2012-2013

DISCUSSION OUTLINE

The State of Democracy
In America

by
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Overview of Discussion

“Problem-solving Discussion is an effort on the part of a small group to reach a solution to a problem through informal interchange of facts, inferences, and judgments. This method of discussion seeks consensus rather than majority rule. The focus of this event should be the encouragement of cooperation and critical thinking to arrive at the collective goal of better understanding and problem solving.”

This statement from the Minnesota State High School League Speech Rules and Policies Manual reflects the true spirit of this event. As discussion participants prepare and research, the goal should be to collect information and develop collaborative skills that will maximize their ability to make valuable contributions as members of a variety of contest groups. In rounds, all discussants should cooperate to achieve group consensus through both substantive (adding valuable information, perspectives, and analysis) and procedural (enhancing the group process, full participation, and positive exchange of ideas) contributions to the process.

Overview of This Year’s Topic

Despite advances that began with the penning of the Magna Carta in 1215, the concept that average persons can and should have sole say in who leads them was untested and definitely unproven during our nation’s formative years. Beginning with the Articles of Confederation, American Democracy remains a work in progress. Each generation faced new challenges to the belief that all citizens should participate in choosing who leads our nation. The early years of the 21st Century are no different. This year’s outline attempts to examine the issues that give us pause to wonder if American Democracy is working in a way that benefits all peoples of this nation. If Robert Wiebe is correct that “Democracy always reveals who we are, not who we will become,” then this topic deserves thorough examination.

A Note on Use of Topics at Invitationals

While the Minnesota State High School League does not limit the use of topic areas used for Discussion in invitational speech tournaments, the Discussion Committee recommends the following “schedule” to give students experience with all parts of the outline:

- January - February 9: State Topics (III. Structural Issues)
- February 11 - March 2: Sectional Topics (II. People vs. Institutions)
- March 4 – March 31: Subsection Topics (I. Financial Issues)

Tournament Managers Please Note: Whether or not you choose to follow the above schedule, it is vital that you communicate to your participating schools which parts(s) of the outline you will use and how you will be organizing your Discussion rounds.
THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

2012 - 2013 MSHSL Discussion Topic Outline

Discussion tasks this year will critically examine the foundation of our nation’s governmental systems. As it relates from the President of the United States to a township supervisor in rural Minnesota, this year’s outline tries to ask a critical question: “Is American Democracy working?” Tasks for this topic should not shy away from covering what may be considered sensitive or difficult subject matter. All efforts should be made to ensure that the questions posed to the students encourage critical thinking and positive group interaction. Part of critical thinking is to recognize bias and to avoid thinking in absolutes.

I. Financial Issues – Subsection Topic
   A. Bribery, Corruption, Conflicts of Interest, Transparency.
   B. Financing of Campaigns (public financing, PACs and super PACs, etc.).
   C. Influence of Foreign Money.
   D. Control of the Media and Access.
   E. Compensation of Elected Officials.
   F. Does Money Equal Access? (The 99% vs. 1%, corporate personhood)
   G. Unrealistic campaign promises (No new taxes, no defense spending cuts, deficit reduction, safety net programs).

II. The People vs. Institutions – Section Topic
   A. The Influence and Success of Protest/Reform Movements.
   B. Influence and Role of Religion.
   C. Abuse of Political Power (eminent domain, cronyism, nepotism).
   D. The Role of Media at All Levels.
   E. Role of Lobbyists and Influence Peddlers (astro-turf lobbying, unfair access).
   F. Racial Issues and Democracy.
   G. Role of Political Parties
   H. Disenfranchisement (literal and figurative)

III. Structural Issues – State Topic
   B. Direct vs. Representative Democracy (ballot initiatives, referendums, recalls).
   C. Ballot Reforms (top two primaries, caucuses, ranked-choice voting).
   D. The State of Checks and Balances.
   E. Electoral College.
   F. Consistency among States (registration, redistricting, ballot access).
   G. Limits of Terms (who is covered, who decides, good idea at all?).
   H. Intersection of Technology and Government/Democracy.
   I. What Can We Learn from Other Democracies?

For subsection, section, and state contests, different sets of task are used for Class A & Class AA. There is no collaboration in the writing of these. Any similarities between tasks used at those contests are purely coincidental. The use of MSHSL-provided tasks is required at subsection, section, and state contests.

NOTE: Competitive sections in which there are no subsection contests may choose to use (1) section tasks or (2) a combination of subsection and section tasks. Participating schools must be informed well in advance which option the Section tournament will use.
Bibliography

(The bibliography is a starting point for those desiring direction in researching this topic. This list is not meant to be exhaustive and presents only a small number of the resources that could be used to prepare for Discussion tasks.)

Books


de Tocqueville, Alexis. *(On) Democracy in America*. 1835, 1840.


Articles


"Tyranny of the Initiative; California might well provide a perilous model, one that could undercut the republic itself”. Los Angeles Times. 13 May 2000.


Magazines/Journals

American Journal of Political Science
American Political Science Review
Journal of Democracy
Political Science Quarterly

Websites

American Political Science Association: www.apsanet.org
C-SPAN: www.c-span.org
Citizens for Responsibility & Ethics in Washington: www.citizensforethics.org
Coalition for Open Democracy: www.coalitionforopendemocracy.org
Common Cause: www.commoncause.org
League of Women Voters: www.lwv.org
Open Secrets: www.opensecrets.org