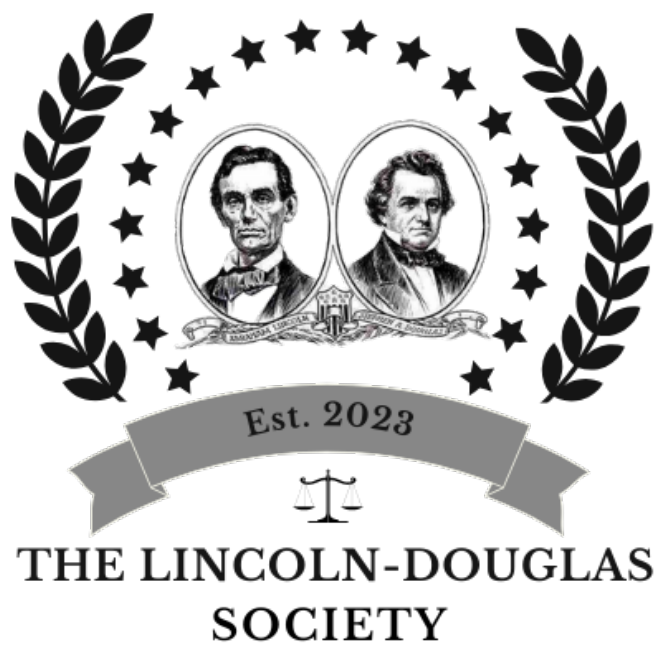




*“A Bastion of Free Speech and Civil Discourse”*



**The Lincoln-Douglas Society**  
*at the University of South Carolina Joseph F. Rice School of Law*  
2025-2026 Information Packet

We are a student-run debate union that aims to foster civil discourse and promote good-faith debate. It is a privilege to inform you more about our society, what we stand for, and to promote civil discourse on your campus.

Attached you will find:

- an example Lincoln-Douglas brochure;
- a graphic from one of our previous debates;
- and a sample folder of Lincoln-Douglas Society event pictures.

Please feel free to contact us at [bsamard@email.sc.edu](mailto:bsamard@email.sc.edu) for any additional questions.

Yours truly,  
The Lincoln-Douglas Society

## **Executive Summary**

The Lincoln-Douglas Society is a student-run debate union that was founded at the University of South Carolina Joseph F. Rice School of Law. The idea emerged from a recognition of the erosion of civil debate in higher education and society as a whole. In the legal profession, especially, we found the absence of spaces to stage good-faith discussion particularly tragic. In this regard, it was our belief that a society that can platform formal debates about the most controversial of issues—and do so in a noticeably civil and professional manner—was a natural first step in reviving civil discourse across our institutions and country.

Throughout the years, we have hosted debates on a wide variety of topics, including abortion, the death penalty, and “hate speech”. We suspected that the community was starving for real discussion on real issues and some diversity of thought. Our suspicions were confirmed when each debate drew crowds of nearly 200 students, professors, local lawyers, judges, and community members.

### **Format:**

Our general debate model was inspired by the Oxford Union’s. The debate itself is centered around a proposition, for example, “*This Body Believes South Carolina Should Abolish its Death Penalty: Yes or No.*” We select speakers for each side to alternate giving brief speeches (10-15 minutes) either for or against the proposition, ultimately voted on by the audience.

We have typically stuck to a 3 v. 3 or 2 v. 2 style debate. Either style helps add tremendous diversity to our debates. With other people speaking to the same issue, an effective speaker must offer their own unique perspective to add something to the debate. This deep bench of speakers allows us to platform our own students and professors. It also affords us space to offer perspectives students may not otherwise hear in the law school. For example, in our death penalty debate, we rounded out each team with a pastor and reverend to offer religious and theological arguments to the conversation. This kind of diversity of thought and perspective has been like no other traditional law school program.

### **Voting:**

Before the speeches are made, the audience votes either “Yes,” “No,” or “Undecided” on the proposition. After the speeches are made, and speakers have urged the audience to vote for or against their cause, attendees go back to their ballot, this time either voting “Yes” or “No.”

This format is very intentional. Having to vote beforehand immediately engages the audience, setting the tone that this is a group endeavor—and that the speakers are simply here to help us, a collective body, reach an answer. The option to be “undecided” beforehand encourages the audience to come into the debate with an open mind, and the ability to change their votes (regardless of what they initially selected) furthers that goal.

It is not enough to only talk to the people who already agree with you. To successfully debate at the Lincoln-Douglas Society, a speech needs to be aimed at those on the fence or the border of changing their mind. Approaching conversation with that mission is quintessential healthy civil discourse, and we seek to be an example of that.



## Post-Debate Receptions:

After each debate, we host a reception for all in attendance to converge and continue the civil discourse amongst themselves. Our theory behind the Society is that one should be able to engage in impassioned debate on a controversial issue in one moment and share a drink with their opponent in the next. We believe that these post-debate receptions embody our core cause in leading people to come together in unity after a disagreement.

## Values & Goals

### Our Values:

#### I. *Free Speech*

**Free speech** is the foundation of intellectual honesty, civic virtue, and the pursuit of truth. Without the ability to question, challenge, and debate ideas—no matter how uncomfortable or controversial—reason itself becomes stifled, and democracy weakens. Free speech is not simply a right we defend—it is the means by which we refine our principles, strengthen our arguments, and ultimately advance justice.

