

Floor Debate Simulation

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject: American Government and Civics
Prepared by: Unicameral Information Office



Overview & Purpose

The simulation is meant to provide students an understanding of the procedures and process of floor debate on a bill in the Nebraska Legislature. Students play the role of senators and engage in debate and compromise to forge new legislation.

Standards Alignment

- SS 12.1.1.e Analyze and evaluate the foundation, structures and functions of state government (e.g., bicameral/unicameral, reapportionment/redistricting, branches of government)
- SS 12.1.2.a Evaluate how individuals and groups can effectively use the structure and functions of various levels of government to shape policy (e.g., lobbying, voting, contacting government officials, petitioning)
- SS 12.1.2.c Engage in civic activities (e.g., discussing current issues, advocating for personal rights and the rights of others, influencing governmental actions, participating in civil discourse, registering for selective service, participating in community improvement activities, service learning)
- SS 12.1.2.d Analyze an issue and determine which level of government is most appropriate to utilize in addressing the issue
- SS 12.1.2.e Describe the roles and influences of individuals, groups and the media as checks on governmental practices (e.g., interest groups, political action committees, lobbyists, public opinion polls)
- SS 12.2.11.a Examine how governments can use taxing and spending policies to influence behavior (e.g., alcohol tax, home mortgage interest deduction)

Materials Needed

Legislative bill (five options are provided)
Presiding Officer script
Stopwatch or clock for timing
Paper/pencil for managing speaking queue

Preparation (approximately 10 minutes)

- Play the Floor Debate clips provided on a large screen or white board.
- Assign students their roles. The simulation requires one student to serve as the bill sponsor and one as the chairperson of the committee that heard the bill. The remaining students will serve as senators. (Refer to the document titled Classroom Setup).
- The presiding officer's script can be found in the floor debate zip file. This role is best played by the teacher. Give the students a few minutes to become familiar with their materials and to arrange their seating.
- Pass out and review copies of the chosen bill. Explain to students the general nature of the bill.

Roles

Presiding Officer (Teacher): Manage the order and timing of senators' speaking turns; recognize the next speaker in the queue

Bill Sponsor (Student): Introduce the bill during floor debate; answer senators' questions.

Committee Chairperson (Student): Introduce any committee amendments; answer senators' questions.

Senators (Remaining students)

Setting Up Your Classroom

- Place one desk at the front of the classroom, facing the rest of the room, where the presiding officer will stand.
- The senators will sit at their individual desks.

Activity (approximately 35 minutes)

- The presiding officer should bring the legislature to order, following the script.
- The bill's sponsor will introduce the bill to the full body. If there is a committee amendment to the bill, the committee chairperson will introduce the amendment to the body.
- Each senator will have the opportunity to speak. (NOTE: Each student is independent senator, even those who served as regular citizens during the committee hearing process. Each senator may take whatever position he or she would like to on the bill.)
- Senators are limited to two speaking opportunities and may speak for two minutes each time.

Floor Debate Rules

- A senator wishing to speak shall raise his or her hand. He or she will be recognized to speak based on when the request was recorded by the presiding officer.
- A senator introducing a bill or amendment/motion may speak three times on the bill or amendment (i.e., opening, second speech and closing). All other senators may speak only twice. All speeches are limited to two minutes.
- Senators may yield their time to other senators. Senators also may use their time to ask questions of other senators.
- Any senator wishing to change a bill may offer an amendment. Amendments must be filed with the presiding officer. Amendments and motions will be taken up in the order in which they are filed with the presiding officer.

Summary (approximately 15 minutes)

- Ask students what they learned from the simulation and what it reveals about the lawmaking process. Discuss the importance of compromise.
- Further information and lesson plan ideas for learning about the Nebraska Legislature can be found at http://www.legislature.ne.gov/education/student_programs.php.