

To: Interested parties
From: Emma Saltzberg, Senior Fellow, Data for Progress
Subject: Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (polling)

Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) is a global, grassroots movement responding to a call from Palestinian civil society organizations to pressure Israel to recognize and honor Palestinian rights through nonviolent economic and cultural means. Modeling itself on the movement to end apartheid in South Africa, the BDS movement's core demands are an end to Israel's military occupation, the extension of full equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel, and recognition of the right of return for all Palestinians who have been displaced from their homes. Since the movement launched in 2005, BDS resolutions have passed on dozens of US college and university campuses, and musical artists have canceled performances in Israel in response to pressure from BDS activists, among other effects of BDS activism.¹

BDS has also drawn intense focus from opponents. Starting in 2014, bills designed to penalize boycott supporters have been introduced in state legislatures across the country.² As of September 2019, twenty-six US states had legislation or an executive order on the books targeting boycotts of Israel.³ (For example, some anti-BDS policies have made public employment or government contracts conditional on a commitment not to boycott Israel; speech pathologist Bahia Amawi [recently won](#) a lawsuit against the Texas public school district that refused to hire her without a written promise that she would not boycott Israel.) In some cases, these states went so far as to punish companies or individuals who boycott Israeli settlements, which are not legally part of Israel—[Georgia's anti-boycott law](#), for example, defines a boycott of Israel as applying to "Israel or individuals or companies doing business in Israel or in Israeli-controlled territories." The ACLU [has called](#) anti-boycott legislation unconstitutional (since boycotts are political speech protected under the First Amendment) and has participated in Amawi's lawsuit and two others challenging anti-boycott provisions.

Lawmakers at the federal level have also voted on anti-BDS legislation and resolutions. Just this year, the first Senate bill of the 116th Congress, put forward during the government shutdown, included an anti-BDS provision that would have given states permission to penalize companies that boycott Israel.⁴ The bill passed the Senate, 77-23; of the Senate Democratic presidential contenders, Warren, Sanders, and Harris voted against it, while Booker, Klobuchar, and Bennet voted for it.⁵ In July 2019, House Democrats brought forward a nonbinding resolution decreeing that BDS "undermines the possibility for a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict"

¹ <https://uscpr.org/campaign/bds/bdswins/#1499799892886-baaacd05-4122>

² <https://fmep.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/State-BDS-and-Settlement-legislation-table.pdf>

³ <https://fmep.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/State-BDS-and-Settlement-legislation-table.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/116/s1/text>

⁵ <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/116-2019/s16>

and affirming Congress's commitment to a two-state solution.⁶ The resolution passed, 398 to 17.
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What do voters think about boycotts, BDS, and anti-BDS laws? From September 13 through September 16, 2019, YouGov Blue conducted an online poll for Data for Progress of a national sample of 1,006 US voters. We asked a set of questions about voters' support for boycotts in general and BDS in particular; we also asked whether voters see boycotts and BDS as legitimate forms of protest.

Boycotts are a nonviolent activist tactic designed to pressure businesses or governments to change their positions by refusing to do business with them. Supporters say boycotts are an effective, non-violent tactic to make change and are protected under the First Amendment. Opponents say boycotts are hypocritical and unfair since it is impossible to boycott everyone who is doing something objectionable.

Do you [agree or disagree] that boycotts are a legitimate form of protest?

In general, would you say you [support or oppose] the use of boycotts?

Some people advocate for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions of Israel, or "BDS," as a nonviolent protest tactic to pressure Israel into withdrawing their occupation of Palestine. For example, BDS supporters advocate for institutions such as universities to boycott and divest from G4S, a company that provides services and equipment to Israeli prisons. Supporters of BDS say that Israel violates the human rights of Palestinians and that BDS is protected by the First Amendment. Opponents say that BDS delegitimizes the state of Israel and that BDS singles out Israel—rather than other human rights abusers—because of anti-Semitism.

Do you [agree or disagree] that BDS is a legitimate form of protest?

And, would you say that you personally [support or oppose] BDS?

Some states have passed anti-BDS laws, which can prohibit BDS supporters from access to government contracts. For example, a school speech pathologist in Texas lost her job with a school district for refusing to sign a contract with an anti-BDS clause. Supporters say that the US government shouldn't do business with people who weaken our allies, like Israel. Opponents say that anti-BDS laws violate the First Amendment.

Do you [support or oppose] anti-BDS laws?

