

# Complex Debate Rules for *Ars Magica*

*These rules are an adaptation of the complex debate rules from Dynasties and Demagogues by Chris Aylott for the Ars Magica roleplaying game. While every attempt has been made to remain faithful to the intent of the original rules, changes have been made to better incorporate the rules into their new context and environment.*

These political debate rules are based on the following principles. Each character involved in the debate is trying to impress an audience, but the audience is less important than the battle between the characters. During the debate, characters take actions that represent their rhetorical tactics and verbal attacks. The effectiveness of each character's action is affected by the most recent action his opponent has taken, so the characters constantly change tactics and try to get the rhetorical upper hand. Just like combat, the goal of political debate is to outmaneuver your opponent and leave him unable to fight back.

Most political debates occur in formal situations with rules of argument. Those aren't important as far as the maneuver's are concerned – there's always a way to sneak an underhanded tactic into a debate, even if the rules forbid it. (Included here are also maneuvers that represent objections to illegal tactics.)

What is important is that most debates occur between balanced teams of debaters; if there are two on one side, there are usually two on the other side. This is important because – just like in physical combat – the side with more voices is likely to overwhelm the side with fewer voices. Most formal debate situations recognize this and limit the number of participants to preserve fairness. This isn't always the case, though.

Legal cases are political debates with balanced teams. Councils of war and juries are political debates where the teams may be completely unbalanced. (Henry Fonda's character in *Twelve Angry Men* must have had many more ability levels than his fellow jurors, for example, to turn the consensus of opinion to his side.)

## Debate Rounds

Debates are broken up into rounds. Each character gets one action per round, which may be split into two half-actions. Rounds are abstract and may represent seconds, minutes, or hours of debate.

## Initiative

Before the first round, each character makes a roll to determine his Initiative Total. The storyguide rolls Initiative for non-player characters involved in the debate. Debate Initiative Totals are based on perception, representing the character's quick wits and ability to react to events as they occur.

Each round, the characters involved in the debate act in order of decreasing initiative

**Initiative Total:**  
**Perception + Stress Die**

## Character Actions

When a character's turn comes up in the initiative

sequence, that character performs one action, which may be split into two half-actions. The character chooses an action or two half-actions from the political maneuvers listed below. At the end of the maneuver, the character makes whatever ability checks are called for by the maneuver(s) and resolves their effects. Most of these ability checks are “attacks” that inflict “damage” upon a person's position, causing them to accumulate political fatigue.

Characters may also take other actions during the debate, including combat actions. If a character takes an action that is not a political maneuver, the debate round is almost always equivalent to a combat round. If this should happen, combat initiative should be determined, and combat and debate rounds should be alternated.

The storyguide may also decide that a debate round is long enough to accommodate more-complicated non-combat actions. It's usually reasonable for a player to perform one ability check instead of a debate action.

## Attacks and Defense

A political “attack” is an attempt to inflict political fatigue upon an opponent. Most of the maneuvers listed below lead to attacks. Each such maneuver specifies the ability that the attacker and the defender use.

When resolving an attack the character chooses a target opponent, then cross references his maneuver with the last maneuver the opponent took on the Political Maneuver Table. This table shows an attack modifier for every possible combination of maneuvers. (If the opponent did not take a maneuver, the modifier is +0.) The character then rolls a stress die and adds the attack modifier, his Communication, his levels in the appropriate ability, and any other bonuses or penalties. This is his Political Attack Total.

The defender must roll a stress die and adds his Perception, his levels in the appropriate ability, and any other bonuses or penalties. This is his Political Defense Total.

If the Political Attack Total exceeds the Political Defense Total, the attack was successful. The Attack Advantage is amount by which the Political Attack Total exceeds the Political Defense Total.

If the attack succeeds, then the attacker uses the damage bonus from the maneuver used to calculate the Damage Total.

