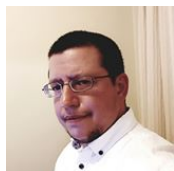


Quantifying antisemitic attitudes in Britain: the 'elastic' view of antisemitism



Looking at attitudes towards Jews in Britain, [Daniel Staetsky](#) introduces the concept of the 'elastic view' of antisemitism. He argues that antisemitism exists at different levels of intensity, and therefore no single measure or figure can ever capture the level in which it exists in society. He explains how the figures need to be understood.

Surveys of attitudes towards 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 rather low in prevalence (around 10% of adults can be characterised as antisemitic) and that the trend in attitudes is stable.

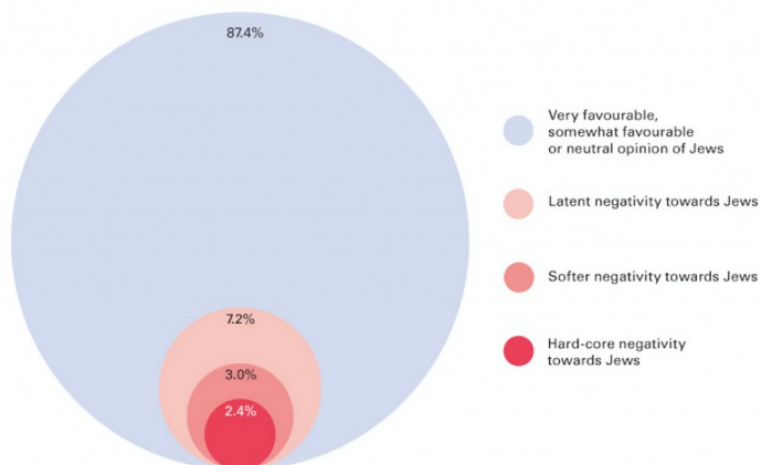
Yet we know from the previous surveys of Jewish population that nearly 50% of British Jews perceive antisemitism to be a problem in the UK. How does one explain this dissonance? To begin to answer this question we propose a novel concept of an 'elastic' view of antisemitism. We develop this concept on the back of a large survey of antisemitic attitudes in Britain, conducted in the late 2016 and early 2017 by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

In line with the previous surveys of attitudes towards religious groups, we 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 on Britain. The least favourably-seen group is Muslims: about 15% declared that they have strongly unfavourable or somewhat unfavourable opinion of this group. Jews and Hindus feature in-between.

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. This led us 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 towards 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 1 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- to understanding Jewish anxieties. The circle represents the population of Great Britain.

Figure 1. Unfavourable view of Jews in Great Britain: an elastic view

Note: exhibit adopted from Staetsky, L. Daniel. 2017. Antisemitism in contemporary Great Britain: a study of attitudes towards Jews and Israel. JPR Report, September 2017, p. 19.

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:

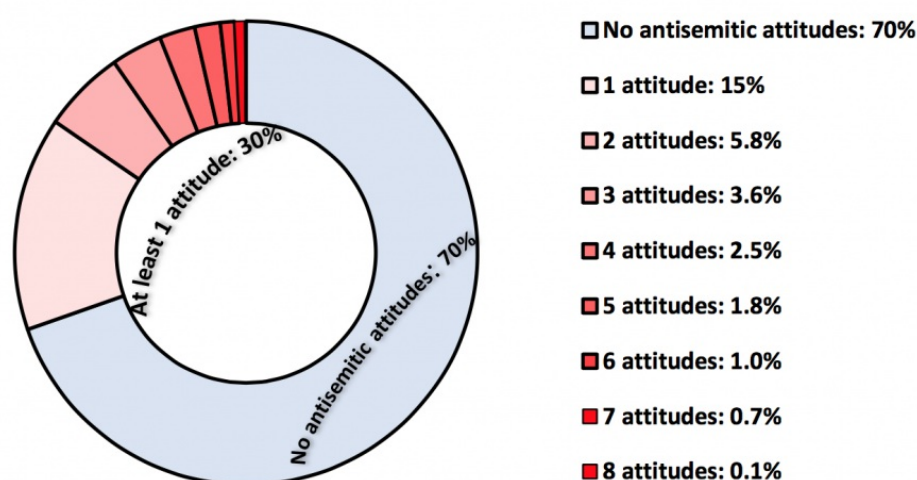
- 1) 2.4%: hard core negativity towards Jews (in strong red), a level repeatedly seen irrespective of the type of response schedule used;
- 2) 3.0%: softer negativity (dark pink), a level of 'somewhat' unfavourable opinion obtained when many opt-out options were available, and
- 3) additional 7.2%: best 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 1 are meaningful in their own right. The power of these figures is their capacity to capture the different intensities of negativity towards Jews. From the Jewish point of view, Jews come in contact with the entire *spectrum* of negativity towards 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 towards Jews. However, there is only so much that a given Jew can do in the course of regular social interaction to clarify this.

An 'elastic' 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 statements about Jews. All of the statements have been known to resonate with Jews as antisemitic from previous surveys. 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 additional 10% or so. The most offensive and extreme forms of Holocaust denial are especially rare.

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 2.

Figure 2. Volume of antisemitic attitudes held by the British public: an elastic view updated

Note: exhibit adopted from Staetsky, L. Daniel. 2017. *Antisemitism in contemporary Great Britain: a study of attitudes towards Jews and Israel*. JPR Report, September 2017, p. 24.

Note that:

- 70% of British population did not endorse a single antisemitic attitude.
- 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 hardcore antisemitism captured by the favourability question (2.4%).
- 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 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.

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 hardcore 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 is higher.

To sum up the most important lesson from the elastic view – the hardcore prejudice towards 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. 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 in Great Britain.

Note: you can read the full report on which the above draws [here](#).

About the Author



[Daniel Staetsky](#) is a Senior Research Fellow at the [Institute for Jewish Policy Research](#). He is an expert in demography and social statistics. In the past he headed Migration Statistics Unit in the Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel and worked as an analyst 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. His work in demography has been widely published.