

Nearly half of Americans admit to anti-Muslim bias

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Close to half of Americans admit to harboring prejudice against Muslims and negative feelings about Islam, a new study from the [Gallup Center for Muslim Studies](#) shows.

The level of anti-Muslim prejudice—43 percent of Americans admitted feeling at least “a little”—is more than twice as high as Americans’ reported feelings toward Buddhists, Christians and Jews.

Fifty-three percent of respondents said their view of Islam was “not too favorable” or “not favorable at all,” according to a 32-page Religious Perceptions in America report.

About 3,500 Muslims gathered last September at the foot of the U.S. Capitol for a first-ever “Islam on Capitol Hill” prayer rally. A recent study shows nearly half of Americans harbor prejudice against Muslims.
(RNS PHOTO/Nick Kirkpatrick)

“It was interesting to note that Americans admit no more prejudice against Buddhists and Jews than they do against Christians,” said Dalia Mogahed, director of the Washington-based center. “So, this isn’t just simply a problem against minority religions. There is a somewhat unique issue with Muslims in particular.”

The report also seemed to debunk the conventional wisdom that greater exposure of individual Muslims can be an antidote to anti-Muslim prejudice.

Researchers found personally knowing a Muslim may “soften extreme prejudice,” but it can’t eliminate bias altogether.

“It suggests that you can know a Muslim but if you have a negative opinion of the faith as a whole because of media exposure, you can perhaps explain that this one friend of yours is an exception,” said Mogahed.

The study drew on media studies that have found prominent television news coverage of Islam tends to be negative and focuses on extremism. That, in turn, fuels anti-Muslim prejudice, Mogahed said.

“The default state for Americans is not having prejudice,” Mogahed said. “Americans really have to learn prejudice by being inundated by negative information.”

Perhaps more concerning is that the 43 percent of self-professed prejudice is likely “an underestimation,” Mogahed said, because people are hesitant to admit it. If the real number actually is higher, that’s “even more alarming,” she said.

Mogahed, who focuses on interfaith dialogue as a member of the White House’s [Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships](#), said she hopes the findings will influence future bridge-building efforts between people of different faiths.

One key finding is that people who are extremely prejudiced against Jews are very likely to hold the same views of Muslims.

“There are more and more parallels between the typical things that are said against Jews and those said against Muslims,” she said, “including conspiracy theories that Muslims are trying to take over the nation and the world, that they’re taking over Europe.”

The report showed a disparity between Americans’ perceived views of

Muslims about gender equality and findings by Gallup researchers who studied populations in majority-Muslim countries.

While just 16 percent of Americans think Muslims around the world believe men and women should have equal rights, majorities of respondents in predominantly Muslim countries—including 85 percent of Saudi Arabians—think so.

“By presenting more accurate, representative information ... some of the perceptions can be better informed,” Mogahed said.

In general, researchers found Americans are quite ignorant of non-Christian faiths. While 63 percent had very little or no knowledge of Islam, 72 percent said they had very little or no knowledge of Buddhism, and half of Americans said they had very little or no knowledge of Judaism.

The Gallup World Religion Survey, which was used as a base for most of the report’s findings, was conducted in October and November 2009 by phone of a random national sample of 1,002 adults; it has an overall margin of error of plus or minus 3.4 percentage points.