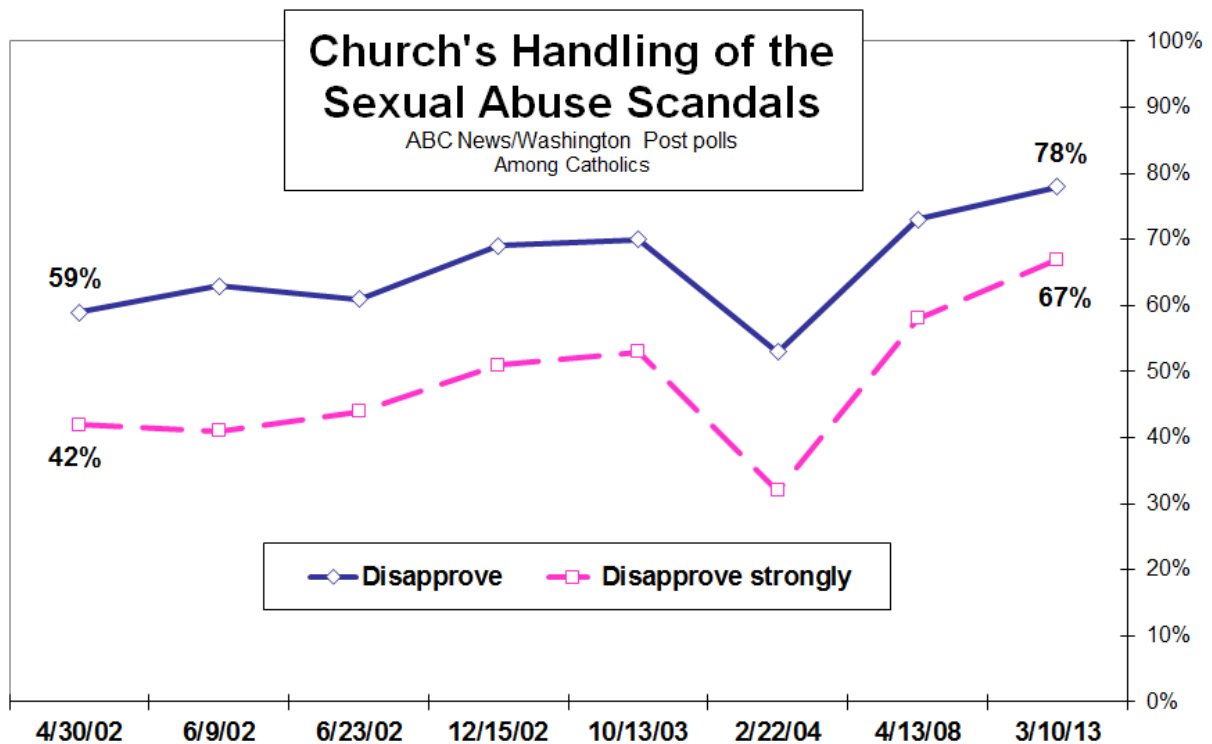


On Eve of Conclave, Record Criticism of Church For its Handling of Sexual Abuse Scandals

A record number of American Catholics disapprove of the church's handling of its sexual abuse scandals, underscoring the challenges facing the next pope as he seeks to restore confidence and trust in the church's leadership.

