Framing for Success: Strategy Overview

By Mark Csoros

Resolved: Economic stability is more important than economic growth.

Hello, everyone! I hope that your initial research into the resolution is going well, and I’ve written this article to give you a few additional pointers to help you on your way. As you can tell from the title, this is a strategy overview, so this piece is primarily concerned with helping you gain a better strategic view of the resolution, and with helping you implement those big-picture concepts into more focused strategic tactics. By way of a roadmap, Part One of this article deals with the clash (or conflict) in the resolution, Part Two covers applications and their implementation, and Part Three focuses on the strategic implications of the economic data that is so important to this year’s resolution. In each of those three main parts, there are four subsections: the basics of the topic, the problem that needs solving, the strategic solution to that problem, and the key takeaways, which are specific tactics to implement and important tips to keep in mind.

## Part I: The Clash

### The Basics

Understanding how and why the two sides of the resolution conflict is the fundamental basis for all LD strategy. Some resolutions feature a clash that’s easy to define and understand; some resolutions, like this one, make it harder to pinpoint where the two sides are in conflict. If you’ve read the Resolutional Overview article, you know that economic growth is “an increase in the production of economic goods and services, compared from one period of time to another,”[[1]](#footnote-1) and that “in the context of economic theory it generally refers to an increase in wealth over an extended period.”[[2]](#footnote-2) You also know that economic stability is “a term used to describe the financial system of a nation that displays only minor fluctuations in output growth and exhibits a consistently low inflation rate,”[[3]](#footnote-3) and that “an economy with constant output growth and low and stable price inflation is likely to be regarded as stable.”[[4]](#footnote-4) If you aren’t as familiar with those definitions as you’d like to be, I recommend that you get a good grasp of the material in the resolutional overview before you continue reading this article. Reading about resolutional analysis and big picture strategy won’t help you very much unless you have a solid foundation of definitional knowledge.

### The Problem: No Definitional Conflict

Unfortunately, those definitions of economic stability and economic growth aren’t mutually exclusive and aren’t even necessarily conflicting. An economy that produces more goods and services each year (a growing economy) isn’t necessarily unstable. By the same token, a stable economy can be, and usually is, a growing economy. This is important to understand, because it means that our definitions don’t inherently provide conflict between the two sides of the resolution. If we were to trust the definitions by themselves to provide clash, both debaters would just agree that economic policy should aim for growth that is both rapid and stable, giving us the best of both sides of the resolution, but making it impossible to argue that one is more important than the other. Unless you’re on the negative side of the resolution and running a balanced NEG or a resolutional critique, you need the two sides of the resolution to conflict so that you can prove that your side is better. To find that conflict, we have to go beyond the definitions and get a little bit creative.

### The Solution: The Perpetual Conflict of “More”

Consider, for example, a resolution that said “Resolved: When choosing what to eat, taste is more important than nutrition.” Both taste and nutrition are important, and every food features some balance between tastiness and nutrition (cookies are generally high tastiness and low nutrition, broccoli is usually low tastiness and high nutrition). Ideally, every food would be like steak, which is healthy and tastes good. Unfortunately, some foods are unhealthy and don’t even taste good (these foods tend to mysteriously appear when I attempt to bake). Just like economic growth and economic stability in this year’s resolution, taste and nutrition aren’t mutually exclusive and don’t have to conflict.

This is where the Perpetual Conflict of “More” - PCOM, for short - comes in. The PCOM is a term that I came up with (trademark pending), that helps explain how LD resolutions create a clash between two ideals that seem to lack inherent conflict. Here’s how it works when applied to this resolution: every single economic policy can either place more emphasis on stability, or more emphasis on growth, and every single economy is either treating growth or stability as more important. In other words, because we’re constantly making decisions about what’s more important, the two sides of the resolution are constantly in conflict.

### The Takeaway: Frame Appropriately

There are two traps that you need to avoid in order to appropriately frame the conflict of this resolution. First, don’t make the mistake of thinking that you need an “all or nothing” type of mentality. There can be resolutional conflict when both stability and growth are being valued. In fact, both stability and growth are always being valued, and there is always conflict, because the resolution says “more important.” However, if you overcompensate while trying to avoid that “all or nothing” mindset, you’ll fall into the second trap: failing to draw any distinction between the two sides of the resolution. The PCOM means that any time one side of the resolution is valued more, the other side must be valued less, and you need to emphasize that point of conflict. If you’re on affirmative, you have to make it clear that because economic stability is more important, economic growth is less important, which means that you’re willing to sacrifice some amount of growth in exchange for long-term, stable, but ultimately slower economic growth. On negative, because economic growth is more important, economic stability is less important, which means that you’ll prioritize rapid economic growth even at the risk of creating dramatic fluctuations in the economy.

