

Most Americans support congressional probe on Muslims

by [Nicole Neroulias](#)

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(RNS) Americans haven't heard much about upcoming congressional hearings on the radicalization of U.S. Muslims, yet more than half think it's a good idea, and nearly as many believe Muslims here haven't done enough to fight extremists in their midst, according to a new poll.

At the same time, 62 percent say American Muslims are an important part of the religious community, and a clear majority -- 72 percent -- say Congress should investigate religious extremism anywhere it exists, not just among Muslims, according to a PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll released Wednesday (Feb. 16).

Peter Gottschalk, co-author of "Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy," said the findings reflect the impact of recent waves of anti-Muslim rhetoric surrounding burning the Quran and opposing the construction of mosques.

"The Muslim community has been fairly successful at demonstrating themselves as neighbors, but the question becomes are they good neighbors?" said Gottschalk, chairman of the religion department at Wesleyan University.

"There's a double standard that Muslims are responsible for extremism by people who happen to be Muslim, but all Christians aren't responsible for abortion clinic bombers or the KKK."

The poll, conducted by Public Religion Research Institute in partnership with Religion News Service, was released as House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Peter King, R-N.Y., prepares to hold hearings on the threat of homegrown Islamic extremism during the week of March 7.

The poll examined attitudes toward both the hearings and American Muslims, analyzing the responses by gender, age, most trusted news source, and religious and political affiliation.

Overall, men, viewers who trust Fox News, white evangelicals and Republicans are more likely to think the hearings are a good idea and to believe Muslims want to establish Shariah law in the United States.

Those groups are also among the most likely to say they feel "well informed" about Islam and the "religious beliefs and practices of Muslims."

These groups aren't necessarily more knowledgeable, however -- just more confident in their beliefs, researchers explained. Researchers said a person's preferred news source is significantly correlated to how much they worry about American Muslim extremism.

"What we're seeing here is a significant Fox News effect," explained Daniel Cox, PRRI research director. "We even see differences among Republicans who trust Fox News most and those who trust other media."

Other findings include:

-- Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of Americans haven't heard

anything about the upcoming hearings to investigate U.S. Muslim extremism.

-- A majority (56 percent) believes that a hearing on American Muslim extremism is a good idea, including most Republicans (71 percent), people who trust Fox News (76 percent), and white evangelicals (70 percent). The hearings find less support among Democrats (45 percent), people who trust CNN (45 percent) or public television (28 percent), and white mainline Protestants (50 percent).

-- Nearly half (49 percent) of Americans do not believe Muslims in the U.S. have been unfairly targeted by law enforcement; more than one-third (36 percent) believe Muslims have been targeted unfairly.

-- One in five (22 percent) Americans believes U.S. Muslims want to establish Shariah law here. This view is far more common among Republicans (31 percent) than Democrats (15 percent), people who trust Fox News (35 percent) than those who trust public television (9 percent), and white evangelicals (34 percent) than white mainline Protestants (20 percent) or white Catholics (22 percent).

-- A plurality (46 percent) believes American Muslims have not done enough to oppose Muslim extremism, including healthy majorities of men, white evangelicals, Republicans and Fox News viewers.

In contrast, only 42 percent of Democrats, 43 percent of people who trust CNN or network news (42 percent) or public television (30 percent) say American Muslims haven't done enough.

-- Americans are split over whether they feel well informed about Muslims and Islam, but men (56 percent) and viewers who trust Fox News

(52 percent) are more likely to report feeling well-informed than women (36 percent), and viewers who trust CNN (41 percent) and network news (31 percent).

Muslim activists say the upcoming hearings -- and the poll's findings -- reflect the work they still have to do to correct negative messages about domestic Islam and counter with positive examples.

"If we thought it was going to have a sober and objective hearing, we would welcome that. It would be an opportunity for the Muslim community to shine, because we know the kind of actions that the community has taken (against terrorism)," said Corey Saylor, legislative director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

"But, given King's track record, any reasonable person would have a concern about the direction he's going to take."

The PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll was based on telephone interviews of 1,015 U.S. adults between Feb. 11 and 13. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.