Voters say that boycotts are a legitimate protest tactic, 76 percent to 14 percent, and they support the use of boycotts, 71 percent to 19 percent. Voters oppose anti-BDS laws, 36 percent to 27 percent. A plurality of voters say BDS is legitimate (36 percent), compared to those who say it is not (31 percent). However, voters overall do oppose BDS, 35 percent to 27 percent, with the remainder of respondents (38 percent) reporting they were unsure.

A majority of Democratic voters say BDS is legitimate (53 percent), and 44 percent of Democratic voters support BDS. Democratic voters oppose anti-BDS laws, 48 percent to 15

⁶ <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/116/hres246/text/eh>

⁷ <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/454399-house-passes-bill-opposing-bds-exposing-democratic-divides>

percent. In addition, of the 38 percent of voters unsure about supporting BDS, a majority are Democratic voters (53 percent).

Between 33 percent and 38 percent of voters responded “not sure” to questions about BDS, a proportion that is unusually high relative to DFP’s polling on comparable issues. For instance, when DFP polled voters on foreign policy questions this summer, between 9 percent and 18 percent of voters responded “not sure” to questions about weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, the post-9/11 authorization for the use of military force, and military aid to human rights abusers.

Voter opinion on boycotts in general

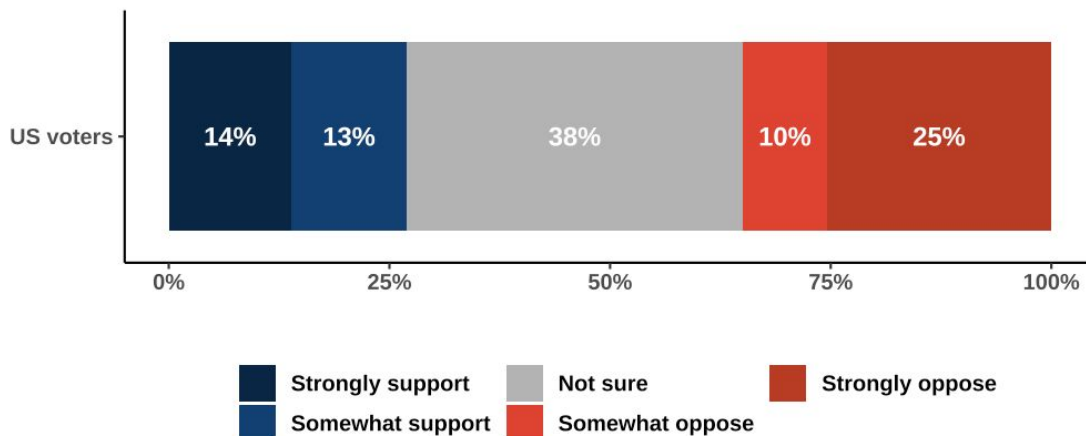
More than three-quarters of voters (76 percent) say boycotts are legitimate as a protest tactic. Democratic voters—those who voted for a Democratic congressional candidate in 2018—agree that boycotts are legitimate, 85 percent to 8 percent, for a margin of agreement of 78 percent. Two-thirds of Republican voters—those who voted for a Republican congressional candidate in 2018—agree that boycotts are legitimate, 67 percent to 25 percent, for a margin of agreement of 42 percent.

Broken down by party self-identification (rather than by voting behavior), the differences are even more stark. Democrats agree that boycotts are legitimate, 86 percent to 6 percent—and 61 percent of Democrats strongly agree. Independents agree that boycotts are legitimate, 58 percent to 20 percent. Republicans agree, 67 percent to 22 percent—more than one in five Republicans does *not* agree that boycott is a legitimate protest tactic, and only 27 percent strongly agree that it is legitimate.

BDS legitimacy and support overall

Voters overall oppose BDS, 35 percent to 27 percent.

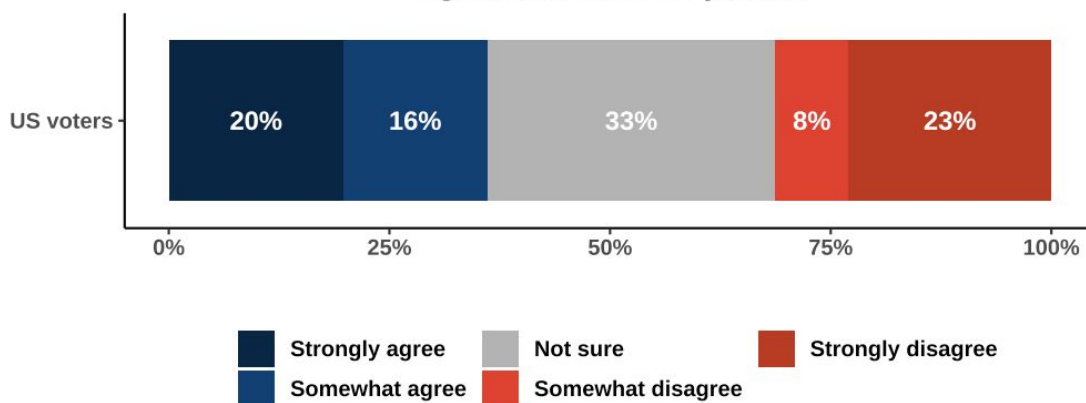
Support for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS)



