



American Muslim Poll: *Participation, Priorities, and Facing Prejudice in the 2016 Elections*



In early 2016 the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding conducted a survey of Muslims, Jews, Protestants, and Catholics to examine their attitudes on various issues from politics and religion, to violence and identity. What emerged from the results is a profile of a Muslim community that is both pious and patriotic, optimistic and weary of discrimination, similar to Jews in its politics, and much like Protestants in its religious practice.

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For more information about the study, please visit: <http://www.ispu.org/poll>

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American Muslim Poll:

Participation, Priorities, and Facing Prejudice in the 2016 Elections

In the years after the September 11th attacks in America, Muslims have been the subjects of frequent discussions but seldom among the participants. The lack of Muslim voices in the national discourse makes much of the discussion of the community speculative or worse. These combined factors work to create a climate in which the majority of Muslims report some level of discrimination—the highest of any major faith group. This survey examines the attitudes of American faith groups on various topics from politics and religion, to violence and identity. What emerges is the profile of a Muslim community that is both pious and patriotic, optimistic and weary of discrimination, similar to Jews in its politics, and much like Protestants in its religious practice.

Key words: Muslim Americans; American Muslims; Public Opinion; Survey; American Identity; Religious Identity; Civic Engagement; Elections

Executive Summary

In early 2016 the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding conducted a survey of Muslims, Jews, Protestants, and Catholics to examine their attitudes on various issues from politics and religion, to violence and identity. What emerged from the results is a profile of a Muslim community that is both pious and patriotic, optimistic and weary of discrimination, similar to Jews in its politics, and much like Protestants in its religious practice.

Muslims are ethnically diverse; the majority favor Democrats

Muslims are the youngest and most racially diverse major religious community in America—the only community without a majority race. Within the Muslim population is a nearly equal percentage of four different racial/ethnic

subgroups: white, black, Asian, and Arab. Muslims are also by far the youngest faith community, with 36 percent of the population younger than 35 compared with roughly one-quarter of Protestants, for example.

Most Muslims support a Democrat for president. Compared with the three other major faith groups, Hillary Clinton finds her strongest support among Muslims (40 percent). Muslims are as likely as Jews (27 and 24 percent, respectively) to favor Bernie Sanders. Donald Trump, the Republican front-runner who has made a number of controversial remarks about Muslims, has his lowest support in this community (4 percent).

Muslims lean Democratic to a degree only eclipsed by the Jewish population, and constitute the lowest share of Republicans of any religious group by a substantial margin.

Muslims: economy, Islamophobia are top priorities for next President

Muslims, like other American faith groups, see the economy as a top priority for the next president. The most striking difference in priorities is, however, that Muslims are the only faith group to identify bigotry and civil rights as a priority (9 percent).

Muslims report more religious discrimination than any other group

More than half of Muslims reported facing some level of discrimination in the past year because of their religion, with 18 percent reporting regular discrimination, the highest of any group.

Those who report regular discrimination were less likely to be optimistic about the country, but more likely to engage in community activities. This suggests that Muslims respond to discrimination by becoming more proactive and involved rather than more isolated.

Muslims are equally engaged in community, less politically

Muslims are least likely to be politically engaged. Whereas 85 percent of Muslims who can legally vote say they plan on casting their ballot for the next president, only 60 percent are actually registered compared with at least 86 percent of Jews, Catholics, and Protestants. This means that a full one-fourth of Muslims who can legally vote and say they plan to vote still have not registered, resulting in the largest gap between the intention to participate and the readiness to do so. Roughly 15 percent of Muslims who are able to vote for the next president say they do not plan to—the largest of any faith group.

Muslims are as likely (statistically) as other religious groups, however, to cooperate with people in their neighborhoods to solve problems. This suggests that those who aim to increase Muslim political engagement would do well to start at the local level.

