



Questions and Answers

The questions asked in a debate (or “Points of Information”, “POIs” for short) are the only moments in which two rival speakers directly address one another rather than simply making speeches to the audience and judges. Accordingly, they are unique opportunities for speakers to emphasise the key areas of disagreement between the two sides, as well as being the only way for speakers to continue to participate once they have had their say. Offering questions is a good way of directly attacking an opponent's position, whilst accepting and confidently answering the opposing side's criticisms is an impressive way of reinforcing your message and demonstrating that it can stand up to hostile scrutiny.

Rules, Convention & Etiquette

Under British Parliamentary rules, questions may not be offered in the first and last minute of every speech (“Protected Time”). When offering POI, convention is to stand up and say something like “Point of information”, “On that point” or “Question”; and to sit down again promptly if the offer is rejected or ignored for more than a few seconds. It is against the rules to “headline” questions (“On a point on criminal negligence”, for example), because doing so introduces material when the speaker holds the floor without giving him a chance to reject it. Speakers are not obliged to accept questions, but it looks strong if they can accept and answer one or two, though they should not accept many more than that or they risk it seeming their speech is being hijacked by the opposing team. It is important to remember that even when a question is accepted, the speaker still holds the floor. Accordingly, POIs should not be longer than ten seconds or so, and can be cut short by the speaker at any point when they want to resume their speech. It is generally considered improper to ask a question on a point which the speaker is not currently talking about. If a questioner is simply seeking clarification (what the speaker precisely means) rather than an opportunity to ask a hostile question they should say “On a point of clarification” or simply “Clarification” to indicate to the

speaker that it is simply a query about an ambiguity rather than an aggressive POI: *“Sir, would your ban cover expenses as well?”*

Technique

Weak Points of Information are typically just inconsequential objections to an irrelevant detail without really attacking the main argument; *“But madam your example is out of date. Malta stopped using proportional representation two years ago”*, or simply repeat what the questioner had said in his own speech without adding any new analysis or engaging with the speaker’s argument: *“Sir, as I told you in my speech and as you’d know if you had listened, to have an abortion is a fundamental human right!”*

Strong questions point out the holes in an argument; *“You’ve told us why dictators have the power and decisive authority to get things done, but you’ve missed that they will abuse that power because their interests and incentives are counter to those of the public”*, or simply query an assertion made by the speaker: *“Madam you’re assuming that women who become prostitutes are always in a position where they have a free choice between lots of other careers and there is no reason to believe that this is true”*.

Make sure you have a clear idea of what you are going to ask before you offer your question because when you have (at most) ten seconds to ask, smooth delivery is important. The most effective questions are short, sharp, precise and to the point; which makes them difficult to evade or neuter with a vague response: *“Can you tell me exactly why prisoners always retain their right to vote?”*

Speakers should never resort to accepting and answering a string of POIs as a way of extending their speech if they run out of things to say. It is much better to wrap up and sit down early than to let their speech be hijacked. When answering a question there is no penalty for pausing for a moment to think of a suitable response rather than rushing to answer. If a speaker doesn’t understand a question it is usually better to simply say *“I’m sorry I don’t understand your question”* than to waste precious time by hearing the question repeated, unless the question is very short.

Tactics

It is not always clear how many questions should be offered. Since questions are expected to be immediately relevant to what is being discussed, and since only a few questions are likely to be answered; it makes sense to offer points very frequently (to prevent the rival team from being more visible); yet since speakers cannot realistically expect to get more than one POI accepted it also makes sense to offer only the strongest points which come to mind, (so they don't blow their chance by offering a weaker objection). The optimum balance is to offer as many POIs as possible which meet a certain minimum standard. There is a similar dilemma in deciding when to ask a question: is it better to prioritise and only challenge the key points of a speech, or to offer every objection which comes to mind? Once again, a balance is to be found.

An inverse dilemma exists for the speaker when deciding when to answer a question: let them waste their questions on contesting your rebuttal or irrelevant examples, or prove the robustness of your key points by accepting questions? Since confidently dealing with a good question massively strengthens a speech, speakers should be eager to accept questions on them as soon as they feel confident enough to do so. The worst possible time to accept a question is when a speaker is building up to an important point because answering the question can derail them and cause them to lose their momentum (which is often the questioner's objective).

Another consideration is whether to risk unveiling "secret" material in a POI. Teams on the second half of the table have to decide whether they want to risk using some of the material they have prepared for their speeches in advance through in a question. Doing so is risky because there is no way of stopping the teams on the top half from stealing the point for themselves and developing it in their own speeches, leaving those on the bottom half with nothing to add.

The final area of tactics to consider is that of traps. A cleverly worded and innocent sounding question can, if answered too readily, lead a speaker into adopting a stance

which is somehow incompatible with his overall position (something the questioner will gleefully demonstrate when they spring the trap in their own speech). A trap question typically sounds something like: *“Do you oppose extracting criminal confessions with torture?”* The obvious answer (a simple “yes”) sets the trap and allows it to be sprung: *“He accepted that extracting confessions under duress would be wrong, yet his own position of taking a defendant's plea bargain into account when sentencing introduces exactly the same coercive incentives in a softer form, undermining the legitimacy of our judicial process in exactly the same way.”* Needless to say, leading a speaker into such a trap is a spectacular way of destroying their case. To avoid falling into such traps it is advisable to think carefully before offering what seems like an obvious answer and to ensure any answer offered is more sophisticated than a simple yes/no: *“Of course we oppose the judicial use of torture, because it violates the principle of personal sovereignty and bodily integrity and subjects a possibly innocent person to extreme and cruel treatment.”* This answer, by offering a precise reason for it, allows the speaker who gives it to prevent it from being misrepresented or twisted by the questioner, whereas a simple answer of “yes” would allow the questioner to choose a reason for it which suited their own position.

Conclusion

Points of information are an important part of any debate, and are the only way to stay constantly involved. Good questions are short, sharp critiques of important flaws in an argument rather than trivial or rambling objections to irrelevant points or bad examples. Taking, rejecting, offering and asking questions confidently is crucial to debating effectively.