And, would you say that you personally [support or oppose] BDS?

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Agree or disagree BDS is a legitimate form of protest



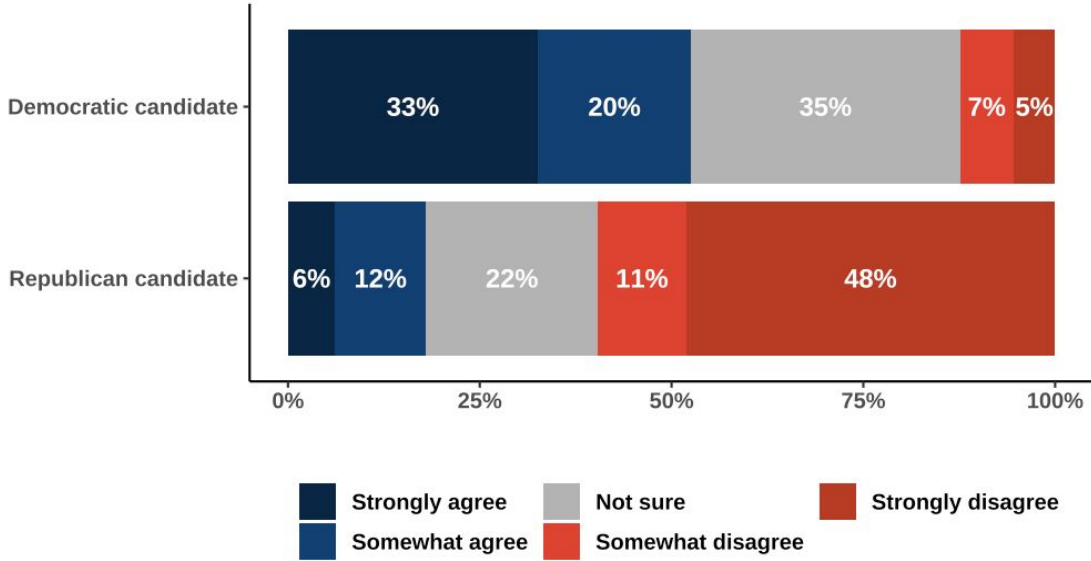
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However, a plurality of voters overall believe BDS is legitimate: 36 percent, compared to 31 percent who say it is not legitimate.

