

Overview of Congressional Debate

Congressional Debate is possibly the most well-rounded activity in speech and debate—offering something for everyone. Many students appreciate the opportunity to write their own topics for debate; others appreciate the breadth and depth of research that is required. Many debaters enjoy the political and social aspects of the event; others revel in the order and logic of Congressional procedure. Some debaters enjoy the wide range of debates that occur in a Congressional Debate session; others appreciate the opportunity to showcase their speaking skills. Whatever students are seeking, they are likely to find it in this event.

Congressional Debate, sometimes just called “Congress” in the debate community, involves students emulating members of the U.S. Congress by debating legislation the participants have prepared ahead of time. Legislation is a one-page bill or resolution that offers a legislative solution to a problem. Topics for legislation include just about anything that the U.S. Congress might consider: domestic social issues (legalization of drugs or prostitution), economic issues (eliminating the capital gains tax), or foreign

policy (enacting stricter sanctions against Iran). The legislation is written by participating schools and students, submitted to the tournament (generally about a month in advance), and then compiled by the tournament staff into a single docket that is distributed to participating schools so they can begin preparation.

Preparation

Participants prepare arguments for and against the various bills, resolutions and amendments. Ideally, these arguments take the form of detailed outlines that will allow for extemporaneous delivery. Debaters will use logic, evidence, and rhetoric to support or oppose the various legislation. (Argument construction is covered in Chapter 3; more information about preparing for a tournament can be found in Chapter 12.) Depending on the region or league, participants may be assigned to a particular committee and, therefore, have a particular point of emphasis for their preparation (the most common committees are Public Affairs, Economics, and Foreign Affairs).

The Session

Once preparation is complete and participants arrive at the tournament, they will report to their assigned room, or chamber. These chambers are assigned by the tournament, often well in advance of the actual competition, and generally feature an even distribution of students from different schools or regions. Participants compete in these chambers in a series of sessions that last between two and four

hours. During each session, debaters will have the opportunity to speak multiple times on a variety of legislation. (More information about competing at tournaments can be found in Chapter 13.) The sessions are largely run by the participants themselves through the use of procedure.

Electing the Presiding Officer and Setting the Agenda

At the beginning of each session, the student legislators elect a chairperson, also called the presiding officer, or P.O., from among their ranks. This individual is charged with running the session, much like a chairperson might run a business meeting. She will call for motions, recognize speakers, manage the chamber, and moderate the debate.

Once the P.O. is elected, the chamber must decide in what order they will discuss the legislative docket. The members compose, nominate, and then vote on different agendas. A tournament may have as many as 40 or 50 pieces of legislation on the docket, thus this agenda-setting process is very important. Not every bill or resolution will be discussed.

Debate

Once the agenda is set, the debate begins. The first bill or resolution is now the focus of the debate. The P.O. calls for the first speech in favor of the legislation; this speech is called either the authorship or the sponsorship speech. It is an authorship if the person who wrote the legislation is delivering the first affirmative speech; if no author

is present, or the author declines to give the authorship (which rarely happens), then any participant may sponsor the legislation. Generally, the author has the right to deliver the first affirmative speech; some tournaments may choose to eliminate this privilege though. Additionally, some tournaments ask for legislation from schools, not from particular students, so sometimes the author's name is not included on the legislation. Whether there is an author or not, the P.O. will call for speakers and students who wish to speak will stand (or, in some regions, raise a placard with their name on it); the P.O. will then select a student to deliver the first speech.

The author or sponsor delivers her three-minute speech in support of the legislation; while she is speaking, the P.O. keeps time and gives the speaker appropriate signals as time remaining. The method the P.O. uses to signal the speaker may vary, but the national norm is to tap with a gavel at specific points during the speech; the speaker knows how much time she has remaining based on the number of gavel taps (more information on gaveling is found in Chapter 11). When she is finished speaking, a two-minute question period follows. During this time, any student legislator in the chamber may stand to ask a question of the speaker. The P.O. will call on members, they will ask their question, then the speaker will answer; this process repeats until the question period has elapsed. (Questioning in Congressional Debate is explored more thoroughly in Chapter 8.) Then, the P.O. will call for speakers in opposition to the legislation and members who wish to speak will stand to be recognized.

