

Class Simulation

Sectional Debates

The Sectional debates, between the North and South, involved arguments about the nature of the Constitution, state sovereignty, and the relationship between nation and state. It also illustrated arguments that precipitated the Civil War. In addition to learning about the debates, students will begin to think about federalism, the Constitution, and states rights critically and more deeply.

Objective

This debates will help students learn the arguments of the Unionists and States Righters from a first hand perspective. Students become familiar with some of the greatest thinkers on both sides of the argument, including people such as Abraham Lincoln and John Calhoun, as well as their reasons opposing or supporting nullification, succession, and various interpretations of the Constitution. Students are able to apply concepts such as social contract theory to historical events, as well as develop independent research and public presentation skills. They also learn the value of considering both sides of an argument.

Time

Roughly four class periods, one for each debate. For smaller classes, one of the days can be removed.

Administration

Assign students to debate groups at least two weeks prior to the first debate. I prefer to allow them to pick their own groups. Have students meet with their groups for five minutes to exchange names and contact information. Then have them randomly draw their side and day from a box. For example, a group drawing A2 would be anti-federalists in the second debate. If you had them do the Federalist debates previously, keep them in their same groups, in the same order, just have them switch sides. Federalists become State Righters and Anti-Federalists become Unionists.

Next, review the assignment [sectional debates.pdf](#) and tell students they need to answer their assigned question from the perspective of their group (Unionist or States Righter). Although primary source materials have been suggested, there is no reason for students to limit themselves to these works. They are encouraged to answer the question using any source they can find. Tell students they will complete a written assignment related to their question and provide a short presentation on their party's position – the former addresses the whole question, the latter might address just part of it. They will also receive a team grade for the question and answer session. The grade sheet linked to the assignment will show them the grade breakdown, which you may want to change.

A few days before the debate, give students your own [short summary of the debates](#), and go over procedures. First, you'll toss a coin to see which group goes first. The group going first puts up its first speaker who presents for roughly 2 minutes on the assigned subject (time varies

depending upon the size of your groups). The group going second then does the same, followed by the second person in the first group and the second person in the second group, etc.... After everyone has presented, the group that goes first will ask a question of the second group. The other group responds and a back and forth discussion ensues. When the debate dies down, ask the other group to answer a question from the first group. After that discussion dies down, you can then allow additional questions from the group, open up questions from the audience (i.e., other students in the class), or pose questions of your own. Stress that you would like to see logical reasoning, not fallacies and rhetoric. I usually spend some time explaining each.

Consider grading both the written and verbal parts of the debate in [excel](#), then printing a grade sheet for each student using the Rmarkdown instructions on my teaching page.

Electronic Debates

These debates work well face to face or through Zoom. If you use Zoom, you might have to pre-assign sides and debate days randomly, then inform students of their group through the grade book in ELC (Blackboard, etc.)

On the day of the debate, encourage students that are debating to write their group name in parentheses after their name. For example, Mary Poppins would add “(U3)” after her name. ...Look for how to allow participants to rename themselves in the Zoom directions ... These suffixes can help you manually assign the groups to breakout rooms if they feel they need to formulate a response during Q&A.