



2026-2027

Lincoln-Douglas Debate
Resolution White Papers

By Martin Wicker, Nathan Wicker, and Price Morgan

Introduction

A hallmark of Lincoln-Douglas debate is the opportunity to dive deeply into the philosophical grounds underlying how we think about the world and how we make decisions. ASDA has decided to recognize this important aspect of the Lincoln-Douglas style by choosing a debate resolution for 2026-2027 that will allow students to explore pillars of ethics and their own beliefs.

Lincoln-Douglas Resolution

Resolved: When in conflict, our obligations to future generations ought to be valued above our obligations to our own generation.

Resolutional Analysis

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

- “When in conflict” establishes that the resolution concerns genuine trade-offs. The debate should be framed by situations where honoring one set of obligations requires accepting costs to the other. Debaters are not required to argue that such conflicts are universal or inevitable, only how we are to act when they do occur.
- “Obligation” in this context refers to a moral duty to a particular course of action.
- “Future generations” refers to people who will exist after the current generation’s death. This includes those not yet born or not yet of age to participate in current civic and political life.
- “Valued above” means assigned greater moral weight or priority when the two sets of obligations come into conflict. It does *not* mean that obligations to the present generation are worthless, only that, in cases of genuine conflict, obligations to future generations take precedence.
- “Our own generation” refers to those people alive and active in civic and political life today.

With this resolution, ASDA foresees a rich variety of opportunities for Affirmative and Negative debaters to explore and debate substantive disagreements on issues like how to weigh concrete, immediate obligations against uncertain, long-range harms or benefits, how moral obligations are generated (contract, consent, virtue, utility, or natural law), and whether non-existent persons can bear rights that impose duties on the living.

Note that this resolution does not specify any particular policy domain. Competitors may draw relevant examples from environmental policy, fiscal and monetary policy, constitutional design, scientific research, technological development, public health infrastructure, or any other area in which the interests of future generations could be in conflict with present-day decisions.

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 set of obligations ought to take moral priority, then build and defend a case as to why obligations to future generations ought to be valued above obligations to the present generation when the two conflict. The Negative competitor may choose to propose an alternate set of standards and argue why those standards should be used instead of the Affirmative competitor's standards or accept and work within the Affirmative competitor's proposed framework. Either way, the Negative competitor should build and defend a case as to why obligations to future generations ought *NOT* to be valued above obligations to the present generation when the two conflict, from the perspective of the set(s) of standards introduced in each debate.

ASDA rules prohibit the use of so-called "prog" arguments or similar tactics by either side. See ASDA Handbook for more information.

Sample Questions to Consider When Preparing Your Strategy

- Does the phrase "when in conflict" imply an equal tradeoff between sacrifice and benefit? Are there cases in which either future generations or the present generation disproportionately benefit or sacrifice?
- Which ethical framework (consequentialist, deontological, virtue-based, contractarian, etc.), best captures the nature of intergenerational moral obligations?
- Can we have binding moral obligations to people who do not yet exist? On what grounds?

- Is consent necessary for a moral obligation to arise? If future generations cannot consent, can we owe them anything?
- How should uncertainty about the future effect how heavily we weigh obligations to future generations?
- Do obligations to future generations include only negative duties (e.g., do not harm) or also positive duties (e.g., leave adequate resources)?
- How do we compare the welfare of a determinate, known group (present generation) with the welfare of an indeterminate, unknown group (future generations)?
- Does democracy, which rests on the consent of the governed, structurally privilege the present generation? Is that a problem?
- What obligations, if any, do present generations have to ensure that future generations inherit functioning political institutions, a stable climate, and sufficient natural resources?

Sample Debate Scenario #1

Affirmative proposes that the most important value for evaluating the resolution is *sustainability*, understood as the duty of each generation to preserve the conditions that make human flourishing possible for all subsequent generations. Affirmative builds a case rooted in Hans Jonas's *The Imperative of Responsibility*, arguing that modern technology such as nuclear weapons, industrial pollution, genetic engineering, and large-scale resource extraction has given the present generation power to cause irreversible harm. If we are cautious and the catastrophe doesn't happen, we've lost relatively little. If we are reckless and the catastrophe does happen, the loss is total and irreversible.

Affirmative contends that this asymmetric risk demands that we value obligations to future generations above short-term interests.

Negative argues that sustainability is an important value, but that *human dignity* in the present ought to be the primary value. Negative contends that billions of people alive today lack adequate food, medicine, and shelter, and that policies designed primarily to benefit future (hypothetical) people often impose crushing costs on the world's poorest living people. Drawing on John Rawls's difference principle, Negative argues that a society must first improve the situation of its least-advantaged living members before redirecting resources toward future generations whose existence and preferences are uncertain in order to uphold human dignity.

The debaters go on to conduct a spirited debate about how to balance the moral claims of distant future persons against the urgent and concrete needs of vulnerable people alive today.

Sample Debate Scenario #2

Affirmative proposes that the appropriate value for evaluating the resolution is *justice*. Affirmative frames the debate with the *individual* as the actor. Affirmative states that future generations have zero ability to advocate for themselves, creating an asymmetry of power between present and future generations. Affirmative asserts that morally speaking, the stronger party should always bear greater responsibility toward the weaker party. Affirmative points out that we all understand this principle implicitly: parents sacrifice their own comfort and obligations for the benefit of their children because children do not have the ability to fully represent and take care of themselves. The only just moral stance for individuals is to recognize that their responsibility to those without a voice requires valuing future generations above themselves. Given that this power imbalance exists, this framework is the only way to achieve justice.

Negative agrees that justice is the highest value but argues that a *government* actor is more suitable to debate the resolution because the moral framework that is reflected in government policy is much more impactful on future generations than the framework an individual personally follows. Negative also establishes that the purpose of government is to protect the rights of its citizens. Negative points out that present generations in many parts of the world are themselves living under unjust conditions and cannot be asked to further subordinate their own claims to justice in favor of generations that may, due to technological progress, be far better off than they are. Negative states that the only framework that achieves justice is one where governments always prioritize their obligations to their living citizens first.

Sample Debate Scenario #3

Affirmative proposes that the appropriate value for evaluating the resolution is *human life*. Affirmative argues that existential and catastrophic risks, including climate change, pandemics, and nuclear conflict, represent threats not only to the present generation but to all future generations simultaneously. Because the loss of future generations would represent a moral catastrophe of staggering proportions (the elimination of all potential human life), Affirmative contends that present-day obligations must be substantially

redirected toward preventing civilizational collapse, even at significant cost to present welfare.

Negative argues that human life is valuable, but that the resolution's framing distorts moral reasoning by treating future generations as a monolith whose interests automatically outweigh present obligations. Negative contends that *freedom* is a more appropriate value, and that democratic self-governance requires that living citizens be the ultimate judges of how to allocate resources between present and future needs. Negative asserts that transferring effective decision-making authority to an abstract "obligation to the future" undermines the consent-based legitimacy of government, and thus, the freedoms of the living. Negative further argues that uncertainty about future preferences and circumstances is a reality, and that present generations may be poorly positioned to determine what future persons will actually value or need.

The debaters each argue that their preferred framework better captures the moral stakes of the resolution.