

First Observations on the 2008-2009 Renewable Energy Topic

by
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Introduction

In January, state and national debate organizations voted for Renewable Energy over Health Care for the 2008-2009 high school policy debate topic by a strong majority of 84%. The topic addresses whether “the US federal government should substantially increase alternative energy incentives in the United States.” The 2008-2009 resolution addresses, mainly, the topic of alternative energy in the United States, within the context of the federal government increasing incentives for that alternative energy. Before diving into your topic, a few important observations should be made about the resolution.

A. Generally

Like almost all high school debate resolutions before it, the 2008-2009 resolution keeps the US federal government as the agent of action and has the US federal government make a substantial change to the status quo. The main difference is the topic the resolution addresses – in this case, the US increasing alternative energy incentives in the US. The most recent resolution addressing this topic was the 1997-1998 resolution: “Resolved: That the federal government should establish a policy to substantially increase renewable energy use in the United States.”

B. Increase Incentives vs. Increase Alternative Energy

This resolution requires all affirmative plans to defend the US increasing alternative energy incentives, rather than increasing alternative energy. The importance of this distinction is largely a topicality vs. solvency question. Is a plan that increases alternative energy incentives but does not result in an increase in alternative energy topical? According to the structure of the resolution, the affirmative is bound only to defending increases in incentives rather than increasing alternative energy itself. Another implication of this distinction is that a plan may fall completely within the parameters of the resolution if it substantially increased incentives for people to *continue* to use the *same* amount of alternative energy they are currently using!

Why would an affirmative team ever want to increase incentives for alternative energy and claim that no alternative energy would increase as a result? Strategic and clever affirmative teams realize that most negative teams will be ready to debate the merits of the different types of alternative energy (wind, solar, hydroelectric power, etc.). However, if it is the affirmative contention that the incentives are ineffective or would otherwise not result in an increase of alternative energy, all these negative arguments about the effectiveness of particular alternative energy resources do not apply to the affirmative plan.

For the negative, this distinction is important, most noticeably, for the point of not confusing *increasing alternative energy* with *increasing alternative energy incentives* on a topicality argument.

“...the affirmative is bound only to defending increases in incentives rather than increasing alternative energy itself.”

Instead, negative teams should keep the topicality argument that the plan does not increase incentives separate from the solvency argument that the plan results in no increase of alternative energy.

C. To Whom?

The resolution specifies no recipient(s) of the alternative energy incentives. Nor does it provide any words that provide clear limitation as to whom should receive these energy incentives. Should it be to US citizens? US Businesses? Foreign businesses located in the US? Foreign citizens in the US? One particular company? A class of companies? Traditionally, negative teams have used the word “substantially” to exclude affirmative cases that would be too “recipient-specific.” The subjectivity of the word “substantially” (and, usually, the subjectivity of the definitions of “substantially”) tends to be a difficult barrier to overcome for negative teams making this argument. Crafty affirmative teams will most likely exploit the “To whom could incentives be given to?” question left open in

the resolution to argue a variety of plans.

D. What are “incentives”?

The question of what qualifies as an “incentive” will definitely be the center of many “T” debates in 2008-2009. Most basically, the Encarta World English Dictionary, 2007 defines “incentive” as “something that encourages somebody to action.” However, this explanation is not particularly helpful to narrow down “incentives” to something concrete. It does, on the other hand, provide insight to how broad the definition is. The breadth (and depth) of the definition is not the only troubling aspect about this term.

Another peculiarity is that the definition and probably many other definitions of the word “incentive” includes the phrase “encourages somebody.” While many people may find similar offer “encouraging,” (e.g. an offer of money) the same offer to another person may not be so encouraging. Bear with the following example:

If Person A offered a copy of “The Jungle Book” to Person B who loves to read, in exchange for Person B giving Person A a back massage, this would probably be an encouragement to Person B since Person B loves to read. However, what if Person B already had a copy of “The Jungle Book” or already read it? Would the offer still be an incentive to Person C who didn’t like to read? What if the copy of book had pages missing? Would Person A’s offer of still be an incentive?

