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Intelligence Squared Debate: Free Speech Is Threatened on Campus

By Nicholas Quinn Rosenkranz

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[Intelligence Squared](#) presented an excellent debate on Tuesday at Yale — [“Resolved: Free speech is threatened on campus.”](#)

Yale was a particularly apt venue for this debate. Yale has a proud tradition of freedom of speech, and its official statement on free speech, the [“Woodward Report”](#) of 1974, is one of the strongest defenses of free speech in the academy. But [the infamous controversy of this past Halloween](#), and the way that Yale handled the controversy, have led many to doubt Yale’s current commitment to free speech. This year, [Yale only narrowly avoided ranking among the 10 worst colleges in the United States for free speech](#), according to the [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education \(FIRE\)](#). So this debate was particularly timely, and it clearly struck a nerve at Yale.

Arguing for the motion were Wendy Kaminer, writer and lawyer, and John McWhorter, professor of linguistics at Columbia. Arguing against the motion were Shaun Harper, executive director of the Center for the Study of Race & Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania, and Jason Stanley, professor of philosophy at Yale.

At Intelligence Squared debates, the audience votes on the resolution before the debate and then again afterward, to see how many minds were changed. Before this debate, 49 percent were “pro,” 27 percent were “con” and 24 percent were undecided. By the end, 66 percent were “pro,” 25 percent were “con” and 9 percent were undecided. Detailed results are available [here](#).

These results are striking, first, because they constitute a rout. At most Intelligence Squared debates, both sides increase their support, drawing from those who begin undecided; but in this case, the “con” side actually lost support over the course of the evening, from 27 percent down to 25 percent (despite the home-court advantage of a Yale professor on the “con” side). And the results are striking, too, for the sheer depth of support for the “pro” side: Again, by the end, fully two-thirds of this Yale audience affirmed that free speech is threatened on campus.

For more information about the state of free speech on campus, check out the [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education \(FIRE\)](#). For video of this excellent debate, check out [Intelligence Squared](#).