**Political Attack Total:**  
**Communication + Ability + Attack Modifier + Stress Die**

**Political Defense Total:**  
**Perception + Ability + Stress Die**

**Damage Total:**  
**Maneuver Modifier + Attack Advantage**

**Attack Advantage:**  
**Attacker's Political Attack Total –  
Defender's Political Defense Total**

## Political Fatigue

When a character is hit by an opponent's political attack

and takes damage, he gains one or more levels of political fatigue. Each level of political fatigue below Confident imposes a cumulative -1 penalty on all debate related rolls. The political fatigue levels are Confident (+0), Guarded (-1), Defensive (-2), Uncertain (-3), Wavering (-4), Incoherent (-5), and Speechless.

The number of political fatigue levels the defender gains depends on his Presence, as illustrated in the Damage Table below. Once the defender has been reduced to Speechless he is eliminated from the debate.

## Damage Table

Presence	One Level	Two Levels	Three Levels
-4 or Less	1	2	3
-3	1-2	3-4	5-6
-2	1-3	4-6	7-9
-1	1-4	5-8	9-12
0	1-5	6-10	11-15
+1	1-6	7-12	13-18
+2	1-7	8-14	15-21
+3	1-8	9-16	17-24

Each further +1 Presence adds +1 to each damage threshold. For every 5 + Presence of the Damage Total, the defender gains another level of Political Fatigue.

## Ending the Debate

There are several ways a political debate can end. The storyguide should choose one that matches the political setting of the game. Keep in mind that none of these methods depend on a specific amount of time. Because this system is abstract, debate rounds might take five minutes or five hours.

Possible conditions include:

- Only one side has participants still capable of carrying on in the debate. This simulates talking until the group comes to a consensus. It's also possible to end the debate when more than one side remains in play. The debate could end when a certain number of sides or individuals have been eliminated.
- After a set number of rounds. This can simulate a legal case or a formal debate that is meant to end at a specific time. A variant is to end after X + one die rounds, where X is a set number of rounds. 5 to 10 rounds is a pretty good set length for a debate.
- When all parties agree to end the debate. It's possible to resolve the debate when this happens, but it's more common for the parties to adjourn the debate and resume it later. Each character retains his current political fatigue level until the debate resumes.
- A debate can also end unexpectedly, usually because one side has stormed out or begins hitting another side with walking sticks. In this situation, the storyguide must decide if the debate is resolved normally or whether it is resolved at all.

## Resolving the Debate

If only one side of the debate remains in the debate – whether that side is one or several characters – that side has won.

If more than one side is still in the debate, then each side adds together the number of political fatigue levels it has inflicted

on the other side during the debate. The side with the highest total wins the debate.

## Political Maneuvers

The following actions can be used during a political debate. Each of the maneuvers below follows this format:

### Maneuver Name

[A brief summary of the maneuver].

**Attacker Ability:** Which ability is used by the attacker to calculate his Political Attack Total.

**Defender Ability:** Which ability is used by the defender to calculate his Political Defense Total.

**Damage Bonus:** Use this bonus when calculating the damage total for an attack with this maneuver. If this line specifies “No Damage,” then this maneuver does not cause damage.

**Length:** Action or Half-Action

**Special:** Any special rules or unusual effects.

### The Big Lie

You wave your laundry list and scream about traitors in the heart of the government. You rave that your opponent is diabolist. Whatever the fib is, it's so outrageous that foolish people believe everything you say.

**Attacker Ability:** Guile

**Defender Ability:** Folk Ken

**Damage Bonus:** +5

**Length:** Action

**Special:** If you fail the attack roll, you must add another botch die to all other rolls you make during this debate. This extra botch die is cumulative with any extra dice acquired through previous failures.

### Build the Argument

You methodically establish each point of your argument and defend it with inexorable logic.

**Attacker Ability:** None

**Defender Ability:** None

**Damage Bonus:** No Damage

**Length:** Half-Action

**Special:** If your next attack uses the Etiquette or Leadership abilities, it gains a +2 bonus. You can gain multiple bonuses from this maneuver, but the maximum bonus you may accumulate from successive uses of Build the Argument is +6.

