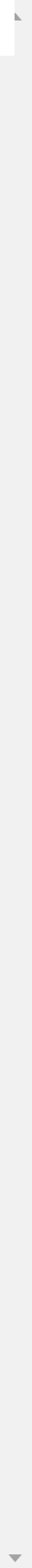


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Anti-Israel Boycotters Lost at Modern Language Association, but



[Russell Berman](#) | 1/17/2015 - 7:30pm

First-Hand Account: BDS supporters tenacious but play fast and loose with the facts.



[*WAJ Note:* On January 10, 2015, we reported how [Modern Language Assoc postpones anti-Israel boycott vote until 2017](#). I asked Stanford Professor Russell Berman, a former President of MLA who attended the debate and vote, to provide us with a first-hand account and analysis.]

At the recent Modern Language Association (MLA) Convention in Vancouver, proponents of the anti-Israel Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) movement made a concerted effort to score an electoral victory for their anti-Israel campaign.

[BDS and its supporters failed](#). I was present during the debate and votes at the Delegate Assembly, and the failure was clear.

Nonetheless BDS supporters have rushed to claim success, [asserting that straw polls taken](#) at the Delegate Assembly supported both BDS and Professor Steven Salaita (who is in a dispute with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).

To make such claims requires misrepresentation of the facts of what happened. But facts matter, and a reasonable examination of the series of votes in Vancouver leads to the conclusion that BDS lost.

Boycott Resolution Delayed Two Years

First some background: in the run-up to the convention, two resolutions were submitted to the MLA's Delegate Assembly Organizing Committee (DAOC). One resolution called for a boycott of Israeli universities, while the other opposed academic boycotts. Because the two resolutions were in direct conflict with each other, the DAOC requested that both proposals be withdrawn during a two-year moratorium on any resolutions concerning Israel. Instead the DAOC proposed a series of discussions about the matter in order to inform the membership. Both sides agreed, and neither resolution was brought to the floor.

However, when the Delegate Assembly convened in Vancouver, the DAOC had to bring its two-year moratorium proposal before the assembly for a vote. BDS supporters attacked it bitterly because they were eager to vote against Israel, and they correctly saw the moratorium as prohibiting such a vote until 2017 at the earliest. The voting showed that they were a distinct minority: the Delegate Assembly adopted the moratorium proposal 95 to 49. This was a victory for the DAOC and a dramatic 2 to 1 loss for BDS.

That first vote was important not only because it rejected the BDS effort to accelerate its anti-Israel campaign but because it took place relatively early in the afternoon when attendance was still high.

As attendance dwindled in the course of the meeting—typical at the Delegate Assembly—the proportion of hard-line BDSers to the overall attendance grew, and this was reflected in one subsequent vote.

The lesson to draw is this: the more robust the attendance and the more representative the Assembly is of the membership, the greater the likelihood of BDS defeat. BDS only wins when attendance drops and the Assembly loses its representative character.

Non-Quorum Votes Late In Meeting Neither anti-Israel nor Pro-Salaita

Later in the meeting, an “Open Discussion” period took place dedicated to four issues, more or less related to the boycott debate, although none specifically referenced the Middle East.

Some twenty minutes were allocated to each topic, and at the end of each period a vote was taken, in effect a set of straw polls.

Only one of the four questions posed mapped clearly onto the pro and anti-BDS camps. This was the third question: “Do you believe that institutional boycotts help or hurt academic freedom?” BDS opponents generally argue that boycotts restrict academic freedom, while most BDSers believe that boycotts not only do not hurt academic freedom but promote it. Nonetheless, it is important that the vote was not directly on anti-Israel BDS, just on the concept of boycotts.

On this one vote, the BDS side appeared to have an edge: 48 voted that boycotts help academic freedom, while 26 voted that they hurt. But by this time, the Assembly had fallen below the required quorum (77) which had been set at the outset of the meeting. If this vote had not been on a straw poll but for a genuine resolution, a quorum call would have blocked it. BDS only wins when attendance declines. (In the moratorium vote, a total of 144 votes were cast; in this straw poll, there were only 74.)

