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Quantifying Antisemitic Attitudes in Britain: The “Elastic” View of Antisemitism

Introduction

Surveys of attitudes toward Jews have repeatedly shown that antisemitism in the UK remains relatively low when compared to other European countries. The last decade alone has seen at least 15 such surveys, all of which tell us that antisemitic attitudes in the UK are present in about 10% of adults and that the trend in prevalence in such attitudes is stable.

Yet we know from previous surveys of the Jewish population that nearly 50% of British Jews perceive antisemitism to be a problem in the UK. Moreover, the frequency of surveys of the British public on the subject of antisemitism (of which several were commissioned by Jewish organizations) and the centrality of the subject in the British Jewish press all testify that the “low” proportion of adults with antisemitic attitudes still translates into high anxiety about it among Jews. How does one explain this dissonance? Perhaps, 10% *feels* low, when this figure is understood formally, purely mathematically, as describing a “minority attitude,” for example, it is clearly far from being a majority attitude. However, is it possible that the true social meaning of this figure escapes us? To begin to answer this question, I propose a novel concept of an “elastic” view of antisemitism. I develop this concept based on a large survey of antisemitic attitudes in Britain, conducted in late 2016 and early 2017 by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, JPR (henceforth the JPR Antisemitism Survey).

Note: This paper is based on the larger body of work focusing on empirical study of antisemitism, housed by the Institute for Jewish Policy research, UK. The more detailed, and much larger in scope, exposition of the results of this work and, in particular, of the findings of the survey of antisemitic attitudes in Great Britain, can be found in L. D. Staetsky, *Antisemitism in Contemporary Great Britain: A Study of Attitudes towards Jews and Israel*. JPR Report, issued September 2017, https://www.jpr.org.uk/documents/JPR.2017.Antisemitism_in_contemporary_Great_Britain.pdf.

The Survey

The JPR Antisemitism Survey is the largest ever population survey conducted on this topic in Great Britain. It was developed by JPR with input from the Community Security Trust, the Antisemitism Policy Trust, and Ipsos MORI at the questionnaire development stage. The fieldwork was carried out face to face and online by Ipsos MORI, on behalf of JPR.

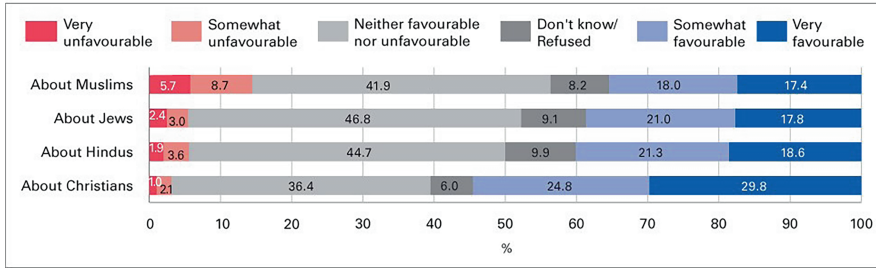
The survey questionnaire was developed by considering the following sources: (1) historical research on antisemitism; (2) past surveys of antisemitic and anti-Israel attitudes conducted by various research institutes and polling companies (such as the Pew Center Global Attitudes survey, the Anti-Defamation League Global 100 study etc.); and (3) the advice of practitioners developing policy responses to antisemitism.

The survey was carried out in two modes: face to face and online. The face to face mode generated a nationally representative sample of 2,003 observations (implying a 2% margin of error in application to the full sample). The national online sample of 2,002 observations was created by inviting members of the voluntary commercial panel maintained by Ipsos MORI to participate in the survey. In both face to face and online modes, the core part of the questionnaire relating to attitudes to Jews was offered to respondents for self-completion. All analyses reported in this note were carried out on the dataset of 4,005 observations, which combined the face to face and the online samples.

What Has Been Found?

In line with the previous surveys of attitudes toward religious groups, the JPR Antisemitism Survey found that an unfavourable opinion of Jews is, distinctly, a minority position in Britain. In response to the question “Please tell me if you have a very favourable, somewhat favourable, somewhat unfavourable or very unfavourable opinion of [Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Christians],” 2.4% said that they have very unfavourable opinion of Jews, 3% have somewhat unfavourable opinion, and together these groups comprise 5.4%.

Further, we found that an unfavourable opinion of *any* religious group is distinctly a minority position in Britain. The most favourably seen group is Christians, perhaps unsurprisingly so, given the Christian heritage in Britain. The least favourably seen group is Muslims: about 15% declared that they have a strongly unfavourable or somewhat unfavourable opinion of this group. Jews and Hindus feature in-between.



