Policy Debate: Synopsis of the Problem Areas for 2017-2018

Students and coaches are invited to discuss these topics extensively before voting online by October 15. See page 48 for details!

I

PROBLEM AREA I: ENERGY POLICY

Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase incentives for development and/or use of renewable energy in the United States.

►► United States energy policy has changed frequently over the past few decades. These changes are indicative of the fact that federal policy is traditionally reactive in nature. The very formation of the U.S. Department of Energy during the 1970s occurred after years of uncertainty regarding the nation's energy supply.

Although national energy policy has changed frequently over the past three decades, many of those changes have been the result of political, economic, or environmental factors at the time. At the start of the 21st century, the combination of technological advances in the renewable energy sector and increased concern regarding climate change contributed to ambitious development of new energy forms.

The list of more popular kinds of renewable energy includes solar, wind, hydro-electric, tidal energy, geothermal, as well as several additional options that remain in developmental stages such as hydrogen and fusion power.

Increased international focus on climate change over the past several years has further served as justification for expansion of renewable energy. These efforts, however, have been tempered by expansion of oil production in the United States. The advent of hydraulic fracturing has resulted in opening new petroleum reserves, especially in shale fields.

This topic is very well-balanced with affirmative teams having the option of advocating for any one of the numerous forms of renewable energy resources. Harms associated with fossil fuel use as well as a potential impact on climate change are problem areas that affirmative teams can opt to address. Affirmative teams also have the option of making a number of critical claims, especially in the context of climate change and preservation of natural resources. Negative teams have a number of options for argumentation. They could argue that, due to current economic/supply factors, it is simply unfeasible to convert to renewable energy in a major way. Moreover, negative debaters can claim clean coal technology or nuclear energy as alternatives to traditional fossil fuel options. Finally, negative teams also have the option of relying on conversation to reduce both consumption as well as environmental impacts of fossil fuel use. Negative teams will also have the option of presenting federalism, backlash, and spending disadvantages. Negative debaters will have the option of a range of counterplans from relying on state and/or non-governmental organizations for implementation or choosing to develop energy resources not supported by the affirmative.

II

PROBLEM AREA II: INCOME INEQUALITY

Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase progressive taxation, the federal minimum wage or consumer lending regulation in the United States.

►► Over the last few decades, the gap between wealthy and poor has increased dramatically, as evidenced by Census and economic data. The 2016 elections, particularly the Democratic primaries, highlighted the anxiety and emotions that people feel about this issue. While the impacts related to the economy are clear to understand, there are also impacts to these disparities in education, social mobility, crime, and even the environment, as seen in this year's developments regarding water quality in Flint, Michigan. This

resolution proposes that the federal government should act to reduce income inequality through either increasing the progressiveness of our taxation system (either by changing the tax rates, adding additional taxes on the super-wealthy, crafting tax breaks that are only accessible by people below a certain income level or establishing through some means a guaranteed income), the federal minimum wage, or through regulation of consumer lending procedures, including but not limited to predatory lending practices such as abolishing prepayment penalties or capping interest rates. In the wake of Thomas Piketty's book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, a number of organizations have taken research into this topic more extensively, guaranteeing a deep and evolving research base over the course of the year. Because these issues affect all people, novices will easily access the core issues, and varsity students should find enough nuance in the literature to craft innovative plans and find strategic advantage ground. Negative teams will have a range of positions at their use to combat these cases, including but not limited to business confidence, inflation, capitalism good, socialism good, and politics—given the range of people's perspectives regarding the economy and the government's proper role in it, a modicum of research will unveil a range of strategic arguments to advance on this debate.

III

PROBLEM AREA III: EDUCATION REFORM

Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its funding and/or regulation of elementary and/or secondary education in the United States.

►► United States students do not rank well compared to their peers from other countries. Achievement gaps also exist between children from different ethnic groups and between affluent and low-income students. Are the schools at fault, or are other issues to blame? What changes in funding, regulations, standards, or support for our schools will bring better results? Do we need more teachers, higher teacher pay, uniform teacher standards, and/or smaller class sizes? Will more money for technology improve teaching? Do we need more flexibility to employ and develop different types of schools? Do we need more flexibility within our public schools? What will bring up graduation rates and help United States students compete internationally? How can we prepare and train the future United States workforce? This resolution will provide a balanced field to discuss these important education issues. The affirmative teams will have the ability to critically examine everything from charter schools to online programs to for-profit schools. There is flexibility to argue for or against K-12 in traditional schools versus more specialized schools. Each area of the country has substantially different standards and rules. This topic allows students to examine those differences and how the federal government can improve education across the board. Negative ground includes arguments from traditional policy options such as federalism, States CP, other agent counterplans, solvency deficits as to whether the affirmative is affecting a large enough scope to solve, spending DAs, politics scenarios, etc. Critical literature is also applicable to the wide variety of presumptions within our government and education systems.

