Collective vs Individual Resolutions



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Let’s do a small experiment. Here are some of the Lincoln Douglas resolutions used in the past few years from the three leagues Monument Publishing writes for, the NSDA,[[1]](#footnote-2) the NCFCA,[[2]](#footnote-3) and Stoa.[[3]](#footnote-4)

* Resolved: When forced to choose, a just government ought to prioritize [universal human rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_human_rights) over its national interest. (NSDA Nationals 2011) Also,
* Resolved: The United States has a moral obligation to mitigate international conflicts. (School year 2013-2014, Stoa)
* Resolved: That a government's legitimacy is more determined by its respect for [popular sovereignty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_sovereignty) than individual rights. (School year 2010-2011, Stoa, NCFCA)
* Resolved: When in conflict, personal freedom ought to be valued above economic security. (School year 2011-2012, Stoa)
* Resolved: When in conflict, an individual's freedom of speech should be valued above a community's moral standards. (Resolution One, School year 2014-2015, Stoa)
* Resolved: When in conflict, the right to individual privacy is more important than national security. (2015-2016, NCFCA)

This is just a small sampling of topics from a bigger pool, but they all have something in common: *a collective vs. individual mentality*. After reading through the lists of all the past Lincoln-Douglas topics in these three leagues, I’d estimate around fifty percent of NSDA’s resolutions are formatted this way, along with seventy percent of NCFCA’s and Stoa’s.

This means for around fifty to seventy percent of your high school debate career, unless something within the leagues significantly changes, you will be debating *collective vs. individual*. **In this article I will break down this specific format of a debate resolution and give you the key to understanding what these resolutions are getting at — including this year’s Stoa topic —** **collective vs individual.**

What is a collective vs. individual debate?

This is you.

As you can see, you have a house. You legally own this house, on land that is also legally yours, and it falls under your fundamental right to property. But wait:

See those people? Those are Bob and his friends. There’s actually roughly three hundred of them, but I did not want to draw three hundred stick figures. They’re all really sick and can’t pay for their medical bills. The oil under your house (black box thing) could easily save them all. So the government wants to tear down your house, move you someplace else, take all your oil and save Bob and his friends.

What we’ve created here is a situation where you, an individual, is at risk of losing an inherent right for a larger group of people by the hand of the government. Maybe you’re one of those good souls that would give up your house and oil for Bob and his friends. Even if you *want* to do it, does the government have the right to *make* you do it?

The situation can change. What if you had to give up your life? Your freedom? What if Bob and his friend’s stakes were different as well? What if it wasn’t three people, but three hundred or thousand? What if Bob and his friends were terrorists? All sorts of situations make the conflict between the collective needs of the public and individual private property rights change.

These are the questions that keep resolution writers awake at night. They find new ways to re-write collective vs. individual with different stakes and different scenarios that are much more real-world than the one I just provided.

If you’re like me, you’re currently doing one of two things right now. You’re already forming arguments in your head as to why the individual or the collective in this scenario is more important (property rights vs. right to human life, maybe). Or, perhaps you’ve decided to step outside the box and ask some serious questions like:

“Can’t Bob and his friends get the funds through other means? Why does the government not have a program for this?”

“Should governments have programs at all? Should we have governments at all?”

“Is a government obligation different than a personal obligation?”

Asking these questions will help you debate. Whether you decide to stay within the collective vs. individual box set up for you is up to you entirely. I’m not going to tell you whether the box is good or bad - I’m here to define, explain, and explore the box.

How to spot a collective vs. individual debate

Often the words “rights,” “individual” or “personal” are included in the very wording, as is the case for our Stoa resolution this year. If one side of the resolution is pitted against a larger group, you’ve spotted it. Sometimes, instead of being a single person and the government, it’s individual state’s right and the federal government, or a single nation and the rest of the world. Sometimes they are harder to spot, such as, “Resolved: In a democracy, voting ought to be compulsory” (September/October 2013, NSDA). Even though the collective and individual aren’t built into the wording, once you look at it for awhile, one of the most obvious angles is going to be individual right not to vote vs. collective benefit of everyone participating. Even if it’s not built-in, it’s going to be a popular angle you’ll need to be prepared for.

General Welfare

After five years of debate, I’ve never heard anyone get up to the podium and say, “Today I’ll be valuing the collective.” In debate, we have fancy value terms for saying the rights of a group of people trump those of an individual. Utilitarianism, The Greater Good, Common Good, The Social Contract, and Net Value Benefits are all ultimately near-synonyms for this idea. The one you will hear most frequently is General Welfare. There is no concrete definition for General Welfare, but I found one for Utilitarianism,

“The belief that a morally good action is one that helps the greatest number of people.” - Merriam Webster[[4]](#footnote-5)

General Welfare is a value that overarches other values like economic security, national freedom, emotional stability, etc. It is trying to get as close to Utopia as we can. It often constitutes protection of the collective by the few, maintaining a healthy balance of cooperation and competition, and provision for the masses while allowing people to maintain their autonomy. It is the object of any good government.

Keep this in mind when advocated for the collective, as is the case for the Affirmative. Almost all good values eventually contribute to the General Welfare. If you choose a more specific value you may end up agreeing both values are just criterions to General Welfare.

General Welfare is straightforward, and on face value sounds perfect. General Welfare, along with Morality, seem to be the Super Values. Every other value should point there. However, unlike Morality, General Welfare has a tricky side that we forget about.

