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## A New Resolution: A Review of Resolved

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## A New Resolution: A Review of Resolved

### Abstract

"The goal here is to learn healthy disagreement around issues where we haven't become totally polarized by ideology."

Posting about the book *Resolved* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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### Keywords

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### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt University.

# A New Resolution: A Review of *Resolved*

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Donald Roth

April 18, 2023

**Title:** *Resolved: Debate Can Revolutionize Education and Help Save Our Democracy*

**Author:** Robert Litan

**Publisher:** Brookings Institution Press

**Publishing Date:** October 6, 2020

**Pages:** 219 (Paperback)

**ISBN:** 978-0815737872

## Part 1: Why Debate and Why Now?

Recently Donald and I were introduced to this intriguingly titled book, one that purports to solve America's political woes with an activity we both love—debate. Both of us have been debaters as students, both have coached debate teams, and both use elements of debate in our classes. Because of this background, we thought we'd review the book in a quasi-debate format to help give an idea of what radical idea the book is pushing, and whether or not such a plan could be feasible.

### Introduction, Definitions, and Harms (Kuiper)

As someone who has been engaged in some form of competitive debate for decades now, I picked up Robert Litan's *Resolved: Debate Can Revolutionize Education and Help Save Our Democracy* with a combination of trepidation and excitement. There are not many books that from the cover celebrate the positive impact of debate, but the superlative wording of the title seemed a little ambitious at the same time. From the very beginning Litan suggests, "America is as divided politically and economically as it has been at any point in (the last 70 years)," citing both political and everyday divisions as evidence of such a divide. From this point on, his thesis is to suggest that the advocacy and practice of quality debate could solve this discordant status; as the title says, to "save our democracy." To win this argument, he structures the entire book like a typical debate round, a style that we'll try to emulate to some degree here.

The opening chapter ("Improving Education") plays greatly on one of Litan's central talent – the comprehensive use of research to support his arguments. Here he lays out the groundwork for the debate here, and like any good debater provides definitions for the core terminology. The

key term referred to throughout the book is “Debate Centered Instruction” (DCI), which is what he explains, exemplifies, and exalts through this and subsequent chapters. In short, DCI enhances student engagement through the integration of debate into school settings, whether that be actual in-classroom lessons or an extracurricular debate program. Through extensive “training in research, thinking, and speaking,”<sup>1</sup> students involved in DCI will become future leaders who “have experience and training arguing both or multiple sides of issues so that, by the time they reach adulthood, they will vote for and demand leaders who have these same qualities.”<sup>2</sup> Chapter One is a fairly complete argument unto itself, and is one of the strongest chapters of the book. Litan’s provides extensive evidence that debate on its own has positive individual effects, and his anecdotal evidence about more corporate implementations is quite compelling too. The current situation is bleak, and debate is a key method to solve the problem. As he suggests, “The future health of our society and economy may depend” on a widespread application of debate education.<sup>3</sup>

## The Method Explained (Kuiper)

Chapter Two (“Debate as a Model”) is probably the most accessible chapter for those not familiar with debate, and it provides a good review for those working in the debate field at the same time. He provides detailed accounts of what a debate team or debate tournament looks like, using this description to show how debate is already designed to be an arena of logic, respect, and skill. There are several types of debate currently speaking, and while Litan’s first love is “policy debate,” he ably guides the reader through the general history of competitive debate in most of its forms and evolutions. Again, it’s an interesting balance he’s navigating in trying to explain to the uninitiated and to remind the veterans, and it’s not quite clear that he succeeds. He obviously is a great resource for those already involved in debate, but as engaging as he is, the connection to “outsiders” might be tenuous. In addition, there is also a hint of elitism about what true debate ought to be, and he tends to take an old-school approach in terms of what is “good” debate.

Despite a few problems here and there, he accomplishes the basic goal of explaining debate fairly well. However, the larger goal of convincing non-debaters about the efficacy and utility of debate is not as clear. The whole book has a lofty objective of convincing readers that debate will solve and even enhance society if debate programs are comprehensively implemented across the board. As Litan himself states his overarching goal of the book: “to persuade school leaders, policymakers, and the wider public why” the country needs to change to a comprehensive debate format.<sup>4</sup> As much as I and other might agree with him, we are in a niche environment, and a chapter that details the glories and tribulations of debate might not be the best of inroads into such intended audiences.

**(Roth)**

I'm jumping in at this point because all I have to say on the Intro and first chapter is "amen" to what Bruce says. For this chapter, though, I think Litan fails to take his criticisms of competitive debate far enough. In its competitive version, debate often gets gamified in a way that loses sight of its pedagogical objectives. Some students learn that they can memorize a really persuasive argument, then bend every argument toward those canned speeches. These students are often rewarded for looking polished, passionate, and articulate, and they win a lot of debates. In the current debate environment, this typically means learning to transform every argument into a laundry list of complaints about inequity and oppression, regardless of the topic. This should blunt Litan's optimistic thesis, as it shows that debate can fall prey to the same social ills that Litan seeks to remedy.

## The Plan Text (Roth)

Chapter 3 focuses on applying debate-centered education beyond the competitive circuit. Litan points to varied efforts to reform education at primary grade levels, but he notes none have really cracked the code to improving High School scores. Litan believes that debate's engaging emphasis on critical thinking, communication, collaboration (in team formats), and creativity in forming arguments will help close this gap. He especially emphasizes the potential to close the test gap for minority students, cure the mental coddling of more economically advantaged students, and encourage females to speak up. The most helpful aspect of this chapter is a number of pedagogical recommendations for implementing debate in the classroom. The goal here is to learn healthy disagreement around issues where we haven't become totally polarized by ideology, with the hope that this posture of engagement flows out from there.

Overall, I find Litan's guidance in this chapter among the most helpful material in the book. I have benefited from debate-oriented pedagogy growing up, and I use it to good effect in a number of my classes. Of all of the claims he makes, though, I remain a bit skeptical that debate will rescue students already in the throes of the sorts of dynamics that Lukianoff and Haidt cite in *The Coddling of the American Mind*. I don't blame this on the pedagogy specifically. Instead, I'm thinking of how common it was in debate rounds to see judges who were still so blinded by their biases that they tended to judge based on their preexisting preferences. The same was true of competitors who seemed to have learned that debate was about framing ever more creative ways to cry "bias and oppression!" Don't get me wrong: I think debate has great potential in pedagogy, but I don't think it's strong enough to save us from ourselves.

### (Kuiper)

I also enjoyed this chapter and thought it was essentially the core of the whole book, laying out a practical application of debate in the classroom. The ideas here encapsulate my basic reaction to the whole book—that the core considerations of the proposal are sound and feasible on an individual or even organizational level, but the intended scope is too lofty to realistically achieve. I think a chapter like this would be an excellent lesson plan in itself for classes or teams, and such an intent much easier to conceptualize. Such implementation on a broader

scale might help to mitigate the biased judging that you mention here as an unfortunate aspect of some competition.

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1. p. 5

2. p. 13

3. p. 17

4. p. 3