### Dazzling Rhetoric

Your words soar. You paint castles in the sky for your audience, and they're ready to pack their bags and move in.

**Attacker Ability:** Leadership

**Defender Ability:** Artes Liberales (Rhetoric)

**Damage Bonus:** +3

**Length:** Action

**Special:** You may choose to damage two opponents with this attack. If you choose to do so, calculate separate modifiers for each opponent, adding your Leadership, Communication, and any

other relevant bonuses (including that opponent's last maneuver). Then make a single attack roll and add it to each of the two modifiers to generate two separate results.

### Distracting Patter

You make a series of quick, nonsensical points, confusing your opponent while you set up your real attack.

**Attacker Ability:** Guile

**Defender Ability:** Folk Ken

**Damage Bonus:** +1

**Length:** Action

**Special:** Whether or not you succeed in this attack, your first subsequent attack that is not Distracting Patter gains a +2 bonus. You may store up to a +6 bonus with successive uses of Distracting Patter.

### Expose Flaw

You uncover a flaw in your opponent's logic.

**Attacker Ability:** Etiquette

**Defender Ability:** Bargain

**Damage Bonus:** +1

**Length:** Half-Action

### False Authority

You know what you're talking about and have evidence to back up your claims. And you know, with just a little bit of stretching, it does!

**Attacker Ability:** Guile

**Defender Ability:** Folk Ken

**Damage Bonus:** No Damage

**Length:** Action

**Special:** Add your Attack Advantage from this maneuver to your Political Defense Total for the next three attacks directed at you. If you use this ability again before this bonus expires, the most recent result takes precedence.

### Forceful Interrogation

You batter your opponent with questions, seeking to disorient her and expose important information.

**Attacker Ability:** Leadership

**Defender Ability:** Intrigue

**Damage Bonus:** +2

**Length:** Action

**Special:** If your attack is successful then you may add your Attack Advantage to your next attack against this opponent. If the attack fails, the opponent gains a bonus equal to the amount by which her Political Defense Total exceeds your Political Attack Total to her next attack against you.

### Gentle Persuasion

Using quiet, reasoned arguments, you cajole your opponents and the audience to your side of the debate.

**Attacker Ability:** Etiquette

**Defender Ability:** Bargain

**Damage Bonus:** +1

**Length:** Action

**Special:** If this attack causes your opponent to lose gain than one political fatigue level, you lose one political fatigue for each level he gains beyond the first.

### Hint at Consequences

You almost suggest that unpleasantness might result from the foolish course of action that your opponent is suggesting. Not that you'd have anything to do with it, of course.

**Attacker Ability:** Leadership

**Defender Ability:** Intrigue

**Damage Bonus:** +1

**Length:** Half-Action

### Humorous Jab

You bedevil your opponent with a quick joke or a witty remark.

**Attacker Ability:** Leadership

**Defender Ability:** Artes Liberales (Rhetoric)

**Damage Bonus:** +1

**Length:** Half-Action

### Invoke Faith

You connect your argument to God or to whatever ideals are worshipped in your society.

**Attacker Ability:** Leadership

**Defender Ability:** Artes Liberales (Rhetoric)

**Damage Bonus:** +2

**Length:** Action

**Special:** If you have any Faith Points, you may add them to the damage bonus to this maneuver.

### Offer Compromise

You find a point of agreement between your position and that of an opponent, then offer to build a greater agreement from that promising beginning.

**Attacker Ability:** Etiquette

**Defender Ability:** Bargain

**Damage Bonus:** +2

**Length:** Action

**Special:** You may choose to expend political fatigue levels to improve your Political Attack Total with this maneuver. Each political fatigue level you expend adds a bonus equal to your Etiquette levels to the total.

### Point of Order

You question an opponent's protocol or methodology. This confuses the opponent and delays him as he explains how he is observing correct procedures.

