

Americans fret about Islam, immigrants, the future, and each other

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#)

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(RNS) Americans of all faiths and viewpoints are gloomy about the economy, anxious about Islam, bothered by immigrants, and mistrustful across racial lines, a new survey finds.

The Public Religion Research Institute's annual American Values Survey, released today (November 17), documents discontent among all major religious groups, races and political views.

"I am struck by the high level of anxiety and worry on all fronts," said PRRI CEO Robert Jones, though he underscored that white evangelical Protestants express it most sharply.

For the first time in six years of the survey, Americans are split—49 percent to 49 percent—on whether "America's best days are ahead of us or behind us."

The survey of 2,695 U.S. adults was conducted from mid-September to early October of this year.

The 2015 headlines likely influenced views, Jones said. He cited the January attack on *Charlie Hebdo* magazine; months of videotaped beheadings of Christians in Libya; waves of Syrian immigrants, chiefly Muslim, fleeing escalating violence at home; the 2016 presidential election campaign; and the #blacklivesmatter movement that has emerged after police shootings of black Americans.

A majority of Americans (56 percent, including majorities in all the major Christian traditions) say the values of Islam are at odds with American values. That's a significant rise since 2011 when Americans were split, with 47 percent saying the values were incompatible while 48 percent disagreed.

This includes the following:

- 73 of white evangelical Protestants (up from 59 percent in 2011)
- 63 percent of white mainline Protestants (47 percent)
- 61 percent of Catholics (41 percent)

Only two groups did not reflect significant change:

- 55 percent of black Protestants said values were incompatible (51 percent)
- 41 percent of “nones,” people who claim no religious label (42 percent).

The responses of Muslims, Jews, and Hindus on that subject are not broken out because their numbers are too small to be statistically compared on individual questions. The overall survey, conducted online and by phone, has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.6 percentage points.

The survey also finds significant unease across racial lines.

According to the PRRI report, the number of Americans who say that racial tensions are a major concern in their community more than doubled, going from 17 percent in 2012 to 35 percent now. Concern about crime as a major problem has risen from 33 percent to 48 percent in the same period.

One question in particular—regarding police killings of black men—found that whites and blacks operate in parallel universes of perception.

Overall, 53 percent of U.S. adults say the killings of unarmed black men by police are “isolated incidents.”

But this includes 65 percent of whites, while only 15 percent of blacks say the same.

Black Americans overwhelmingly (81 percent) say the killings are part of “a broader pattern of how police treat African-Americans.”

“On this issue, there is no daylight statistically between white evangelicals (72 percent), white mainline Protestants (73 percent), and white Catholics (71 percent),” Jones said.

This divide is glaring despite the mobilization of religious leaders from all sides to address police violence, discrimination, and racial inequality, Jones said.

Their efforts have had “little measurable impact,” he said, because “white Christians in the pews just see a different set of social problems than their fellow black Christians do. Any conversations about racial reconciliation need to back up. They need to find out first if they even see the same problems before they can address solutions.”

Adding to the gloomy mood, more than seven in ten (72 percent) believe that the country is still in a recession, unchanged from 2014 despite rising employment.

Another grim perception, held by 65 percent of Americans: “One of the big problems in this country is that we don’t give everyone an equal chance in life.” That reflects a jump of about 12 percentage points since 2010.

American unease seems to come from all directions. Another example from the survey: Nearly half (48 percent) of Americans say they are “bothered when they come into contact with immigrants who speak little or no English,” compared with 40 percent in 2012.

Dan Cox, research director of PRRI, said the full picture shows a nation “increasingly uncertain” about the future, “while nostalgia for the 1950s is widely felt,” particularly among white evangelical Protestants.

PRRI also looked at the how the current top five 2016 Republican presidential contenders stack up with the white evangelical vote.

Ben Carson leads the pack with a 55 percent favorable rating with this influential voting block and 26 percent unfavorable. Still, 10 percent say they have not of him. That matters since these are the people any candidate might turn toward to grow support, Jones said.

Behind Carson are the others:

- Jeb Bush has a 41 percent favorable rating but a 47 percent unfavorable rating. Only 3 percent said they had not heard of Bush.
- Donald Trump has the highest unfavorable rating with white evangelicals (52 percent) and a 39 percent favorable rating. And everyone said they have heard of him.

- Marco Rubio has more favorable (36 percent) than unfavorable (29 percent) ratings and significant maneuvering room to introduce himself to people who haven't heard of him (20 percent)
- Ted Cruz is the least known of the top five with 23 percent saying didn't know him. Among those who do, however, his favorable and unfavorable ratings are about equal: 31 percent to 32 percent.

Cruz and Rubio also shared the distinction of the highest declined-to-answer number—14 percent for each—while the leading three had less than 10 percent of people who said they didn't know or refused to answer.