It is also interesting to note that the 48 votes on the BDS side here are effectively equal to the 49 votes that BDS cast on the initial moratorium.

This points to the fact that there is a very dedicated pro-BDS core that was however not able to break out of its camp and to win new adherents. Having lost the quorum and incapable of gaining momentum, BDS can surely not credibly claim victory in this round.

Yet the BDS advocates are quite willing to misrepresent the facts. This is especially clear in the victory claims regarding the final straw poll in the open discussion.

Writing on the anti-Zionist [Mondoweiss](#) website, UC-Riverside Professor David Lloyd, a co-founder of the U.S. academic BDS movement and one of the proposers of the initial pro-boycott resolution, asserts that the Delegate Assembly “endorsed the idea that the MLA should roundly condemn retaliation against scholars who speak out publicly on matters concerning Palestine and Israel.”

In fact, no such vote was taken; there was no vote taken on issues of retaliation, there was no vote on the Steven Salaita case (to which Lloyd refers) and there was certainly no vote on Palestine and Israel.

The question put before the Assembly which Lloyd misrepresents as treating the Middle East was rather: “As a delegate, I believe that the MLA should publicly speak out against problems with faculty governance and public speech.”

In the discussion that preceded the vote, the speakers focused on the role of non-tenure-track faculty in governance structures. There was very strong, indeed unanimous support for that issue, rather than for the one that Lloyd reports. That final vote, in other words, was hardly a victory for BDS—although it could be seen as an initial step toward a reform of governance structures. But that’s another matter.

So the record of the MLA Delegate Assembly is clear: BDS lost on the moratorium vote; BDS failed to win endorsement of Steven Salaita.

This is not the record of victory that BDS supporters are claiming.

Lessons: BDS supporters tenacious and willing to misrepresent facts

There are a few lessons to draw from this recent MLA experience.

First, the DAOC proposal and its endorsement by a supermajority indicate that there is, within the professional association, a broad, moderate center, interested in reasoned debate and open to argument. Two thirds of the Delegate Assembly did not want to rush into a highly politicized topic.

Second, the pro-BDS vote never surpassed the 49 votes it received in the first round: it is a clearly delimited camp that failed to attract additional supporters. However, its supporters are willing to sit through meetings more tenaciously than their opponents because they can only win majorities when attendance declines. So it is to their advantage to have votes take place late in meetings. One should therefore be attentive to quorum rules.

One should also expect the BDSers to make every effort to build membership support for an eventual boycott resolution. This includes the newly formed MLA Members for Justice in Palestine. MLA members who support academic freedom and oppose BDS will have to be vigilant and mobilize. Despite the BDS loss in Vancouver, there's lots of work ahead.

Third—and this should surprise no one—BDS proponents have no qualms about blatantly misrepresenting facts. The false account of the Delegate Assembly calls into question the credibility of other claims from the BDS camp.

At the end of the day, BDS encountered some significant losses at MLA. And that's good.

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Reactions



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#BDS vote in MLA, boycotters lose vote then lie in anti #zionist @Mondoweiss <http://t.co/U7w9cW4qm6> via @LegInsurrection @Saeb Erekat
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Comments

oldav8r | [January 17, 2015 at 8:08 pm](#)

Pardon me if I don't grasp the gravity of this debate, but if the MLA had voted 100% in favor of BDS is there anyone beyond a small subset of a small group of academics who would give a damn?

jem927 | [January 18, 2015 at 9:14 am](#)

The MLA, of which I'm a member, reminds me not a little of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire — a barely unified collection of scores of tiny kingdoms, duchies, principalities, and tribes that share a common general interest (the study of language and literature) and very little else.

Indeed, the competing parties often disagree about what is meant by “study,” “language,” and “literature.” I think think the organization is mostly (and ironically) unified by its many fissures and divisions.

This, perhaps, is why when the MLA passes politically tinged resolutions, the world yawns.

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