In summary, you can’t argue that the two sides of the resolution are diametrically opposed, because they aren’t, and you can’t argue that the two sides of the resolution are exactly the same (though they could be, under the right circumstances), because the round must have conflict. So, you need to find a happy medium, where you can acknowledge that valuing one side of the resolution doesn’t completely do away with the other side, but also where you can acknowledge the differences in emphasis that cause the two sides to conflict.

## Part II: Applications

### The Basics

Applications are crucial components of an LD strategy, and using them properly can give you a huge competitive advantage. This section discusses the strategic benefits and limitations of applications, outlines how this resolution makes it challenging to run them effectively, and describes a pair of techniques to overcome that challenge.

### Strategic Value

Applications are great strategic tools because they exemplify how principles and concepts apply to the real world (that’s why they’re called “applications”). Arguing that economic stability is theoretically better than economic growth is good, but demonstrating how that theoretical advantage led to real benefits in the real world is strategically much better. However, bear in mind that applications by themselves don’t prove that a principle is true, they’re just examples of instances where the principle happened to be true. If you were arguing that McDonald’s is better than Burger King, describing one bad meal that you got at a Burger King wouldn’t prove that you were right. However, that low quality meal can help demonstrate and support your argument that McDonald’s is better because it generally has higher-quality meals.

Applications also carry strategic risks and rewards because they can be “turned.” When an application is turned, it means that it’s been hijacked to support the side of the resolution that it was originally used against. Just as an example, let’s take the Great Depression, which Coach Vance Trefethen wrote about in his Historical Applications article. The Aff debater uses the Depression as an example of economic growth gone wrong, claiming that the rapid growth of the Roaring 20’s caused the Crash of 1929 and ushered in depression. The Neg debater argues that the Federal Reserve’s response to the Crash - which heavily emphasized stability over growth -increased the length and severity of the Depression. If the Negative debater is successful, and convinces the judge that economic stability was more to blame for the Great Depression, then the application has been turned from a piece of Affirmative support to a piece of Negative support.

Successfully turning an application has huge strategic value. If you can turn your opponent’s example back on him, it will boost your credibility while diminishing your opponent’s, and give you a time advantage at the expense of your opponent. Let’s say your opponent, as the Affirmative debater, spends thirty seconds explaining how unstable economic growth caused the Great Depression, and thirty seconds describing how badly it damaged the U.S. economy. Even if you spend forty-five seconds explaining why the Fed’s anti-growth response to the Crash was the real reason the Depression was so “Great,” you get to take advantage of the thirty seconds where your opponent talked about the Depression’s impact. Since you just proved that the Depression supports your side, you spend forty-five seconds and get a “free” thirty seconds, and your opponent has not only wasted a minute on this application, but spent half of that minute constructing an argument that ultimately hurts his own side. LD rounds are short, so even brief amounts of time can give you a huge strategic advantage. Look out for opportunities to turn one of your opponent’s applications, and be careful that your applications are solid enough that they can’t be turned against you.

### The Problem: Application Sorting

When the two sides of the resolution don’t conflict definitionally, it can be hard to determine if an application helps or hurts your side of the resolution. Since any given economic policy or historical example could be definitionally consistent with economic stability or economic growth, sorting applications into an Affirmative pile and a Negative pile can be a daunting task. Thinking back to the “taste vs nutrition” example resolution that we discussed in the last section, we get a feel for how hard it can be to properly classify applications. Steak tastes good and is good for you, and the things that I bake are bad for you and don’t taste good, so what goes where? Fortunately, sorting economic applications is a bit easier than sorting foodstuffs, and there are a couple of methods that you can use to properly categorize this resolution’s applications.

### The Solution: Two Methods

The first and most straightforward method of sorting applications involves highlighting the changes in an economy’s growth rate. If an economy grew by 2% one year, then by 8% the next year, then by 4% the next year, then that economy is clearly not exhibiting stability. The growth rate is all over the place, increasing fourfold in one year, then decreasing by half the next year. But, if an economy has exhibited similar growth rates for several years, it’s likely an example of an economy that is valuing stability over growth.

The second method involves understanding an economy’s potential for economic growth. Vox writes that:

“Likewise, more than a few quarters of super-fast growth would be unsustainable, and could mean the economy is overheated and that inflation is or will soon be a problem. It’s not an exact science, but growth that’s centered somewhere around 3 or 3.5 percent is considered strong in the U.S. The country hasn’t quite attained that level of sustained growth yet since the recession. But it’s not the same in every country. Developing nations can often produce much faster economic growth for years on end, as they catch up to the developed world by doing things like improving their infrastructure.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Because the U.S., is a developed nation, we can’t sustain the same growth rates as developing nations. If we tried to match the growth rates of those developing nations, our economy would be at risk of “overheating.” Investopedia tells us that “an overheated economy is one that is expanding at a rate that is unsustainable,” and points out that an overheated economy can often lead to a dramatic drop in growth, a recession, or even a depression.[[6]](#footnote-6) Developing nations can experience faster economic growth, without overheating and sacrificing economic stability, simply because they have more room to grow.