Mosque attendance is linked to civic engagement, not radicalization

American mosques made headlines when front-runner Republican candidate Donald Trump suggested that they be closed because they allegedly cause radicalization. We found that frequent mosque attendance has no correlation with attitudes toward violence against civilians, but it is linked with higher levels of civic engagement. Muslims who regularly attend mosques are more likely to work with their neighbors to solve community problems, be registered to vote, and are more likely to plan to vote.

Stronger Muslim religious identity is linked to stronger American identity

Despite lower political engagement, Muslims are as likely as Protestants to have a strong American identity. They are also as likely as other Americans to identify strongly with their faith.

Although a recent poll shows that a slight majority of Americans say they do not believe Islam is compatible with American values, the data paint a different picture. Muslims who say their faith is important to their identity are more likely to say being American is important to how they think of themselves.

Muslims reject attacks on civilians

Muslims oppose military targeting and killing of civilians more than any other faith group, and are as likely as other faith groups to also oppose the same act of violence carried out by individuals or a small group. Muslims who attend religious services more frequently or have a stronger religious identity do not differ in their views of civilian casualties by either a military or an individual from those who do not hold strong religious views.

Why This Survey?

In the years after the September 11th attacks in America, Muslims have been the subjects of frequent discussions but seldom among the participants. This attention often increases around elections as some political leaders use identity politics in their discourse and their policy proposals to target Muslims, as happened in the Ground Zero mosque discussions during the 2010 midterm elections, and the calls to close down mosques and ban all Muslims from entering the United States during the 2016 presidential campaign.

The rise and constant media coverage of the so-called Islamic State is often conflated with discussions about Islam itself, creating an environment of fear of Muslims among some Americans. One study found that 80 percent of news coverage about Islam and Muslims in the United States is negative, with armed militants, not religious leaders, representing the faith.ⁱⁱ Roughly half of Americans say they don't know a Muslimⁱⁱⁱ and the faith group is the least warmly regarded religious community in America.^{iv} The lack of Muslim voices in the national discourse makes much of the discussion of the community speculative or worse. These combined factors work to create a climate in which the majority of American Muslims report some level of discrimination—the highest of any major faith group.

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) offers a badly needed evidence-based contribution to this highly charged and often misinformed national conversation. Muslims were surveyed not as isolated specimens, but within the context of their country's faith landscape, along with Jews, Protestants, and Catholics. The survey examines the attitudes of these American faith groups on various topics from politics and religion, to violence and identity. What emerges is the profile of a Muslim community that is both pious and patriotic, optimistic and weary of discrimination, similar to Jews in its politics, and much like Protestants in its religious practice.

Results

Muslims are ethnically diverse, lean Democratic

Muslims are the youngest and most racially diverse major religious community in America—the only one without a majority race. Within the Muslim population is a nearly equal percentage of four different racial/ethnic subgroups: white, black, Asian, and Arab. Of these four, Arabs constitute the lowest share of the population, countering a popular perception of Muslims as primarily Arab. Muslims are also by far the youngest faith community, with 36 percent of the population younger than age 35 compared with roughly one-quarter of Protestants, for example.

Most Muslims support a Democrat for president. Compared with America's major faith groups, Hillary Clinton finds her strongest support among Muslims (44 percent). Muslims are as likely as Jews (27 and 24 percent, respectively) to favor Bernie Sanders. Donald Trump, the Republican front-runner who has made a number of controversial remarks about Muslims, has his lowest support in this community (4 percent).

