

I hear it all the time in debates. '57% of people think we should legalise marijuana ...77% of people want to keep the monarchy ... a survey was done and most people thought this was a bad idea.' One issue with these kinds of statements is the unreliability of opinion polls: their complete failure to foresee the results of the UK General Elections in 2015 and 2017, and the Brexit referendum and the US presidential election in 2016, does not inspire confidence. However, even if they were 100% accurate, they would not make for proof.

What elections, opinion polls and surveys give you is evidence about what people think about something. They do not prove that something is a good idea. Does the fact that 52% of British people voted in a referendum to leave the EU prove that leaving the EU is a good idea? No; it proves that, on June 23rd 2016, leaving the EU was slightly more popular with British voters than remaining in the EU. If you want to prove that leaving the EU was a good idea, you must show, in much more detail than that, how the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs.

What most people believe, or want to do, may or may not be the right thing to believe or the best thing to do. The debater's job is to **prove** that it is the right or best thing, and simply citing popularity through the medium of elections, referenda, surveys or opinion polls is not proof. When, in 1922, the Irish parliament voted in favour of a treaty of separation from Britain which involved several compromises, Eammon De Valera, who did not approve of the compromises, said, 'The people do not have the right to choose wrong.' Well, actually, they do. But that doesn't stop them being wrong.

To sum up:

- No more entering opinion polls into the search bar when you're preparing for a debate.
- Rely instead on arguments about costs and benefits.
- If the opposition use the argument from democratic majority, swiftly dismiss it by saying something like, 'It may be the case that x has majority support, however, it remains a bad idea because ...' and get back to the main arguments.

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5 Argument by authority

'Hannah, tidy up your bedroom.'

'Why?'

'Because it's so untidy you can't find anything in it.'

'But Dad, I'm the only one who has to find things in it, and I know where everything is.'

'It's unhygienic, it's a health hazard.'

'I haven't had a day off school sick in two years.'

'Your sister's is much tidier.'

'I'm not my sister.'

'I hate looking at it.'

'Don't go in there then.'

'Just tidy up your bedroom.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm your Dad and I say so!'

Have you ever had an argument like that? Yes, I thought so. As the parent of a teenager, I've had it myself a few times.

It's a useful exercise sometimes to analyse the arguments you have in daily life in terms of logical fallacies (though probably not a good idea to do this while you're actually having them, if you don't want to annoy the other person even more than you already have). Let's look at this argument. At first, it progresses through argument and rebuttal, Dad putting arguments, Hannah rebutting them. If I was Dad's debating coach, I would suggest that, while his arguments are both strong and varied, he gives up rather too easily, moving on to a new argument every time he meets rebuttal rather than responding to the rebuttal with a reinforcement of the argument. But it's hard to remember these things when you've had a bad day at work, you're tired, and the dishwasher has broken down again.

Dad's last argument, though, is much weaker, because he essentially gives no reasons for Hannah tidying up her bedroom other than his own position of authority in the family. While it is sometimes necessary for everybody's well-being in a family, a school or wider society for a parent, teacher or police officer to exert their authority without having to explain themselves, this kind of argument - the **argument by authority** - will not win you any points in a debate. The

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