Armed with this knowledge, we have a way of using an economy’s growth rate, and not the changes in growth rate, to determine which side of the resolution is being prioritized in any given application. We just need to determine if that economy is growing faster than its potential. If a developing country like Kenya has 8% economic growth and isn’t even close to overheating, then probably valuing stability. But, if the U.S. were to experience 8% economic growth, it’s likely that our economy would be growing unsustainably quickly at the expense of stability. This tactic is even more effective if we also consider the variations in a nation’s rate of growth, as we do with the first method. If Kenya’s economy grew at about 8% per year for five years, then suddenly started growing at 12% and overheating, it’s likely that growth is being valued above stability.

### The Takeaway: Analyze Often

You’ve probably heard the expression “measure twice and cut once.” It’s a handyman’s saying, and it means that you should check and double-check before you commit yourself to a course of action. As a construction strategy, that saying prevents a lot of wasted time and wood. As a debate strategy, that saying can save you a lot of time and prevent a lot of mistakes. Those two methods of sorting applications that we just went over, those are your measuring tapes for this resolution, and I recommend that you keep them in your back pocket and ready to use. Before you add a turnable application to your case, measure it with those two methods, analyze it to make sure it fits where you think it fits. In prep time, before you start constructing a response to your opponent’s application, take some measurements. Do some analytical work to see if the application actually fits better on your side of the resolution. Not everything is what it seems to be, so it’s strategically wise to analyze applications carefully. Measure twice and cut once.

## Part III: Econometrics

### The Basics

Econometrics is a portmanteau word, a combination of “economic” and “metrics.” It refers to ways in which we measure economic data, and this resolution requires you to be especially careful when dealing with numbers and data. As you’ll recall from the Resolutional Overview article, you can measure economic growth in terms of GDP or GNP, which can be stated in either real or nominal terms. There are lots of ways to tell if the economy is overheating, several ways to determine if the Federal Reserve’s policy is working, several ways to measure an economy’s productivity, and so on.

### The Problem: Differing Metrics

That wide variety of economic metrics makes it vitally important that you pay attention to the metrics that you use, and to the metrics that your opponent uses. Let’s suppose that your opponent claims that the U.S. economy is better than Kenya’s because the U.S. economy is growing faster. That should make you a little bit suspicious. As we saw in the last section, Kenya is a developing country, so it would be very odd if its economic growth rate was slower than the U.S.’s. If you do some digging, you might find that your opponent is measuring economic growth in terms of total GDP increase per year, not in terms of percentage GDP growth per year.

That simple distinction makes a huge difference. If you have $100, I have $1, you earn $2, and I earn $1, which of us is earning money at a faster rate? You just earned twice as much money in terms of dollars, but your wealth only increased by 2%. I earned half the amount that you earned, but my wealth doubled, which is a 100% rate of growth. Saying that the U.S. economy is growing faster than Kenya’s is technically true, if you use the right econometrics, but it’s a very misleading statement because it doesn’t compare the dollar amount of GDP growth to the dollar amount of existing GDP.

The difference between real and nominal GDP should also stay at the forefront of your mind. Sometimes, nominal GDP can increase without an economy actually producing more goods and services. When this happens, it’s called “stagflation,” which is another portmanteau word that combines “stagnation” and “inflation.” The Corporate Finance Institute writes:

“Stagflation is an economic event in which the inflation rate is high, economic growth rate slows, and unemployment remains steadily high.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Stagflation is relatively rare, but one notable example happened here in the U.S. in the 1970s. The Corporate Finance Institute once again writes:

“The onset of stagflation in the 1970s was blamed on the US Federal Reserve’s unsustainable economic policy during the boom years of the late 1950s and 1960s. The Fed moved to keep unemployment low and boost overall demand for products and services in the 1960s. However, the unnaturally low unemployment during the decade triggered something called a wage-price spiral. The OPEC oil embargo in 1973 also contributed to the unwanted economic event in the US. Industries across the country suffered from excessively high oil prices and shortages. Demand fell to new lows and industrial output suffered.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

If you just went by the nominal GDP rate, it would seem like the U.S. economy was healthily growing in the 1970s. After all, the dollar value of the goods and services exchanged in the economy increased. However, adjusting for inflation and digging a little deeper into America’s economic health would tell you that the rate of true economic growth (the rate at which we produced more goods and services) was decreasing.