Muslims Favor Democrats

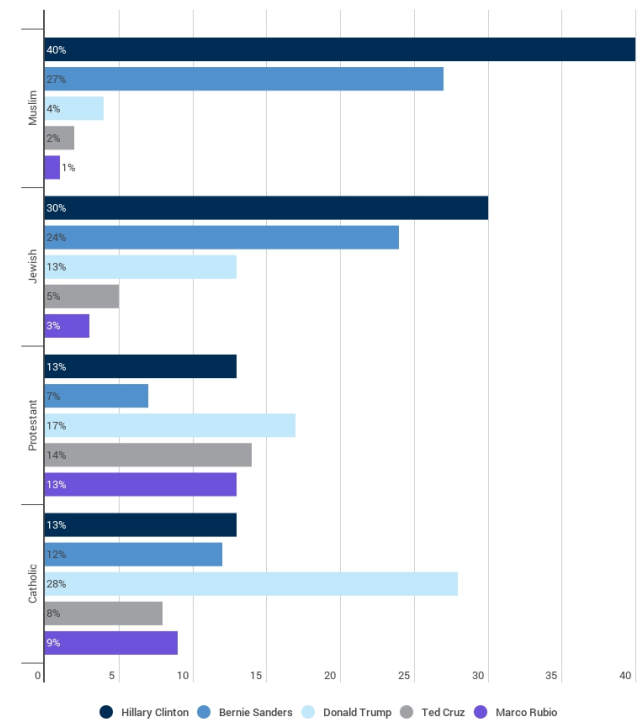


Figure 1: If the presidential election were held today, who would you want to win?

Muslims lean Democratic to a degree only eclipsed by Jews, and have the lowest share of Republicans of any religious group by a substantial margin.

Muslims, Jews Most Likely to Identify as Democrat

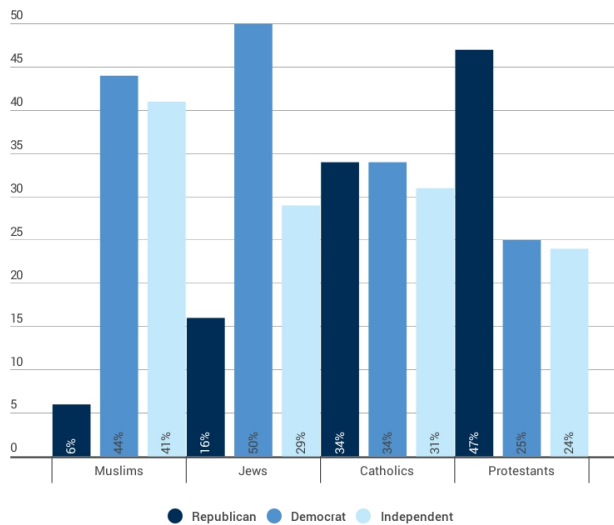


Figure 2: Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?

Muslims: economy, Islamophobia are top priorities for next president

Muslims, like other American faith groups, see the economy as a top priority for the next president. The most striking difference in priorities, however, is that Muslims are the only faith group to identify bigotry and civil rights as a priority (9 percent). Whereas between 21 and 24 percent of members of other faith groups identify national security and terrorism as a top priority, for Muslims, only the economy commands such double-digit emphasis. Muslim priorities more closely resemble those of self-identified Democrats than Republicans, with the concerns of Democrats being more on economic growth and jobs (20 percent) and less on national security (9 percent).

Muslim priorities also closely reflect those of the broader African American community, who identify the economy and job creation as top federal priorities (32 percent) along with bigotry and civil rights (8 percent).

Muslims' Top Priorities are Economy, Civil Rights, Education

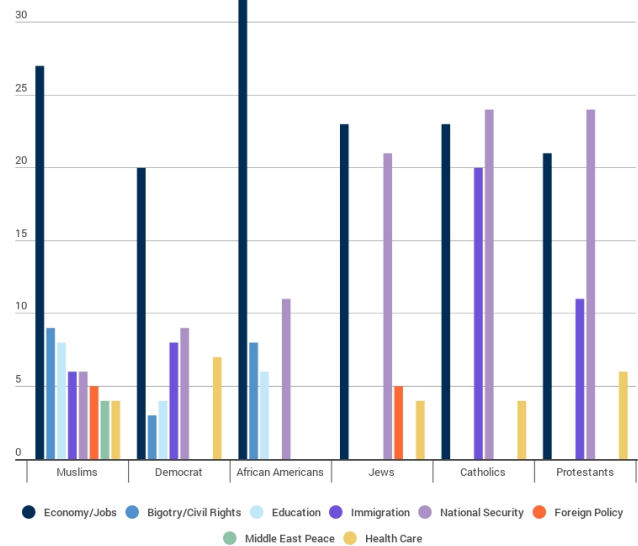


Figure 3: What is the most important policy priority on which you judge a candidate? (Open-ended, first response shown)

Muslims report more religious discrimination than any other group

More than half of Muslims reported experiencing some level of discrimination in the past year because of their religion, with 18 percent reporting regular discrimination, the highest of any faith group surveyed.

