

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

CAN TEACHING STUDENTS REAL DEBATE  
REDUCE POLITICAL POLARIZATION?

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PARTICIPANTS:

ROBERT E. LITAN  
Nonresident Senior Fellow - Economic Studies

DARRELL M. WEST  
Vice President and Director - Governance Studies  
Senior Fellow - Center for Technology Innovation

NORM ORNSTEIN  
Resident Scholar - American Enterprise Institute

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ANDERSON COURT REPORTING  
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190

## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. LITAN: Good morning, everyone. I assume from our technicians that this is on. So, I want to welcome you. I'm a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, this is Bob Litan. I'm also a practicing attorney. And we're having an event today which will give a Cliff Notes version of a new book that I have out called "Resolved: How Debate Can Revolutionize Education and Hopefully Save Our Democracy."

And we have two fantastic commenters, and I'm grateful to both of them for agreeing to do this. One is Norm Ornstein, and the other is Darrell West. Norm is a resident fellow a long time at AEI, and also the co-founder along with his wife, Judy, of the Matthew Ornstein Memorial Foundation, which among other things, trains debaters in the Washington, D.C. area. And Darrell is Vice President of Government Studies. And both Norm and Darrell are probably two of the most astute observers of politics in Washington, D.C. and also in the United States. So, it's terrific to have you both of you on. Thank you.

So, I'm going to start by giving you a story about how it came to my writing the book. I grew up in Kansas and by total accident one day in 2018, I'm on my Twitter feed, and an article pops up and it's from the Christian Science Monitor. And it's about a debate team in Kansas, my home state. This is now 50 years since I had debated in high school. And it's about why debate is so hot in Kansas and it's about a team that went on to win the National Championship in 2018 in high school debate. First time a Kansas team had done this, I think, ever. And by the way, the following year, another Kansas team also won the National High School Championship. And this article resonated with me because debate changed my life. I was a stutterer like Joe Biden, until I was about 14 and my mother forced me into debate, and debate cured my stuttering. To this point, I'm not sure how, but it did.

It also taught me that issues are complex a lot. Because when you debate, you have to do both sides. You have to do it civilly, with reason and with evidence. And it taught me a lot about my life and it changed my life. And you should just know from this description, of course, that the kind of debating that you saw between President Trump and Joe Biden about 10 days ago was not a true

competitive debate.

It violated every single one of those conditions that I talked about. Even the more civil debate this week between Vice President Pence and Senator Harris really doesn't qualify as a true debate, nor have any presidential debates, because they're limited to basically sound bites, just 60 seconds or 90 seconds. There's no real-time fact checking, and there's no interruption. I mean, these are the kind of things that get you disqualified in competitive debate. Well, in any event, after seeing this article, and the thought occurred to me, what if everyone in the United States, every voter had been a competitive debater?

Wouldn't we be, as a society, a lot better off? A lot less polarized, and have all these skills that I talked about that debate teaches. But I realized that was unrealistic. We're not going to get every kid to do competitive debate. Less than 1 percent of all kids do this. Both in high school, and certainly far lower in college. So, I had a fantasy. I thought, well, is there a way maybe, to get debate introduced at the actual classroom and the teaching of classes? In history and English, science and even math.

And I thought, if everybody had debate as a matter of course in high school and also middle school, wouldn't they have a lot more fun learning? They'd be a lot more engaged. This'd be especially true for minority students, many of whom are a year or two behind. And they need motivation and this would give it to them. And then if kids learn more, they would earn more in their lives, and if they debated, they wouldn't see things so black and white, so to speak. They'd see that the world is full of gray, and they actually would demand of their politicians a lot more complexity than what we're seeing right now, which is which is full of negative ads. So, that's the thought occurred to me, and I thought, I'm going to write a book about this.

The only problem was, I didn't know anybody who was doing this. So, I started interviewing people like crazy. And I saw that there was an academic named Joe Balum (phonetic) at Georgia State, who actually recommended this. It was called Debate Across the Curriculum, it was in an academic journal, but I didn't have enough to write a book about. And then, I got lucky again. In the

course of all my interviews, I ran across two individuals. One is Les Lynn in Chicago, another is Mike Wasserman in Boston, and it turns out that each of them, with their colleagues, had been doing exactly this.

They had been what Les Lynn calls debatifying the curriculum, taking the existing textbooks and materials that teachers were now using, but they were turning the class into a debate, either once or twice a week. They would break up the class, maybe in little circles of six to eight people, let the kids basically get comfortable talking to each other, and eventually they would have debates before entire classes. And I talked to both them, they invited me to see this in action, what I call debate-centered instruction in the book, and what I saw actually amazed me. These were schools in Boston, Chicago that were full of minority kids, and yet, there was a buzz. There was an excitement to the classroom, with few exceptions. The kids were engaged. It wasn't like the kind of thing that you expected to see in a school.

And by the way, this could occur whether it was a charter school or a regular school, it didn't matter. And I learned over the course of this that Lynn and Wasserman had tested their students both before and after they introduced this kind of debate across the curriculum, and the test scores they brought up in these schools, there was a lot more of attendance, the grades were better and the kids were doing a lot better. And that gave me encouragement.

And so, I did some more research. It turns out that the Boston Debate League Experiment is now being formally statistically studied, with controlled variables, the kind of things that social scientists like to see. It's not a randomized control trial, the kind you'd see with drugs, but at least it's something close to that.