Agree or disagree BDS is a legitimate form of protest

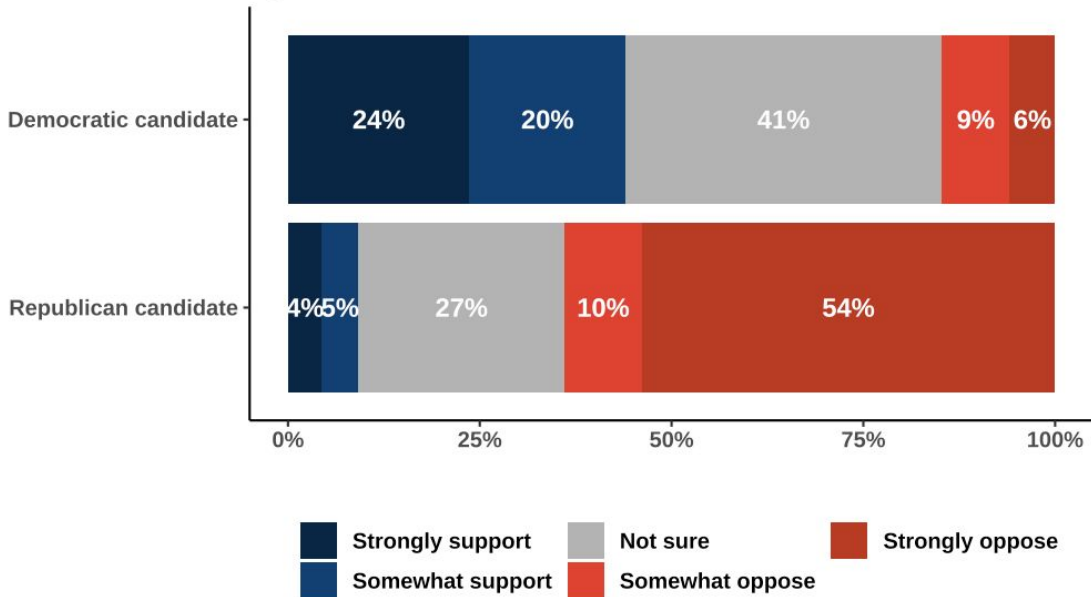
By 2018 vote choice



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Support for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS)

By 2018 vote choice

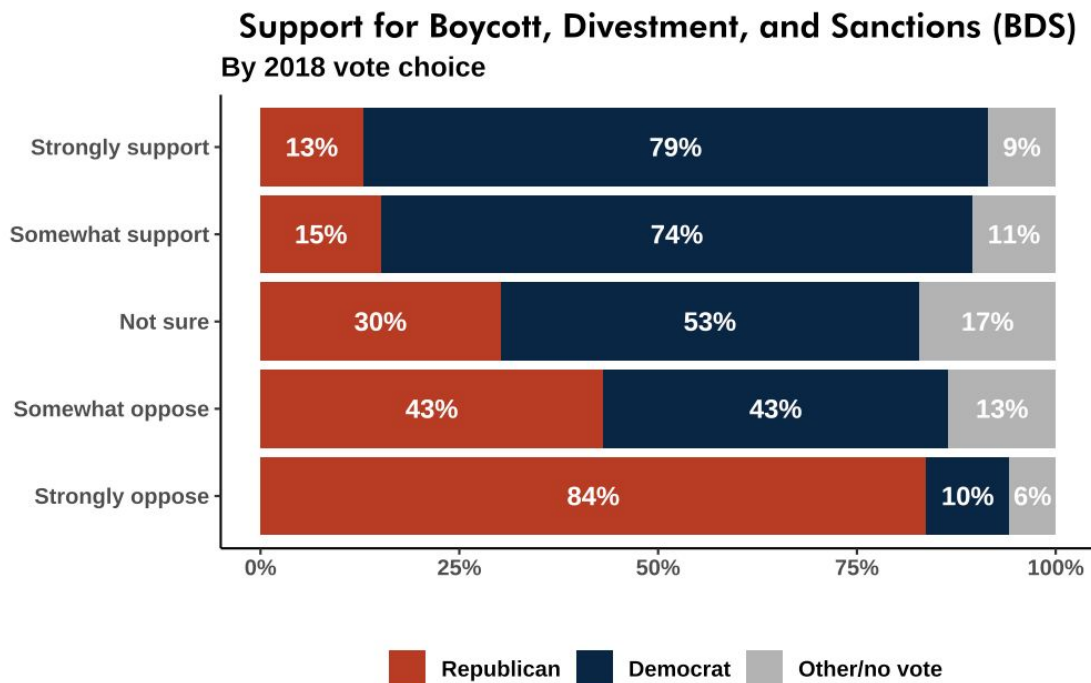


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A majority of Democratic voters—53 percent—say BDS is legitimate, and 44 percent of Democratic voters support BDS. Another 41 percent of Democratic voters are unsure where they stand on BDS, leaving only 15 percent who oppose it.

Among Republican voters, 60 percent say BDS is *not* legitimate, and a majority (54 percent) strongly oppose BDS, in addition to another 10 percent who somewhat oppose it for a total of 64 percent of Republican voters opposing BDS.