This poses another potential problem with defining “incentive.” It may be difficult to define “incentive” objectively. What is encouraging to every person? What if there was someone that hated money? Would offering that person that hated money be an “incentive,” even though most people probably like money? Probably not. One way around this issue may be to argue a definition of incentive in terms of what most people would find encouraging. On the other hand, how does a team go about

proving that most people find a particular “incentive” encouraging?

Without such an interpretation, however, it leaves open the possibility of a more subjective interpretation as to include anything that anyone could find encouraging. In the hypothetical above with the person who hated money, taking away the money that person did have could arguably be an incentive in that circumstance. The implications of this are clear. If both giving money and taking away money could be an “incentive” in different circumstances, then the affirmative could argue completely opposite positions in different debates. While this is not necessarily undesirable, it can be quite confusing!

“...would decreasing taxes on electricity from alternative energy be an increase of an incentive? Or would it be the decrease of a disincentive? Are the two even different?”

E. Incentives vs. Disincentives

Sometimes it is helpful when defining a word to exclude from the definition what it is definitely not included. The antonym of “incentive” is “disincentive.” The Encarta dictionary defines “disincentive” as “something that deters somebody from taking an action.” Already, we have a similar problem as the one posed previously. Instead of “encourages somebody” the problem arises from “deters somebody.” What may deter someone may not deter another person.

Moving beyond this problem, we have two other words (aside from “incentive” and “disincentive”) with which to analyze the meaning of the “incentive”: “encourage” and “deter.” One may conclude that the resolution is thus requiring the US to encourage alternative energy rather than deter uses of non-alternative energy. But this begs the question: If encouragement is giving people what they want, and if to deter someone is forcing people to have something they do not want, then would removing a deterrent necessarily be an encouragement? In other words, would decreasing taxes on electricity from alternative energy be an increase of an incentive? Or would it be a decrease of a disincentive? Does decreasing a disincentive have the same effect as increasing an incentive? Are the two even different? Or, does decreasing a

disincentive *always* increase an incentive?

There are no easy answers to these questions. In fact, many would not even ask themselves these questions and would not understand the importance of raising them. The point is here is that, when there are no easy answers and the questions seem to get more and more confusing, take a stand with one interpretation and argue why using that interpretation (arbitrary or not) is better for debate, in theory, than leaving the term undefined. This is (should be) the nature of topicality debates, anyway.

Literature will be a good way to help you determine what is an incentive and what is not. Do not over-rely on dictionary definitions that leave you with more questions than answers. As you do research on the topic, pay attention to what scholars and experts in the field of energy policy are labeling incentives or disincentives to guide your preliminary understanding of the topic and, later, as the basis for your topicality arguments.

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F. Incentives for Alternative Energy vs. Alternative Energy as an Incentive Itself

The resolution uses the phrase “substantially increase alternative energy incentives.” Most people, (myself included) probably read this and thought that the resolution required the US to increase incentives for alternative energy. On taking a closer look though, the structure of the resolution does not necessarily require this. What if the US federal government were to offer everyone in the US free solar power if they stopped smoking? This plan would substantially increase alternative energy incentives, but the alternative energy is the incentive rather than the end goal achieved with an incentive.

One plausible and valid response to this may be that giving someone alternative energy as an incentive falls entirely out of the resolution. No words in the resolution mention smoking! On the other hand, what if a plan had the US federal government buy free packs of cigarettes for everyone that used solar power? Would that be an alternative energy incentive? If the resolution says nothing remotely close to

smoking as one might argue above, then would this not also be clearly outside of the parameters of the resolution?

G. “Alternative Energy” Incentives vs. Alternative “Energy Incentives”

The intent of the resolution (as demonstrated by the content of the topic paper and the resolution’s nick “Renewable Energy” Topic) is clearly to pose a question of renewable energy resources. But in a debate where the exact wording of the resolution plays a determining role, it is not difficult to see how creative (or bored) debaters could manipulate the reading of this resolution. Instead of alternative energy (as referring to renewable energy) incentives, some affirmative teams may try to claim the US should increase different incentives or alternative “energy incentives” that are different than those that the US offers now. Imagine how this could change the topic.