Notes: Face to face sample, N=900. Due to rounding, percentages may not always add up to 100%. Question: Please tell me if you have a very favourable, somewhat favourable, somewhat unfavourable or very unfavourable opinion of (Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindus)

Figure 1: Opinions held by the population of Great Britain about Jews and other religious groups.

We experimented with different response possibilities to the favourability question in order to test the sensitivity of our findings to the way the question is asked. Typically, survey questions include some “opt-out” possibilities, which could be used by people without strong opinions, people who have difficulty responding, and people who are not eager to reveal their true feelings. The latter possibility is especially worrying in the given context. Attitudes toward ethnic and religious groups are a sensitive topic in the West, and negativity toward certain groups is a sentiment that is neither easily admitted nor readily expressed. Within the context of this survey, that means that the respondents may have been somewhat cautious about revealing the true nature of their feelings toward certain groups, and may have given responses that were socially acceptable instead, that is, responses that were unlikely to result in them being negatively judged. In survey science jargon, the outcome of such under-reporting is called social desirability bias. The presence of such bias would mean that the survey might produce lower levels of unfavourability toward various religious and ethnic groups than the levels that exist in reality.

These considerations led to the decision to split the sample into two sub-samples, with half of our respondents being asked exactly the same question as before but with fewer opt-out options. A certain degree of sensitivity was revealed. Still, we found that only 2.4% of the population hold very unfavourable opinions toward Jews and 10.2%—somewhat unfavourable, together comprising 12.6%, raising the probability of Jewish encounter with unfavourable opinions from 1 in 20 (as a 5.4% level of unfavourability would suggest) to about 1 in 8.

Figure 2 casts the findings obtained so far in a graphic form and introduces the concept of an “elastic” view of antisemitism that will pave the way—eventually

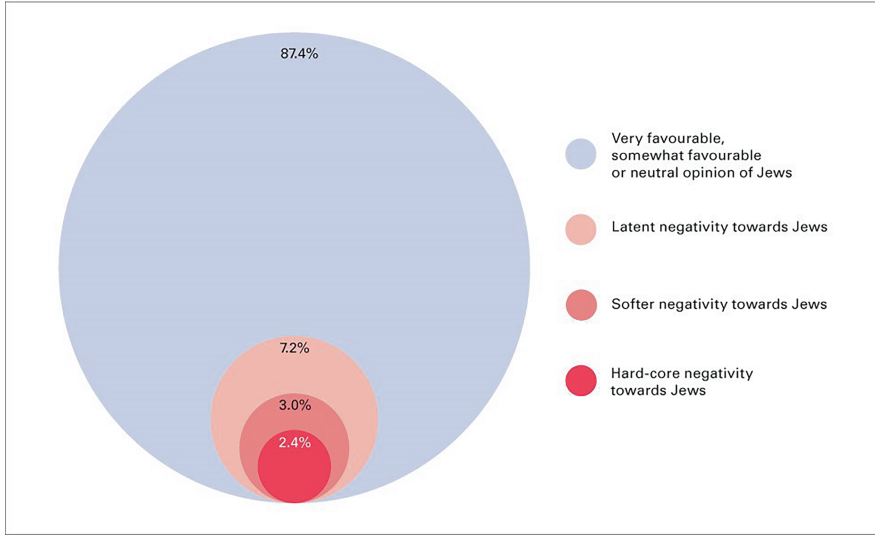


Figure 2: Unfavourable opinion of Jews: an elastic view.

ally—to understanding Jewish anxieties. The circle represents the population of Great Britain.

The proportion holding a favourable or neutral opinion of Jews is very dominant numerically—about 87%. The proportions holding unfavourable opinion are in warm colours:

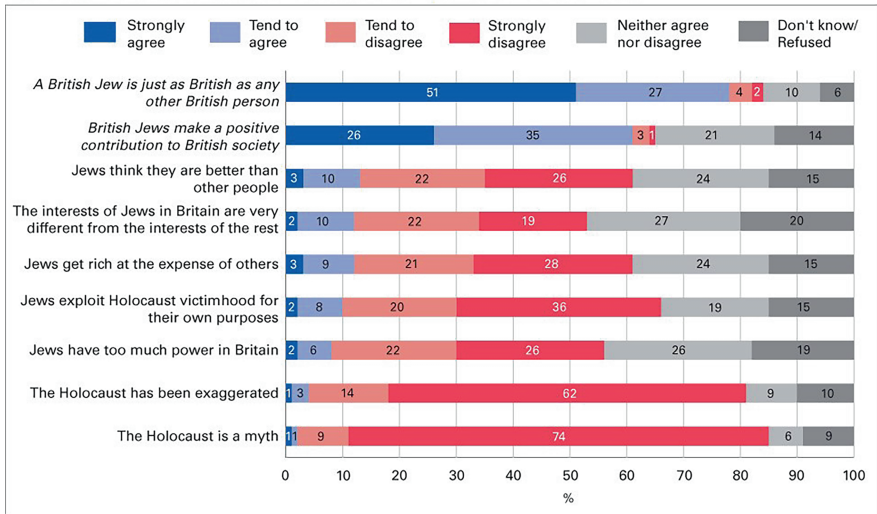
1. 2.4%: hard-core negativity toward Jews (in dark red), a level repeatedly seen irrespective of the type of response schedule used;
2. 3.0%: softer negativity (in dark pink), a level of “somewhat” unfavourable opinion obtained when many opt-out options were available, and
3. additional 7.2%: best thought of as latent negativity (light pink) expressed only under a less “generous” response schedule, in terms of response options available.

At the core of an “elastic” view is the notion that one cannot measure the prevalence of antisemitism using just one number. All three figures appearing in Figure 2 are meaningful in their own right. The power of these figures is in their capacity to capture the different intensities of negativity toward Jews.

The two estimates from the JPR Antisemitism Survey set the boundaries of the lowest and the highest levels of the prevalence of unfavourable attitudes to Jews. It is clear, considering all available estimates, that the estimates of the prevalence of negativity toward Jews vary in rather narrow boundaries: argu-

ably, the minimum recorded level is 5.4%, while the maximum level is 12.6%. The fundamental conclusion presented earlier, that unfavourable attitudes toward Jews in the UK is a minority phenomenon, remains unchanged. Yet the real social meaning of this level—that is, is it dangerous for the Jewish population of the country, or what level does it have to reach to become socially or politically problematic or dangerous—remains unclear. If research findings are to be of value in policy terms, it is critical that their social significance is properly understood.

An “elastic” view can be developed further. Attitudes in general, and anti-Jewish attitudes in particular, are not limited to simple emotional characterisations. In practice, we also offered our respondents a selection of specific *negative and positive* statements about Jews (Figure 3). These negative statements have been known to resonate with Jews as antisemitic from previous surveys.



Notes: N=3979 (respondents self-identified as Jews – 26 in total in the dataset – were not asked these questions in the survey). Positive statements are italicised. Due to rounding, percentages may not always add up to 100%. Question: Below are a few statements that people have made about different ethnic or religious groups in the UK. Some people may agree with them, some may disagree and some may not have an opinion at all. Please tell me to what extent you would agree or disagree with someone who said the following statements.

Figure 3: Opinions held by the population of Great Britain on specific statements about Jews.

Note first that one of these positive statements was “A British Jew is just as British as any other British person” and that it was endorsed by a clear majority (almost 80%). The other positive statement, “British Jews make a positive contribution to British society,” was endorsed by about 60%. The extent of neutrality and/or inability to answer are significant in relation to these questions, but

this does not undermine the overall impression of the rather common, albeit not universal, positive perception of Jews as a group that is part of Britain and that makes a positive contribution to it.

Ideas around excessive and sinister “Jewish power,” “Jewish exclusivity,” “Jewish wealth,” and “Jewish exploitation” (of other people for economic or political gain) are the most common antisemitic ideas, but they are not widely prevalent among the British. In their strong form they are held by about 2% of the population, in their weaker form by an additional 10% or so. The most offensive and extreme forms of Holocaust denial are especially rare. The prevalence of such ideas is of a similar magnitude to the prevalence of hard-core negativity toward Jews, as reported earlier.

At the next step we collated these results into a single index of antisemitism, where each respondent who agrees strongly or somewhat with any of the negative views receives a score of 1 in relation to that particular view. We then sum across the responses to different questions and obtain a total score for this individual. The maximal number of antisemitic attitudes that one can hold is eight, which would effectively mean that an individual holds both an unfavourable view of Jews and endorses all specific antisemitic statements (seven in number, in this context). The minimal is one—which signals endorsement of just one attitude.

The distribution of this new variable, which we call the Antisemitism Index, is set in Figure 4.