Muslims Report the Most Religious Discrimination

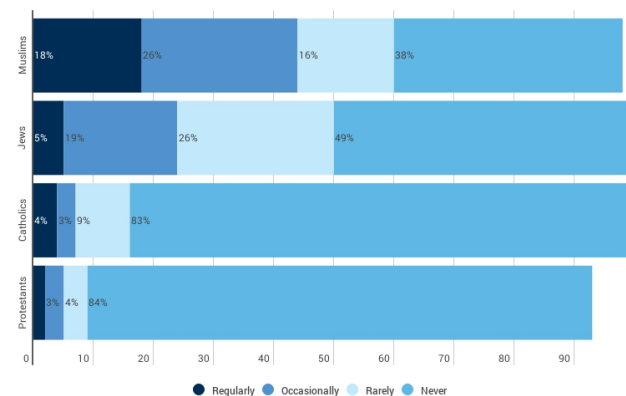


Figure 4: How often, if at all, have you experienced discrimination in the past year because of your religion?

Those who report regular discrimination were less likely to be optimistic about the country, but more likely to engage in community activities. This suggests that Muslims respond to discrimination by becoming more proactive and involved rather than more isolated.

Muslims Reporting Religious Discrimination Less Optimistic, But More Engaged in Community

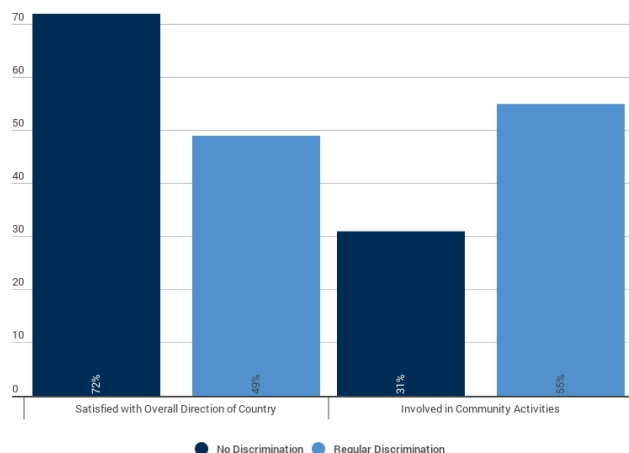


Figure 5: How often, if at all, have you experienced discrimination in the past year because of your religion? Overall, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in this country today? (%Satisfied shown); In the past 12 months, have you worked with other people from your neighborhood to fix a problem or improve a condition in your community or elsewhere? (%Yes shown)

Muslims support President Obama, direction of country

President Obama finds his highest support among Muslims. In fact, there is a 15 percentage point difference between Muslims' approval of the president and the next closest religious group. The percentage of Muslims in America who are satisfied with the direction of the country is almost double the optimism of Jews, the second-most satisfied religious group. This satisfaction with the country is consistent with other polls^v conducted during the Obama presidency.

Muslims Most Satisfied with Direction of Country, President Obama

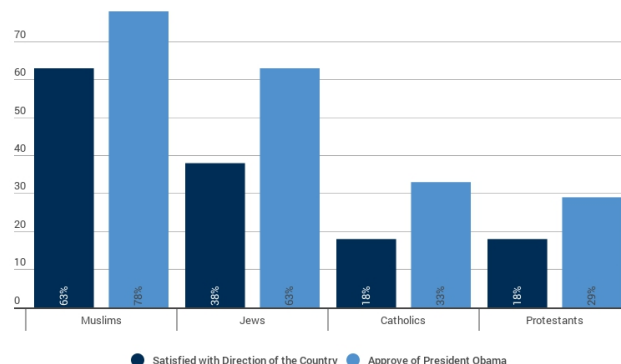


Figure 6: Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as president? (%Approve shown); Overall, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in this country? (%Satisfied shown)

Muslims are equally engaged in community, less politically

Muslims are as likely (statistically) as people in other religious groups to cooperate with people in their neighborhoods to solve problems.

