

## Congressional Debate at Nationals: Understanding Changes for 2010

by Adam Jacobi

The following excerpt is a recap of a feature in November's *Rostrum* (p. 11-12), giving context to changes in rules and procedures for Congressional Debate:

Senator John C. Stennis often advised people to "look ahead." In that spirit, students who participate in the NFL's district and national congress chambers simulate the legislative process by attempting to solve problems and change the status quo for the better. Since the National Forensic League held its first Student Congress in Wooster, Ohio in 1938, it has undergone several evolutions and spun off a number of different local variations. Despite change, the event continues to hold true to its mission, "promoting leadership and communication skills through rigorous interaction and debate on issues confronting our democracy" and it remains the one event that uses a real-world framework as a platform for discourse.

The Board of Directors recently passed a number of changes in Congress, culminating more than three years of discussion by three different committees, review by district leadership from across the country at

two separate leadership conferences and an online survey. The changes address top concerns brought to board members and the national office alike, driving the following goals:

1. Create parity and respect between Congress and other main events
2. Attempt to bring conflicting rules into alignment
3. Simplify polices and procedures at both the district and national tournaments
4. Establish consistency and transparency (ease of implementation) among district tournaments
5. Establish a congressional debate model for all parts of the United States

At its core, Congress remains the same student-centered event, especially at the local and district level. Students originate topics for debate by writing bills and resolutions, they set their own agenda, they serve as presiding officers, and they give speeches and vote in support or opposition of legislation under the framework of parliamentary procedure.

*(continued on next page)*

### No Longer in Use:

- Alpha/Omega legislation dockets
- Formal committees required to establish agenda
- Points and Base system for advancement

### New:

- Four prelim sessions
- Two minutes of questions following first negative speech
- Judge ranks determine advancement and placement, including the National Champion
- Student-elected Leadership Bowl

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## Legislation

The *docket* of legislation to be released May 10 will contain:

- 25 items of preliminary legislation
- 12 items of semifinal legislation
- 6 items of final legislation

In setting the order of business, students may propose an agenda or briefly caucus committees to propose an agenda. The agenda shall be determined by a majority vote by the chamber.

## Schedule

There will be four preliminary sessions, not three. Each session will last for about three hours; have a new presiding officer, new seating chart, resetting of precedence and recency; and begin with new legislation that has not been debated in a previous session. Also, each first negative speech on legislation is followed by a two-minute questioning period.

## Advancement

At the end of each session, scorers will rank their eight most preferred legislators (which may include the presiding officer), and legislators with the lowest cumulative rank total advance to the next level of competition or place at the end of the tournament. Points are still awarded for speaking and presiding, and these will be recorded as NFL points for the tournament, but points no longer have bearing on advancement. The Base system is officially

retired. The parliamentarian no longer hand-picks one student to advance; s/he ranks along with judges, but *holistically*, for all four preliminary sessions the two semifinal sessions, or the single final session. S/he also will still rank order all students in the chamber, to be used as the final tie-breaker.

Evaluation of debaters and presiding officers will be done using the new evaluation ballot, available at [www.nflonline.org/AboutNFL/LeagueManuals#Events](http://www.nflonline.org/AboutNFL/LeagueManuals#Events). The ballot prompts scorers to take speeches, answers to questions, and even the quality and pertinence of questions asked into account when holistically ranking students at the end of a session. A scorer may decide that quality trumps quantity of participation, and can note this on the form.

Placement of six (instead of nine) finalists—including the National Champion—at the end of the Sen. John C. Stennis National Congressional Debate will be determined by tabulated judge ranks, with an expanded panel of judges that will include respected coaches, bipartisan chiefs of staff and committee clerks from the US Congress (with thanks to our valued partner, the Stennis Center for Public Service Leadership), and local public officials (no more than three on each panel). Recognizing the top six is consistent with all other NFL events, as well as the computation for the Mundt school award.

The 2010 National Congressional Debate also marks the debut of Senate and House Leadership Bowls, awarded to

one senator and one representative whose cumulative **student rank totals** from the preliminary, semifinal, and final sessions is a testament to the respect they command as leaders within their chambers. This replaces the student vote at the end of the final session to determine the national champion and placement.

To adjourn this article, it's important to note that while several functions of the National Congressional Debate have been streamlined, Congress still remains a student-centered event at its core, with students interpersonally negotiating and simulating the legislative process. The new Leadership Bowls encourage civil treatment beginning in the preliminary session (as opposed to the old process of student voting, which influenced just finals), so students must exhibit humility, respect, integrity, and leadership in their service as a legislator from the very beginning of the tournament, and through the very end. ■

### *About the Author*

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