And I talk in my book several reasons why I think the statistical study will bear out what both Lynn and Wasserman are doing, and why it's so positive. A, because debate is fun, it engages people; B, because you're more likely to retain things if you're actually doing them; and third, there are actually academic studies of competitive debaters in the NORY schools that show that kids, even controlling for self-selection bias, kids do better once they're involved in competitive debate and it's stood

to reason that if they had been doing this all the time for three or five years of their school, that they would be better off if that happened. And I make a long case that that's true.

And I also argue that this is something that could be done relatively simply, with a maybe a summer institute that could train teachers in the method of debate-centered instruction, it only takes about a week. And once the teachers were trained, they could train other teachers, and it could be rapidly scaled. So, the foundations that are out there listening to this, I urge you to do something like this and you can get in touch with me, by Googling me and I'd be happy to talk to you about it.

Two more points. I have an entire chapter on why I think this would change the workforce and narrow income inequalities. Because if debate centered instruction's going to teach you better, you're going to learn more, and over the course of your life, you're going to earn more. Secondly, you're going to be more open to taking repeated education and coursework to keep you up with the labor force, so that when things like the pandemic hit, or less onerous things, you'll be more willing to engage in new learning, because you had so much fun learning in school. And finally, I'll turn to the topic of this session, which is can debate reduce polarization?

I am not going to claim here today that debate -- well, we certainly can't have every kid in the United States take debate education, or adults do it, so we can't eliminate the degree of polarization, which, by the way, is a lot worse than when I wrote the book. The book had to be delayed for six months before the pandemic, and I wish I could have re-written parts of it, but it was basically in the can, I couldn't do that. But I will argue that if we could somehow get over this election, to the point where the American people broadly accept that the winner was legitimately elected, and that may take a landslide victory by either party, if we could get to that point, I will argue that over the long run, if we introduce debate in the way that I talk about, we're going to have a less polarized society.

We're going to have students who are going to, who have been trained to debate themselves, they're going to be less subject to falling for the kind of one-liners you see in debates, they're going to demand politicians who give a lot more nuanced and complex answers, and the politicians themselves will have to basically appeal more to the reason of voters rather than emotion, which is what

the literature basically says, that voters do now.

So, they, I only have one regret when doing this book, and I'll conclude with this. I wish I had written it 20 years earlier and devoted the last 20 years of my life to propagating this idea, because I honestly truly believe that if we had significant fraction of voters that had been trained in these kind of techniques, we would not see the kind of polarization that we do today. So, thank you very much, and Norm, I'll turn it over to you.

MR. ORNSTEIN: Thanks, Bob, and let me say this book is really a terrific introduction to a different way of looking at the world and looking at education. And I think educators are hungry for something like it.

I'm going to make a few a comments in different areas. The first is more broadly, we don't have a panacea for -- it's not just polarization but tribalism in the society now. A deep division, but the challenge that we've had in our governing system is that the way the framers set up the system, Congress was to bring from disparate places with very different backgrounds together face-to-face to debate and deliberate and it was going to be vigorous, and there were going to be very strong views across a variety of spectrums, but over time, people would begin to look at things from how others viewed them with different perspectives, and organically, you could come together and at least reach an understanding that the process was legitimate.

We don't have that anymore. We know that people don't even have a -- share a common set of facts, which is the core for dealing with all of this. It's going to be a long time until we get back to it, but debate brings that. It makes people understand different points of view. If you are doing competitive debate, you have to take positions that you fundamentally disagree with and you get an understanding, and then you can argue even better.

And you know what we say often now, in Broward County, Florida, they were so successful at competitive policy debate that the county instituted mandatory speech or debate classes for the students. When they had the tragedy down there at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas School, those kids, many of them had been taking a speech class where the subject was guns. They understood all the

different points of view and they've changed the dialogue in the country. And we can do some of that and it will take time, but we can make a difference.

Now, I want to say as well that debate is the gift that keeps on giving in different ways. For kids who take competitive debate and Bob is right, it's only a small sliver of them, we need to expand in different ways to make it fit the entire educational package, they learn life skills and they get into the competitive juices start flowing. It's a natural kind of thing. They learn how to research. They learn how to get up in front of others and to speak. You have to write. You have to organize arguments. And you have to do it in a civil fashion. And what we've seen in our own experience with kids doing competitive debate, mostly Title I Schools in the Washington, D.C. area is, that they use it as a way to improve their lives and improve their standing. We've had these kids go on to top colleges and they're not intimidated by anybody. And if we can extend that and expand it to many others and do it with issues that matter, then we're going to see a real difference in the society.

What I say to the kids at our summer debate camp is, I believe in equal opportunity. But we don't have equal opportunity in this society. Some people start 25 yards ahead of the starting blocks and others start 25 yards behind. And what debate is doing for the kids in our institute and in the Washington Urban debate league is, it's moving them back up to the starting blocks, so that when you see the talent that these kids have, and you see the drive that they have, that they expand with debate, it makes an enormous difference. And we can do this more broadly and it doesn't cost much, but it really can make a difference. Now, let me turn it over to Darrell.