However, Muslims are the least likely faith group to be politically engaged. Only 60 percent of Muslims who reported they could legally vote were registered to do so compared with at least 86 percent of Jews, Catholics, and Protestants. This means that a full one-quarter of Muslims who can legally vote have not yet registered, resulting in the largest gap between the intention to participate and the readiness to do so. Eighty-five percent of respondents in the same group say they plan on casting their ballot for the next president; however, this will still mean that roughly 15 percent of Muslims who are able to vote do not plan to vote for the next president, the largest of any faith group.

Muslims Equally Engaged in Community, Less Politically

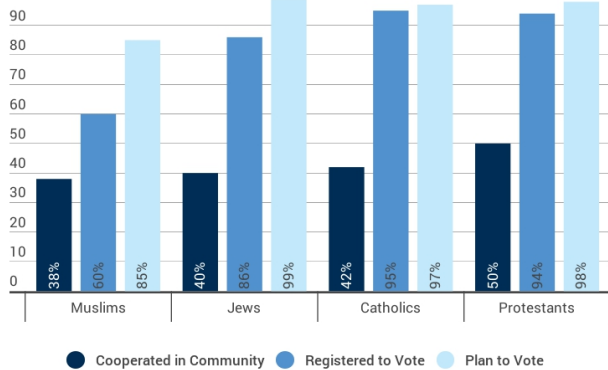


Figure 7: In the past 12 months, have you worked with other people from your neighborhood to fix a problem or improve a condition in your community or elsewhere? (% Yes shown); [Asked only of those legally able to vote]: Are you registered to vote at your present address or not? (% Yes shown); Do you plan to vote in the 2016 presidential election? (% Yes shown)

Muslims who plan to participate in the next election differ from those who do not in their perception of the effectiveness of voting and in their differentiation of the available candidates. Muslims who plan to vote value the impact of that vote to either make a change or as a civic duty. Those who say they do not plan to vote say their ballot doesn't count or don't see a candidate or issue with which they identify.

The top reasons Muslims mention for voting are:

- "Civic duty" (27%)
- "I want to make a difference" (22%)
- "I want to make sure a specific candidate is not elected (8%)
- "It is my right to vote/important right or freedom" (8%)

The top reasons Muslims mention for not voting are:

- "My vote doesn't matter/count/won't make a difference" (19%)
- "I don't like any of the people running" (17%)
- "The issues I care about are not represented by any candidate" (10%)

This suggests that those who aim to increase Muslim political engagement would do well to start at the local level, where the community is already involved and where they can more easily see the effect of their engagement.

Muslim religious service attendance is linked to more civic engagement

American mosques made headlines when front-runner Republican candidate Donald Trump suggested that they be closed because they allegedly cause radicalization. We found no correlation between Muslim attitudes toward violence and their frequency of mosque attendance.

Instead, frequent attendance at religious services by Muslims is linked to civic engagement. Muslims who regularly attend mosques are more likely to work with their neighbors to solve community problems, be registered to vote, and are more likely to plan to vote. All these relationships are statistically significant.

