

# SIKHISM IN THE UNITED STATES

## What Americans Know and Need to Know

On behalf of the National Sikh Campaign, Hart Research Associates conducted qualitative and quantitative research to uncover how Americans view Sikh Americans and to identify the most effective messaging and information for increasing positive perceptions and attitudes toward Sikh Americans.<sup>1</sup> This research shows that while most Americans know little to nothing about Sikh Americans and some feel uncertain or anxious upon seeing Sikhs, **there is enormous potential to enhance positive feelings toward Sikh Americans.** In particular, messages and information that emphasize the commonalities Sikhs share with other Americans, as well as Sikhism's strong emphasis on equality, are effective in communicating the Sikh-American story to the broad American public. The memo below outlines the findings from this research and strategic recommendations.

### **1) Most Americans are a blank slate when it comes to Sikh Americans. Although some Americans have a negative reaction to or are uncertain when they see someone wearing a turban, the lack of knowledge provides a valuable opportunity to educate Americans about Sikh Americans and Sikh culture.**

- ★ The majority of Americans (60%) admit to knowing nothing at all about Sikh Americans and only one in 10 Americans (11%) personally knows someone who is Sikh. Younger Americans, more highly educated Americans, and those living in larger cities are among those most likely to know at least something about Sikh Americans.
- ★ When Americans see a picture of a man or boy in a turban, they are far more likely to assume that he is Middle Eastern or Muslim than that he is Sikh. In focus groups and open-ended survey questions, numerous Americans admitted to feeling “wary,” “judgmental,” or “cautious” when they see a bearded man in a turban.
- ★ While only a minority of Americans admit to having negative feelings toward Sikh Americans, the majority feel neutral and do not have a fully formed opinion one way or the other. Most Americans simply do not know enough about Sikhs to form an impression and many say they try to keep an open mind when meeting someone new.

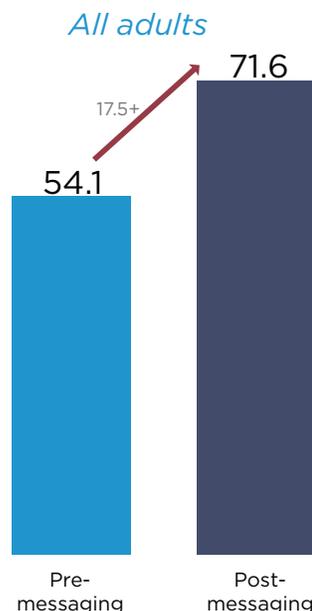
# NATIONAL SIKH ★ CAMPAIGN ★

## 2) Americans are receptive to learning about Sikh culture, beliefs, and people. Information and messaging about Sikhs significantly enhances warm feelings toward Sikhs and substantially increases the degree to which Americans believe Sikh Americans possess positive qualities.

- ★ A description of Sikh religion, beliefs, and history in America evokes a strongly positive reaction among adults. Nearly two in three (65%) adults rate their feelings as highly favorable (ratings of 8-10 on a zero-to-10 scale) to the description.
- ★ Those who are warmer toward Sikhs to begin with tend to have the most positive reactions to the description of Sikh religion, beliefs, and history in America. Among white Americans, college graduates are more likely to have a favorable reaction (76% rate their impression as an 8-10) than those without a college degree (59%) and those who initially rate their feelings toward Sikhs as warm (84% favorable reaction to the description) or neutral (64%) are more favorable than those who initially say they feel cool toward Sikh Americans (36%).

### Warm feelings toward Sikh Americans increase substantially after extensive information and messaging.

Mean ratings\* of feelings toward Sikh Americans\*



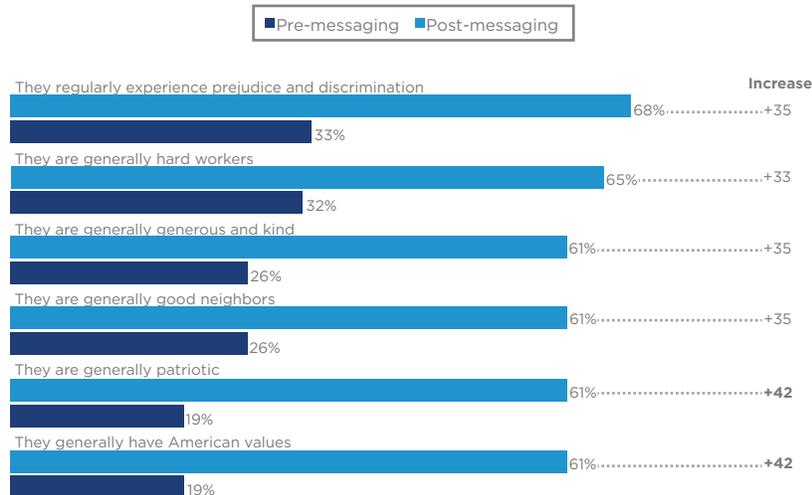
\* Ratings on zero-to-100 scale. 100 = extremely warm, 50 = in the middle/neither warm nor cold, 0 = extremely cold

# NATIONAL SIKH ★ CAMPAIGN ★

- ★ After reading about Sikh history and beliefs as well as a series of messages about Sikhs, warm feelings toward Sikh Americans increase substantially. By the end of the survey, a large portion of Americans moved from feeling neutral (mean = 54.1 on a 0-100 scale) to warm (mean = 71.6, an increase of 17.5 points). This movement toward warmth and positivity spans a wide swath of Americans including more challenging audiences such as Americans who did not attend college and Republicans.
- ★ Messaging and information also significantly improve positive perceptions of Sikh Americans on discrete characteristics. While most Americans do not initially know enough to say whether different traits and qualities apply to Sikh Americans, solid majorities associate positive attributes with Sikh Americans by the end of the survey. Messaging had the largest impact on perceptions that Sikh Americans are patriotic and hold American values.