MR. WEST: Okay, thank you very much. And Bob, congratulations on your terrific book. It's very well written, nicely argued, I definitely recommend it to those of you who are tuning into this event. It makes a point about the value of debate-centered education as a way of teaching civic skills and building communications abilities. It's also a way, I think, Bob is right about creating a more informed citizenry. So, I agree 100 percent with that. And Norm and his wife Judy have also done a lot on this front through their private philanthropic activities, so it's good to hear the great results that you're getting on that front as well.

And I think both Bob and Norm are correct that debate is a way to encourage and increase the next generation of leaders. One of the nice features of Bob's book is he talks about the corrupt leaders who participated in debate during their youth and how that helped propel them into a career of public service, and helped improve their leadership skills. Bob has a list of a number of prominent Americans who came from a debate background, they're presidents and Supreme Court justices, although my personal favorite was John Belushi, who I had not realized had a background in debate, but obviously that helped him in his entertainment career as well.

I think Bob is certainly right about the dangers of our current political polarization. So, last year I wrote a book entitled "Divided Politics" that looked at this issue, drew on my own experiences growing up in a conservative rural community in Ohio, but then going on to teach Brown University, which is one of the more liberal universities in the country. And just seeing the tribalization among the left and the right was very informative for me, just in thinking about the root causes, and how we might address it. And Bob is certainly correct that our current polarization which seems to be getting worse every day makes it very difficult if not impossible to address the important public policy challenges that we have.

And I think Bob outlines a number of steps that need to be undertaken in order to improve education and save our democracy. Debate can certainly be one of the vehicles to address that. The idea of having argument-based education, I think, is an interesting and novel concept, and it's a way to add more substance and analysis into the learning process. We also need to revamp education in a number of different ways.

I like the emphasis on the role of evidence in argument. When I was teaching at Brown, I mean, we had some of the top students in the country there. They were very good at arguing. They were not so good about evidence, and so, of course, we like to emphasize, it's nice to have this persuasive argument, but you need to be attuned to the evidence so that you can use -- the help document those types of arguments. And I think a debate is another way to encourage people to think about evidence, to think about the facts, and to think about that can be true to be the national discussion.

The two questions that I had for Bob and I know we'll get into more of this in the



conversation. One is the focus on two-sided debates, because most debates take a question and then there are two sides, so somebody's arguing in favor of the proposition, the other side is arguing against it. So, the question I have is whether we should have two sided debates, or what some people refer to as three, or four-sided debates, as a way to reduce polarization.

So, a three-sided debate might be, yes, no, or maybe, or, it depends. Basically, it's a way to introduce more nuance into the discussion. Right now, Brookings actually is in a partnership with the Cato Institute, which is a libertarian think tank, on three-way debates that incorporate three different perspectives into the argument. So, we're filming video events where there are three speakers who basically often take the stance of yes, in favor of a particular proposition; no, in opposition to that proposition; or it's complicated, it depends on a number of different conditions, and so on.

And it actually has worked very well, we've got a very positive response. So, I'd be interested in Bob's take on that. And then the second question which Bob actually gets into in his book, is just the implementation challenges. I think, both from Bob's work, and Norm's work here in the D.C. area, it's clear that there have been really good pilot projects that have gotten really good results. The question is, how do you scale that up statewide, and then nationally?

And Bob does talk about this in the book in terms of funding, participation, the role of teachers, if teachers are resistant to doing this, how do we overcome that resistance, and so, I'd be interested in just kind of thinking about the logistical aspects and the implementation issues associated with this. And Bob, I'll turn it back over to you.

MR. LITAN: Okay, so, I'll answer the questions, but first, I forgot to tell everybody, you can ask questions by going to, or sending a note to [events@brookings.edu](mailto:events@brookings.edu), or you can go to Twitter, and you can ask a question, and just put the hashtag #Resolved, and the people who are working on this will get the questions. And we had some people give questions and we'll return them back later at the dialogue.

So, several things, Darrell, first, before I get to answer your specific question, I should have said that Les Lynn and Mike Wasserman and his colleagues deserve the Nobel Prize in educational

innovation, if there were such a thing, so I just want a shout out to them. What they are doing is just simply phenomenal.

Second, the issue about facts that Norm has talked about, and we all know that everybody's siloed in their own facts and so forth, that hasn't infected the schools yet. Because the schools have textbooks that have been vetted by -- over the years, it takes a long time to get the textbooks, and basically to a first approximation, what you get in school are the facts, and really what I'm talking about with debate education is just to debatifify the facts, and let people find from the material, from the textbooks, evidence from the textbooks that support a view or it doesn't, and if you have to go to the internet, teachers have been trained, by Wasserman and by Lynn, on how to help kids separate out fact from fiction on the internet. So, that's very important. The debate over facts has not yet infected the schools, so the norm, I will concede it could happen, all right? I'm not going to be Pollyanna-ish about this.

So, let me turn to your questions, Darrell. They're both excellent questions. You're right, debate does not have to be two-sided. What Lynn and Wasserman do, is, they use what's called the claim evidence reasoning paradigm that you use in the debate and you put a class. So, for example, in history, you could say the claim is the United States should not have fought World War I.

What's the evidence for that? Look in the textbook. What's the reasoning why that evidence matters? And you imagine the World War I question having multiple sides. Okay, we could have done the whole hog; we could have only done a limited thing; we could have stayed out.

