



Colonial Williamsburg

Revolutionary Rhetoric Congress

2025 Quick Start Guide & Overview

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Welcome to Revolutionary Rhetoric Congress

This is Congressional debate set in colonial Virginia's House of Burgesses (1750-1769). You'll debate as either a Loyalist or Patriot, trying to pass legislation while navigating party loyalty, personal goals, and the need to avoid gridlock.

Read this guide in 15 minutes and you'll understand everything you need to compete successfully.

Also note that all documents related to the Congress event are subject to revision. Please check back frequently for the latest updates.

What makes this tournament unique

Standard Congress vs. Revolutionary Rhetoric

Element	Standard Congress	Revolutionary Rhetoric
Legislation	Not scored	25% of your final score
Committee	Informal/varies	Formal session, 25% of score
Chamber	Chamber work is 100% of your score	Chamber work is 50% of your score
Parties	No parties	Loyalists vs Patriots with bonuses
Gridlock	No penalty	-50% penalty if too few bills pass
Bill outcomes	Don't affect score	Up to +20 points based on passage
Presiding	Students compete for PO	Adult non-competitors chair/Speaker

The big difference

In standard Congress, speeches in the chamber make up most of your score, even though you do a lot of other work as a competitor. In Revolutionary Rhetoric:

- **Your written legislation is judged** (somewhat like an essay event)
- **Committee work is its own round—and it is scored** (not just prep time)
- **Parties matter** – you will get bonuses if your side wins
- **Votes have consequences** - whether bills pass affects YOUR score
- **Gridlock hurts everyone** - pass enough bills, or everyone loses points

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Scoring Breakdown

Legislation (25% of base total plus bonuses)

- **Base score:** 2 judges independently score your written bill 0-25 points, then average
- **Committee modifier:** +0 to +5 based on what happens in committee
- **Chamber modifier:** +0 to +10 (prelim) or +0 to +20 (final) based on what happens on the floor
- **Amendment bonuses:** +1 to +4 if your amendments pass

Committee (25% of base total plus bonuses and penalties)

- **Chair ballot (35%):** Scored 1-20 on 5 categories = 100 points possible
 - Active participation and quality questions
 - Understanding of rules/procedure
 - Furthering personal legislative goals
 - Furthering party goals
 - Finding compromises
- **Speech judge ballot (65%):** Authorship speech (counts as 2 speeches) + 1 additional speech, averaged
- **Party bonus:** +10 points if your party passes more bills than the other party
- **Gridlock penalty:** -50% if the committee passes out fewer than 3 bills

Chamber (50% of base total plus bonuses and penalties)

- **Speaker ballot (35%):** Scored 1-20 on 5 categories = 100 points possible (same criteria as committee chair)
- **Speech judges' ballot (65%)**

- **WITH docketed bill:** Authorship speech (1-50 point scale) + top 1 other speech (1-25 scale)
 - **WITHOUT docketed bill:** Top 3 speeches (each 1-25 scale)
- **Party bonus:** +20 points if your party passes more bills
- **Gridlock penalty:** -50% if the chamber passes fewer than 4 bills

Timeline: What happens when

WEEKS BEFORE TOURNAMENT

1. Submit legislation between October 27 and November 3 to brett@richmondforum.org.
2. 2 independent judges evaluate your legislation. You won't know your score until the end of the tournament.

FRIDAY

- Check-in opens
- Assignments posted on Tabroom.com (your chamber, committee, and party) once registration closes
- Oath of office ceremony (all competitors together)

SATURDAY

Morning: Committee meetings

1. Roll call & quorum check
2. Bills considered in order received
3. Each bill gets 15 minutes total:
 - Authorship speech (3 min) + questions (2 min)
 - Debate, amendments, voting
4. Goal: Pass 3+ bills out of committee to avoid the gridlock penalty

Lunch break (lunch/caucusing):

- Parties can meet to strategize
- Tabroom creates each chamber's preliminary docket (maximum 8 bills)

Afternoon and evening: Preliminary chamber sessions.

