

Statistical analysis of the Amsterdam Open 2008 Debate Rounds

Introduction

We at the Amsterdam Open value quality above anything else. That's why we provide you with a top-notch tournament, in one of Europe's finest cities, and enmesh you in our "couleur locale" – whether that be tourist-biking trips around the city or discreetly pointing you to our coffeeshops and red light district. And because we value quality, we also analyze the results of the motions and debates, because we want to be able to provide you with as fair a tournament as possible.

That's why we provide you with the statistics for the Amsterdam Open 2008. The full statistics can be found online, here: <http://www.kdco.nl/AO2008/Round%205%20-%20main/Statistics%20After%20Round%205.html> In this report we concentrate on the most salient bits. We'll present the results per motion, and conclude with the overall results.

Here's our basic assumption: we expect every team to be equally good, and every motion to be equally winnable from every position. This means that for every debate, we expect 25% of the OGs to become 1st, 25% of OOs to become 1st, 25% of CGs to be first and 25% of COs to be first. The same goes for every other position. Does this assumption hold true?

Round 1: THW criminalize the act of having sex with a heroin-addicted prostitute.

Here are the results for the first round. At first glance, there seems to be a slight shift away from first proposition: first prop teams were a little bit more likely to not become 1st, in favor of the others. But, given the fact that we had 13 rooms (52 teams), this result is statistically insignificant.

Round 1	OG	OO	CG	CO
1st	15,3%	30,7%	30,7%	23,0%
2nd	30,7%	23,0%	15,3%	30,7%
3d	30,7%	23,0%	23,0%	23,0%
4th	23,0%	23,0%	30,7%	23,0%

The main weakness of this motion is of course with the "heroin-addicted" – why not add "crack", or LSD or what have you not? This might make it an op-favored motion, but the results show it wasn't.

Round 2: THW not allow political parties based on religious grounds

This motion is definitely more op-favored. Both OG and CG only became first in 7,6% of the debates held. This result is statistically significant.

Round 2	OG	OO	CG	CO
1st	7,6%	38,4%	7,6%	46,1%
2nd	23,0%	30,7%	23,0%	23,0%
3d	30,7%	15,3%	46,1%	7,6%
4th	38,4%	15,3%	23,0%	23,0%

The problem in this case lies with the words “based on religious grounds”. Many of the debates focused on the definition of these exact words. When OG defined it as meaning something to the effect of “political parties based on extremist religious grounds”, opposition argued that this definition was too strict, and when OG kept it broader, opposition argued it was too broad. The debate we were aiming for was the broader debate: whether parties in a democracy should be based on identities (like religion), or interests (like class interests, geographic regions, et cetera). Clearly, our intention failed.

Round 3: publicly recognize the right of the Tibetan people to national independence

This motion again worked out fine. Even though at first glance there seems to be an op-bias, this result is not statistically significant enough to draw conclusions on – even the fact that OG came either 1st or 2nd in only 3 out of 13 cases has a p-value of 9,2%. That is statistics-speak for: you shouldn’t worry about it.

Round 3	OG	OO	CG	CO
1st	15,3%	30,7%	15,3%	38,4%
2nd	7,6%	23,0%	46,1%	23,0%
3d	38,4%	23,0%	23,0%	15,3%
4th	38,4%	23,0%	15,3%	23,0%

Even though this motion had been run at Prague and Ankara just in the month before the AO2008, we still wanted to run it. The reason was that we felt the motion has not been debated enough at tournaments in the Netherlands. Even though it was an international tournament, we decided it was about time that a Dutch tournament ran something that tied into this highly current and relevant topic.

Round 4: would limit the voting rights of the elderly

This motion turned out to be the most unbalanced motion of the tournament. None of the OGs came first, and none of the OOs came either 3rd or 4th. A clear “ opp-sweep”, this one, unfortunately:

Round 4	OG	OO	CG	CO
1st	0,0%	46,1%	15,3%	38,4%
2nd	15,3%	53,8%	0,0%	30,7%
3d	46,1%	0,0%	38,4%	15,3%
4th	38,4%	0,0%	46,1%	15,3%

The reason why we gave this motion was because a few years ago, pension-scheme and welfare state debates were held a lot, usually with motions along the lines of “THW raise the age of eligibility for pensions to 70 years” or something to that effect. These debates almost always seemed to get stuck on “but the elderly would never agree to such a breach of societal contract – and they are one of the biggest voting blocs, so reform will never happen”. This motion tried to have the same debate about how pension-schemes are burdening our welfare states, but then to get deeper into the nature of solidarity between generations, providing prop-side with a means to circumvent the “but they will never agree”-argument. We assumed that the topic of pension schemes would be sufficiently well-known for most debaters to tie this in directly, but in many debates, this didn’t happen.