The first speech in opposition to a bill or resolution (also called a "negative" speech) is also followed by a two-minute question period. Afterward, the P.O. will call for

more speeches, alternating between affirmative and negative. Students typically speak with the assistance of notes (most often written on a legal pad). Each speech on a bill or resolution after the first affirmative and first negative speeches is followed by a one-minute question period. Members make new arguments, they respond to old arguments, they compare and weigh the different evidence presented by each side, and, eventually, they summarize the debate. (More information about debate and summary is found in Chapter 9.)

This process continues until no students wish to speak on the legislation, the chamber votes to end debate on the legislation, or the tournament rules require an end to the debate on the legislation (some tournaments set a time limit for each debate). At this point, the chamber will vote to pass or defeat the legislation; competitors will rise in support or opposition and may even abstain. The success or failure of legislation is interesting and often compelling: close votes are common; hotly contested issues raise the chamber's interest in the outcome of the vote. Nevertheless, the vote count has no bearing on the results of the competition, so students should not worry if they are on the "losing" side.

Speaking, Precedence, and Recency

No participant is forced to speak on a particular side of a bill or resolution or to speak on a topic at all. This flexibility is one of the aspects of Congressional Debate that appeals to students. The flipside to this is that, with the exception of authorship speeches, participants are not guaranteed the option to speak at any given moment. Although a member may stand to be recognized during a

debate, he may not be called on. This limitation is mitigated, though, through the use of precedence and recency. By rule, participants who have spoken the least number of times have precedence. Imagine that both Allison and Ben stand to give a negative speech; if Allison has already spoken twice during the session, and Ben has only spoken once, the P.O. must call on Ben. Additionally, members who have spoken least recently have recency. Allison and Ben stand again later in the session, and now both of them have spoken twice. Because Ben delivered his second speech most recently, the P.O. must now call on Allison. Put another way, because it has been longer since Allison last spoke, she has better recency and the right to speak.

The use of these two systems, precedence and then recency, ensures that all competitors have equal opportunity to speak over the course of a session. Not every participant will get to speak exactly when she wants, but everyone will get a fair chance to compete. The only exception to these rules is the authorship speech; if the author of a bill or resolution is present when it comes up for debate, she has the right to give the authorship speech regardless of recency or precedence.

Throughout the session, students will use procedure to take various actions: exit and enter the room, call for recesses, address the chair or chamber, amend legislation, extend questioning, and so on. (A more detailed exploration of Congressional Debate procedure is provided in Chapter 11.)

Ending the Session

At the end of a session, several events will occur. First, the chamber will vote on any legislation that is currently being debated or that had been tabled earlier in the session. Next, they will take care of any necessary business for the next session, such as amending the agenda or electing a new presiding officer (a different student serves as the presiding officer in each session at a tournament). Finally, depending on whether or not it is the last session of the day or of the preliminary sessions, the students may vote to determine various awards, such as Best Presiding Officer or Best Legislation. When all business is complete, the chamber will either recess (to reconvene at the beginning of next session) or adjourn (effectively ending the legislative day).

Judges

At least one adult judge attends each session of each chamber. Sometimes, a tournament also provides an adult parliamentarian, who will make decisions about procedure and ensure that the P.O. and the chamber are following all rules. The parliamentarian may also act as a judge. The judge(s) and possibly the parliamentarian have three responsibilities: scoring each speech, scoring the presiding officer's performance, and completing a preferential ballot ranking the best legislators in the session. These "prefs" typically determine which students advance to elimination rounds or receive awards. Judges are generally instructed to rank the students holistically, taking into account not just their speeches but also their poise and presence in chambers, their involvement in questioning, and their use of procedure.

KEY CONCEPTS

- In Congressional Debate, students act as though they are legislators making decisions about bills and resolutions on the floor of the House or Senate.
- Students deliver speeches, typically three minutes, in support of or against bills and resolutions.
- After each speech, other members of the chamber ask questions of the speakers.
- Before the first session, students form an agenda to determine the order of the bills and resolutions debated.
- Before each session, the chamber elects a presiding officer to run the chamber.
- The presiding officer must use recency and precedence to determine the speaking order of the chamber.
- Each session is judged by one or more adults, and there may or may not be a parliamentarian who oversees the chamber.