Demographics of BDS Support



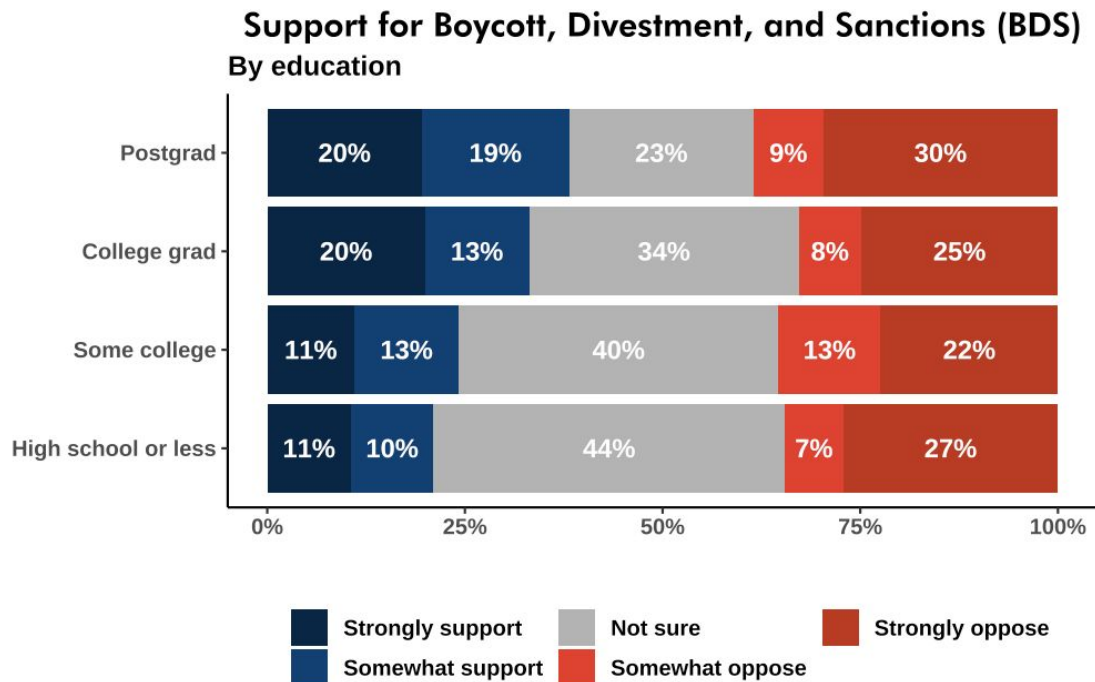
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BDS supporters lean heavily Democratic. Of voters who strongly support BDS, 79 percent voted Democratic in 2018, and 13 percent voted Republican. Among voters who somewhat support BDS, 74 percent voted for Democrats and 15 percent voted for Republicans in 2018.

Voters who somewhat oppose BDS are split between parties: 43 percent voted for Democrats, and 43 percent for Republicans.

Voters who strongly oppose BDS are overwhelmingly Republicans: 84 percent of strong opponents of BDS voted for a Republican in 2018, compared to only 10 percent who voted for a Democrat.

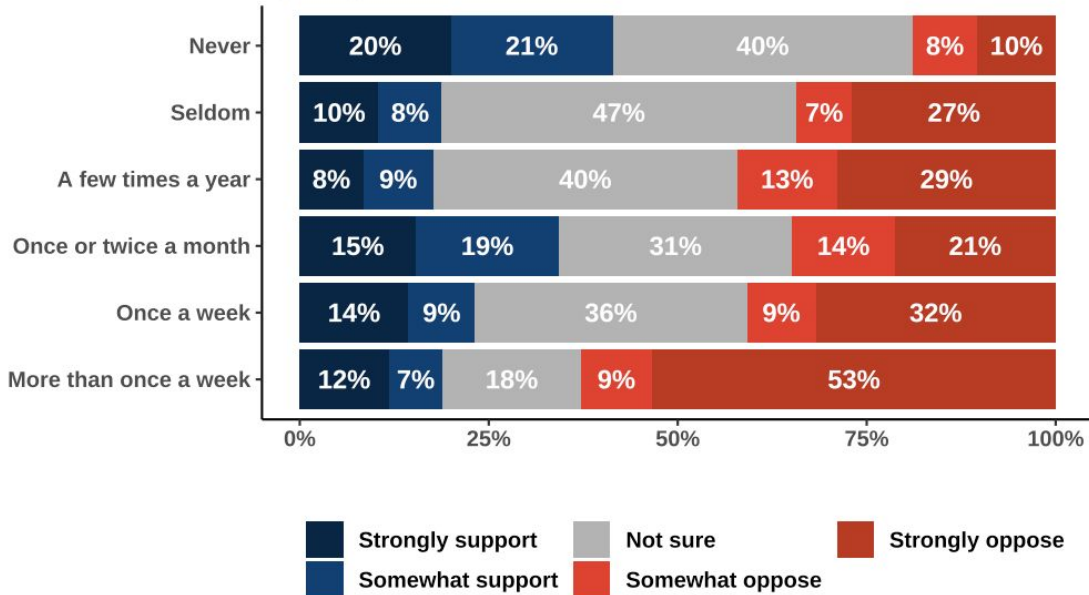
Voters who are not sure about BDS are majority Democratic voters: 53 percent of respondents who are not sure about BDS voted for a Democrat in 2018. Another 30 percent voted for a Republican, and 14 percent did not vote at all (a much higher proportion of nonvoters than any of the other categories of BDS opinion, which range from 3 percent to 7 percent).



