the 1970's. After the upheavals in 1968—Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy won most of the Democratic Party primaries but Hubert Humphrey won the Democratic nomination only to be defeated by Richard Nixon in the general election—the Democrats changed the rules to shift power out of the hands of the party professionals to the primary voters for 1972. As a result, George McGovern, from the more liberal wing of the Democratic Party, won the nomination and then proceeded to lose 49 of 50 states in the general election. (Some Republicans are worried 2016 is déjà vu all over again.) To prevent a repeat, Democrats created superdelegates to rebalance the process, and got Jimmy Carter and victory in 1976. That's the simple version, anyway.

In an election year, you are likely to get topics on election issues. Consider yourself warned!