



Welcome to Boycott Nation

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It's becoming hard to know with whom one can do business.

We've been told that if you don't like what Rush Limbaugh or Glenn Beck says on the radio, you should not only not listen to their shows, you should boycott businesses that advertise on their shows. We are told that if you don't like the activities of the American Legislative Exchange Council—a nonpartisan nonprofit that provides a meeting ground for conservative state legislators to share ideas—you should boycott companies that support the council.

Target Corp. became a boycott target after it contributed to a group that supported Tom Emmer, a pro-business candidate for governor of Minnesota who also happened to oppose same-sex marriage. After California voters passed Proposition 8 (restricting same-sex marriage), boycotters swung into action. Among the targets: the Los Angeles Film Festival, because one of its directors contributed to Prop 8.

Though boycott culture is largely a left-wing phenomenon, it's by no means a left-wing monopoly. Conservatives recently threatened to boycott the Miami Marlins because the team's manager, Ozzie Guillen, told the press, "I love Fidel Castro. . . . I respect Fidel Castro." The boycott was averted when Mr. Guillen apologized and was suspended for five games.

All these examples are what are called "secondary boycotts"—attempts to influence the actions of the target by exerting pressure on a third party. Secondary boycotts should not be confused with primary boycotts. A decision not to patronize a business that discriminates on the basis of race is an example of a primary boycott. Primary boycotts—used to great effect during the Civil Rights Movement—have a long and often laudatory history.

But secondary boycotts have long been recognized as harmful to civil society. They rend the social fabric by making it difficult for people to simply live their lives. The boycott of contributors to the American Legislative Exchange Council, for example, came about because state lawmakers who are members of the council introduced bills requiring voters to present a photo ID before voting. Polls consistently show majority support for

voter ID laws, but such laws are strongly opposed by some on the left, who argue that they disenfranchise voters.

Many corporate donors to the American Legislative Exchange Council, however, are also corporate donors to the Congressional Black Caucus, which strongly opposes voter ID laws. If secondary boycotts become the norm, supporters of voter ID—whom, if we are to believe the polls, vastly outnumber critics—could decide to boycott these companies.

Similarly, opponents of same-sex marriage—who appear to be roughly equal if not superior in number to proponents—could start boycotting companies that contribute to pro-gay rights organizations. Soon everyone is boycotting everyone, trade is restricted, political tensions increase, and life is generally unpleasant. Secondary boycotts create an environment in which political conflict, rather than peaceful trade, dominates our relationships.

Boycotts are particularly unattractive when intended to squelch speech. In each of the previous examples, boycotts were organized to harm the target economically so that the target would pressure the original speaker to, well, shut up. The power of ideas is abandoned for the power of economic coercion.

One boycott often leads to another, creating a damaging snowball effect. For example, conservative columnist Michelle Malkin is asking fellow conservatives to boycott companies that succumb to liberal boycotts.

The other day a friend, a businessman in Wisconsin, raised the question of whether he should hire someone who had signed a petition to recall Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker. He had no quarrel with the applicant, who seemed qualified. Any decision not to hire would be, in effect, a secondary boycott of the applicant. This type of thinking will almost certainly lead to the stifling of many valuable political ideas and innovations.

Which brings us to the demands for more disclosure of political speech. Normally, Americans have a constitutional right to anonymous political activity. Indeed, the organizers of boycotts do not have to disclose their financiers. In the 1950s and '60s, protection of privacy and anonymity of donors was instrumental to the ability of the NAACP to operate in the South.

But in 1976 the Supreme Court allowed the government to require limited disclosure of political campaign giving. Increasingly, however, mandatory disclosure of political activity is not being used for any of the three legitimate state interests recognized by the court—exposing corruption, assisting in enforcement of other campaign-finance laws, or providing information that can help the public evaluate the message. Rather, compulsory political disclosure is increasingly used for organizing secondary boycotts of speakers. As one anti-Prop 8 activist cheered, "Years ago we would never have been able to get a blacklist that quickly!"

People have a right not to do business with companies or individuals. But blacklists—never a healthy part of political debate—endanger the very commerce that enriches us all.

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