



2025-2026

Lincoln-Douglas Debate  
Resolution White Papers

By Jeff Markham, Price Morgan, and Nathan Wicker

## Introduction

2026 is the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. ASDA has decided to recognize this milestone by choosing Team Policy and Lincoln-Douglas debate resolutions that are centered on ongoing questions that Americans face as we seek to build a more perfect Union.

## Lincoln-Douglas Resolution

***Resolved: A federal system of government is superior to a unitary system of government.***

## Resolutional Analysis

Competitors in the Lincoln-Douglas event should debate in a way that conforms to the following definitions:

- “System of government” here refers to the organizational structure “used for controlling a country.”<sup>1</sup>
  - “Federal” here refers to a system of government “in which power is distributed between a central authority and a number of constituent territorial units.”<sup>2</sup>
  - “Unitary” here refers to a system of government in which “ultimate governing power is concentrated in a single national authority.”<sup>3</sup>
- “Superior” should be interpreted in terms of the specific proposed standards demonstrated to be most important by the competitors during the debate.

With this resolution, ASDA foresees a rich variety of opportunities for Affirmative and Negative debaters to explore and debate substantive disagreements on issues like which

---

<sup>1</sup> “government.” Cambridge Dictionary. Full sentence: “the system used for controlling a country, city, or group of people.” Retrieved Sept 26, 2025. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/government>

<sup>2</sup> “federal.” Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Full sentence: “of or constituting a form of government in which power is distributed between a central authority and a number of constituent territorial units.” Retrieved Sept 26, 2025. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/federal>

<sup>3</sup> “Unitary state.” Greene, Jim. EBSCO Knowledge Advantage. Full sentence: “A unitary state, or unitary government, is a political system where ultimate governing power is concentrated in a single national authority.” Retrieved Sept 26, 2025. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/political-science/unitary-state>

goals governments ought to be oriented toward, how the empirical results of certain systems of government might differ from their goals, and even where we should draw a theoretical line of distinction between federal and unitary systems of government.

Note that this resolution is not limited to the context of the United States. Federal and unitary systems of government predate the founding of the United States, and are used by many other countries around the world. As such, competitors are not required to focus on which style of government would be best for the United States.

## Affirmative and Negative Burdens

ASDA's statement of value debating norms will apply when debating this resolution. The Affirmative competitor should propose a set of standards for judging which type of system of government is preferable, then build and defend a case as to why a federal system of government is preferable to a unitary system of government from the perspective of these standards. The Negative competitor may choose to propose an alternate set of standards and argue as to why these standards should be used instead of the Affirmative competitor's set of standards, or accept and work within the Affirmative competitor's proposed standards. Either way, the Negative competitor should build and defend a case as to why a federal system of government ought NOT to be considered superior to a unitary system of government, from the perspective of the standing set of standards.

## Sample Questions to Consider When Preparing Your Strategy

- What should be considered the source of a government's authority?
- Do these two types of systems of government represent the opposing ends of a spectrum? If so, where should we draw the theoretical line between federal and unitary systems of government?
- What are some general advantages of a federal system of government?
- What are some general advantages of a unitary system of government?
- What are some circumstances in which people might feel a need for federal system of government?
- What are some circumstances in which people might feel a need for a unitary system of government?
- Given that many people may feel that both systems of government might have unique strengths under different sets of circumstances (e.g. war, peace, international economic competition, natural disasters, broad public unity or disunity, public health crises), should we account for all of the potential

circumstances that a government may face when gauging which types of systems of government are best, or should we focus on the most likely circumstances only, or should we do something else entirely?

- Which system of government would better accommodate different viewpoints?
- Which system of government would better encourage political participation?
- Which system of government would best incentivize innovation in government?
- Which system of government would more effectively prevent tyranny?
- Which system of government would be most efficient?
- Which system of government would be quickest to respond to a crisis?
- Which system of government would create the most consistency across the country?

## Sample Debate Scenario #1

Affirmative proposes that the most important value for systems of government to uphold is *the liberty of individual citizens*. Affirmative builds a case as to why a federal system of government is preferable for achieving this value, starting with the theory of checks and balances outlined by the Founding Fathers in the Federalist Papers, and building on this theory with examples of the real-world achievements of decentralized systems of government.

Negative argues that individual liberty should not be understood as an end in itself, but rather as a *means* to upholding a more important value: individual well-being. On this basis, Negative proposes that *the well-being of individual citizens* ought to be considered the highest value that systems of government should seek to achieve. Drawing on the theory of governance outlined by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, Negative builds a case that a unitary system of government is preferable for achieving this value. Negative argues that Affirmative's examples of real-world successes of federal systems of government actually support the Negative view, because the governments that Affirmative drew examples from behave like unitary governments in times of crisis.

The debaters go on to conduct a spirited debate about whether liberty or well-being ought to be valued most highly, along with a debate about whether Affirmative's examples should be understood as demonstrating the benefits of federal or unitary systems of government.

## Sample Debate Scenario #2

Affirmative proposes that an appropriate value for systems of government to uphold is *the cultivation of virtue*, as described in Aristotle's *Politics*. Affirmative builds a case as to why a federal system of government is preferable for achieving this value, starting with Aristotle's theory that the best size of a community for cultivating virtue is far smaller than modern nation-states, and then illustrates this with examples of how smaller communities such as the Shakers and ASDA have empowered their members to cultivate virtue in shared practices as diverse as woodworking and competitive debate.

Negative agrees that the cultivation of virtue is an appropriate value for systems of government to uphold, and agrees that smaller communities are better for the cultivation of virtue, but disagrees that the governing systems of these communities can correctly be described as "federal." Negative builds a case arguing that in a virtue-oriented community, power is concentrated in the most excellent members of each practice, who set the standards of the practice for everyone else. This is just as true in a unitary system of government (e.g., France or the United Kingdom) – the United States does not have a monopoly on virtue because of its federal structure.

The debaters go on to conduct a spirited debate about how and whether we ought to apply the concept of federalism when interpreting the power dynamics in small, virtue-oriented communities.

## Sample Debate Scenario #3

Affirmative proposes that an appropriate value for systems of government to uphold is *justice*, as defined by Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Affirmative builds a case as to why a federal system of government is preferable for achieving this value, starting by making observations about the fundamental diversity of beliefs held by people in the world, and then arguing that a federal system of small communities is best for upholding Nozick's view of justice, as it allows each community to determine and enforce a set of rules that are agreeable to all of its members.

Negative argues that justice is important, but that the continued survival of the human race is a prerequisite to achieving abstract values such as justice. Therefore, Negative argues, we should instead decide which type of system of government is best based on which can most effectively achieve the value of *preserving human life*. Negative builds a case arguing that humans are facing international existential threats such as pandemics and natural disasters, and that a unitary system of government is best for defeating these threats.

The debaters each argue that their preferred system of government achieves *both* values more effectively than their opponent's preferred system of government. Affirmative argues that federal systems of government allow for the preservation of human life by making it easier to avoid armed conflicts, and that historical examples of unitary systems of government have often created their own threats to the preservation of human life. Negative argues that unitary systems of government can uphold Nozick's definition of justice by strongly and uniformly enforcing rules, and that federal systems of government may fail to uphold Nozick's definition of justice by creating opportunities for people to hop between jurisdictions and break rules with impunity.