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NSDA Nationals Public Forum Debate Topic Analysis

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Resolved: On balance, the benefits of United States Participation in the North American Free Trade Agreement outweigh the consequences.

Introduction and Background

When looking at the two topics the Public Forum Wording Committee released as options for this year's NSDA National Tournament, it is hard to ignore the impact President Trump's rhetoric during his 2016 campaign and since entering the White House has had on trade policy in the United States. While the topic that was selected by member coaches and students doesn't mention President Trump by name, the question of the resolution certainly asks debaters to consider the positions on both sides of the NAFTA debate that has been sparked by the President's opposition to the agreement – specifically, the resolution focuses on whether U.S. participation has been beneficial. This is an important component of the resolution to highlight, because a lot of the academic literature on NAFTA often examines the trade agreement as a whole – and not necessarily one country's participation. It will not be enough for debaters to read arguments about “NAFTA is good” or “NAFTA is bad” if they want to make the final round stage in Ft. Lauderdale next month – they will need to link those benefits or harms specifically to U.S. participation.

Before diving into specific affirmative and negative arguments, I want to take a moment to highlight some of the history surrounding NAFTA and remind students about how close to home some of their arguments might hit for their judges. While history often references NAFTA as a major policy development in the Bill Clinton administration, it is important to understand the vast majority of the NAFTA negotiations occurred during the George H. W. Bush administration. I point this out because as debaters research this topic, they will find there is no clear-cut divide between political ideologies when it comes to free trade policies. Politicians in both major U.S. political parties often advocate for free trade policies – as do think tanks that have political leanings – so it will be important to carefully vet your research to make sure you're consistent in your argumentation. Following ratification in 1993 by the House and Senate (with large numbers in both parties voting to ratify), President Clinton signed NAFTA into law on December 8, 1993 and the agreement went into effect on January 1, 1994.

As debaters examine the impacts of U.S. participation in NAFTA, they should be aware many Americans have developed strong feelings about this agreement over the past 24 years. Some of those feelings have been driven by personal experiences – such as the outsourcing of jobs or lower prices of goods – and some are driven by the political messaging that has been done on the issue of NAFTA (such as President Trump's or Bernie Sanders' anti-NAFTA positions). It will be important for debaters to present arguments that avoid the purely partisan arguments for and against the U.S. participation in NAFTA and

instead rely heavily on the significant amount of peer-reviewed research and statistical analysis that provides empirical support for each position.

As with any good debate topic, I do not believe there is a clear bias for either side in this debate. There are a large number of competent economic minds on both sides and this topic is going to produce some fantastic rounds at the National Tournament. Weighing is always critical in Public Forum, but it will be especially important in these debates. The resolution does not discuss to whom the benefits or harms must impact – but it does specify they must link to U.S. participation. Teams that successfully explain why their harms or benefits are the MOST important impact in the round and avoid getting caught up in the laundry list of impacts sure to exist in any trade policy will be the most successful.

Affirmative Positions

Affirmative teams at the national tournament will want to embrace arguments highlighting the advantages of having more free trade in the global economy. While it will be important for Affirmative teams to explain *why* the United States' participation is critical to NAFTA's successes/benefits, many of the arguments are going to be your "free trade good" arguments that advocates have made for decades.

It is important for Affirmative teams to paint a picture of what trade looked like BEFORE NAFTA, or what NAFTA would look like without the US – and draw comparisons to those worlds. One of the first things Affirmative teams will need to establish is the expansion of trade that occurred under NAFTA. By most accounts, trade has grown 3-4x as a direct result of NAFTA. That growth in trade is important, because it leads to a variety of economic advantages. The most common benefit cited by supporters of NAFTA is the expansion of exports for certain industries within the U.S. (and also Canada and Mexico). By eliminating tariffs, NAFTA has made it easier for industries to export goods at lower rates, thus making their goods more attractive to buyers. Negative teams obviously will dispute the benefits of these exports and point to some of the drawbacks, but Affirmative teams that effectively articulate the magnitude of the economic output caused by NAFTA will be in a strong position.

