

Political Science 150: American Government and Politics

Instructor: Nicholas Jacobs

Term: Spring, 2018

Group Debate – Topics and Expectations

Debate Topics

Each student will select one of the topics listed below and develop an argument in response to the debate question. Students will work collectively, in groups no larger than three per side of the debate:

- 1) Should we ratify the Constitution again, if given the choice?
- 2) Is the federal government too powerful in 2018?
- 3) Is America's social welfare state too large or not large enough?
- 4) Should we replace the Electoral College with a nation-wide plurality vote?
- 5) Should we strengthen political parties? What reforms are needed?
- 6) Should the President have "fast track" authority for bills?***
- 7) Should Members of Congress have term limits?
- 8) Should U.S. Federal Judges serve for life?
- 9) Should states make it easier for colleges and university to restrict "hate speech"?***

*** See Note at the Bottom of Page Two

Debate Format

On the day of the debate, the presentations will be structured as follows. The affirmative side will give their opening remarks, then the opposing side will deliver their opening remarks. Opening statements should introduce the idea, the main justification for the position, and should be between 6-8 minutes. After the opening remarks, the affirmative side will have up to 5-minutes to respond without interruption to points raised, or by raising a new point. The opposing side follows. This back-and-forth will proceed until all members of each side have spoken. Then, beginning with the opposing side, each side may ask the other team up to three questions, going in turn. The audience is then given the opportunity to ask questions of either side. Each side will then be allotted 5 minutes for a prepared conclusion. Prepared, written remarks are highly encouraged throughout the debate.

Evaluation

Your debate performance is worth one-fifth of your final grade (slightly less than the midterm examination). As such, I expect that you will have prepared remarks, develop a deep appreciation for the topic, and conduct yourself professionally during the debate. Consider the degree of preparation that goes into a written assignment and the degree of mastery you achieve in completing those types of papers. Your debate performance requires a similar amount of effort, even if the presentation of your argument is to be done orally.

I will consider the following when assessing your presentation.

Argument Clarity: You clearly presented your stance and the primary reasons for that stance were clear. You or your partner presented the argument early in the opening debate remarks. As a team, you presented the justifications for your opinion coherently and in a logical order. You do not commit any of the common logical fallacies [listed here](#).

Evidence: You presented multiple, well-reasoned rationales for taking your stance. You may give appropriate emphasis to your strongest arguments, but, in the end, you offer more than just one persistent refrain. You develop examples that help establish the relevance of the topic as well as the significance of the argument for the practice of contemporary American politics.

Response to Opposing Argument: You listened. Your response clearly suggests that you digested and interpreted the opposing argument with care. You respond to what the opposing side actually said, concede anything that might be true, but ultimately engage with them to bolster your own argument.

Questioning: You ask questions that disrupt the logic of the opposing side's argument. You may prepare these questions in advance, although note that some of the best questions emerge from the arguments or examples of the opposing side. You respond with conviction and your response conveys that you have researched this topic with considerable depth. You do not commit any of the common logical fallacies [listed here](#) (particularly relevant: begging the claim, ad hominem, red herrings, appeals to authority).

Presentation Style: You should speak confidently and with conviction. You may rely on written notes, but you must speak to the audience, not merely read. It is clear that you rehearsed, particularly for your opening remarks. Don't get flustered.

I will not consider whether you "won" the debate, or whether the majority of the class agreed or disagreed with your stance on the topic.

Some Final Notes:

- 1) I consider audience participation to be an essential component of this assignment. In fact, while I do not offer extra credit, per say, in this course, I will consider your participation in asking questions in your participation grade. Routine questioning will even boost your group debate grade. For consider, if your debate grade is less than you might have desired, come to the next debates *prepared* to ask questions of the presenters.
- 2) You will find that many scholars and pundits write on these topics, but I am not expecting that you parrot back what they say. In fact, a creative argument is the surest way to a) show the level of preparation for the debate b) expose your opponents' preparation c) demonstrate the significance of the topic d) and the necessity of taking the stance that you advocate. Be specific, but do not appeal to authority for authority's sake.
- 3) Most of the topics are of broad theoretical importance and you should engage them at that level. For example, regarding Congressional term limits: do not get caught up in splitting hairs over whether it should be 4 years, 6 years, 30 years, etc. Engage instead with what such a reform means for democratic representation, Congress' institutional strength, expertise in governance, and the Congress' relationship with other governing institutions. You can offer compromise positions or reforms in your concluding remarks. That said, two topics require specific reference to a less-known reform:
 - a. "Fast Track" Authority for Legislation: This is a proposal offered by the political scientists Terry Moe and William Howell in their latest book, *Relic*. In short, Moe and Howell want to strengthen the president's ability to propose specific legislative action, and require the Congress to take a vote on those proposals. Respondents should familiarize themselves with the proposal, ([see here](#)), but, again, focus on what such a reform would mean broadly and theoretically.
 - b. "Hate Speech" and Colleges: The idea here is to debate a change in our federated, constitutional structure. Do not get bogged down in whether or not such speech is constitutional or not – we are debating whether we should change the very terms on which we decide the constitutionality of such speech. What are the merits of restricting certain types of speech? Is there even such a thing as "hate speech?" How do these debates fit into our larger conversation about American governance and its history? What are the risks and gains from such reforms?