



Lincoln Douglas Nationals Topic Quick Tips

The Nationals topic for Lincoln Douglas is an age-old quandary made particularly timely by recent events. Lately, issues such as gun control and government surveillance have dredged up a number of important controversies relating to the desirability (or lack thereof) of a powerful state. Although there are many pithy quotations on this question (you'll hardly lack for speech intros!), the actual debatable portions are tough to tease out.

In this topic analysis, we're paring down the evidence focus in favor of a more analytical approach. The reason for this shift is that this topic doesn't really lend itself to a storm of cards so much as it calls for a thoughtful examination of the meta-issues that frame our thoughts about government and how to debate them. Many of the authors who write about this tend to make rhetorically powerful claims, such as:

"Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." – Benjamin Franklin

Or, on the other side,

"It's important to understand that you can't have 100 percent security and then have 100 percent privacy and zero inconvenience -- we're going to have to make some choices as a society," – Barack Obama

Many of these arguments are assertions. Debating assertions, as we've previously written, is difficult because they lack warrants and tie-breakers that give the judge clear options to resolve the debate beyond ideological impulse. Today, in examining the Nationals 2013 Lincoln-Douglas resolution,

Resolved: Oppressive government is more desirable than no government.

We will attempt to tease out the argumentative and strategic significance of these issues. We'll begin with the affirmative.

Affirmative:

- 1. Humans left to their own devices will coexist peacefully because they have an incentive to maintain the common good.** One of the important controlling issues on this resolution is your ability to win arguments about human nature. This is because the function of government is to constrain and control human impulse. In order to win that a smaller or non-existent government is more desirable than a larger and stricter government, you will need to win that humans would not give in to their darker impulses in its absence.

Many, such as notable philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, argue that a human in a **state of nature** (that is, a situation where there is no government and every individual exists only for themselves) is inherently peaceful. Although Rousseau later qualifies this notion, he uses it as a



basis for understanding why oppressive government is not necessary or desirable. Each human's unique need for self-preservation will tend not to infringe upon that of others; that is, a human takes what he or she needs to survive and has no reason to accumulate the belongings of others or harm them because surplus goods confer no particular advantage without organized social structures.

The overriding incentive for a human is to survive, so an unencumbered human being has every incentive to avoid trouble and to behave in such a way as promotes independent living and avoids clashes with others. In fact, philosopher John Locke believed that humans are basically **reasonable and tolerant** and will tend toward promoting equality.

These qualities in context may be used to suggest that, after overthrow of an oppressive government, people would tend to, if not cooperate, than at least leave one another in peace in pursuit of their own aims.

Although none of these philosophers explicitly advocated that there be no government at all, they did use these arguments as a basic reason why people could be trusted to govern themselves: **humans possessed the basic understanding that by granting others liberty they could expect the same.**

In essence, the reason the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you) makes sense to most people is because our instinct is toward reciprocity and cooperation and we intuitively understand that this works best when everyone behaves accordingly.

When debating, use this as a **framing issue**. Stress that, if you win that people are, by nature, good, then you win a controlling piece of **impact defense**. This argument diminishes the negative's access to any number of disadvantages about people doing terrible things without an all-powerful sovereign to keep them in line. Human nature is a persuasive argument because it allows you to make the predictive claim that people will tend to cooperate. You can then contextualize all of the negative's arguments about how people are violent as a natural reaction to an unnatural form of social order (an oppressive state) rather than an instinct unto itself.

- 2. Liberty allows individuals to live the lives they will be the happiest living.** Another important facet of the debate is establishing what constitutes a good life. The negative may have some persuasive arguments about an oppressive government improving longevity of life, but will likely have a much more difficult time explaining how oppressive limits contribute to happiness.

Happiness is, often, a function of **choice and the extent to which one can act according to their own self-interest**. Consider: if you were able to choose to spend a day any way you wished, you would likely choose whatever made you happiest. Having more choices available increases the probability that one will have the option to choose something that makes them happy. Having



fewer choices does the opposite. A smaller government gives an individual the opportunity to choose, whereas an oppressive government does the opposite.

You can use this as an **impact calculus** issue and argue that it is more valuable to have a happy, free existence than to live safely in servitude. There are a number of ways to make this argument, but you can most easily settle on a deontological versus utilitarian calculus. By positing the right to liberty, choice, and freedom as a moral side constraint, you can dismiss the negative's possible body-count impacts.

- 3. Absolute safety is impossible and a ruse to infringe on liberty.** Another thing that you should point out when you are affirmative is the elusive nature of "safety." Most negative arguments will hinge on the necessity of government to guarantee safety and security. Without government, they argue, there will be no one to protect the public from murderers, terrorists, rapists, etc. You should make defensive arguments to this claim:
 - 1. Uniqueness argument:** Crime exists everywhere in the world now, regardless of how oppressive the government is or is not. Tragedies like bombings, shootings, etc. happen regardless. Since these things happen now, the burden is on the negative to demonstrate how, if, and how much worse they would get without an oppressive government system. If they can't articulate this, they don't have a **unique disadvantage** but rather a problem that exists now and may get worse by an unknown amount.
 - 2. Link argument:** You should **challenge the relationship** between amount of government and potential for crime. You can use this argument as a hedge to demonstrate that the existence of people with a will to violence, not the amount or the nature of government, is the deciding factor in how dangerous the world is. That is, if someone hatches a plan to do violence to others and possesses sufficient creativity to elude capture, no amount of government will stop them. Consider the recent tragedies in Boston and Newtown. Individuals who engage in sufficient planning and eschew traceable forms of communication are often able to elude discovery until after their crimes have been committed.
 - 3. Impact argument:** To make this otherwise defensive answer to a negative argument work as offense, you can proceed to argue that appeals to safety are intrinsically bad. Using any example you like (popular ones may be the PATRIOT act or, more recently, PRISM) you can argue that governments justify intrusions on liberty most effectively by telling their citizens that it will make them safer. You can argue that the trade of liberty for safety is never a good bet for the reasons above and contextualize the negative as similar to a government entity with ulterior motives.
- 4. The government should serve the people or else it ceases to be legitimate.** We've written about this in the past (see the foreign intervention topic analysis for cards on this question), but you can always argue that government is best and most productively theorized as a **social**