The issue of job creation and outsourcing will be central to many of the debates that occur in Ft. Lauderdale. Even if Affirmative teams elect NOT to run a jobs impact in their case, it is certain most negative teams will. Affirmative teams should be ready to engage in the jobs debate by highlighting the specific sectors that have created jobs as a result of NAFTA and have comparisons prepared to the outsourcing claims that will be made by most negative teams. It will also be important for Affirmative teams to be prepared to discuss job trends in Canada and Mexico – remember, the resolution requires links to U.S. participation, but not all impacts have to originate from the U.S. There may be opportunities for Affirmative teams to discuss job creation across all three nations – allowing that benefit to outweigh the Negative's harms. One way Affirmative teams might be able to tackle this more complicated approach is by examining Foreign Direct Investment and understanding how NAFTA increased FDI. This investment from U.S. banks and businesses into the Canadian and Mexican markets certainly provides

Affirmative teams with a direct link to U.S. participation in NAFTA. Any attempt to move the debate beyond purely U.S. impacts will require Affirmative teams to contest frameworks that try to limit the debate to U.S. citizens, but that is a certainly a winnable argument.

One of the most common arguments in support of free trade is that trade with fewer restrictions lowers prices. When examining the data surrounding NAFTA, you will find that prices went down is not disputed by most economists – instead, the debate centers on whether those lower prices are a good thing. For supporters of free trade, lower prices mean an individual can buy more – or their spending power increases. For example, Affirmative teams might argue that because NAFTA lowered prices in certain sectors, American middle class consumers were able to purchase more of the goods they needed/desired, thus generating economic activity and growth. Negative teams will dispute that interpretation (which I will discuss in just a little bit), but this is another key area of the debate Affirmative teams should be prepared for. A creative look at prices and spending power could offer Affirmative teams a strong position to build upon.

In addition to these more common pro-Free Trade arguments, Affirmative teams will have the opportunity to explore more creative avenues of argumentation as well. There is significant literature available on how free trade policies decrease the likelihood of conflict between nations, within a region, etc. While it is unlikely the U.S., Canada, and Mexico would ever find themselves in an armed conflict – there are certainly ways to link U.S. participation in NAFTA to other free trade policies around the globe, as well as the general endorsement of free trade as an economic foundation. In addition to the “world peace” approach, Affirmative teams could also impact out what lower prices or cheaper goods mean for government expenditures, etc. Increased competition for government contracts may lower expenditures, allowing governments to spend more on critical services or decrease the debt (if you believe governments ever actually care about the debt).

As Affirmative teams make decisions about their case arguments, my best advice would be to remember the “On balance” portion of the resolution. The resolution assumes there are benefits and consequences of U.S. participation in NAFTA – Affirmative teams should spend less time trying to deny consequences exist and more time focused on finding the biggest beneficial impacts that will outweigh those consequences. Affirmative teams that can build a narrative with that goal in mind will be very successful this June.

Negative Positions

As teams look to the Negative, they will need to take their Free Trade Good hats (Made in Mexico) off and replace them with their Protectionist/Populist gear (Made in the USA). To be clear: Negative teams do not have to indict every free trade agreement – just U.S. participation in NAFTA – but many of the arguments on this side of the resolution will mirror those made against free trade in general. Also it is important to note Negative teams have a slight advantage given the wording of the resolution and “On

Balance”. Negative teams should make it clear it is not enough for the Affirmative to show some benefits – if those benefits do not OUTWEIGH the consequences, then the Affirmative team has not proven the resolution true and the judge’s ballot should be cast for the Negative. This will probably require some clear framework and/or an overview at the top of the summary or final focus, but it could become useful in a close round.