1. Roll call & quorum check
2. Bills that passed out of committee are considered in the order determined by the Speaker's Office
3. Each bill gets 30 minutes total:
 - Authorship speech (3 min) + questions (2 min)
 - First negation (3 min) + questions (2 min)
 - Debate, amendments, voting
4. Goal: Pass 4+ bills in your chamber between the two sessions to avoid the gridlock penalty
5. Dinner break between the two sessions.

SUNDAY

- The top 6 competitors from each party in each preliminary chamber advance to the final chamber
- The final chamber follows the same format as the preliminary chamber
- There will be a morning and afternoon session with a lunch break

Understanding the parties

You'll be assigned to one of two parties. You cannot choose or change your party.

Loyalists

Core Beliefs:

- Support King, Parliament, Governor, British military
- Defend royal prerogative and British government positions
- Will not tolerate criticism of the King/Royal Family (lèse-majesté was a crime)
- Generally **conservative** on economic/social issues
- Favor legislation benefiting Britain (as long as not unfair to the colony)

Patriots

Core Beliefs:

- Oppose King/Parliament/Governor when Virginia's rights and autonomy are threatened
- Willing to criticize the Governor and Parliament (but are not openly disloyal to the King)
- Want more colonial autonomy (NOT full independence - that's prohibited)
- Believe taxation without representation is illegitimate
- Generally liberal on economic/social issues

The strategic reality

Every committee and chamber is split 50/50 between parties.

This means:

- It is IMPOSSIBLE to pass bills without bipartisan support or deals
- If your party passes more bills than the other each member of the party receives BONUSES (+10 in committee, +20 in chamber)
- If too few bills pass overall, everyone on that committee or in that chamber is penalized (-50% of that session's score)

You must balance THREE competing interests:

1. Party loyalty (get your party's bills passed for bonuses)
2. Personal goals (get your bill passed for big points)
3. Avoiding gridlock (work across the aisle or everyone suffers)

This creates the core tension of the event: pure partisanship leads to gridlock, but being too bipartisan hurts your party.

Your Bill's Journey: From Submission to Final Score

Revolutionary Rhetoric Congress 2025

 **BEFORE TOURNAMENT: Submit Legislation → 2 Judges Score (0-25 each) → Averaged = BASE SCORE**



 **COMMITTEE SESSION (15 minutes per bill)**
Speech (3 min) → Questions (2 min) → Debate & Amendments → VOTE

✓ **PASSES**


✗ **FAILS**

Original
+5 pts

Amended
+4 pts

Tie
+2 pts

Majority Nay
+1 pt

 **Bill Dies in Committee OR Continues to Chamber?**

DIES
Score = Base + Committee Modifier
(Journey ends)

TO CHAMBER
(If Top 8 bills)
Not Top 8? +3 bonus, stops



 **PRELIMINARY CHAMBER (30 minutes per bill)**
Speech (3 min) → Questions (2 min) → Debate & Amendments → VOTE


✓ **PASSES**

✗ **FAILS**

Original
+10 pts

Amended
+8 pts


Failed
+6 pts

 **Bill Dies in Prelim OR Continues to Finals?**

DIES
Score = Base + Com + Prelim
(Journey ends)

TO FINALS
(If Top 8 bills)
Not Top 8? +6 bonus, stops



 **FINAL CHAMBER (30 minutes per bill)**
Speech → Questions → Debate & Amendments → VOTE

✓ **PASSES**

✗ **FAILS**

Original
+20 pts

Amended
+16 pts

Failed
+12 pts







FINAL LEGISLATION SCORE

Base Score (0-25, averaged from 2 judges)
+ **Committee Modifier** (0-5 points)
+ **Prelim Chamber Modifier** (0-10 points)
+ **Final Chamber Modifier** (0-20 points)
+ **Amendment Bonuses** (if you amended others' bills)

= YOUR LEGISLATION SCORE (25% of total score)

 **Maximum Possible: 60+ points**

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

-  **Passing is better than failing** - At every stage, passage gives more points
-  **Further is better** - Bills reaching finals can earn up to +45 points beyond base
-  **Original form = Most points** - Amendments reduce your bonuses
-  **Every stop still scores** - Even if your bill dies early, you keep earned points

Critical rules you must know

Prohibited content

Your legislation will receive a score of 1-5 (essentially zero) if it:

✗ Mentions slavery/enslavement in ANY form

- Why: It would require some students to defend slavery, which is unacceptable
- ☒ You CAN mention indentured servitude

✗ Calls for total independence from Britain

- Why: It would dominate all debate and limit topic variety
- ☒ You CAN propose home rule, colonial autonomy, or increased local control

Legislation requirements

☒ Must relate to events between 1750-1769 (real or plausible). Refer to the brief for more details.