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While opposition to BDS is similar across education levels, voters with more formal education are much more likely to support BDS. Voters with a high school education oppose BDS, 34 percent to 21 percent, while 44 percent say they are not sure. Voters with some college oppose BDS, 35 percent to 24 percent, with 40 percent not sure. Voters with a college degree are evenly split: 33 percent support BDS, 33 percent oppose it, and 34 percent are not sure. Voters with postgraduate education are also evenly split, with more voters taking a position: 38 percent support BDS, 38 percent oppose BDS, and 23 percent are unsure. Opposition to BDS ranges from 33 percent to 38 percent across education levels, but support for BDS rises from 21 percent to 38 percent between voters with a high school education and voters with postgraduate education.

Support for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) By religious service attendance

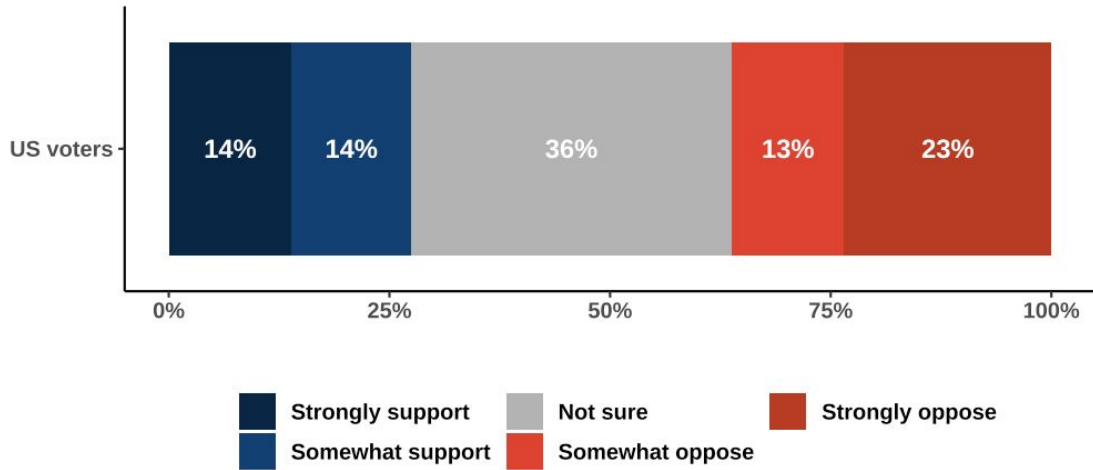


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Support for BDS is most concentrated among voters who do not attend religious services, a group which is the single largest religious-attendance subgroup in the sample (27 percent of respondents). Voters who report never attending religious services support BDS, 41 percent to 18 percent, with 40 percent unsure. Among those who seldom attend services, 47 percent are unsure about BDS, while 34 percent oppose it and just over 18 percent support it. Voters who attend services a few times a year oppose BDS, 42 percent to 18 percent, with 40 percent not sure. Those who attend a once or twice a month are evenly split: 35 percent oppose BDS, 34 percent support it, and 31 percent are unsure. Weekly attenders oppose BDS, 41 percent to 23 percent, including 32 percent strongly opposed; 36 percent of voters who attend services once a week are not sure about BDS. Those who attend religious services more than once a week are most likely to oppose BDS: 63 percent oppose it, including a majority (53 percent) who strongly oppose it. Only 19 percent support BDS, and another 18 percent are not sure, making this group the most likely to take a position on BDS.