Math, people think you can't debate math. Well, how many word problems are there in math? And it turns out there are multiple ways to solve problems. It's a perfect example of having more than two sides. So, I fully endorse the idea that it's actually being used. And I've seen it in classrooms where people give many different perspectives.

Second question, how do you scale this? Well, we don't have a Federal system of education, so we can't have a law that mandates debate-centered education. But what we can do is encourage local school boards to do this, and what I really believe is that if we had a summer institute of

the kind that Norm has for debaters, if we had it for teachers, the foundation to support it and it were marketed to schools across the country, school boards would send their kids -- and would send their teachers to learn how to do this. And essentially, word gets around.

And as to the teachers, I think from what I saw, the teachers are overwhelmingly positive about this. This is fun. They don't have to get on the stage and lecture for 60 minutes. They could roam the room and give suggestions to the kids about what they're doing right, and what they're doing wrong. The teacher becomes a coach, and in a way it's a lot easier for the teacher, although there is initial prep time.

You have to basically structure the kind of evidence that they're supposed to be looking at and so forth. But I think there'd be a lot of teacher enthusiasm. And it skips over the politics of charter schools or not charter schools and so forth. This is something that's good for everybody. Whether it's a private school, a public school, a charter school, it doesn't matter.

And final, I'll just have one more point. This is not just good for high school, medical schools, too. Somebody asks a question, is this good for college students? And I'm just going to ask you, Daryl, I'll turn it around, I mean, you taught in college for many years, and now we have the wave of trigger warnings on college, where a lot of kids are just, they claim that they're being offended if somebody says the slightest little thing that could tick them off, and the teachers are worried about setting off trigger warnings, or whatever.

And I make the argument in the book, that if you had a generation of kids come into college, who've been through a debate, they are not going to be upset by the kind of things that go into the -- this whole trigger warning business would disappear. And so, I think that it's not too late. Now, it's true, it is late by the time kids get to college, but I argue, why can't you have come introductory courses and split them up into sort of subgroups, and have the TAs basically run debates and teach people through debates. So, I don't think that's even too late to get to college. So, I'll quit there, and Darrell, why don't you answer them the events about college, and then Norm, you can jump in.

MR. WEST: Yep, that's a great point in terms of college. I do believe debates could be

very useful at the collegiate level as well. And I particularly like the idea, and Norm mentioned this, the value of people having to defend an argument contrary to their own point of view. It's a way to kind of get people to think about other people's views. That the world doesn't always agree with their particular stance on an issue. It forces them to come up with evidence to support a view they may personally dislike, or disagree with, and I think at the college level, that's a very valuable skill, because there are just so many aspects of our society now that are putting all of us within an echo chamber, technology is encouraging this, social media is doing this, patterns of news consumption seems to be leaning in that direction. So, anything that gets people out of their own personal viewpoint, thinking about other points of view.

That's going to be really good for democracy, it's going to be good for reducing the polarization, because right now, I think one of the biggest threats to democracy is this tendency to view opponents as enemies. Not just somebody who disagrees with you, but someone who is bad, poorly intentioned, or just an evil individual. There's a lot of that that we see in this current political campaign. And early instruction in debates, I think, would help break down that kind of issue.

MR. ORNSTEIN: So, Bob, first, I want to offer a counter argument, to one of the things that you said, which is that the fact problem has not infiltrated the schools. That's probably true in Chicago, and Boston, but if you look at the way they vet textbooks in Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Alabama, it's a very different world. They screen out a set of facts that don't agree with a broader ideology, and whether it's creationism, or the plight of the American Indian, going back in history, or even the role of slavery, we're seeing plenty of that, and my guess is that we're also seeing a screening that comes through just what people get at home. So, it's a bigger problem, I think, than you suggested.

Second, I want to just offer an anecdote here. At the -- we did our debate camp this year virtually, of course. Last year, where we had kids in person, we had almost 200 kids. And the first day we do a little introduction, and my wife Judy was standing next to a woman who was very nervous, because her fifth grader, rising sixth grader, was doing this for the first time, and she said, my daughter is so shy, I don't know if she's going to be able to handle this. And then they went into classrooms, and

these novice kids, the first thing that they do, is teach them just what debate is all about.

And we went into a classroom, and there was this young girl whose mother had been so concerned. And they said to the kids, we're going to put a proposition on the blackboard, and you just go off into corners, go here if you strongly agree, and go under the opposite corner if you strongly disagree, and here if you just disagree, and here if you agree, and in the middle if you're neutral.

And the first one was, resolve a hot dog is a sandwich. And they divided into categories, and you had a number of kids argue that a sandwich is two separate pieces of bread, with something in between, that you eat in a particular way. And this girl raised her hand and she said, I guess none of you have ever been to Subway. Subway is a sandwich, and it is one piece of bread, and you eat it this way.

And then next question, was, resolve dogs are better for humans than cats. And the cat people talked about the cats and this little girl raised her hand and she stood up and said, "There are service dogs, there are no service cats." And it was like the mic dropped. And she was valuable throughout, and I realized a couple of things, here. The first is that this poor mom didn't really know her own child very well, because kids may sit at the dinner table, and they aren't often asked for their opinions, but they have opinions, and they have an ability to articulate them if they're given a chance.