Stagflation is a rare and extreme example, but it helps to illustrate how misleading economic data can be. A more restrained example, and one that will likely show up in a lot of LD rounds this year, is mistaking inflation for an acceleration in the economic growth rate. The Resolutional Overview article features a quick summary of how this mistake can impact economic analysis, but I want to extend that summary a bit because it’s important to your strategic understanding of this resolution.

Let’s say, for example, that there is no inflation at all, and the economy is experiencing stable growth of 3%. This is obviously unrealistic, because it would mean that the money supply is staying perfectly constant, but bear with me for a moment. Without inflation, nominal GDP and real GDP would be exactly equal to each other, both growing at 3% per year. Now, let’s say that real GDP keeps growing at 3% per year, but the amount of money in the economy increases, because the government starts printing more money. That inflates the money supply, meaning that each dollar is now worth a little bit less, and prices start to rise. If real GDP stays at its 3% growth rate, which we’re assuming it does for the purposes of this example, nominal GDP will rise to some rate above 3%. If you were using nominal GDP to gauge the economy’s growth, you would say that the economy is growing somewhat faster than 3%, but the real GDP would tell you that the economy is actually increasing its capacity to produce goods and services at exactly 3%. Even though stagflation isn’t happening in this example, using the wrong method of GDP measurement can skew your understanding and put you at a strategic disadvantage.

### The Solution/Takeaway: Embrace the Specifics

There are three strategies that will help you implement this solution: one that relates to you and your opponent, one that relates to you and your judge, and one that relates to you and your framing of the round.

First, listen carefully for the specific econometrics that your opponent uses, and don’t be shy about clarifying them in cross-examination. As a general rule, asking clarifying questions isn’t a great cross-ex strategy, but it can pay major dividends in this resolution. Sound reasoning based on flawed data will lead to the wrong conclusion, and we just went over some very detailed examples of how tiny econometric mistakes can create deeply flawed data. So, stay sharp and listen for specifics.

Second, have a concise and effective way of explaining these specifics to the judge. The subtle differences in economic metrics can seem unimportant, and explaining those differences and their impact can be difficult and time consuming. Having a short, understandable, and comprehensive way to communicate these kinds of points will give you a huge strategic advantage.

Third and finally, consider using a point of resolutional analysis to incorporate specific econometrics into the round. You may not need to implement this kind of analysis into your framework for round, it all depends on the case you run and the round you’re in. But, an econometrics Rez A point may help you establish uniform guidelines that aid your case, or help you swiftly disqualify some of your opponent’s points. It’s something to keep in mind as you embark on the case-writing process.

## In Conclusion

In every new resolution, there’s a seemingly endless list of new things to learn, a seemingly infinite mountain of research to do, a seemingly boundless sea of new values, applications, cases, philosophies, and strategies. In some ways, all those “seemingly” statements are true, because there are always new things to learn and uncover in a resolution. But, no matter how daunting each new resolution seems to be, it always manages to become a familiar, almost friendly topic area by the end of the year. This resolution is no different. So be anxious for nothing, and don’t back down from this challenge of a new topic. Just use the tools you have, get a little better each day, and enjoy the learning process.

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3. Business Dictionary. “Economic Stability.” <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/economic-stability.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ph.D. of Economics Frank Shostak, Apr 10 2019. (Shostak is an Associated Scholar of the Mises Institute. He owns a consulting firm, and has taught economics at two South African universities. His Ph.D. in Economics was completed at Rands Afrikaanse University) “Does Economic Stability Contribute to Growth?”; The Mises Institute. <https://mises.org/wire/does-economic-stability-contribute-growth> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Economics and Policy Journalist Danielle Kurtzleben, June 20, 2014. (Kurtzleben is a political reporter assigned to NPR’s Washington Desk. Before joining NPR, she was a correspondent for Vox. She holds a B.A. in English from Carleton College, and a Master’s Degree in Global Communication from George Washington University’s Elliot School of International Affairs.) “What is a good rate of GDP growth?”; Vox <https://www.vox.com/2014/6/20/17587398/gdp-good-rate-growth> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Investopedia’s Director of Trading and Investing Content James Chen, May 24, 2019. (Chen is the former head of research at Gain Capital, a prominent investing firm, and has two decades of financial experience as a trader, investor, advisor, and global market strategist.) “Overheated Economy”; Investopedia <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/o/overheated_economy.asp> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Corporate Finance Institute. "What is Stagflation ?" <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/knowledge/economics/stagflation/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Corporate Finance Institute. "What is Stagflation ?" <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/knowledge/economics/stagflation/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)