

Why Mutual Judge Preferences are better than all the alternatives, except maybe one

(When MJP was first coming along, it was necessary to convince people of its desirability, and I handed out a version of what follows. This may no longer be necessary information now that MJP is pretty common, but it might be useful to new programs trying to figure out why the world is the way it is.)

Let's cut to the chase. The one alternative to MJP that may be better than all the rest is pure randomness. Many people can, and have, made the argument that the best debaters are the ones who can pick up the greatest diversity of ballots. This is analogous to saying that the best speakers in general, outside of debate, are the ones who can win over the greatest diversity of audiences. Probably true. Pure randomness at debate tournaments would, the logic goes, be a better educational preparation for the world at large later on. Perhaps. Public Forum debate, which is probably the most popular debate event in the country at the moment, is based on successful oratory (among other things) in front of a diverse, often lay, audience, and it is thriving, probably as a result of the resulting approachability. And, of course, most novice and JV level debate tournaments assign judges randomly (or mostly randomly, depending on the tab staff), which does assume acceptance of the argument of appealing to the greatest diversity of judges, given that we train students that way. But by the time we get to the varsity level, at least in LD and Policy, the stakes are high and there are different expectations. (By the way, I've also heard people argue in favor of totally random team assignments rather than brackets. We do live in a debate universe, after all, where people are not only opinionated but also clever and vocal. But this idea has never gotten much traction, and it is not really judge-assignment related, so we'll let it go.)

At most invitational tournaments, LD and Policy judges are not assigned randomly. After all, tournaments are competitive events. People pay to be there, and they have expectations that they will get judging of a certain quality. Most people at invitational tournaments want something other than random judge assignment. Aside from PF, even having a few strikes is not enough. There's a lot riding on the competition these days. People want a fair shot at winning. Insofar as winning is entirely based on having your judges pick you up, focus on the nature of judging, and the nature of the assignment of judges, is warranted.

Absent total randomness, there are three possible ways of handing the assignment of judges: tab room, consensus, or MJP. One underlying goal of any assigning is that the best judges are placed in the rounds that count the most. It is commonly agreed that bubble rounds, where the loser will be unable to advance to elims, are the highest priority, then down-1s (assuming you need to have an X-2 record to break), then undefeateds, then out-of-its. The question is, how do you define best judges?

The tab room decides:

The tab room can see who is in which brackets, so they can assign the best judges in the rounds that count the most, as described above. In fact, they can rank the entire pool as A, B, C, and let the software do the literal assigning according to these criteria. The thing is, this requires that tab actually knows who the best judges are. How do you define best? The same way I do, if I'm in tab? Obviously, determination by the tab staff means a very prejudiced view of the pool from one or two people. This was the way it was done since tabbing was invented, but it isn't very confidence-building.

The community decides:

The parochialism of relying on the tab staff led to a system of community rankings being occasionally used, where all the teams ranked all the judges, and an average was established, and judges were ranked A, B or C accordingly. But this simply moved the prejudice from the tab staff to a tyranny of the majority of the field. This might not be so bad at primarily local events, but even the most national of tournaments tends to draw judges (especially hires) mostly from its region, and the further away one is from that region, the less likely one can confidently agree with the community rankings. I mean, it's not your community. Your vote is less informed because, even if you read all the paradigms, you really don't know all the players.

The teams decide:

Mutual Judge Preference (MJP, alternately referred to as MPJ, Mutual Judge Preferences) moves the ranking directly to the teams debating; they get to decide for themselves, on an individual basis, which are the best judges. Prejudice is removed, or more to the point, the prejudices of anyone other than the people involved in the round. MJP is not perfect, and I think we'll see changes going forward in some of how it is implemented, but it is a better system for judge placement than any other, provided everyone uses it. Moving the decision of the quality of the judges to the teams makes sense: they are the ones who paid to attend the tournament, they are the ones who know the judges best (or at least enough of them) insofar as a particular judge's preferences on their own debating, and given that tournaments are competitions, the tournaments should make that competition as fair and efficient as possible.

WHAT MJP IS: An agreement between the two debaters about the nature of the judge. Whatever one debater has ranked the judge, so has the other, hence the word mutual.

WHAT MJP ISN'T: Selecting a judge favorable to you, thus gaining an unfair advantage. You and your opponent both rated the judge equally, so presumably any bias evens out.