☒ Must be credible given the technology and realities of the period

☒ Must use the NSDA template to format bills/resolutions for submission

☒ Follow the format in the NSDA High School Unified Manual

Electronic device policies

- ☒ Laptops, tablets, phones allowed in the chamber
- ☒ Internet must not be accessed during the event
- ☒ Can receive texts from tournament staff
- ☒ All devices on SILENT mode

Violations may result in scoring penalties or disqualifications at the sole discretion of the Speaker's Office.

Props and visual aids

- Must be period-appropriate (existed 1750-1769)
- Chair/Speaker can rule them out of order without a motion
- If you use a smartphone as a prop, it will be ruled out of order

Time limits

Activity	Committee	Chamber
Total time per bill	15 minutes	30 minutes
Authorship speech	Up to 3 minutes	Up to 3 minutes
Authorship Q&A	2 minutes	2 minutes
Q&A extensions	+2 min, max 1 times	+2 min, max 1 times
Other speeches	Up to 2 minutes	Up to 2 minutes
Amendment speeches	1 minute	1 minute

If your time expires, you may complete that sentence. No other grace period.

If you don't use all 3 minutes for authorship, the remaining time is added to your Q&A period.

Speech requirements

In Committee:

- 1 authorship speech (counts as 2 speeches) + 1 speech on another bill = MINIMUM

In Chamber:

- If your bill is docketed: 1 authorship speech (counts as 2) + 1 speech on another bill = MINIMUM
- If your bill is not docketed: 3 speeches on others' bills = MINIMUM
- Missing required speeches = zeros factored into your average

Gridlock thresholds

Committee: Must pass 3+ bills or everyone gets -50% penalty

Chamber: Must pass 4+ bills or everyone gets -50% penalty

This penalty affects ALL competitors in that committee/chamber, regardless of party.

Quick reference: committee vs. chamber

Element	Committee	Chamber
Presiding Officer	Committee Chair	Speaker
Time per bill	15 minutes	30 minutes
Electronic devices	Allowed (internet OFF)	Allowed (internet OFF)
Authorship Q&A extensions	+2 min, up to 3x	+2 min, up to 4x
Required speeches	Authorship + 1 other	Authorship + 1 OR 3 total
Authorship speech scoring	1-25 scale	1-50 scale
Bills must pass (gridlock)	3 minimum	4 minimum
Party bonus	+10 points	+20 points
Can author amend own bill?	Only if on committee	Yes
Docket size	All referred bills	Maximum 8 bills

Essential motions

Always in order

Call the previous question (close debate)

- Requires: Second, 2/3 majority, show of hands
- Not debatable
- Use when: Ready to end debate and move to a vote

Recess (5 minutes maximum)

- Requires: Second, majority, show of hands
- Limited to 2× per session
- Use when: Need to caucus with your party or stretch your legs

Appeal the decision of the chair

- Requires: Second (within 2 minutes of decision)
- Goes to the Speaker of the House for a decision, not to a vote
- Each member gets only 1 appeal per session
- Use when: Chair makes wrong ruling

Table / Take from table

- Requires: Second, majority, show of hands
- Debatable
- Use when: Want to postpone without killing the bill

Reconsider a previous vote

- Requires: Second, majority, show of hands
- Sebatable
- May only be made by someone who voted on the prevailing side
- Only for final passage votes
- Only between bills (not during debate)
- Use when: You want to revote on a bill

Motions for Authorship and First Negation Question and Answer

Suspend the rules (extend question time)

- Committee: +2 minutes each time, maximum 1 extension for authorship speech only
- Chamber: +2 minutes each time, maximum 1 extension for authorship and first negation only
- Requires: Second, majority, show of hands