The classroom doesn't give them that chance for the most part. The standard classroom is, you get a lecture, and maybe you'll have a teacher ask a question, but it doesn't elicit an opinion. And if you can draw kids out and get them to express opinions, and have them learn those techniques of debate, you're going to pull out qualities that are there, but that are rarely drawn upon in the real world of education, or even the real world at home. And we have seen some of these kids just come out of shells in a lot of ways. And when you see kids who've never stood up in front of a group of people before in their lives, within three days, getting up and having -- armed with some facts on the issue, they go right at it, and they're just incredibly impressive.

And then, one other point, with regard to what Darrell said, if you look at the policy debate arguments, they're actually not both sides. You start with what can be a proposition, this one subject for the year. This year, remarkably enough, thanks to our Washington chapter, the topic, nationally, is

criminal justice reform. But you can offer an argument at the beginning of a debate that might be a philosophical one, or a tactical one, or a substantive one, but now, if somebody makes a claim in the affirmative, what the negative, if they want to win, is not just to argue against this to offer a counter claim.

It's to look at this from a different perspective, and say, you're wrong, but here's what you could do that would be better. So, in fact, what policy debate teaches you is the nuance. And the reality that it's not just two sides, that if you're going to win a debate, you have to perhaps argue a third side. So, it's much more robust than you might imagine, just on the surface.

MR. LITAN: So, I'll pick up on that on with several anecdotes, and by the way, even though you're going to get these anecdotes, still buy the book, all right? I don't want to -- I'm going to give away parts of the stuff of the book, but it's still worth reading. So, Norm is right that in competitive debate, I go through all the strategies in one of the chapters they talk about, counter plans, and something called the perm, and all kinds of variations, and in competitive debate, it does exactly what Norm talks about, and you get all kinds of variations.

But let me go to his second point, his story about the baby steps that you use to get kids engaged. Because the premise of this whole thing is, is that even shy kids, they love to talk. And this is really what this is taking advantage of. Kids love to talk, all right? If you just give them a chance. And what Mike, Lynn and Mike Wasserman, what Mike Wasserman and Les Lynn do, is that's exactly how they teach the kids.

They start off with these baby questions that you're talking about, and then they gradually move up. And so, to perfectly illustrate this, there's one teacher in Boston whose class I saw, I think her name, if I remember right, is Melissa Graham. She taught an eighth grade ESL class, so this is a class of kids, five different native languages, all right? So, how are you going to debate with kids that can barely communicate with each other? So, what Melissa does, is she splits the class up, and they talk in their native tongues, and they have these mini kind of questions and eventually, she moves them into speaking in English, but not the before the whole class, so that they don't get embarrassed. And this is very important because one of the greatest fears I point out that people have in their lives, is speaking publicly.

It ranks probably one of the greatest fears of anybody, almost as bad as fearing of death, that's how bad the shyness problem is among a lot of people. And in my case, I was a stutterer, I was scared to death to talk.

And so, what Melissa does, is by gradually introducing these kids, first in their native language, then in English, and eventually, getting more and more complex, she, by the end of her classroom, I tell her story, in this book, she has most of these kids mainstream into regular classes in one year, you know and it's a perfect illustration of how you can draw kids out, and to be a lot more loquacious.

And a final point, so, in my chapter about the benefits of debate in the workplace, if you asked employers, what's the number one problem they see in kids coming out of high school and college, the number one answer, and this has been going on for like 20 years, all right, so it's not new. They all say that even college graduates, they can't speak in reasoned articulate fashion. They can't explain themselves. They may be able to write great essays, but put them in front of a group, and have them talk intelligently, they can't do this. And if we had debate centered instruction, we'd cure that. And that is why I argue, that we would revolutionize the workplace, if we have a cohort of people that had these skills.

So, I just wanted to pick up on your points, there. I'll turn it over to either one of you before we go to questions. Any further --

MR. WEST: I have a question, that I think is relevant for each of you, you mention kind of the role of technology in this pandemic, having to like, Norm do your debate summer camp virtually. I'm curious how debate would differ from in person versus through a technology platform. Does it operate differently, or are there different things you'd have to worry about? Are there different benefits that might come out of that?

MR. ORNSTEIN: Okay, so I'm going to give you a quick report for what Mike and Les Lynn had told me. True, there's a problem with internet access, so a lot of kids do not have universal broadband, and that is a huge problem our society has to solve, and the pandemic has revealed (phonetic) that.

That being said, this is the experience that they've had. Kids who may be shy speaking in front of 30 people are not shy talking to a computer screen. But somehow, they don't get as nervous. And so, in a way, the remote environment actually enhances the debate experience. It makes kids come out of their shell, more than they would if they had actually been in a classroom. So, if we could get everybody access, and we could somehow preserve this remote feature of learning into the post-pandemic world, I actually think it would improve the debate environment. At least that's their experience.

MR. ORNSTEIN: So, I can tell you, ours, at least in a nutshell, first, Bob is absolutely right. In inner cities, there are internet deserts, and not just in the inner cities, our kids are from D.C. mostly, and Prince George's County, and there are places where they simply don't have high speed broadband. And we also have kids who didn't have the right devices. You can't do this on a phone. So, we had to work a little bit to make that happen, but we got it happening.

The second challenge was, and this was remarkable to me, we're talking about a camp that went three weeks this summer. Three weeks for the varsity debaters, and we now have kids who are debating competitively, nationally, and doing very, very well. And two weeks for the novices and the junior varsity.