#### II. *Civil Discourse*

**Civil discourse** transforms disagreement into understanding and conflict into progress. Civil discourse that is grounded in respect, but unafraid of disagreement, is essential for both legal education and public life. Through open, thoughtful engagement, individuals learn to reason rather than react, to persuade rather than provoke, and to seek truth rather than victory alone. In an era often defined by division, we believe civil discourse is the cornerstone of a free and informed society—one where ideas are tested, refined, and ultimately strengthened through dialogue.

#### III. *Professionalism*

Underlying all of this is an aim at **professionalism**. We see professionalism and civil discourse as reinforcing goals: the more professionalism we bring to the Society, the healthier the discourse; and being able to partake in good-faith civil discourse makes for more professional lawyers and future lawyers. The Society serves as a lesson in peaceful disagreement, finding common ground, and taking opposing stances while remaining respectful. All these things, we believe, will foster skills and values that are integral in the legal profession and to society as a whole.

### Our Goals:

- I. Promote civil discourse and good faith debate.
- II. Provide students with an example of what civil discourse can—and should—look like in their everyday lives.
- III. Foster a student body and community that engages openly with important issues—approaching them thoughtfully, respectfully, and with a commitment to productive dialogue.
- IV. Foster diversity of thought and perspective, as well as open-mindedness.
- V. To attempt to reach an answer to the tough questions at the center of each discussion.

### **Testimonials**

We recognize that we will always have ways to improve. As such, we solicit feedback from the audience as they fill out their ballot at the debate. There are always a few helpful suggestions, but the feedback we wish to emphasize is the bounty of comments indicating we are fulfilling our stated goals. Here is a small sample:

“Great job filling a gap in the student experience here at USC Law!”

“Super well-put together, everyone felt respectful of both parties and it was a great display of civil debate”

“This was amazing! Congratulations to all those involved. This is what academia and society can greatly benefit from.”

“I appreciate the sentiment of having the opposing sides introduce each other”

“Literally one of the best events this school has had. So needful in today. Thank y’all!!!”  
“Very informative! I loved the three different perspectives”

“Thank ya’ll!!! I really enjoyed hearing from students, religious leaders, and then of course legal professionals. It was a well rounded and educational experience.”

“This debate was very interesting and insightful with the many perspectives on why or why not it should be protected. I enjoyed this a lot! :-)”

### **Society Expansion**

The Lincoln–Douglas Society is committed to fostering a nationwide movement of principled debate and open dialogue within law schools across the country. What began as a single chapter at the University of South Carolina Joseph F. Rice School of Law—and has since expanded to Cornell Law—has demonstrated the transformative power of structured, respectful discourse on complex legal and social issues.

Our vision is to build a network of Lincoln–Douglas chapters that embody the same core values: free speech, civil discourse, detail-oriented, and professionalism. To that end, we are developing a clear and adaptable framework that any law school can use to establish its own chapter. This framework includes guidance on debate structure, event organization, branding, and best practices for fostering an environment that welcomes diverse perspectives.

We aim not only to promote these discussions but to actively assist new chapters in getting started. From providing sample constitutions and event templates to offering ongoing mentorship, we want each chapter to become a thriving “bastion of free speech and civil discourse” within its academic community.



Schools interested in joining this growing movement are encouraged to explore our website for more information on how to start a chapter—or reach out directly to [bsamard@email.sc.edu](mailto:bsamard@email.sc.edu) for personalized assistance in bringing the Lincoln–Douglas Society to their campus.

### **Connecting With the Society**

#### **Our Website:**

Our [website](#) serves as the central hub for all things Lincoln–Douglas Society. There, visitors can learn about our mission, explore upcoming debates, access resources for starting new chapters, and read reflections from past events. The site also features media highlights, membership information, and opportunities to get involved. Whether you’re a student, faculty member, or supporter of civil discourse, our website is the best place to stay connected with the Society’s work and growth nationwide.

#### **YouTube:**

Our [YouTube channel](#) showcases the heart of the Lincoln–Douglas Society in action. Through high-quality recordings of our debates, interviews, and educational content, viewers can experience the depth of discussion and professionalism that define our mission. The channel serves as both an archive and a teaching tool—allowing anyone, anywhere, to engage with the ideas debated on our stage and be inspired to bring that same spirit of civil discourse to their own communities.

#### **Social Media:**

Our social media presence on Instagram and LinkedIn helps us stay connected with members, supporters, and partner institutions nationwide. Through these platforms, we share updates, event highlights, and opportunities to get involved—all while continuing to promote our mission of fostering free speech, civil discourse, and professional excellence across the legal community.

### **Final Notes**

We find immense value in the Lincoln-Douglas Society. We believe that we have made a tangible impact not only in reviving civil discourse but furthering professionalism in the legal profession. It is our mission to see that the Lincoln-Douglas Society, and all its benefits, spreads beyond South Carolina.

Should another institution wish to start its own chapter, we’d prefer it to be under one unifying brand. Thus, for example, we suggest forming organizations like the Lincoln-Douglas Society at the University of Texas, etc. And again, should any school be interested, they are welcome to contact us at [bsamard@email.sc.edu](mailto:bsamard@email.sc.edu), and we will provide them all the help necessary to get started.