**Attacker Ability:** Artes Liberales (Rhetoric)

**Defender Ability:** Leadership

**Damage Bonus:** No Damage

**Length:** Half-Action

**Special:** If you succeed in your attack, instead of gaining political fatigue levels, your opponent loses his next action.

### Present Evidence

You counter your opponents arguments with hard facts.

**Attacker Ability:** Etiquette

**Defender Ability:** Bargain

**Damage Bonus:** +2

**Length:** Action

### Profound Conclusion

You make a firm point that's impossible to argue with.

**Attacker Ability:** Etiquette

**Defender Ability:** Bargain

**Damage Bonus:** +3

**Length:** Action

**Special:** If your Attack Advantage on this roll is greater than 5, then make another political attack using your Leadership ability while every opponent makes a political defense roll using Artes Liberales (Rhetoric). If you succeed in beating every defender, you may declare the debate over. Each side totals the number of political fatigue levels it has inflicted, and a winner is determined.

### Questionable Conclusions

Having stretched your facts, you weave spurious interpretations into a silken argument.

**Attacker Ability:** Guile

**Defender Ability:** Folk Ken

**Damage Bonus:** +2

**Length:** Half-Action

### Reality Check

Your facts interfere with your opponent's lies.

**Attacker Ability:** Folk Ken

**Defender Ability:** Guile

**Damage Bonus:** +3

**Length:** Half-Action

### Regroup

You pause to think and prepare your next set of arguments in your mind.

**Attacker Ability:** None

**Defender Ability:** None

**Damage Bonus:** No Damage

**Length:** Half-Action

**Special:** Add +2 to your Initiative Total for the rest of the debate.

### Shore Up Defenses

You anticipate objections, defending against your opponents' arguments by strengthening your own.

**Attacker Ability:** None

**Defender Ability:** None

**Damage Bonus:** No Damage

**Length:** Half-Action

**Special:** Add your Intelligence modifier to your Political Defense Total for the next 2 rounds.

### Sly Insinuations

You undermine an opponent with comments that skate the edge of insulting.

**Attacker Ability:** Guile

**Defender Ability:** Folk Ken

**Damage Bonus:** +1

**Length:** Half-Action

### Smear Opponents

You attack your opponent directly, suggesting that his morals, motives, knowledge, or authority are tainted or inadequate.

**Attacker Ability:** Leadership

**Defender Ability:** Intrigue

**Damage Bonus:** +2

**Length:** Action

**Special:** If you succeed in this attack, then the opponent must add an extra botch die to all his future rolls in the debate. If you fail in this attack then you must add an extra botch die to all your future rolls in this debate. This botch die is cumulative with any other extra botch dice acquired during the debate.

### Support Ally

You make a series of minor points that buttress the arguments of another character.

**Attacker Ability:** None

**Defender Ability:** None

**Damage Bonus:** No Damage

**Length:** Half-Action

**Special:** The character you are supporting receives a +2 bonus on his next skill check. No character may receive more than a +6 bonus from Support Ally for any one attack roll.

### Tantrum

You use your talent for yelling, throwing things, and hitting the table with your shoe to prove that you are dangerous and should be taken seriously.

**Attacker Ability:** Leadership

**Defender Ability:** Folk Ken

**Damage Bonus:** +3

**Length:** Action

**Special:** In addition to this attack roll, make a Leadership check with an Ease Factor of 6+. If you fail this check then you gain one level of political fatigue *and* you must add an extra botch die to all other rolls made during the debate.

### Threat

You make an explicit threat to your opponent. If he doesn't do what you want, on his head be it.

**Attacker Ability:** Guile or Leadership

**Defender Ability:** Folk Ken or Intrigue

**Damage Bonus:** +5

**Length:** Action

**Special:** If your attack fails, you gain one level of political fatigue *and* you must add an extra botch die to all other rolls made during the debate.

**Adapted By João Medeiros from material originally written by Chris Aylott.**

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