Anti-BDS laws by vote, party ID, religious attendance, education

Support for anti-BDS laws

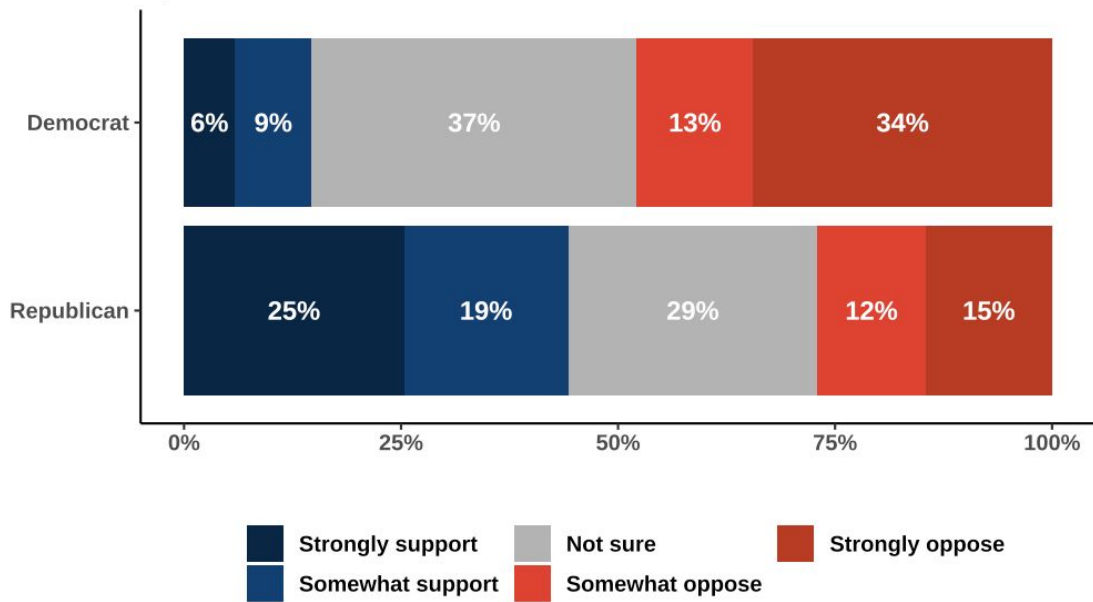


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Overall, voters oppose anti-BDS laws, 36 percent to 28 percent. Another 36 percent of voters say they are not sure about anti-BDS laws.