The most common argument against NAFTA (or frankly most free trade policies) is that it destroyed American jobs. The argument goes like this: because NAFTA lifted restrictions between Canada, Mexico, and the United States, U.S. companies moved manufacturing and other jobs to Mexico where labor was significantly cheaper. Negative teams need to be ready with a very clear narrative of how/why this happens and be able to explain the magnitude of these impacts. Affirmative teams are going to respond with the benefits that outsourcing can provide (cheaper goods, more growth in other job sectors, etc.) – but Negative teams that can articulate the impact on specific industries/communities and how those consequences cannot be undone for those specific individuals or industries will be the most successful.

Even if companies did not actually outsource jobs due to NAFTA, there is a decent amount of literature arguing the threat alone also created consequences in the American economy. This literature argues companies in the U.S. used the threat of outsourcing to prevent the unionization of their workers and as a result suppressed wages, did not increase benefits, etc. It will be important for Negative teams to be clear about the link to NAFTA here – especially because plenty of other policies have impacted unionization in the United States over the past 20+ years – but if they can make their links clear, this argument is again specific to U.S. involvement and could outweigh numerous Affirmative benefits.

The two argument approaches above will likely generate the most U.S.-centric impacts in the debate for Negative teams. They will be an effective counter to any benefits the Affirmative claims for U.S. citizens, the U.S. economy, etc. Negative teams can choose to go the domestic route and stay focused on impacts to the U.S., but there is another path they may want to consider – and that would be the impact on Mexico. While rhetoric against NAFTA is the U.S. often focuses on U.S. jobs, there is significant literature that highlights the consequences of NAFTA on our neighbors to the South and those arguments deserve examination in this debate.

As NAFTA lifted restrictions between the three countries, companies in the United States took advantage of the lack of regulations and moved to Mexico. When they did so, they put a large number of Mexicans out of work – particularly in the farming industry. Because NAFTA allows for farm products subsidized by the U.S. in Mexico, Mexican farmers could not compete with the lower prices, etc. This had impacts on the Mexican economy, poverty rates, and even might have increased the flow of undocumented workers into the United States.

The impact on Mexico doesn't stop at farming. American companies often hear accusations of providing sub-standard working conditions in Mexico across all industries and have had a detrimental impact on the Mexican environment due to the use of specific chemicals and elimination of forests and other vital portions of the Mexican ecosystem. It might be difficult to make these issues central to the debate, but Negative teams that can neutralize the benefits of the Affirmative when talking about the U.S. economy might benefit from having impacts that can then outweigh when examining other countries. Remember, these harms in Mexico are not necessarily inherent to free trade – but instead have a clear link to the way the U.S. has participated in NAFTA. That reality provides a clear link to the resolution if articulated properly. Any attempt by Negative teams to expand the debate beyond U.S. impacts will require a clearly articulated and extended framework, but if that is accomplished, a lot of arguments possibilities become accessible.

Conclusion

President Trump has made it clear in his public statements (and on his Twitter feed) that he believes NAFTA is a bad deal for the American people. However, when the President is asked to provide details about his new approach to NAFTA, we don't get a clear picture of what U.S. participation will look like if President Trump actually renegotiated the deal. As such, debaters at the National Tournament should focus on what impact U.S. participation NAFTA has had up to this point and not engage in speculation about what Trump's NAFTA could mean for Canada, Mexico, or the United States.

As teams prepare for Ft. Lauderdale, my primary advice would be to read. Read before you write your cases. Read before you cut all of your blocks. Read before you make any major strategic decisions. NAFTA is complicated, and there is 24 years' worth of analysis and data to comb. Don't jump to a conclusion just because one author says so. Work to verify those conclusions and build a case strategy that doesn't just have a piece of evidence to support it – but also passes the logical test of “does this make sense?” The National Tournament is a marathon, not a sprint, and the teams that make it to Friday's final stage see their cases change a lot between Round 1 on Monday and the end of the week. Those changes come from constant reading – because the work is never done.

Best of luck to you and your teams as you embark on my favorite tournament of the year. Enjoy the moment and appreciate the opportunity you have to compete against the best of the best. We can't wait to meet you at our ISD table at Sunday's NSDA Expo and at the ISD Student Posting Party on Tuesday evening. See you in Ft. Lauderdale!