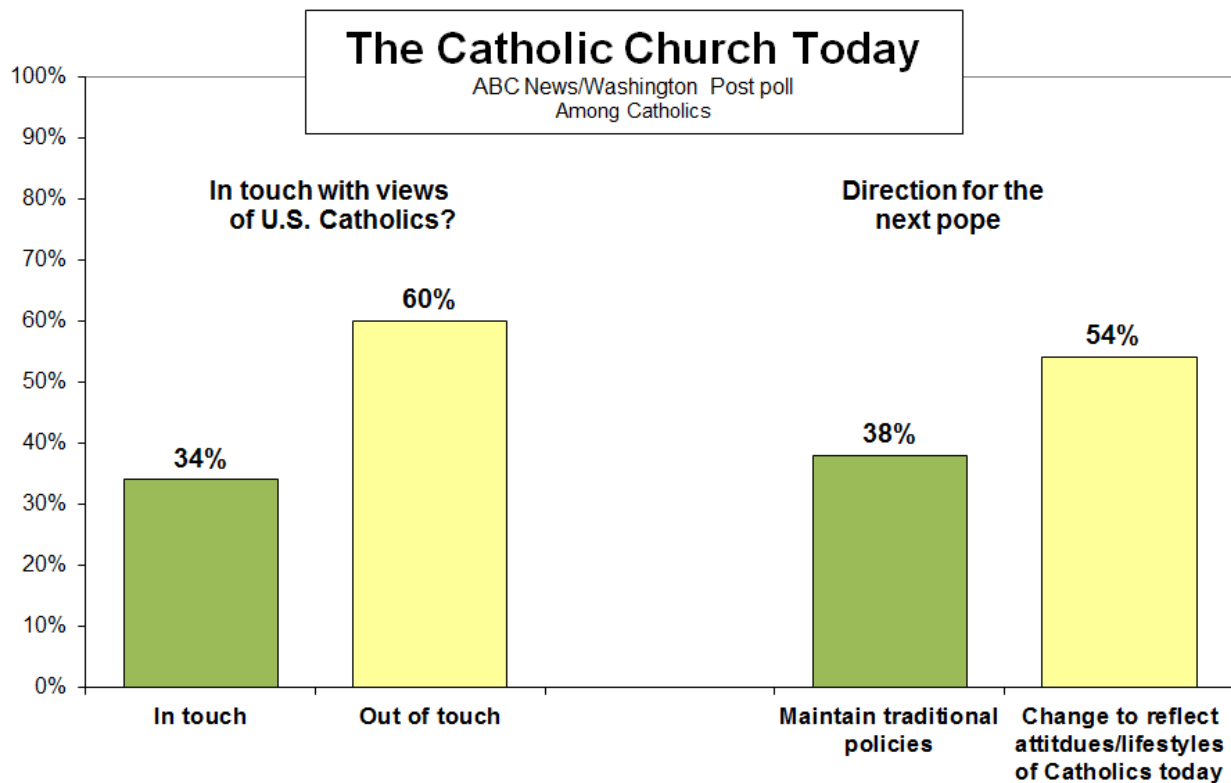
More broadly, Catholics in the latest ABC News/Washington Post poll say the church, while relevant, also is out of touch with their views. Majorities differ with doctrine on issues such as ordaining women and allowing priests to marry, as well as on some central social issues.

In clearly its greatest difficulty, an overwhelming 78 percent of Catholics now disapprove of how the church has handled the issue of sexual abuse of children by priests, and two-thirds disapprove strongly – the highest and strongest disapproval since the scandals erupted more than a decade ago, up sharply since U.S. church leaders sought to address the issue in 2004.



Sixty percent of Catholics, more generally, describe the church as “out of touch” with the views of Catholics in America, and by 54-38 percent Catholics urge a new direction by the next pope, away from traditional policies and toward new approaches that better reflect “the attitudes and

lifestyles of Catholics today.” Less-frequent churchgoers, in particular, seek change – but even among those who attend Mass frequently, more than half call the church out of touch.



The survey was completed Sunday, in advance of the conclave starting tomorrow at which cardinals will elect the successor to Pope Benedict XVI, who resigned last month, citing fatigue.

He leaves with somewhat muted acclaim: Sixty-eight percent of Catholics give a positive rating to the way Benedict performed as pope – robust for a political figure, but weaker than might be expected for a spiritual leader. Only 19 percent say he did an “excellent” job. (The pope’s personal popularity, as opposed to his performance rating, was higher in an ABC/Post poll last month – 76 percent of Catholics saw him favorably overall, 43 percent “strongly” so.)

DISCONNECTS – Criticism of the church on the sexual abuse scandal is notable both for its direction and its depth. In early 2004, as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops sought to address the issue with the release of an extensive report, 53 percent of Catholics disapproved, 32 percent strongly. Those numbers have soared by 25 and 35 percentage points, respectively.

If less intense, there are other areas of disconnect as well. Fifty-five percent of Catholics in this poll, produced for ABC by [Langer Research Associates](#), oppose the church’s ban on marriage by priests; 58 percent oppose its prohibition on ordaining women. Both are down from their peaks in years past, 67 and 65 percent, respectively, but still reflect majority opposition among Catholics to some basic church positions.

Previous ABC/Post polling has shown differences on social issues, as well. Most American Catholics support gay marriage, for example, and 51 percent favor legal abortion.

Despite these results, acceptance of the church’s continued influence is broad, if not full-throated. Eighty-six percent of Catholics see it as relevant in the world today, as do 70 percent of Americans overall. Still, many fewer – 30 percent of Catholics and 18 percent of all adults – call the church “very” relevant, including just 34 percent of frequent churchgoing Catholics.

The church’s shortfall in being seen as highly relevant is in accord with other results, such as the nearly 2-1 sense that it’s out of touch with the views of Catholics today, 60-34 percent, and the desire among Catholics, by a 16-point margin, for the next pope to adopt policies that reflect current attitudes and lifestyles.

CHURCHGOERS – There are differences within the Catholic faith, notably in the choice between a traditional or new path for the church ahead. Those who attend Mass regularly favor traditional church policies by 58-41 percent, while less-frequent churchgoers, by 63-24 percent, prefer an approach more in tune with current lifestyles and attitudes.

