Event Description

A simulation of the U.S. legislative process in the Senate and the House, students generate a series of bills and resolutions for debate in Congressional Debate. Debaters (also referred to as Senators and Representatives) alternate delivering speeches for and against the topic in a group setting. An elected student serves as a presiding officer to ensure debate flows smoothly. Students are assessed on their research, argumentation, and delivery skills, as well as their knowledge and use of parliamentary procedure.

Considerations for Congressional Debate

Students who do Congressional Debate are typically interested in learning about issues that are significant to the legislative process within the United States. Students are exposed to a deeper application of Robert's Rules of Parliamentary Procedure. Students must prepare for debate on numerous topics in any given competition and be able to extend a long-lasting debate with unique and fresh ideas, as well as by refuting previous speakers on a specific topic.

Traits of Successful Congressional Debaters

When considering what event you should choose, or in which direction to point a student when selecting an event, below are some general traits of successful Senators and Representatives to keep in mind:

- Interested in legislative process
- Networker
- Analytical thinker
- Interested in varied issues
- Persuasive
- Enjoys research

List of Past Legislation Titles

- Bill to Regulate E-Cigarettes
- Resolution to Recognize the Republic of Somaliland
- Resolution to Amend the Constitution to Legalize Same-Sex Civil Unions
- Bill to Update the Clean Air Act
- Bill to Increase Development in Space
- Bill to Regulate Three-Dimensional Printing to Prevent the Production of Private Firearms
- Bill to Lift the Ban on Crude Oil Exports
- Bill to Alter Agricultural Subsidies
- Bill Concerning Raising the Federal Minimum Wage
- Resolution to Repeal Zero Tolerance Policies in Public Schools

Congressional Debate is an exercise in leadership. It's a political game where your fellow students can have as much influence on the outcome of the round as your judges. You're rewarded for taking risks; one cannot simply fade into the background and expect to succeed. It's these exact skills that translate into success later in life—those who think a little bit differently are those who make permanent change in the world." Christina Gilbert, Association Alum

Basic Understandings

Congressional Debate is like a simulation of the real United States legislature. A group of 10-25 students, called a Chamber, will compete in a legislative session. A series of bills and resolutions will be proposed by students from various schools. Students in turn will be selected by a presiding officer—a student elected to conduct the business of the round—to give speeches both advocating for and encouraging the defeat of the measure in front of them. Following each speech, competitors will be able to pose questions of the speaker. Once debate is exhausted on a particular item, the chamber will vote either to pass or fail the legislation, and debate moves on to the next item.

Legislation comes in two types—a bill and a resolution. A bill is a plan of action, detailing how a particular policy proposal will be implemented. A resolution, meanwhile, is a statement expressing the opinion of the chamber. Passing the resolution does not change anything about the world around us, it merely states the preference of the chamber. For example, let's say a school had a dress code. The student body may pass a piece of legislation expressing their displeasure with the dress code (a resolution) or legislation modifying the colors and styles of the school uniform (a bill).

At the beginning of the session, the students will elect a presiding officer, otherwise known as the PO. The PO's job is to select speakers to give speeches, select questioners, maintain decorum in the chamber, and facilitate a fast and smooth debate for all.

Typically, one session of Congress lasts about 2-3 hours. During that time, students typically give speeches 3 minutes in length. The first two speeches on a piece of legislation are known as the first advocacy, or first pro, and the first rejection, or first con. These speeches are followed by 2 minutes of cross examination. After the first pro and con speech are established, each additional speaker is subject to one minute of cross examination by the chamber. The PO selects the members of the chamber to ask the questions of the speaker.

Research

Congress arguments generally have solid evidence supporting their claims. Evidence can come from anywhere—newspapers, journal articles, studies, books, primary documents, etc. The type of evidence varies based on the topic being debated, but when gathering research, you want to ask yourself four questions:

1. Is the source reputable? Sources should have a good reputation for 'getting it right'—newswires such as the AP and Reuters tend to be less credible than newspapers. Wikipedia is good background reading to get an overview of a topic, but doesn't have a reputation of being a credible source.
2. Is the source verifiable? This refers to the ability to verify the data and claims made by the source. If a source is based on a personal interview or some other insider knowledge, that generally cannot be verified through independent means.
3. Is the source authoritative? Different sources are expert at different fields. The Office of Budget and Management is an authority on budget policy on the US, but may not be the ideal source for a resolution about foreign policy in the Middle East.