Frequent Mosque Attendance Linked to Greater Civic Engagement

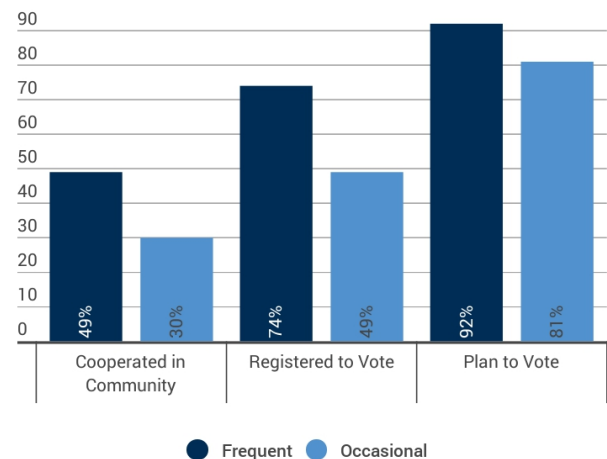


Figure 8: In the past 12 months, have you worked with other people from your neighborhood to fix a problem or improve a condition in your community or elsewhere? (% Yes shown); Are you registered to vote at your present address or not? (% Yes shown); Do you plan to vote in the 2016 presidential election? (% Yes shown)

Muslims are similar to Protestants in their religious service attendance and are as likely as Protestants to say religion is important to their lives.

Muslims Similar to Protestants in Religious Patterns

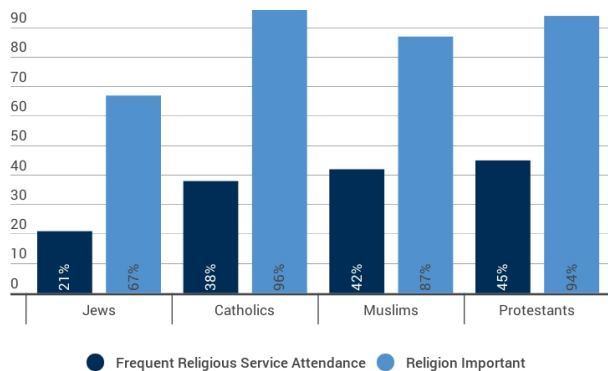


Figure 9: Aside from weddings and funerals how often do you attend religious services: more than once a week, once a week, once or twice a month, a few times a year, seldom, or never? (Total % of “more than once a week” and “once a week” shown); How important is religion to your daily life? (Total % of “Extremely Important” and “Somewhat Important” shown)

Muslims and Protestants have similar views of the role of religion in law

A majority of Muslims, like every other religious group, believe that religion should play no role in the law. However, 41 percent of Protestants and 37 percent of Muslims favor a role for religion in American law, the two highest percentages among American faith groups. Muslims, however, do not identify “morality” as a key priority of the next president, suggesting that even those who see a role for their religion in American law may not envision a theocratic morality police as some have alleged to justify laws to “ban sharia.”

Muslims, Protestants Most Likely to Favor Role for Their Religion in Law

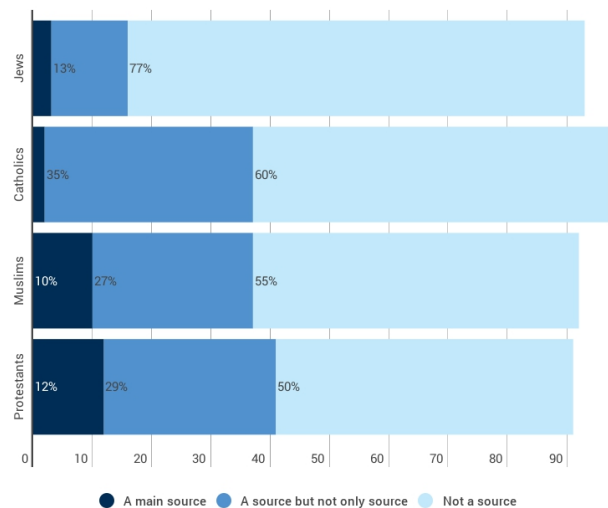


Figure 10: Which comes closest to your point of view: your religion should be the main source of American law, your religion should be a source of American law but not the only source, your religion should not be a source of American law?

Stronger Muslim religious identities are linked to stronger American identities

Despite lower political engagement, Muslims are as likely as Protestants to have a strong American identity. They are also as likely as other Americans to identify strongly with their faith.