contract between a population and a sovereign authority. Essentially, people give up certain rights and liberties in exchange for protection from danger.

Oppressive governments, however, violate their social contracts with their citizens by endangering their liberties beyond what is reasonable or just. In these instances, the government ceases to serve the public good. In essence, the government ceases to be legitimate and would be better abolished. You can use social contract theory to argue that the obligation to destroy a government in violation of the social contract necessarily means that it would be preferable to have no government at all.

In order to win an **external impact**, you can also argue that allowing violators of the social contract to exist undermines the foundations of democracy and civil society. These conventions exist because of the continued credibility and legitimacy of the social contract and allowing exceptions to persist endangers them.

On the negative, you will need to take a slightly different tack. We will begin with the inverse of the first affirmative argument above:

1. **Humans left to their own devices will do bad things.** As before, in order to prove the necessity of government at all costs, you will need to substantiate that humans will behave deplorably in its absence. One way to do this is to make a framing argument about human nature.

I've already explained how to deploy this argument above, but in order to substantiate it you may want to consult international relations theorists that discuss the need for offensive realism. For example, many authors argue that humans have a natural desire to maximize benefit at the expense of others. They use these theories to explain competition between states but often do so by citing evolutionary biology. The argument here is simple and relies on the concept of the **survival of the fittest**. Since, historically, the humans to survive were the ones who were most able to out-compete others we remain hard-wired for competition rather than cooperation. These traits made our distant ancestors survivors.

If you're looking for a more classical philosophical twist, consult Thomas Hobbes. He theorizes that government is needed to check the base impulses of humans and channel them toward order and progress. For Hobbes, government of any form is preferable to the absence of government because the sovereign is the only bulwark against human failings.

As above, you should use this as **terminal defense** against the affirmative's liberty claims by arguing that absolute liberty would be used to violent and nefarious ends.

2. **Government oppression allows order, which is necessary for public goods that are not in self-interest.** We've discussed before the concept of a **public good** (see our universal health care topic analysis for more detail). Public goods are those things that serve a **common interest of all**



by satisfying a **particular need** on the part of a segment of the population. For example, health care is argued to be a public good because, by providing health care to those least able to afford it, we serve the common interest in preventing the spread of treatable illnesses.

Note that, in this example, the public good of a healthy population via universal health care is not in the **direct self-interest** of those who must give up some of their resources to pay for those who cannot afford care. If given the choice, many of them would choose not to subsidize the care of others and instead keep their money.

Let's try another example – say, government monitoring of phones or other communication devices. This arguably serves a public good by allowing government agencies to find out about possible crimes before they are committed. This same tactic, however, infringes on an individual's self-interest in preserving privacy.

Although both of these examples are certainly debatable, I raise these issues only to prove the point that often, public goods and liberty/freedom are in conflict. Oppressive governments can more easily subordinate individual liberty to the pursuit of public goods and, as a result, uphold them in even the most difficult of instances and in the face of tons of opposition.

Complete lack of government, however, would provide no hope of the common good prevailing in instances such as these where the public good and self-interest theoretically contradict. You can come up with your own examples, but the key here again is impact calculus. Why is the preservation of these public goods preferable to self-interested ends?

In general, you'll need to argue that individuals should not have the right to do things that harm themselves or others, even in the event that this right upholds a moral good (choice, freedom, etc.).

- 3. The lack of government creates a dangerous vacuum.** Another useful negative strategy is to challenge the assumption that government transitions can occur peacefully. Although the resolution merely asks you to compare oppressive government to “no government” (which could complicate a transitions argument), the affirmative will likely paint a picture of oppressive government simply fading away to a lawless yet peaceful utopia.

You should use this opportunity to paint a vivid picture for the judge using relevant examples of oppressive governments being overthrown and the utter chaos that springs up in the aftermath. There are a number of recent case studies that illustrate that, after a violent overthrow or revolution, repressive governments will either reconstitute themselves as ad-hoc bands of armed revolutionaries or lawless criminal safe havens (try researching Libya and other Arab Spring countries where the transition from repression to civil society has been rocky).



In many cases, government structures are so entrenched that “no government” in practice almost always means “partial government.” In fact, many authors challenge the idea that humans can exist indefinitely without formal government because of the natural desire for protection and the competitive drive of those with leadership impulses to take charge. You can argue that these partial governments lack the established laws and norms of long-standing government structures and are inherently unstable and dangerous as a result.

That’s all for today! Keep refining your LD cases and, as always e-mail for case critiques or questions to lauren.sabino@ncpa.org. Good luck at NFL Nationals!