## Messaging significantly increases positive attributes associated with Sikh Americans.

Proportions who feel that each describes Sikh Americans well  
(8-10 ratings on zero-to-ten scale, 10 = describes extremely well)



**3) The most effective messages connect Sikhism with American values, particularly equality, and describe how Sikhs embody the quintessential American story. Americans need to understand that Sikh Americans are regular Americans—they live in the same neighborhoods, are integrated into their communities, hold American values, and are proud to be Americans.**

# NATIONAL SIKH ★ CAMPAIGN ★

- ★ Although they feel positively about a number of messages about Sikhs, Americans feel the strongest connection when the Sikh story is put in familiar terms—that of immigrating to America and becoming regular, hardworking members of communities. The message below is among the most impactful that we tested. The most effective aspects of the message, as identified through a highlighting exercise, are the phrases emphasizing Sikhs’ work ethic and pride in America.

Sikhs embody the quintessential American story. Like the Irish, Italians, and Chinese before them, Sikhs immigrated to this country **seeking a chance to build a better life for their families through hard work**. Today, Sikhs serve on their local PTAs and in Boy Scout troops, run small businesses and local charities, and sing our national anthem with pride. They are part of the fabric of their communities in every corner of this nation. They know that the United States is the greatest country on earth, and they are **proud to call themselves Americans**.

- ★ It is important not only to show that Sikh Americans are similar to other Americans in their lifestyles and story, but that they hold American values as well. When asked to choose among all the messages, Americans say the most important one is the description of Sikh beliefs as told in terms of core American values. As revealed in a highlighting exercise, it is these values, rather than the analogy with the American Revolution, that truly resonate.

If the American Revolution had started out as a spiritual movement instead of a political movement, it would look a lot like the Sikh religion. Just as the Founding Fathers of the United States put together a Bill of Rights that protected the fundamental rights for all US citizens, Sikhs also share a core set of beliefs that **focuses on the rights of all people to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”** Sikhs believe that all men and women are created equal and that the right to practice religion freely is encoded in Sikhs’ founding documents. For hundreds of years, Sikhs have fought, and many have given their lives, to **protect the rights of others**—including Hindus, Christians, and Muslims—to practice their own religions.

- ★ Sikhs’ focus on equality is one of the most memorable and powerful points to make and should be a prominent feature of a successful messaging campaign. In response to open-ended questions and the message highlighting exercises, Americans—and especially women—consistently identify the value of equality as what stands out to them the most.

# NATIONAL SIKH ★ CAMPAIGN ★

- ★ Sikhs' military service is also an important supporting point in illustrating Sikhs' patriotism and love for the United States. One of the most compelling lines in the messaging exercises is that "Sikhs have a long history of serving in the US armed forces with honor" and many Americans volunteer patriotism as one of the most important things they learned about Sikhs. A cautionary note, however, from the focus groups: discussing Sikhs' history of military service elicits some skepticism and questions about the total

## **4) While messaging and information about Sikhs increases positive feelings across the board, groups that are initially warmer toward Sikhs are especially receptive. These groups respond favorably to messages that emphasize Sikhs' shared American values.**

- ★ Certain segments of Americans are particularly receptive to learning more about Sikh Americans and represent the most effective targets for an initial campaign. These groups identified below exhibit relatively more positivity and openness to Sikh Americans at the outset and have the most positive reaction to subsequent messaging and information:
  - Millennials
  - Mainline Protestants
  - Women ages 50 & older
  - Democrats
  - College educated
  - Western region
- ★ Just because these target audiences are more open-minded initially does not mean that they are well informed about the Sikh religion or culture. As with the majority of Americans overall, messages that place Sikhs within the familiar American story and emphasize Sikhs' shared American values strongly resonate across our target audiences. Again, Sikhism's focus on the value of equality—particularly gender equality—is an important component of the shared values message.
- ★ In addition to the messages describing the "American Story" and "Sikhs' Parallel with American History," several target groups also show a strong affinity for a message that explains the meaning behind the turban. Millennials, Democrats, and Americans living in the West say "The symbol of the turban" is one of the most important messages about Sikhs to convey.

# NATIONAL SIKH ★ CAMPAIGN ★

Today, and for the last 500 years, many Sikhs around the world have worn the turban as an expression of their faith and their commitment to serve humanity. Throughout history, Sikhs have worn the turban to signal their readiness to protect all people against injustice, regardless of faith, gender, caste, or color. Today, a Sikh American who wears a turban signals that he or she is always ready to put him- or herself forward to serve the community's needs. It represents their commitment to the equality, unity, and service that are at the heart of the American ethic.

- ★ Women ages 50 and older are unique in that although they are among those most receptive to learning more information about Sikhs, they are initially less warm and familiar with Sikhs than the other target groups. Furthermore, they also place particular value on learning about Sikhs' patriotism and character (in addition to "American Story" and the "Parallel with American History"). In response to open-ended questions about what stood out to them the most in a positive way, women ages 50 and older described Sikhs' patriotism and character of being a good neighbor, citizen, and a hard worker. These themes, which are conveyed in the most effective messages, are important to highlight when talking with older women.

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<sup>1</sup>The project began with three focus groups among white Americans with mixed levels of education (one group in Iselin, NJ, and two groups in Chicago, IL) to hear how people describe in their own words their knowledge, perceptions, and reactions to Sikh Americans. Following the focus groups, a national survey of 1,144 non-Asian Americans was conducted in August and September of 2014. These interviews were conducted online to allow participants to view and react to images of Sikh Americans and engage in message highlighting exercises in addition to responding to traditional open- and close-ended questions.