But it was 9:00 to 5:00 every day for those two or three weeks and imagine kids living in two bedroom apartments, where everybody's home because of the pandemic, and having to be in front of a computer for most of the day. And what we found was that the overwhelming majority of them stuck with it for the entire time, and I'm sure there were distractions, and it wasn't easy, it was a challenge for the parents and the other siblings as well.

By the way, we get a lot of siblings coming in. We see their older siblings doing well with this, and they say, we want to do it too. It's not the same interaction with people. My son, who was a national champion high school debater, went all over the country debating in high school, built friends and relationships that lasted for his life, by 34. I just couldn't believe the army of people from all over the country, and these kids build relationships here, and when you do tournaments, you meet others, you compete against them, but they become your friends, so doing it virtually, you lose something that way.



You have to be sure that you've got a technology. We had 200 kids that divided into different classrooms, with instructors, who are all over the country. One advantage we had, was, we get top flight people.

One thing about debate as Bob knows, is, it's a little bit like summer camp for people, once you get into it, it's in your blood for the rest of your life. And we have these remarkable people who would be instructors, for this camp, and we could get more of them, because they didn't have to travel to Washington and spend time here finding a place to live, which we could do for them, and so on. And it worked. It worked well, and the responses from the kids and their parents were overwhelmingly positive. But I think if we can move to a hybrid experience, where we can do some of it virtually, and some of it in person, that would be the best model.

MR. LIMAN: Okay, so now I'm going to turn to some questions. We've got some great questions that I've heard before. So, the first question is, is there any concern that a debate curriculum, debate-centered curriculum, would force kids to reveal the opinions on every subject, and not every kid has an opinion on every subject. And are there some issues that shouldn't be evaded. So, here's my stab at the answer. A lot of learning that takes place right now in the classroom that does not require opinions. The claim evidence reasoning model, in a history class or an English class or whatever, has people use debate techniques to go through the textbooks and uncover what's in the textbook that is evidence and is reasoning. It doesn't require them to advance an opinion, it basically enhances their research skills. So, later on, there may be opinions, but on most subjects that you're learning, it's not opinions, so it doesn't require you to do that.

Secondly, are there some issues that shouldn't be debated? The answer is yes. And I have an extensive discussion of this. So, I'll give you some examples, and there's a great quote that I quote in the book, I can't remember the name of the author, he says, "Don't debate the undebatable," right, so, like, you can't debate abortion, all right? There are some issues that are just literally so black and white, and people have very firm views, whether from their parents, their experience can't do that.

I'll give you another good example. I would not want to put kids in a pro and con position, Nazism is a good thing. All right? We have to proceed from our basic assumption, that when kids go to

school, they're learning about the democratic system of government, and we can learn about Nazism and communism as a historical matter, all right, but not to put kids in a position where they're actually having to become Nazis, or Communists, and defend that way of government.

So, there's a certain premise, that debate is something that you need in a democratic society, and there are subjects that are off limits. And I do say, to get to a concern that Norm had raised, the issue of what's off limits or on limits is probably something that needs to be decided locally, and I grant you, Norm, there are some places where that's not a good thing, unfortunately, because some places endorse creationism, and so forth. It's well out of the mainstream.

But I would say from a national perspective at least, to a large approximation, that is there a problem? And it's a problem that I can't solve on my own. I mean, all I can say, is, maybe those kids who are educated that way and then come to college and then meet other people that have been debate -- have been educated differently, maybe they'll have a more open mind. But that's a problem that unfortunately I can't solve. Any comments on those questions?

MR. ORNSTEIN: I would just add to that, Bob, I that I think if you introduce debate centered education and debate more into some of these areas, that kids are going to learn different information sources than they might have otherwise. They're going to end up being challenged to think about things in a different way, even if there are subjects that are avoided along the way. And they're going to be better citizens as a consequence.

So, we're not going to solve every problem. We're not going to be able to overcome walls of basically studied ignorance that we find in some parts of the country. And that may be true in many parts of the country, with different sets of issues. But if you can get people thinking about how you can put yourself in others' shoes; how you can make a case even if you don't believe it; where you go to get information; that's going to be a huge step forward for this society.

MR. WEST: I just have one quick comment to this from listening to each of your answers, it sounds like the choice of the question actually is crucial in terms of the types of benefits that you might be able to get out of this, and I would agree that there are certain topics that would not be

constructive, and would not advance the types of benefits that you advocate in your book. So, it sounds like when teachers are envisioning this, putting a lot of thought into the choice of the question would matter in terms of how students would react and the types of benefits you might get out of it.

MR. ORNSTEIN: One other point, Bob. When we do our summer camp, we bring in experts to speak. And I've been stunned at the quality of the questions from these kids. The first year the subject was policy towards China. And my colleague Nick Eberstadt, who's one of the world's experts on North Korea, he came in and he met with small groups of students for 20 minutes apiece. And they ask questions about North Korea, and its relationship with China, its relationship with the United States, that were better than the questions you would have got from adult audiences. Last year, the topic was foreign arms sales. The first day, we had somebody from the Congressional research service who spoke to all of the kids.

Some were sitting there, it looked like they weren't paying any attention at all. They were on their phones or on their laptops, and then they got to questions, I didn't even they'd get any questions. And the questions were just absolutely superb. I'd like to see a presidential debate where the questioners were not journalists, or even the town hall where they're adults. Get kids asking questions, and we would end up with a higher quality set of questions and probably better answers, because they wouldn't stand for some of the gobbledygook.

