

Congressional Debate

A room of students acts as a mock legislature: short speeches for and against bills and resolutions, questioning, motions and votes, run by an elected student presiding officer. Each student competes as an individual.

10 to 30

legislators per
chamber

3 min

each speech

2 min

questions after first
speech each side

1 min

questions after other
speeches

About 3 h

a typical session

Debate on one bill

1 Authorship or sponsorship speech **3 min**
2 Questioning **2 min**
3 First negative speech **3 min**
4 Questioning **2 min**
5 Affirmative speech **3 min**
6 Questioning **1 min**
7 Negative speech **3 min**
8 Questioning **1 min**
 Alternate until the previous question passes,
then vote

Authorship: given by a student from the school that wrote the bill. With no author present, someone gives a sponsorship speech. Going over 3 minutes costs points.

Legislation

Bill: a proposed law in numbered sections, within the powers of the US Congress, naming the enforcing agency. One page maximum.

Resolution: a statement of opinion, not a law. A constitutional amendment resolution needs two-thirds.

Examples (2026 NSDA Nationals): A Bill to Ban Deep Sea Mining; A Resolution to Amend the Constitution to Abolish the Electoral College.

Precedence and recency

When several stand to speak, the PO picks: (1) those who have not spoken, (2) **precedence:** fewest speeches, (3) **recency:** spoke least recently. Questioners are tracked the same way.

Direct questioning

Used in every round at NSDA Nationals and districts: questioning is split into 30-second blocks, one questioner per block with follow-ups allowed.

Who does what

LEGISLATORS

Speakers

Give speeches on either side, ask and answer questions, make motions and vote. Later speeches must answer earlier speakers by name and add something new.

ELECTED BY THE CHAMBER

Presiding officer (PO)

Runs the session: recognizes speakers and questioners by precedence and recency, keeps time with the gavel, rules on motions and calls votes. Scored like a legislator.

ADULT

Parliamentarian

Sits near the PO, helps with rules, and ranks every legislator at the end.

ADULT

Scorers

Score every speech and the PO, then rank their top eight legislators.

How judges score

POINTS	6	5	4	3	2	1
Meaning	Exemplary	Accomplished	Competent	Developing	Emerging	Unacceptable

At the NSDA each speech gets 1 to 6 points for argument, evidence, clash and delivery, with answers to questions counted in. The PO gets about one score per hour presided. Ranks usually decide who advances. Whether a bill passes does not affect results.

Common motions

MOTION	EFFECT	VOTE
Previous question	End debate, vote now	2/3
Amend	Change the wording	1/3 second, majority
Lay on the table	Set the bill aside	Majority
Suspend the rules	Set aside a rule	2/3

Before the session

- ☐ Read every item on the docket
- ☐ A speech outline for both sides of each bill
- ☐ Two or three cited facts per speech
- ☐ Questions ready for likely speakers
- ☐ Timer practiced: under 3 minutes

Tips and common mistakes

- Prepare both sides of every bill.
- **Clash, don't rehash:** answer earlier speakers.
- **Cite evidence** in every speech.
- **Stay in character** and courteous.
- **Be active:** question, move and vote.

Key terms

Docket

The legislation a chamber can debate.

Sponsorship

First speech when no author is present.

Rehash

Repeating arguments already made.

Chamber

The room of legislators (House or Senate).

Germane

Relevant; amendments must be germane.

Gavel

The PO's tool for time and order.