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U. Iowa Study: Obama Muslim Rumor Lives On Nationally, But Not In Iowa City

(UWIRE.com) *This story was written by Lauren Sieben, The Daily Iowan*

Some voters are still struggling to identify Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama's religion less than a month from the election, and the Muslim rumor has yet to die down, a University of Iowa poll shows.

The number of voters who mistakenly believe Obama is Muslim hasn't changed since a Pew study in June, according to a national Hawkeye Poll of 680 registered voters between Oct. 1-11.

Obama is a member of the United Church of Christ, but a 2004 press release posted on a Republican website accused him of concealing his Islamic faith and propelled rumors that he is Muslim.

The Hawkeye Poll indicated that the number of Democrats who believe Obama is Muslim has decreased to 5.5 percent. The number of Republicans who believe he is Muslim has increased to 14 percent.

Hawkeye Poll Director and UI political-science Associate Professor David Redlawsk said Iowa City voters don't necessarily follow the national trend.

Voters who identified Obama as a Muslim were most likely to be Republican or identify themselves as Evangelical, he said.

"Given in Iowa City that both groups - Republicans and Evangelicals - are smaller than the national numbers, I would expect fewer people in Iowa City to identify him as Muslim," he said.

Bruce Gronbeck, the director of the UI Center for Media Studies and Political Culture, said Iowa City is "obviously an island even within the state," pointing to the community's liberal tendencies as a reason that residents may be more aware of Obama's religion.

Ali Tayh, the president of the UI Muslim Student Association, said he doesn't notice many people in Iowa City identifying Obama as Muslim, but that the negative association with Muslim is the "wrong impression."

"Obviously, the main thing right now is that [people] commonly associate being Muslim with terrorism, and that's just not right at all," he said. "It's just a problem that these days, whenever a terrorist does anything, they automatically associate the religion with it."

Gronbeck said some voters who believe Obama is Muslim may be doing so to conceal their underlying issue with his ethnicity - a process called "re-coding."

"It becomes very difficult for any American to say, 'I'm voting against somebody because he's a black,' " Gronbeck said. "It's a lot easier to re-code the issue into a category that is 'socially acceptable,' so to say 'After 9-11, I really just can't vote for somebody with a Muslim background.' "

Gronbeck estimated that 10 percent of voters who won't vote for Obama based on the Muslim rumor are in fact re-coding the issue to appear more socially acceptable.

As for the rumor's effect on the general election, Gronbeck and Redlawsk said voters who believe Obama is Muslim are unlikely to have voted for him anyway. Eighty percent of the voters who believe Obama is Muslim plan to vote for McCain, Redlawsk said.

"Just saying that he's Muslim I don't think is going to change anybody's mind," Tayh said. "If you're not going to vote for him, then you're not going to vote for him."

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