MR. LITAN: Exactly. And imagine if all those kids had the debate kind of education that we're talking about, they would demand, which is really a perfect segue to my next question, which I have gotten many times. So, Darrell makes reference to the fact that at the end of my first chapter, I have a list of people who are famous today, and they had debate, and it took me a while to uncover this list, and I thought by the way, I may have made a mistake here, too, but I've got the best sources I could. And two of the names are on the list, they're in this question. So, the question is, Senators Ted Cruz and Elizabeth Warren were both champion debaters. They are both hyper-partisan. Doesn't that undercut your argument about debate being healthy and moderating in politics?

That is a great question. And by the way, Ted Cruz was a national college champion in

parliamentary debate. The person that he beat, by the way -- the person that he lost to in his junior year, by the way, was Austan Goolsbee, who was President Obama's chief economic advisor, then when Austin graduated Yale, Ted, in his senior year won the national championship. That's an interesting factoid for the book. And Elizabeth Warren was a national champion debater, from Oklahoma, which was right south of me in Kansas, so, Elizabeth, who I've known for 35 years, she grew up 60, 80 miles from me, and she credits debate with having her changed her life. And by the way, every person I talked to that I interviewed, they all say the same thing. Debate changed their lives. And Norm is right about that, and it's not just the friends, it's their whole attitude, and by the way, every single person, to a person, they agreed, that if people had had debate training, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in today.

I didn't get one disagreement. So, to answer the question, don't these two polarizing figures represent the antithesis of my conclusion that we'd have a less polarized society? So, here's my argument in the book, you can buy it if you want, if you don't. I say that what debaters are really good at is sizing up their audience. They size up their judge today in a way that's not true 50 years ago. And when you're speaking to an audience, and you're very skilled at knowing what kind of arguments hit certain buttons, you'll speak certain ways. Now, imagine that the whole audience changes. So, imagine 30 years from now, 50 to 80 percent of people are voters, have gone through debate-centered education, they have a B.S. detector, right?

They know issues are not just simple binary, zero one. They know there's a lot of complexity. They know that bumper stickers are misleading. They know that you need facts. They know that basically things are in shades of gray. I make the argument, all very smart debaters, including the Elizabeth Warrens and the Ted Cruzes of the world, they would respond to this, because they're really good, all right. And I believe that they would be less polarizing and probably more moderate than they would, now maybe the times would be different, but I'd say on balance, with the audience changing, politics changes, and you can either buy that or you don't, but that's the argument that I make. I'll turn it on over to Norman, there. Because it is a really good question.

MR. ORNSTEIN: Yeah. It doesn't mean that if everybody debates, that everybody is

going to come out the same place. I can tell you from the anecdotes that Ted Cruz was not popular among the other debaters, because people felt that he actually used deceptive arguments and was not entirely honest in the way he approached it, but that's Ted Cruz. At the same time, I think you could see where Elizabeth Warren's ability to make her case was clearly honed by debate. I would add one other person to this by the way, Stephen Colbert, who is a friend, and I've talked to Stephen about debate, and he will say, and the words exactly, debate changed my life. He was an indifferent student, and when he sees Don debate, it got his juices flowing. It gets competitive juices flowing, but it made him a better student and a better person, and if you've ever watched the Colbert Report, he had a feature called The Word.

That was taken right from the debate. It altered his entertainment world as well. We're going to get people who are not going to be honest in the way they make their cases. That's the nature of the world. We're going to get people who have rigid views and aren't going to change them. We're not looking at changing everybody, we're looking at changing a culture, and that's what a debate can be.

MR. LITAN: Like, Stephen Colbert's on my list, so thanks for echoing that. Darrell, you want to weigh in?

MR. WEST: Yeah, just a quick point. The example I loved from your list was Supreme Court Justice Stephen Dwyer, and I never talk with him about his debate background, but I can see that type of background in his behavior on the court, just in terms of how he asks questions; how he listens; you look at his legal reasoning, so you can definitely see some of the benefits showing up later (inaudible).

MR. LITAN: And there's one other Supreme Court Justice on that list, it is Sam Alito, from a completely different perspective, and by the way, Sam was in my -- obviously, at Yale law school, he was one year ahead of me. I think we were in one class together and he's obviously used his debate skills to advance his career. So, next question.

This is another really good question. It's about social media. And with the proliferation of filter bubbles in social media, and by the way, there's a great movie on Netflix, I'll give it free publicity, it's

called The Social Dilemma. If people haven't seen it, they should see it. It's a very disturbing movie.

But the argument is, in a world of social media where everybody's completely filtered, how can we overcome that? That's the question, all right, so, my simple answer is, this is a problem, a very big problem, but I would argue that debate is an antidote to that problem. It even makes the case stronger for having kids educated in debate, and the analogy I would give is not in the book, I thought of it post pandemic, is that debate centered instruction is not a therapeutic, all right. If the society's sick, I can't fix it. I mean, if the thing is sick, I can't do that, for people that are basically beyond accepting being open-minded, I just can't change that.

Although, footnote, it's conceivable that some parents with kids that are educated in debate, will be in osmosis with that. And you could have some parents actually become more open-minded as their kids actually teach them. I still have hope for that.