Never in order

- ✗ Motion to suspend the rules (except for extending Q&A following an authorship speech)
- ✗ Motion to extend debate should time expire
- ✗ Motion to close the chamber (the chamber or committee room is, by default, an open chamber)

Special Procedures You Should Know

Proxy voting (committee only)



If you're presenting your bill in a committee you're not assigned to:

1. Tell your committee clerk you're leaving
2. Designate a member of YOUR party to vote for you (proxy)
3. Tell your committee clerk who your proxy is
4. Present your bill in the other committee
5. Return to your assigned committee
6. Proxy ends automatically when you return

Author amendments in the nature of a substitute

Before party assignments, you submitted your bill. After you receive your party assignment, your bill might not fit your party.

You may submit ONE revised version to align with your party:

-  Must keep the same subject matter
-  Can change partisan perspective
- Example: Bill supporting colonial autonomy → revised to support royal authority if assigned Loyalist
- This amendment is accepted without debate

Alternating Pro/Con speeches

After the authorship speech:

1. Second speech **MUST** be opposition with preference given to a negation from the opposite party (unless no one on either side wants to oppose)
2. After that, Chair/Speaker alternates pro and con
3. If one side runs out of speakers, the other side continues

Questioning rules

- Questions must be addressed through the chair, not directly to another competitor
- No two-part questions or immediate follow-ups
- Brief questions only (Chair can gavel down speeches disguised as questions)
- Permission to preface is **NOT** required
- If a question is ruled out of order, the speaker doesn't have to answer

Voting procedures

Roll Call Votes (for all bill passage):

1. Clerk calls names alphabetically
2. Respond: "Aye," "Nay," or "Abstain"
3. Must be in your seat to vote
4. Chair asks "Does anyone wish to change their vote?"
5. Clerk announces totals
6. Chair announces result
7. **On a tie vote, the bill FAILS**

Show of Hands (for motions):

- Simply raise your hand when Chair asks for ayes/nays
- Majority or 2/3 required depending on motion

Your first steps

Before you arrive

- ✓ **Submit your legislation by deadline** (check Tabroom.com)
- ✓ **Read the full rules** (especially Sections 7, 9, 12)
- ✓ **Prepare your 3-minute authorship speech**
- ✓ **Research the time period** (1750-1769 colonial Virginia)
- ✓ **Think about both sides** (you don't know your party yet)

When you arrive

1. Check in at registration
2. Find your assignments on Tabroom.com:
 - Which chamber are you in?
 - Which committee are you on?
 - Which party are you assigned to (Loyalist or Patriot)?
3. Attend the oath of office ceremony (required for all)
4. Review your committee's docket (all bills being heard)
5. Meet your party members (if time permits before committee meetings start)
6. Strategize - but remember you need bipartisan support!

In committee

1. When your bill is called: Approach the podium, deliver a 3-minute speech
2. Answer questions for 2 minutes (can be extended by motion)
3. When others speak: Consider whether to speak for/against
4. Remember: You need 1 authorship speech + 1 other speech minimum
5. Think strategically: Does this help my bill? My party? Avoid gridlock?

In chamber

1. Same format as committee, but 30 minutes per bill
2. Only bills that passed out of committee (only top 8 make it to the chamber)
3. Authorship speech scores on a 1-50 scale (double weight of the committee round)
4. Other speeches score on a 1-25 scale

Scoring strategy

For legislation score (25%)

Write a solid bill (judges score before you even arrive):

- Clear, well-organized, follows NSDA format
- Historically plausible for 1750-1769
- Addresses who implements it, timing, penalties, funding
- Allows debate on both sides

Get it passed:

- In committee: +2 to +5 points
- In chamber: +8 to +10 points
- In finals: +16 to +20 points
- Even if it fails, you still get points

Offer amendments to others' bills:

- If your amendment passes: +2 to +4 points
- Doesn't hurt your own bill score

For committee score (25%)

Chair's ballot (35%):

- Ask quality questions (not just to talk)
- Use motions correctly
- Push for YOUR bill to pass
- Support your PARTY's bills
- But also show willingness to compromise