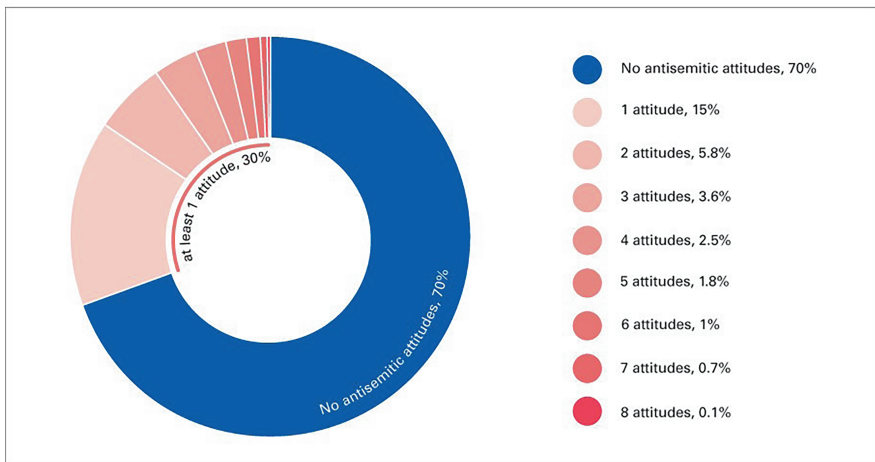


Figure 4: Presence of unfavourable opinion of Jews and /or endorsement of antisemitic statements: the elastic view updated.

Note that:

1. 70% of the British population did not endorse a single antisemitic attitude.
2. Holding 6–8 antisemitic attitudes is very low in prevalence, affecting about 2% of the population. This figure is remarkably similar to the levels of hard-core antisemitism captured by the favourability question (2.4%).
3. About 15% of British adults hold two or more antisemitic attitudes to some degree at least. Beyond this boundary are a further 15% who either strongly agree with, or tend to agree with just one such attitude. Accounting for all groups endorsing *at least one attitude* brings the total prevalence of antisemitic attitudes, at different intensities, to 30%.

How is this 30% best understood? Categorically, 30% does *not* represent the proportion of antisemites in society. Only a small proportion of them can be called antisemitic in a full political sense of this word. What it represents instead is the level of *diffusion* of antisemitic ideas and attitudes, and the extent to which these ideas permeate society. With this we make a shift from counting antisemites to quantifying antisemitism, which may appear subtle, but it is very important for a proper understanding of Jewish anxieties.

What Does It All Mean?

This analysis suggests that while strong antisemitism is a marginal position in British society, antisemitic ideas are not. These ideas can be held with and without open dislike of Jews, and they are present to some extent in one third of Britons. In day-to-day life, the frequency of Jewish people’s encounters with antisemitism is determined not necessarily by the small minority of hard-core antisemites but rather by much more widely diffused elements of attitudes that Jews commonly consider to be antisemitic. Thinly scattered and weakly held antisemitic attitudes matter, because they are more *prevalent* than strong attitudes, so the probability of an encounter with them is higher.

From the Jewish point of view, Jews come in contact with the entire *spectrum* of negativity toward them, and more often than not, they will have an imperfect knowledge about which part of the spectrum any given antisemitic view arises. It can arise from the segment holding a very weak and hesitant form of negativity toward Jews. However, there is only so much that a given Jew can do in the course of regular social interaction to clarify this. Regular social interaction is a setting where, more often than not, the Jewish side has only imperfect information about the total worldview of the non-Jewish side. That “total worldview”

may or may not include multiple antisemitic attitudes—the Jewish recipient is unlikely to know the whole picture.

To sum up the most important lesson from the elastic view—the hard-core prejudice toward Jews is rare, but encountering some degree of prejudice is much more common, and, as a result, that kind of prejudice is more visible and more impactful when Jewish lives are concerned. Antisemitic ideas, in contrast to the hard-core antisemites, are diffused among a significant proportion of the general population which makes contact with such ideas a not infrequent occurrence in Jewish lives. In many instances, those expressing such views may not even realise that a particular comment or remark might be experienced by Jews as offensive or upsetting, but they can impact significantly on the perceptions, sense of comfort and safety, and, ultimately, the quality of life for Jews.

Daniel Staetsky is a Senior Research Fellow at JPR. His expertise spans the disciplines of demography, applied statistics, and economics, and he is a former researcher and analyst at the Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel and at RAND Europe. He holds a PhD in social statistics from the University of Southampton, and an MA in demography from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he specialised in Jewish and Israeli demography and migration. His work on demography has been widely published, and includes most recently Are Jews leaving Europe? (JPR, 2017); The rise and rise of Jewish schools in the United Kingdom: Numbers, trends and policy issues (JPR, 2016); and Strictly Orthodox rising: What the demography of British Jews tells us about the future of the community (JPR, 2015).

References

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