IV

PROBLEM AREA IV: DOMESTIC AGRICULTURE

Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its regulation of one or more of the following in the United States: genetically modified foods, biofuels, pesticides, concentrated animal feeding operations, crop insurance.

►► Issues related to the quality, quantity, and ethics of food production are of interest to all Americans. Accordingly, it seems strange that it has been 30 years since we last debated an agriculture topic at the high school level. The United States actively promotes controversial agricultural practices through direct subsidies and provision of crop insurance. Affirmative teams would be able to focus on numerous controversies related to federal promotion of agricultural programs. The United States is the world leader in the production of genetically modified foods, despite objections from the European Union and numerous scientists about safety. The federal government promotes the use of corn for the production of ethanol despite concerns about the impact on food prices and shortages around the world. Environmentalists argue that natural methods of integrated pest management should replace the intensive use of chemical pesticides. Concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFO) are controversial because of their impact on animal rights, overuse of antibiotics, and promotion of human obesity. Proponents of sustainable agriculture believe that

federal crop insurance regulations could be better used to discourage factory farming at the expense of family farms and/or sustainable agricultural practices. Negative teams will also have a variety of arguments from which to choose. Negative teams can argue that genetically modified foods are absolutely safe and offer the key to feeding the world while also protecting against drought conditions and minimizing use of pesticides and herbicides. Defenders of biofuels argue that ethanol offers a clean and renewable way to promote U.S. energy independence. The current reliance on chemical pesticides and large farming and ranching operations can be defended as essential means of ensuring the world's food supply while keeping prices within reach of the poor.

V

PROBLEM AREA V: RUSSIA

Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase economic, diplomatic and/or military pressure on the Russian Federation.

►► Recent allegations of hacking into the DNC is only the most recent Russian action that endangers economic and political stability worldwide. In recent years, Russia annexed Crimea, armed the Syrian government, and armed rebels in Ukraine. Russia's political leaders maintain close ties with organized crime and silence dissidents. Russia's economic system lacks the ability to create a modern market system. Past U.S. efforts to engage Russia have failed to foster necessary reforms, making it clear that the U.S. needs to place more pressure on the Russian Federation.

Some may assume that this topic is merely a minor revision of the 2016-2017 China topic. However, the relationship between the U.S. and China is fundamentally different than the relationship between U.S. and Russia. Thus, pressure and engagement are not synonyms. Pressure involves more forceful language or actions, whereas engagement assumes a more cooperative environment exists. Further, Russia's foreign policy is more focused on Europe and the Middle East, whereas China's foreign policy is more focused on Southeast and East Asia. Hence, significantly different issues will be debated. For example, Syria/ISIS and military deployment in Europe are potentials areas of advantage ground on the Russia topic, but unlikely to be affirmative ground on the China topic. Debating Russia enhances students' understanding of world affairs in a unique manner.

Possible affirmatives include supporting the Ukrainian government, imposing sanctions that focus on Russian energy sales, recommending that Russia be removed from international organizations such as the G8 or WTO, expanding the use of the Magnitsky Act to include more Russian officials and business personnel tied to rights violations, supporting pipeline construction for European supply of oil and natural gas, supporting international banking reform, withdrawing from New START, working with NATO to deter Russian military activities in the Baltic States or Arctic Ocean, or reversing/halting military base closures in Europe. Negative ground includes disadvantages based on Russian backlash, Russian election results, U.S. politics, European destabilization, or terrorism. Counterplan ground includes testing the agent of action (e.g., EU or NATO), engaging Russia instead of pressuring, as well as alternative solvency mechanisms for the Affirmative advantages. Critical ground includes realism, otherization, securitization, "terror talk," or threat construction.

Vote Online!

Students and one chapter advisor per school may vote online until October 15 at 4:00 p.m. CT. To access the link, visit **www.speechanddebate.org/topics** and follow the online ballot instructions. The two most preferred topic areas will be placed on a second online ballot in November.

NOTE: *The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) handles selection of the annual Policy Debate topic where each state organization, the National Speech & Debate Association, the National Catholic Forensic League, and the National Debate Coaches Association all have voting privileges.*