

# U.S. Catholics' political leanings affect their approval ratings of pope

WASHINGTON — In the advent of Pope Francis' fifth anniversary in the papacy, a new Pew Research poll of U.S. Catholics shows their regard of the pope is, for the first time, colored by their political leanings.

The survey, released March 6, said it saw "signs of growing discontent with Francis among Catholics on the political right, with increasing shares of Catholic Republicans saying they view Francis unfavorably, and that they think he is too liberal and naive."

In 2014, one year into Pope Francis' papacy, "there was no discernible difference between the share of Catholic Republicans (90 percent) and Democrats (87 percent) who expressed a favorable view of Francis," the survey said. "Today, by contrast, the pope's favorability rating is 10 points higher among Catholic Democrats (89 percent) than among Catholic Republicans (79 percent)."

"In our polling about John Paul II and Benedict XVI, when we look at them we don't see any falloff from them over time," Greg Smith, a Pew senior researcher, told Catholic News Service. "What's interesting about this survey that this is the first one where this political polarization among American Catholics really stands out."

The March 6 poll was the eighth time Pew had asked Catholics their views about the pope. Pew had asked Catholics about Pope John Paul or Pope Benedict eight times total over 25 years — five times for Pope Benedict and three for Pope John Paul.

Pope Francis still maintains marks any religious or civil leaders would covet: 94 percent of Catholics say he is compassionate and 91 percent say he is humble — numbers unchanged from a 2015 Pew survey. His overall favorable rating is down one point, from 85 to 84 percent, from a 2014 poll. Those with unfavorable views of the pope were double that of 2014, but still in the single digits at 8 percent.

But "the share of American Catholics who say Pope Francis is 'too liberal' has jumped 15 percentage points between 2015 and today, from 19 percent to 34

percent,” the poll said. And 24 percent of U.S. Catholics now say he is naive, up from 15 percent in 2015.

Since 2014, “the share of Catholic Republicans who say Francis represents a major, positive change for the Catholic Church has declined from 60 percent to 37 percent. By contrast, there has been little movement since the end of Francis’ first year as pope in the share of Catholic Democrats who view him as a major change for the better,” the poll said — 71 percent today vs. 76 percent four years ago.

Other groups hold Pope Francis in high esteem, although not as much as Catholics do. Of white mainline Protestants, 67 percent approve of Pope Francis’ tenure, as do 58 percent of religiously unaffiliated adults.

Slimmer majorities of black Protestants (53 percent) and white evangelical Protestants (52 percent) also approve of the pope. Nine percent of white evangelicals were unfavorable toward Pope Francis when he was chosen pope in 2013. That number has since tripled to 28 percent; it had been 31 percent last year.

The survey introduced new questions not asked in past polls.

Fifty-five percent of Catholics said the priests at their parish are “very supportive” of Pope Francis. Another 23 percent say their priests are “somewhat supportive” of the pontiff.

Similar approval numbers were generated when Catholics were asked whether Pope Francis was doing an “excellent” or “good” job appointing new bishops and cardinals; 58 percent said so. And 55 percent say he is doing an “excellent” or “good” job addressing environmental issues.

A somewhat larger majority — 63 percent — said Pope Francis “has done at least a little to promote acceptance of homosexuality,” the survey said, adding he has done “about the right amount” or that they would like to see him “do more” on this issue. Also, 64 percent of Catholics say the pope has done at least a little to increase acceptance of divorce and remarriage.

The survey further asked Catholics to describe the most significant thing Pope Francis has done in his time as pope. In response, American Catholics named a

broad range of accomplishments without being prompted as to specific issues. Nine percent noted Francis' work in setting a good Christian example, another 9 percent cited his "opening up the church and becoming more accepting." Eight percent said helping the poor; 7 percent said Pope Francis has made the church more accepting toward gays and lesbians; 6 percent mentioned his global outreach; and 5 percent said he is uniting the Catholic community and encouraging open communication and dialogue.

Four percent each cited two negative or neutral actions: becoming overly involved in politics or alienating conservative Catholics. Another 4 percent of respondents said he hasn't done anything significant at all, or that they are still waiting to see what he will do. And 29 percent either did not know or could not name any significant thing that Pope Francis has done.

The Pew survey was conducted Jan. 10-15 by phone among 1,503 adults, including 316 Catholics — three times as many being contacted by cellphone than by landline. The margin of error was 2.9 percentage points for the full survey, and 6.4 percentage points for Catholics.

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