Think about whether the source in question is an expert on the field the legislation is about.

4. Is the source recent? While not every source has to be up-to-the-minute, generally, the more recent the source, the better. As current events evolve, older sources may become outdated or irrelevant, but the nature of timeliness will vary based on the topic.

When presenting the evidence to support your claims in the round, students may read the evidence verbatim, or paraphrase. Students would be wise to keep copies of the original source for all evidence used in a speech, including that evidence which is paraphrased. Since paraphrasing is common in Congressional Debate, backing up the paraphrasing with the original source will help eliminate any question that may arise. Oral source citations should also be provided—state the name of the source and the date of publication. For example, "The New York Times claims on August 15, 2014 that malnourishment is plaguing the nation of Sudan."

Structural Components

A Congress speech typically consists of an introduction, a series of arguments and a conclusion. The introduction should be a succinct overview of what is to come in the speech—an attention-getter to get the audience focused, a clear thesis statement, and a preview of the arguments to come. Try to contain the introduction to about 30 seconds—anything longer than that eats up valuable time for content!

Each argument consists of a claim, backing to support that claim, a warrant, and one or more impacts. The claim is simply the argument being made—without support though, the claim is not inherently valid. Thus, it needs backing, or logic and evidence to support why the claim is true. The warrant connects the backing to the claim—it serves as support for why the backing is relevant to the claim. This may be an unstated assumption: for example, let's say the claim is that Program X is a waste of money and the backing is that Program X costs ten billion dollars. The warrant here might be "that's too much money to spend on this program." The argument concludes with an impact—the benefits or drawbacks of the argument being true. By spending too much money on Program X, we won't have the money to spend on some other initiative that would be good. Or by spending this much money on Program X, certain harms will be generated that we want to avoid.

The arguments in a Congress speech can either be constructive in nature or they can serve as refutations to arguments posed by the other side. Constructive arguments build up support for one side of the debate; rebuttals tend to refute arguments on the opposite side. As debate progresses, it is important to avoid rehash, or the mere repeating of previous arguments. Generally speaking, the later the speech is on a given topic, the higher expectation there is to refute and debate previous arguments. After all, 'refutation' is an essential element in any debate event!

Congress speeches end with a conclusion that recaps the main points, repeats the introduction, and ties the speech together thematically.

Organizing

When preparing your Congress materials, organize research by legislation. It helps to 'tag' your evidence by indicating what claim or arguments that evidence supports. Include a full citation in your notes so you can refer to the original source again should you need to.

You can even organize responses to potential arguments that may be raised throughout the course of debate. If you encounter the same piece of legislation at multiple tournaments, it helps to keep track of the arguments made by other speakers and prepare responses to those claims in advance. Organize your research in a way that will make it easily accessible to you during the session.

Be prepared to debate both sides of the legislation—some topics may encourage many advocacy speeches, so giving a speech opposing the legislation will be more advantageous. Be mindful of the balance of speeches in the chamber and adjust accordingly.

Standing it Up/Practicing

Giving practice speeches is a great way to get familiar with the mechanics of the event. You can either give speeches on your own, or ask a teammate(s) to debate with you to get familiar with the event. It helps to try to simulate the conditions of the Congress round as much as possible—use the same kind of notes you would in an actual speech.

It may be useful to prepare questions to ask both before the tournament as well as during the session. Having a few good questions prepared is always a good strategy, especially if someone who is called on before you asks a similar question to yours! One tactic may be to see how many questions you can ask of a teammate even though in the real round you may only get one question in.

Performance Tips

In your first Congress chamber, the key is confidence! Act like you've done this before and follow the lead of your fellow competitors. While it can be intimidating at first, your goal should be to get as many questions and speeches in as you can.

The basic delivery mechanics can take you a long way—eye contact, posture, physically walking between your points to indicate transitions, volume and projection, enunciation, etc. Practice these skills before the tournament so you are sure to demonstrate your mastery in the round!

As the round progresses, notice not only who stands out but why. What is it about their performance that is so appealing? Are they well researched? Do they have solid evidence? Keep track of the kinds of performances that stand out to you so you can focus on those skills in practice!