

Faulty Speaker Recognition Systems: “Longest Standing” and “Activity” Waste Time



by Adam J. Jacobi

While I have coached Dramatic Interp., Policy Debate and everything in between, my passion seems to have become Student Congress Debate. Perhaps it's because I discovered early in life that communication is the crux of how our democratic society works, and the dynamism of lawmaking is a true test of problem solving at work. To that end, I introduce you to the monthly “Congress Connection” column, where I will ponder issues central to this event, and endeavor to bring it to the masses!

In the last Rostrum article I penned about Congress (November 2006), I discussed what I dubbed “urban legends” of Congress: the use of procedures that are not actual procedures! I also pondered ethics and the efficiency of chambers: upholding the ultimate aim that Congress is really more about speaking and debating than it is about the procedure. To that end, I present some new parliamentary customs that have arisen, and my observations and recommendations, accordingly.

Foremost is the much-maligned conundrum of speaker recognition. The prevailing parliamentary rule in most leagues is precedence, that is, those speakers who have not spoken, or who have spoken least. However, before precedence is established, recognition is still random, and subject to the bias of the elected student presiding officer. So, to combat this, recency was devised, adding one priority layer to precedence by recognizing the legislator who spoke least recently (earliest). When employed,

recency actually continues for the duration of a session, in companionship to precedence. In my observation of Congress chambers across the country and in different leagues, students have chosen to adopt this norm on their own, lending credence to its effectiveness.

In their quest to appear impartial, students who preside have devised less effective and efficient measures to recognize speakers before precedence is established. The first of these is longest standing, which recognizes speakers who stood first (and conceivably, continued to stand) on each side of debate for a particular legislation. The problem with this is twofold: the presiding officer has to take the time to write down everyone who stood, taking care to note shorter persons in the back of the room, plus, the order in which s/he writes the names is still random, but subject to bias. So, this approach fails to mitigate bias, and actually adds more time to figuring recognition, taking time away from legislators to speak.

Next, there's the notion of activity, which is even less effective than Longest Standing. Here, presiding officers track questions, and in some cases, motions by students on the floor. Those who advocate this system assert that it encourages more interaction in a chamber. The reality is that students make gratuitous motions and ask meaningless questions just to get recognized. And, guess what? The presiding officer has

control over who to call on for motions and questions, so this little magic trick of illusion only shifts the perception of bias away from recognizing speeches. Again, extra time is wasted in figuring these fallacious factors of mitigating bias. What's more, the NFL added one minute of questioning after each speech following the sponsorship, which encourages more interactivity. However, that period should not be used gratuitously, either. It should be reserved for meaningful, substantive questions that truly extend or clarify debate.

The bottom line is that longest standing and activity are a waste of time, because they do not truly aid a presiding officer in adding objective priority layers to the recognition system.

Beyond the effective recency method, there aren't any prevailing norms I've observed that mitigate the need to randomly recognize speakers before precedence is established. Beware those that claim to eliminate that bias, because they're usually a smoke and mirrors approach that can actually waste more time.

Next month, I'll discuss abuse use of voting blocs and other manipulative measures that discourage smaller and starting Congress programs. If you have any comments, concerns, questions or ideas you'd like to pose in this column, please let me know! E-mail jacobi@nflonline.org.