Support for anti-BDS laws

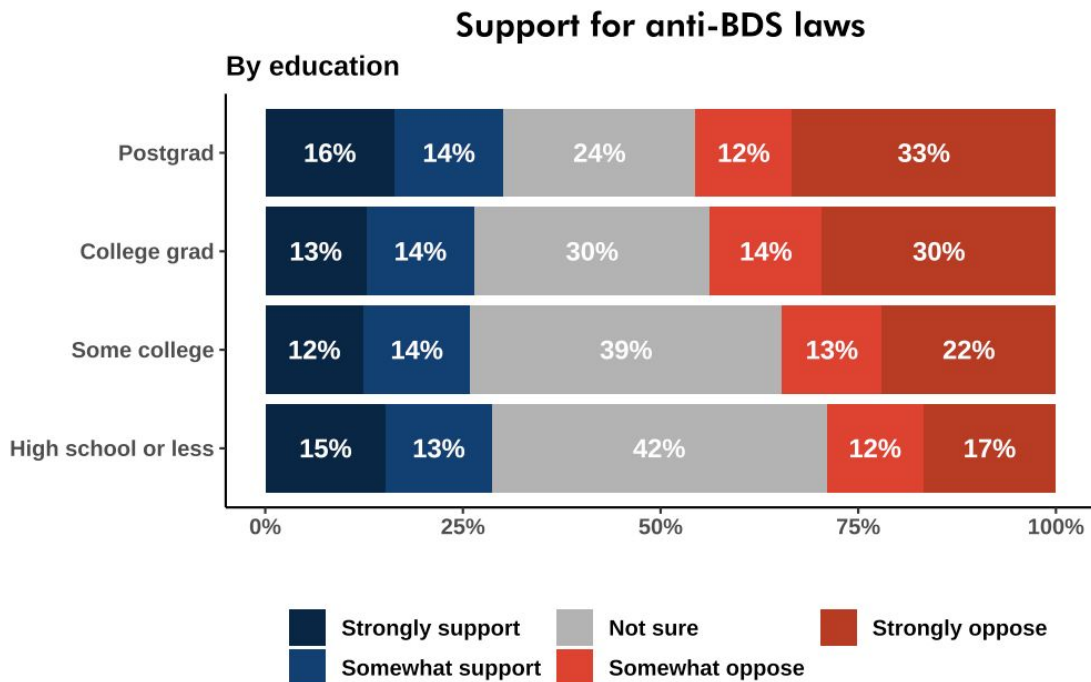
By 2018 vote choice



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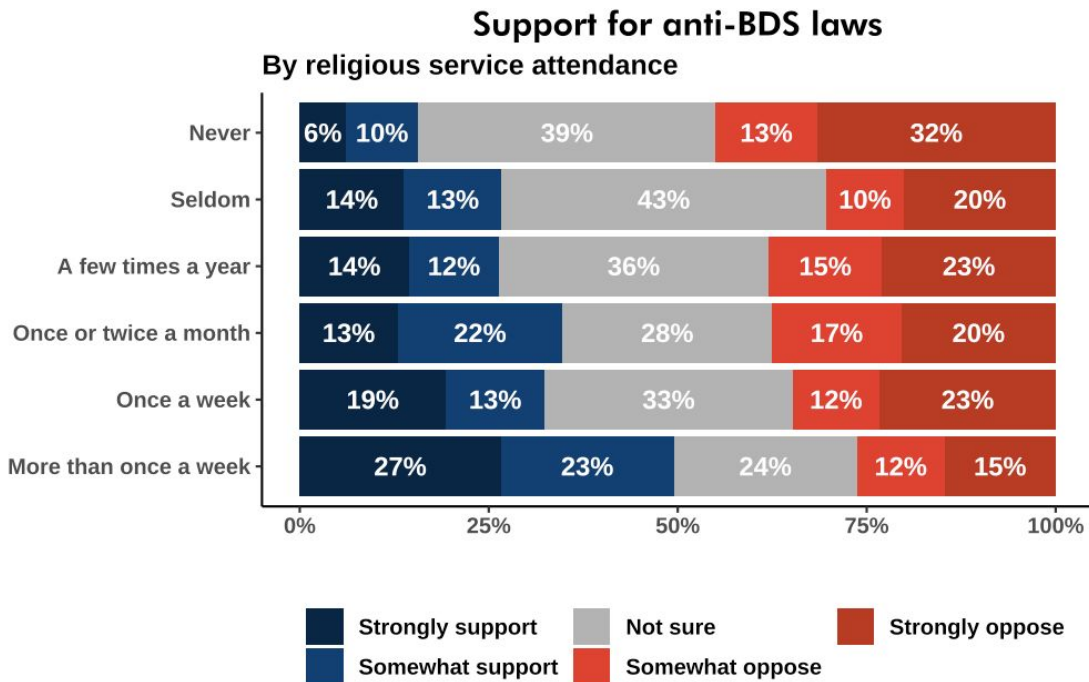
Nearly half of Democratic voters (47 percent) oppose anti-BDS laws, and only 15 percent support them; 37 percent of Democratic voters say they are not sure.

Among Republican voters, anti-BDS laws have net support but not majority support: 44 percent of Republicans support the laws, while 27 percent oppose. Fewer Republican voters than Democratic voters say they are not sure about anti-BDS laws: 28 percent of Republicans are not sure.



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Voters who attend religious services more than once a week are most likely to support anti-BDS laws: about 50 percent support, about 27 percent oppose, and 24 percent are not sure. Those who attend religious services weekly narrowly oppose the laws: 35 percent oppose, 32 percent support, and 33 percent are not sure. Voters who attend services once or twice a month also narrowly oppose the laws, 38 percent to 35 percent, with 28 percent unsure. Among voters who go to services a few times a year, 38 percent oppose the laws, while 26 percent support them and 36 percent are unsure. Of voters who seldom go to services, 43 percent are not sure about anti-BDS laws, while 30 percent oppose the laws and 27 percent support them. Voters who never go to services are the most likely to oppose anti-BDS laws, at a rate of 45 percent to 16 percent opposed, with 39 percent unsure.



DATA FOR **PROGRESS**

Support for anti-BDS laws is similar among voters with different levels of education, while opposition to the laws is more prevalent among voters with more education. Voters with a high school education are split on anti-BDS laws, and most refrain from taking a position: 42 percent are unsure, while about 28 percent support the laws and 29 percent oppose them. Voters with some college oppose anti-BDS laws, 35 percent to 26 percent, with another 39 percent unsure. College graduates oppose the laws, 44 percent to 26 percent, with 30 percent not sure. Voters with postgraduate education oppose the laws, 46 percent to 30 percent, with 24 percent unsure. That’s a range from 26 percent support among high school–educated voters to 30 percent support among postgraduate–educated voters, while opposition to the laws ranges from 29 percent among high school–educated voters to 46 percent among postgraduate–educated voters.

Conclusion

Overall, these data demonstrate that opposition to BDS among Democratic voters is small (15 percent), while support among Democratic voters is at nearly 50 percent, and Democratic politicians who vote for legislation and resolutions condemning BDS should keep that in mind. BDS is much less popular among Republican voters. A majority of Republican voters do oppose BDS; in fact, a majority oppose it strongly. The unusually high percentage of “not sure”

responses to BDS questions suggests that there is room for BDS support to grow, particularly among women and young voters.