In hindsight, we should have chosen for the alternative wordings we had for this motion, which was: ‘THW limit the voting rights of those who are pensioned’. This alternative would have been better

than the one we've ended up with since it would have given OG a clear pointer as to *why* exactly the elderly would deserve a lesser voting right. During this specific debate, many OGs did find the right *principled* argumentation ("votes are cast for the future, but the elderly have no interest in the future, since they have none, they have an interest in here and now") but failed to tie it in to this specific policy problem. By tying the two closer together, building a specific case would have been much easier – and we might have gotten the debate we wanted to have.

Then again, when pension-scheme and welfare state-debates were in vogue, the motions didn't propose a remedy like limiting voting rights, but rather on more widely discussed measures like raising the pension-age. It might well be that the policy that this motion proposes is very difficult to argue for.

We could have also chosen for another wording, which was: 'THW differentiate voting rights according to age', leaving it up to OG whether they wanted to talk about the elderly hollowing out the welfare state, or about the young who are have a hard time wizening up and becoming "good citizens". We didn't choose that one because we felt it was unfair to CG to leave them in the dark on the policy until OG announces their choice.

As it stands, this motion turned out to be very op-favored, and this is not good.

Round 5: This house would ban the practice of S&M

Thankfully, this one turned out to be a bit more balanced: there are no statistically significant deviations from our expectations.

Round 5	OG	OO	CG	CO
1st	38,4%	23,0%	15,3%	23,0%
2nd	7,6%	30,7%	30,7%	30,7%
3d	23,0%	15,3%	23,0%	38,4%
4th	30,7%	30,7%	30,7%	7,6%

We expected this debate to be well-balanced along the prop-op-axis, and it apparently turned out that way. This was our motion to "separate the men from the boys" *and* give something juicy and philosophically quite tough to end with. It separates the men from the boys because it is easy, on prop-side, to say "SM, yuck!" and on the op-side to mumble a bit about what a men called J.S. Mill once wrote about ("what? *Liberty?*"), but difficult to really extend on that for the entire debate. Our judges did hear some really smart arguments and well-thought through analysis, so compliments to all our debaters for that.

Overall

The overall results show an overall op-bias on the Amsterdam Open 2008:

Overall	OG	OO	CG	CO
1st	15,3%	33,8%	16,9%	33,8%
2nd	16,9%	32,3%	23,0%	27,6%
3d	33,8%	15,3%	30,7%	20,0%
4th	33,8%	18,4%	29,2%	18,4%

The assumption of 25% of every result for every position didn't hold true. OG had the biggest disadvantage: OG became either 1st or 2nd in 32,2% of the cases, and 3rd or 4th in the rest of the cases. The situation was slightly better for CG, who became 1st or 2nd in 39,9% of debates – but this difference was marginal. OO had the biggest advantage: it became 1st or 2nd in 66,1% of the debates. It was marginally better then CO, who became 1st or 2nd in 61,4% of all preliminary rounds.

Conclusion

The conclusion is clear: there was an op-bias on the Amsterdam Open 2008, and it is largely due to two motions: the motion on political parties and religious grounds, and the motion on voting rights for the elderly. The latter one especially formed a problem, since none of the OGs came first there. Of course, positions are assigned evenly, which means every team can expect to see every position at least once. But if you are unlucky enough to have drawn OG in this particularly uneven round, that reasoning doesn't provide much comfort. And also, some teams may have to face the "unlucky" OG-position twice.

On the positive side, we can draw our lessons from this analysis. For the next tournament, we provide the following recommendations:

1. The judging panel should take care that the words in the motion can be clearly defined. In hindsight, the 2nd motion left open too much of what was meant by "religious grounds". This is, so to say, a "linguistic" error.
 2. In the case of topics not used very recently, or of topics which have a somewhat "off-beat" implied policy, the judging panel should take care to hint at the specific problem the implied policy is to solve. At least, "limiting voting rights from the pensioned" provides OG with both a policy and a clear problem, "limiting voting rights of the elderly" doesn't.
 3. In case recommendation 2 doesn't provide help, the judging panel should take care not to air motions that imply policies which are "off-beat" or "strange". A criterion for the judging panel could be to check whether a certain implied policy has actually been proposed and/or defended by a serious political or intellectual leader in any serious magazine before. The last recommendation does have the drawback that it makes debating less innovative: instead of being able to seek truly new solutions to current political and philosophical problems, it condemns debaters to only dealing with what other people already talk about. One of the best motions at WUDC Vancouver, in my view, Alex Deane's "THBT people sentenced to life imprisonment should be allowed to choose the death penalty instead" would probably have never made it as a WUDC QF-motion if this last recommendation would actually be applied.

With these recommendations, we expect the Amsterdam Open 2009 to be more fair and have less of an opposition-bias.

Daniël Schut, Chief Adjudicator AO2008

With help from:

Anne Valkering, DCA AO2008

Avihu Tamir, DCA AO2008

Julius Lindenbergh, Tab Director AO2008

Kirsty Russell, DCA AO2008

Thank you very much!