American Faith Groups Share Strong Religious and American Identities

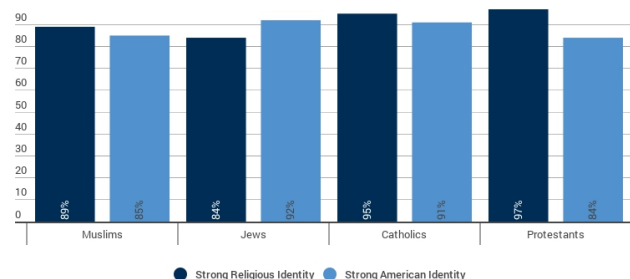


Figure 11: On a scale from 1 to 4, how important is being an American to the way you think of yourself, where 1 means not important at all and a 4 means very important? (Total % of “Very important” and “Somewhat important” shown); On a scale from 1 to 4, how important is your religion to the way you think of yourself, where a 1 means not important at all and a 4 means very important? (Total % of “Very important” and “Somewhat important” shown)

But are the two identities compatible? Although recent polls show that a slight majority (56 percent) of Americans indicate¹ they are not, the data paint a different picture. Among Muslims, we found a statistically significant correlation between a strong religious identity and a strong American identity. In other words, Muslims who say their faith is important to their identity are more likely to say being American is important to how they think of themselves than those who express a weak religious identity.

Muslims with Strong Religious Identities Are More Likely to Have Strong American Identities

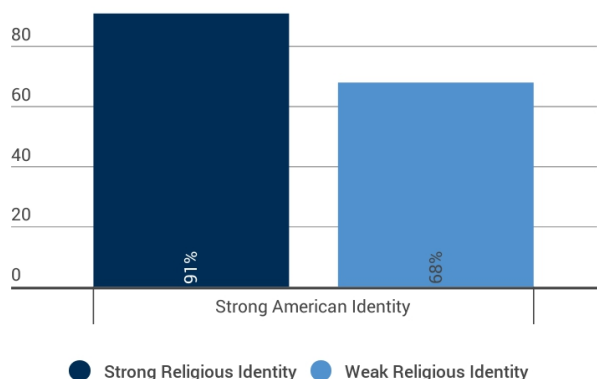


Figure 12: How important is being an American to the way you think of yourself, is it very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not important at all? (Total % of “Very” and “Somewhat important” vs. “Not Too” and “Not Important” shown); How important is your religion to the way you think of yourself, is it very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not important at all? (Total % of “Very” and “Somewhat important” vs. “Not Too” and “Not Important” shown)

Muslims reject attacks on civilians

Muslims oppose military targeting and killing of civilians more than people in other faith groups and are as likely as people in other faith groups to also oppose the same act of violence carried out by individuals or a small group. The Geneva Convention^{vi} defines the first as a war crime, and the second is a description of non-state terrorism. Muslims who attend religious services more frequently or who have a stronger religious identity do not differ in their views of civilian casualties by either a military or an individual from those who do not frequent the mosque or do not identify strongly with their faith.

Muslims Most Likely Faith Group to Reject Military Attacks on Civilians

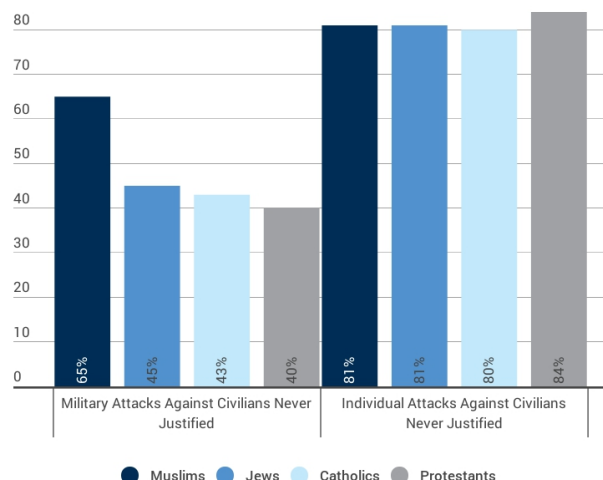


Figure 13: Some people think that for the military to target and kill civilians is sometimes justified, while others think that this kind of violence is never justified. Which is your opinion? (never, sometimes, depends, don't know/refused).

