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The Objectivity of Debate Judges

by ROBERT L. SCOTT*

"The problem of securing competent judges of debate is always with us."¹ This statement is as true in 1954 as it was in 1917 when Lew Sarett made it. At the turn of the century, however, important personages, governors and judges, for example, were invited or hired to sit as debate judges and to render their decisions. Today the average intercollegiate debate situation is the tournament debate. Two teams debate before a critic-judge, generally a coach from some other school entered in the tournament, who designates the "winning" team and who is often required to give oral or written criticisms and to assign quality ratings to the debaters.

Debaters and debate coaches are notoriously dissatisfied with debate judges. There seems to be a good number of debaters who have never lost a debate but who have fallen victim to some incompetent judging. At times the wails of these debaters and coaches have reached such pitch that many in the field of speech have become disgusted with the problems which arise from debate decisions and have advocated non-decision debating.

A main thread that winds through the controversy over judging debate, in this writer's observation, is the ability of judges to be objective. Judges have been charged in general and in particular with giving decisions based upon bias or personal opinion on the merits of the question debated rather than the merits of the particular debate.

Common sense would seem to lend some credence to these charges. Since debate questions today are chosen from problems of current national and international importance, and since debate coaches are generally men with good education who must—because of the nature of their jobs—be quite familiar with the questions which their teams debate, it would be difficult for them to keep from forming some sort of opinion on the merits

of the questions currently debated. Can we not assume that when these coaches are pressed into service at debate tournaments that they will be likely to be influenced by their own preconceived opinions? But although this assumption is often made, and although debaters complain vigorously, we have little evidence on this problem other than the opinions based on general observation of debate.

In the first issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* an article dealing with the judging of debate appeared.² These articles have continued up to the present but there was an especially vigorous outpouring of the problem of judging debates in the second decade of this century. In general these articles reached three conclusions: that securing competent judges is a perplexing problem; that the most common complaint against judges is that they allow their personal opinions on the merits of the question to influence their decisions; and that experience helps make a better debate judge.

This writer determined to examine the problem of judging debate objectively from the standpoint of the conclusions reached by these writers. The problem was one of determining the opinions on the merits of a debate question of the judges in a tournament situation, learning the amount of experience of each judge, and then determining whether or not these opinions and the experience of the judges affected the objectivity of their decisions and quality ratings.

The subjects for this study were forty-four judges, college debate coaches, from forty-two colleges and universities from nine states which participated in the annual University of Nebraska Debate and Discussion Conference February 23 and 24, 1951. These judges gave 158 decisions and 632 quality ratings.

Each judge filled out a questionnaire during registration for the conference. This questionnaire contained two key items: which side of the question the judge was personally very favorable to or slightly favorable to and

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1. Lew R. Sarett, "The Expert Judge of Debate," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, III (April, 1917), 135.

2. Howard S. Woodard, "Debating Without Judges," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, I (October, 1915), 229-33.

how much experience the judge had. (An index of experience was obtained by adding together the number of years the judge had debated in college and high school and the number of years he had coached college or high school debate.)

On the basis of the response to these two questions, the judges were divided into several groups. One set of groups was determined by the judges' opinions on the merit of the question. These groups were the very favorable, the slightly favorable, the entirely favorable (the sum of the first two groups), the undecided, the slightly unfavorable, the very unfavorable, and the entirely unfavorable (the sum of the last two groups). To test the significance of experience, the entirely favorable, the undecided, and the entirely unfavorable groups were subdivided into the more and the less experienced (using the medium as the dividing point).

Using the decisions and quality ratings from the judges' ballots, eighty-five different statistical comparisons were made. The decisions of each group were compared to that expected, i.e. an equal number of affirmative and negative decisions; the mean quality ratings each group assigned to affirmative and negative debaters were compared to see if any group favored either side; the superior ratings assigned by each group to affirmative and negative debaters were compared. In addition the decisions and quality ratings of the groups were compared with each other. For example, the mean quality ratings of the judges who were very favorable to the question were compared to the mean quality ratings of the judges who were very unfavorable to the question.

Although it is impossible to record the result of all these statistical comparisons here, the conclusion indicated by this analysis may be stated quite simply: the opinion of the judges on the merits of the question debated had no significant effect upon their decisions, mean quality ratings, or assignment of superior ratings. Even a comparison of the ratings and decisions of groups extremely unlike in opinions on the merits of the question failed to show a statistically significant difference in their awarding of decisions or assigning of quality ratings.

The comparison of the more and less experienced judges was interesting. In general

the division of the judges into sub-groups according to whether they fell above or below the median amount of experience had little effect upon their decisions, mean quality ratings, or assignment of superior ratings. Although the mean quality ratings of the more and less experienced judges did not differ significantly, the less experienced judges had a consistent tendency to assign a greater number of quality ratings above and below the mean than did the more experienced judges. In other words, the ratings of the more experienced judges tended to group more closely to a central tendency than did those of the less experienced judges.

Of course these conclusions must be put into their proper perspective. This was merely one experiment with one group of judges in one tournament situation. The data reported give strong but not conclusive evidence concerning the objectivity of debate judges. Any positive conclusions must arise from the logical examination of a number of objective analyses of the performances of many debate judges in different situations and on different debate questions. The tentative general conclusion indicated is that the average college debate coach or speech teacher who is called upon to judge intercollegiate debate is quite objective in giving decisions and assigning quality ratings to debaters and that opinions on the question debated will have little effect upon the judge's objectivity. Less experienced debate coaches seem to be as objective as the more experienced, but the less experienced seem to be more variable in their assignment of quality ratings.

The charge of bias is not the only one levelled against debate judges. The opportunity awaits other investigators—I would say especially upon the master's level—not only to go beyond this study in method and scope in analyzing the objectivity of debate judges but also to analyze other important characteristics of debate judges.

Discretion of speech is more than eloquence; and to speak agreeably to him with whom we deal, is more than to speak in good words or in good order. —*Bacon, Essay XXXII*

Men are never so likely to settle a question rightly as when they discuss it freely.

—*Macaulay*