WHAT MJP ALSO ISN'T: A guarantee of getting your most favored judge, i.e., all your A+ judges all the time. Some schools have been spoiled (I'll explain why in a second) and are used to getting only top choices, but that's just not the way MJP works. Once again, the word is mutual. So how does MJP operate? After all the judges for a tournament are set, the week before the event every team can rank every single one of the judges, usually on a scale 1 (highest) to 6 (strike). There is a set number for each ranking; conflicts are separate, and automatically removed from the math. A team can also have an unlimited number of 1s, if they are so inclined. The rest of the tiers have maximums. During the tournament, in each round the tab room will provide the best mutually preferred judge it can, according to a set procedure: assign to the bubble first, usually the down-2s, then the down-1s, then down-0s, then down-3s, to the end. (Much of this is automated, of course.) If a debater in a pairing has not ranked the judges, the opponent's ranking is followed. If neither debater ranks, judge assignments are random. Standard tabbing procedures insure that everyone gets the best judge the system can come up. Competitive needs (bubbles) are determiners of the order of placement. But keep in mind that mutual placement means mutual, not mutual until the number is too high; a lot of people don't get this. You can have a 2-2, a 3-3, a 4-4 or even a 5-5. At the point where we're giving you a 1-2 or 2-1 instead of a 3-3, it isn't mutual anymore. (The impacts of casting off mutuality to preserve high rankings are devastating to the judge pool at large, but that is not an issue for this discussion. The point is, if you advertise Mutual, you need to deliver Mutual—end of story.)

In the beginning, MJP in LD, for a variety of reasons, was a tool of what we'll call the Circuit teams. They would go to, say, Yale, which offered MJP, and rank all the judges. The non-Circuit teams, suspicious of the whole MJP thing, did not rank. This means that the Circuit teams got to call the shots. Since there was no issue of mutuality, and in practice the non-Circuit, non-ranking teams were telling the system they would take any judge in the pool, those who ranked always got their 1s and those who didn't rank either got their opponent's 1 (if the opponent ranked) or else any available judge in the pool if neither ranked. No wonder the average non-Circuit team looked at MJP with suspicion. MJP seemed to require a lot of in-depth knowledge of the judges, gleaned either from experience or from the judge paradigm wiki, and it was the sort of thing that seemed to exclude the average team (or anyone who doesn't have the masochistic streak necessary to read all the judge paradigms). So to start out, the system was that the Circuit teams got super judging, and everyone else either got the Circuit teams' judges or potluck. Since the average non-Circuit teams are what we might call Traditional style, the effect of this was to almost guarantee that Circuit style succeeded over Traditional style. And for no other reason than that the Traditionals weren't doing preferences! This is obviously a bad situation. Styles in LD have been evolving since day one, but by a natural selection process. This was genetic engineering. Something had to be done to ameliorate the situation, so we added a mandate for teams that, when initially registering for a tournament, a coach has to define his own judges as either Circuit, Traditional, or (trained) Newcomer. Simple as that. Either a judge claims to prefer Traditional LD, whatever that is, or Circuit LD, whatever that is—we all know both of them when we see them. So now the Traditional teams can mark all the traditional judges as 1s, and all the Circuit teams can mark all the traditional judges as 5s, and vice versa, with a lot of shading in-between.

Circuit teams no longer call the shots of who wins at tournaments simply on the basis of Circuit-biased judging.

There is a big—BIG—unexpected result from this. On the obvious side, it means that if you and your opponent are roughly on the same page, your judge will probably also be on that page. But in the LD world where there are big differences in approach, and as more and more Traditionalists catch up with ranking as do the Circuits, the likelihoods of 1-1 or even 2-2 prefs diminish. We've seen it already. More 3-3 pairings. Even some 4-4s, and once or twice a 5-5. After all, a judge pool is only so big. And what does this mean? If a Traditional kid hits a Circuit kid, in a world where everyone prefs, they are likely to have a judge neither of them considers a top choice. They're going to have to debate in front of a 3-3, someone who may be unknown to them, or someone who has a peculiar approach, or someone who doesn't like something either of them does like. What is a poor debater to do? Two words: judge adaptation. MJP, when used by half the field, is judge maximization for that half. MJP, when used by all the field, is the great leveler. LDers have to relearn how to adapt to all kinds judges, just as they used to 20 years ago, back in the day when judge adaptation was the number one means to success. Adaptation is probably not even on most people's list nowadays, but it's going to have to go back.

So why should you always pref? First, you give your students competitive equality; second, you keep the activity from going off in a single direction (i.e., the Traditionals are not handing LD to the Circuits on a silver platter of preferred judging); and third, you're actually bringing back the need for speakers to adjust to their audiences, which in the public speaking world outside of high school debate, is always the number one concern. As I said, there may be some rough edges on the procedures of MJP at the moment (nothing's perfect), but it works, and it's a better system than letting the tab room staff rule the world based on their personal prejudices. Plus it has the potential to keep LD honest—but only if everybody does it. MJP is a good thing. Do it.