Speech judge's ballot (65%):

- Deliver a strong 3-minute authorship speech
- Give at least 1 other strong speech
- Additional speeches can only help (low scores dropped)

Maximize modifiers:

- Help get 3+ bills passed (avoid -50% penalty)
- Help your party pass more bills (+10 bonus)

For chamber score (preliminary and finals combined) (50%)

Speaker's ballot (35%):

- Same as committee chair criteria
- Active throughout BOTH sessions

Speech judges' ballots (65%):

- Your authorship speech is worth DOUBLE but can only be given if your bill was docketed (1-50 scale)
- Give at least 1 other strong speech
- If no docketed bill: Give 3 strong speeches

Maximize modifiers:

- Help get 4+ bills passed (avoid -50% penalty)
- Help your party pass more bills (+20 bonus)

Common mistakes to avoid

- ✗ **Writing about or speaking on slavery or total independence** → Automatic low score
- ✗ **Not making the required minimum number of speeches per round** → Zeros averaged into your score
- ✗ **Being too partisan** → Gridlock penalty hurts everyone, including you
- ✗ **Being too bipartisan** → Your party may miss bonuses
- ✗ **Using internet for research or communications other than with tournament staff during competition** → Penalties from Speaker
- ✗ **Not knowing the rules** → Can't use motions effectively
- ✗ **Forgetting to designate a proxy if called to speak in another committee** → Miss votes your party may need in your committee while presenting elsewhere
- ✗ **Asking compound questions** → Chair will gavel you down
- ✗ **Not strategizing with your party** → Miss opportunities for coordination

Where to get help

Before the tournament:

- Full rules: Main rules document (Sections 1-15)
- Sample scripts: Appendix D
- Motion chart: Appendix A
- Timing chart: Appendix B
- FAQ: Appendix F
- Questions: brett@richmondforum.org

During the tournament:

- Tournament logistics: Tabroom.com
- Rules questions: Ask the Chair/Speaker or appeal to the Speaker of the House
- Scoring questions: Ask tournament staff at tabroom

Key Appendices:

- **Appendix A:** Complete motion chart
- **Appendix B:** All time limits in one place
- **Appendix C:** Committee vs chamber comparison
- **Appendix D:** Sample scripts for everything
- **Appendix E:** Glossary of terms
- **Appendix F:** Frequently Asked Questions

Final tips for success

1. **Come prepared with a quality bill** – it is 25% of your score before you even speak
2. **Know your party's ideology** – you will be more persuasive if you sound authentic
3. **Build coalitions** - you need votes from the other party, so make friends
4. **Think three-dimensionally** - every action affects: you, your party, and gridlock
5. **Use recency and frequency** - the Chair recognizes people who haven't spoken recently
6. **Master the motions** - knowing when to call the previous question is powerful
7. **Keep track of time** – do not waste the 15/30 minutes; bills must keep moving
8. **Quality over quantity** - your best speeches count; weak speeches get dropped
9. **Watch the gridlock number** - if you're close to 3/4 bills, negotiate to pass something
10. **Have fun with the role-play** - this is 1760s Virginia, embrace the historical setting!

Ready to compete?

You now know:

- ☒ How scoring works (Legislation 25% + Committee 25% + Chamber 50%)
- ☒ What makes this unique (parties, gridlock, scored legislation)
- ☒ The timeline (committee → chamber → maybe finals)
- ☒ Critical rules (no slavery/independence, device rules, time limits)
- ☒ Essential motions (call previous question, recess, appeal, etc.)
- ☒ Strategy tips (balance party + personal + gridlock)

Next steps:

1. Write your legislation and submit by the deadline
2. Review the full rules document for detailed procedures
3. Prepare your authorship speech
4. Show up ready to debate as a Loyalist or Patriot

Good luck and may your bills pass without gridlock!

For complete rules, see the full Revolutionary Rhetoric 2025 Congress Rules document.

Change log

October 17: Initial version posted

October 27: Corrected various sections to note that the first negation in chamber sessions is subject to questions and that questioning may only be extended once per author and once per first negation. Some other minor edits for clarification.