But the way I think of debate-centered education, it's like a vaccine. It basically vaccinates kids against severe cases of polarization. Not everybody, because no vaccine is 100 percent effective, but even if it's 50 or 75 percent effective, which we hope the COVID vaccine will be. I think it will be a significant benefit. But now, I'll turn it over to you. Social media driving us crazy, what does that do to debate?

MR. ORNSTEIN: What I would say is, having watched our kids debate and in some cases using a presumed fact, that came from social media, the other side manages to come back with -- actually, that's not true. And you get a little bit of a check on the fake news, the real fake news, the false things that are out there. And it actually pushes people to look a little bit deeper into where they're going.

But I would have to say, we're living in a world where it's going to be harder and harder to make a distinction between what's real and what is not. You can do videos now that seem 100 percent real, that are completely manufactured. It is easy for clever people to put something out that gets into the social media fabric that seems utterly reasonable, but that, in fact, is utterly false. And we don't have a good antidote for that. But having people sensitized to what's real and what isn't, to what arguments to look for and how to vet things will help us, at least a little bit, and will mean that if we get some kind of a

firestorm with something that's actually false, you're going to have a lot of people who will look at it a little bit more skeptically, if they've gone through debate centered education.

MR. WEST: I have argued in other settings that because of the social media problems and the echo chambers, we need digital literacy training programs now for young people, and debates actually could be part of that, a digital literacy campaign is basically teaching people to be skeptical about information and sources of information; to do their own fact checking; to see something on social media, and immediately ask themselves, does this make sense? Does it seem to be accurate, does it come from an authoritative source? So, I think debate can help because of the emphasis on evidence, and the emphasis on effects, so it's very consistent with the types of things that we need to do, to address these serious problems.

MR. LITAN: Okay, well, we have five minutes left. I'm going to press two questions, and get quick answers, and if we don't have time, that's the way it is. All right, so then, the two final questions, do we have any evidence that debate actually reduces polarization? And another question, the other question is, there are other forms of instruction, how do we know that debate is better than some other form, all right. So, I'm going to answer the evidence point. The short answer is, to know whether it will reduce polarization over time would require the equivalent of a Framingham Heart Study, where you follow people over 30 years, all right?

I don't think we have 30 years. I think there's enough powerful evidence in this book, that we need get started right away, and by the way, this is a point that I made privately with Norm, and he's made it to me, that even if it didn't reduce polarization, the educational benefits and the workplace benefits of debate-centered education are still enough to recommend that schools ought to adopt it. And then, secondly, are there other forms of education that may be better?

Well, I have a long discussion in the book about something called project-based learning, which was pioneered by an educator named Ted Dintersmith. It's a book that had a huge influence on me, and I give Ted a tremendous amount of credit to the book. And I argue that really, debate-centered education is a variation of project-based learning. Each week kids get a project, and they are supposed

to analyze a claim, give evidence and reasoning. And so, I think that project based learning, which has been shown to have demonstrable effects, really is compatible with debate, and it's really debate as a subset of that, and there's a movement around the country to do project based learning and it sort of answers the scaling question, that I think was supposed to be before, if we embed debate as a political matter, as part of project-based learning, we may be able to accelerate its embellishing. So, those are my quick answers. Any final thoughts from the two of you?

MR. ORNSTEIN: So, the National Urban Debate League, and the Washington Urban Debate League, and their chapters around the country and we can use more of them, they really do focus on kids in Title I schools, and try and teach them competitive debate, it's a little bit different from the broader topic. They've done at least some studies following up, and kids who get into debate do better. They do better on tests, they do better throughout their educational experience. They do better at getting into colleges, they do better when they're at colleges. It's not the same kind of 35-year study that would be nice to have. It's not entirely systematic, with all of the controls you'd want to build in, as Bob said, we're seeing that happen a little bit more. But there's sure an awful lot of data that would suggest that this is a big plus for people, and it improves their lives.

And I'm absolutely convinced that these are life skills that are taught. And they work in the workplace; they work throughout one's life; you learn how to adapt better; and how to do the kinds of things that are necessary in a global economy.

MR. LITAN: Darrell, any final thoughts?

MR. WEST: Yeah, I'll just close. I just want to commend Bob and Norm for your work in this area. Bob for a terrific book, very well written, teachers across the country who want a how-to manual on what to think about; how to implement this; read the book, it'll all provide lots of very useful information. And Norm, you've done amazing work in the D. C. area, in exposing local kids to debate, and love the work that you're doing there as well.

MR. LITAN: Okay, well, I want to thank both of you. You've added tremendously to the discussion. I'm grateful for the very nice words you've said. I know they're heartfelt, I know you just



weren't buttering me up, because I know you actually believe in this stuff, and we all care about the future of our country. And to all of those of you who are tuning in, I thank you for doing it. Please spread the word.

I think we're onto something. And I've said to many people, I'm 70-years old now, I can't do this, I don't have enough years left in my life, so I'm hoping that if I could just turn on the light bulb on a few people who are watching this, and make them into, essentially, debate centered educational entrepreneurs, then I will feel happy that I will have made one small part in helping to change the lives, as Mike Wasserman, and Les Lynn are doing every single day. So, thank you very much, and have a good rest of the day.

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ANDERSON COURT REPORTING  
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190