If you save ninety-five percent of people, that’s great and all, but that means we lost five percent. Sure, you can try to justify five percent until you realize five percent of the earth’s population is three hundred fifty million people. All with friends and family they care about, faces, stories, and the ability to feel immense amounts of joy and pain in ways completely unique from one another. When you debate someone with statistics, ask them for the numbers, not the percentages.

Valuing General Welfare is what constitutions are built on. It’s considered one of the pillars of human societies. The Social Contract, where we give up some rights to belong to a group, is necessary for those groups to exist. To some degree, the Social Contract is necessary. Governments have to make somewhat cold decisions on how best to preserve their people. We lose military lives every year to protect our country. Scientists die in freak accidents to better our medicine, science, and technology. We pay taxes, don’t carry guns into courtrooms, and stop at traffic lights because we agree the General Welfare is more important than our right to do otherwise.

Let me ask you something, though, would you agree to the execution of every mentally disabled, homeless, or elderly person because they do not contribute to the General Welfare? Wouldn’t the resources they use be better served to the ninety-five percent of us that are able bodied and mentally sound? Of course not. That’s draconian, and frankly sick. But that’s what happens when General Welfare is held as wholly good and completely unchallenged.

Human Rights

There are many ideas on what constitutes as a Human Right. They are argued to be fundamental and inalienable. They impose a moral obligation on other individuals to respect one another’s Human Rights, and they are not to be taken away unless in very specific circumstances after due process. They are the same for everyone, despite their race, religion, nationality, sex, or status.[[5]](#footnote-6) Some people have an extremely strict view on what a human right is and others will label nearly anything as a human right. Here are some common definitions,

* “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” This is taken from the Declaration of Independence. Most anything falling under the Bill of Rights and all other Constitutional rights and Amendments are often considered human rights.
* “Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Property.” Alternatively phrased as “pursuit of estate” or “indolency of body, possession of outward things,” from philosopher John Locke.[[6]](#footnote-7) Basically this is saying you have the right to your own body and not slavery or abuse, and that you may own other things such as land or possessions but not people.
* “Personal Freedom.” Basically, my right to do whatever I want as long as it does not harm others.
* “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”[[7]](#footnote-8) This is a United Nations document, written in response to the atrocities of World War II.

Some debaters will advocate that General Welfare and Human Rights are the same thing. Indeed, General Welfare requires at least the majority have human rights. In other types of resolutions the differences are often a moot point and you are best served agreeing to your opponent’s value, whichever it is. But there is a distinct difference you have to remember: Human Rights are concerned with the individual, whereas General Welfare is for the public. As the Negative in this resolution your opponent may point out it is in the best interest of General Welfare if the individual has a Human Right taken away (in this case, the right to property).

Taking away people’s Human Rights can be a dangerous road to start on. The more rights you let a government take away the more they are capable of taking. Sometimes this is done without the consent of the individual. This is what happens under rule of dictators. Some philosophers negate the idea of Human Rights altogether, like Friedrich Nietzsche[[8]](#footnote-9) and Karl Marx.[[9]](#footnote-10) These are not necessarily people I would cite in a homeschool debate league, but something to maybe research and be aware of. Political philosophy professor Charles Blattberg argues that discussion of human rights, since the definition changes from country to country, de-motivates people from upholding the values that rights are meant to affirm.

The greatest national debates you will see are going to be on this issue. Is abortion a violation of right to life? Does it help or harm general welfare? What about the right to bear arms? Does that help or harm the general welfare? International intervention? Gay marriage? Civil disobedience? Uncivil disobedience? These are questions America is at war over. This is why high school debate resolutions are so often phrased in the individual vs collective manner. They are preparing you for the real world.

The Resolution

What does this all have to do with this year’s resolution? Well, let’s have a look at it:

*“Resolved: The needs of the public ought to be valued above private property rights.”*

Here are some of the questions you’re going to have to answer in many debate rounds:

* Do the needs of the public = the philosophy of General Welfare?
* Are private property rights Human Rights?
* Which is more valuable: Human Rights or General Welfare?
* Is this specific right more or less important than another?
* Does the “needs of the public” include their Human Rights, or things outside that and further up Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs?

The purpose of looking at the Human Rights and General Welfare aspect of this debate is not to get you to see a nuance or the specifics of the resolution, but instead the broader “big picture” issue it alludes to. This is the collective good as opposed to individual rights, which is what you will be debating this year.

1. "Current Topics: Speech, Debate: National Speech & Debate Association." 2014. 7 Jul. 2016 <<http://www.speechanddebate.org/topics>> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. "Past Debate Resolutions - NCFCA." 2014. 7 Jul. 2016 <<http://www.ncfca.org/what-we-do/speech-and-debate-competition/debate/past-debate-resolutions/>> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. "Stoa USA - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia." 2012. 7 Jul. 2016 <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stoa_USA>> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. "Utilitarianism | Definition of Utilitarianism by Merriam-Webster." 2006. 7 Jul. 2016 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/utilitarianism>> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. "What are Human Rights - ohchr." 2007. 7 Jul. 2016 <<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Pages/WhatareHumanRights.aspx>> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. "A Letter Concerning Toleration (Hackett Classics): John Locke, James ..." 2016. 7 Jul. 2016 <https://www.amazon.com/Letter-Concerning-Toleration-Hackett-Classics/dp/091514560X> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. "Zientkowski on human rights in Nietzsche's philosophy – Stephen ..." 2014. 7 Jul. 2016 <<http://www.stephenhicks.org/2014/09/20/zientkowski-on-human-rights-in-nietzsches-philosophy/>> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. "Karl Marx (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)." 2003. 7 Jul. 2016 <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marx/>> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)