Some people think that for an individual or a small group of people to target and kill civilians is sometimes justified, while others think that this kind of violence is never justified. Which is your opinion? (never, sometimes, depends, don't know/refused).

There is a connection to American identity, however. Muslims who reject any attacks on civilians are more likely to have a strong American identity than those who do not unequivocally reject such attacks. Although this correlation does not mean cause, it does suggest that efforts to alienate Muslims from their American identity, by casting them as outsiders to be banned, may hurt, not help efforts to counter extremist ideology.

Conclusion

The data demonstrate that Muslims hold similar attitudes as other religious groups in America in their views toward community service, religion, and war. Contrary to popular views, Muslims with a stronger religious identity are more likely than those with a weaker religious identity to have a stronger American identity.

Thomas Jefferson famously wrote that the foundation of a functioning democracy is a well-informed citizenry. The central role the Muslim community occupies in our current national debate, coupled with the public's reported lack of first-hand knowledge of the community, makes empirical research on Muslim attitudes vital. We hope this report fills a gap in public information during this election year and in this way strengthens our democracy and elevates our political discourse.

Methodology

ISPU created the questionnaire for this study and commissioned two firms to conduct the survey: Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS) for a nationally representative survey of Muslims and Jews, and Triton Polling & Research for a nationally representative survey of the general American public. ISPU owns all data and intellectual property related to this study.

SSRS conducted a survey of Muslims and Jews for ISPU from January 18 through January 27, 2016. SSRS interviewed 515 Muslim and 312 Jewish respondents. Sample for the study came from three sources. SSRS telephoned a sample of households that was pre-screened as being Muslim or Jewish in SSRS's weekly national omnibus survey of 1,000 randomly selected respondents ($N = 550$) as well as purchasing a listed sample for Muslim households in both landline and cell phone frames from Experian, a sample provider that flags specific characteristics for each piece of sample ($N = 171$). SSRS's Omnibus survey completed half of all interviews with cell phone respondents, so prescreened respondents included those originally interviewed on both landline and cell phones. In an effort to supplement the number of Muslim interviews they were able to complete in the given time frame and with the amount of available prescreened sample, SSRS employed a web

panel and completed the final 106 Muslim interviews via an online survey with samples from a nonprobability panel. The data from this project are weighted to match estimates of the Jewish and/or Muslim populations determined from 3 years of data collected through the SSRS Omnibus as well as estimates from the Pew Research Center's 2011 survey of Muslim Americans. The telephone portion of respondents has a margin of error at 95 percent confidence level of Muslims ± 6.9 percent and Jews ± 7 percent.

Triton live-agent surveys were conducted by an in-house, state-of-the-art call center located outside of Bend, Oregon. All surveys incorporated standard statistical methods to select a representative sample of the target population. Triton conducted this telephone poll of the general public, on behalf of ISPU, by live interviews to respondents via landline and cell phones between January 18 and January 30, 2016, securing a sample size of 1,021 completed surveys with a margin of error at 95 percent confidence level of ± 3.1 percent. The weighting applied was gender, age, and region.

For more details on polling methodology, visit <http://www.ispu.org/poll>.

End Notes

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RESEARCH MAKING AN IMPACT

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About ISPU

ISPU is an independent, nonpartisan research organization specializing in addressing the most pressing challenges facing the American Muslim community and in bridging the information gap between the American Muslim community and the wider society. Through objective, empirical applied research ISPU supports the American Muslim community to develop, contribute and innovate, offering actionable recommendations to inform community change agents, the media, the general public and policy makers alike. In addition to building in-house capacity, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines, building a solid reputation as a trusted source for information for and about American Muslims.

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