Instead of debating renewable energy, these teams could reroute the debate to *changing* incentives to continue the use of fossil fuels! Of course this would invite a tubful of topicality charges brought by the negative. But wouldn’t a team (who may be particularly bored or creative) have anticipated this and written a 40+ point block to those topicality arguments? Negative teams may be left with no choice but to throw Hail Marys to the judge’s sense of reasonability if not prepared.

H. Must Incentives Be Conditional?

Plans that are topical (i.e. increase incentives for alternative energy) and that also serve to increase alternative energy will generally make three changes to the status quo: (1) the legal change that the plan (i.e. changing the law to offer alternative energy incentives), (2) the government will act to provide the incentive (or, in the alternative, act to remove disincentives), and (3) the recipients of incentives will change their positions regarding alternative energy (e.g. using alternative energy, investing more money in alternative energy resources, etc.).

However, if the recipients of the incentive refuse to accept the incentive, then the US stops actively providing the incentive. One obvious exception to this is plans that offer incentives for people to *continue current* use of or investment into alternative energy. For all other plans, though, incentives will probably be conditioned on whether the recipient accepts.

The importance of this comes into play when the negative is arguing both solvency deficits and disadvantages. Imagine the following hypothetical:

The affirmative plan gives \$100,000 in annual tax breaks for energy companies that invest in the development of wind power. The advantages to the plan are (1) that wind power helps decrease global warming and (2) that taxes are evil. The negative team argues “The Birds DA,” that constructing more wind turbines for wind energy will kill birds that fly into them causing certain keystone species of birds to become extinct. The negative also argues that incentives of \$100,000 will fail and that only incentives of \$1 million annual tax breaks would solve.

The negative team should be wary that winning the solvency argument (that no companies would accept the incentives - and thus those companies would not be constructing wind turbines) would kill the link to Birds DA since no additional turbines constructed as a result of the plan would be killing birds. The affirmative advantage of global warming would be extinct as a result of the solvency argument, but the affirmative may still have a decent argument for retaining its “Taxes are Evil” advantage. With a reasonable argument for

that advantage, the negative may have no offensive arguments to weigh against it.

The point is that negative teams should watch out for their solvency arguments fouling the links to their disadvantages. Affirmative teams may also want to consider structuring the 1AC so that they would have this strategic option in the 2AC as a way to nullify most if not all of the negative’s offensive arguments made in the 1NC.



I. Incentives in the US & Renewable Energy Outside the US?

The resolution requires only that the US increase alternative energy incentives *in the United States*. However, it does not limit where the alternative energy should go.

For example, suppose a plan gives all US energy companies federal tax breaks if they start joint ventures with companies in China that develop renewable energy. This plan would increase alternative energy incentives in the US because the federal tax breaks are incentives, and since federal taxes relate to taxes paid in the US to the US government, they would be incentives “in” the US, while the renewable energy resources are being increased in another country.

Conclusion

While the 2008-2009 resolution may have appeared to be straight-forward at first glance, the structure and possible interpretations of the resolution make the resolution much more complex. However, this is largely true on almost all topics and is not a reason that this resolution should be changed or discarded. Rather, these observations should be kept in mind when beginning preliminary research on the topic, while digging through backfiles and while developing strategies on both sides.

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Ridge High School

Basking Ridge, NJ

Ridge High School, in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, seeks Assistant Directors for our Forensics Team for the 2008-2009 school year. The Assistant Director positions include coaching, administrative and travel duties, tailored to the individual coach’s expertise. The Assistant Director will also work with the current Director of Forensics to maintain and promote this progressive and growing program. Currently, Ridge High School actively participates in all Individual Events, Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Public Forum, and Student Congress; however, coaches with Policy Debate experience are also encouraged to apply.

The Assistant Director positions are extra-curricular, non-tenure track positions, and do not require any classroom instruction; however, full and part-time teaching positions are also available throughout the district. Information on other professional opportunities can be accessed at <http://www2.bernardsboe.com/BernardsBOE/Jobs.aspx>.

Questions regarding the Ridge Forensics program or the Bernards Township Public Schools can be directed to the current Director of Forensics, David Yastremski, at DYASTREMSKI@BERNARDSBOE.COM.