Not surprisingly, then, frequent churchgoers are much more apt to give positive ratings to the traditionalist Benedict’s performance as pope – 83 percent do so, vs. 58 percent of those who attend church less frequently. (This drops to 42 percent among non-Catholics, with many more undecided.) Even among frequent Catholic churchgoers, though, just 27 percent say Benedict did an excellent job.

	Catholics/church Weekly+	attendance Less
Benedict’s performance as pope:		
Excellent or good	83%	58%
Excellent	27	14
See church as relevant	93	81
See it as “very” relevant	34	26
Church is in touch	40	29
Church is out of touch	53	64
Direction for next pope:		
Traditional	58	24
Change	41	63
Prohibition on priests marrying:		
Favor	49	24
Oppose	47	61
Prohibition on ordaining women:		
Favor	56	19
Oppose	41	70
Church’s handling of sex abuse scandal:		
Disapprove	74	82
Strongly disapprove	61	72

Among other differences, regular churchgoers favor the ban on ordaining women by a 15-point margin, 56-41 percent; but less-frequent churchgoers oppose the ban, by a much broader 70-19 percent. Further, regular attendees divide about evenly on allowing priests to marry; those who attend less often oppose this prohibition by a wide 61-24 percent. (A fifth of adults identify themselves as Catholics. Among them, four in 10 say they attend church almost every week, or more.)

To some extent these results mark a tension for the church between tending to the concerns of current frequent churchgoers while also seeking to appeal to Catholics who attend less often. Nonetheless, as noted, even among regular worshippers, 53 percent describe the church as out of touch with the views of Catholics in America today. And most strikingly, even among regular churchgoers, 74 percent disapprove of the church’s handling of the abuse scandal, and six in 10 disapprove strongly.

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by landline and cell phone March 7-10, 2013, among a random national sample of 1,001 adults, including 201 Catholics. Results have a margin of [sampling error](#) of 3.5 points for the full sample, and 8 points for Catholics, including design effect.

The survey was produced for ABC News by [Langer Research Associates](#) of New York, N.Y., with sampling, data collection and tabulation by Abt-SRBI of New York, N.Y.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com at <http://abcnews.com/pollingunit>.

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Full results follow.

*= less than 0.5 percent

1-24 held for release.

25. How would you rate the job the former pope, Benedict the sixteenth, did as leader of the Catholic church - excellent, good, not so good or poor?

		----- Positive -----			----- Negative -----			No
		NET	Excellent	Good	NET	Not so good	Poor	opinion
3/10/13	All	47	9	38	26	15	11	27
	Cath.	68	19	49	25	16	10	7

26. How relevant do you think the Catholic Church is in the world today - very relevant, somewhat relevant, not so relevant or not relevant at all?

		----- Relevant -----			----- Not relevant -----			No
		NET	Very	Somewhat	NET	Not so	Not at all	opinion
3/10/13	All	70	18	52	24	16	8	5
	Cath.	86	30	56	14	10	4	0

27. (ASKED OF CATHOLICS) In general, do you think the Roman Catholic Church is in touch with the views of Catholics in America today, or is it out of touch?

	In touch	Out of touch	No opinion
3/10/13	34	60	7
4/13/08	34	62	4
4/24/05	44	52	4
10/13/03	34	62	3
10/1/95	38	58	5

28. (ASKED OF CATHOLICS) Currently, Roman Catholic priests cannot get married. Do you favor or oppose that policy?

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
3/10/13	34	55	10
4/13/08	36	60	4
10/13/03	30	67	2
3/28/02	34	60	6
10/1/95	37	61	1
8/8/93	39	58	4
8/23/87	45	49	6
3/24/86	46	50	5

29. (ASKED OF CATHOLICS) Currently, women cannot become priests in the Roman Catholic Church. Do you favor or oppose that policy?

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
3/10/13	34	58	8
4/13/08	36	60	3
10/13/03	32	64	4
3/28/02	35	61	4
10/1/95	33	65	2
8/8/93	34	63	2
8/23/87	42	53	5
3/24/86	43	53	4

30. Do you approve or disapprove of the way the Catholic Church has handled the issue of sexual abuse of children by priests? Do you approve/disapprove strongly or somewhat?

	----- Approve -----			----- Disapprove -----			No opinion
	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Somewhat	Strongly	
3/10/13	10	3	7	81	11	69	10
4/13/08	17	5	12	74	16	58	9
2/22/04*	23	8	15	66	19	47	11
10/13/03	17	4	13	77	15	62	6
12/15/02	20	7	12	76	18	58	4
6/23/02	23	8	15	66	21	46	11
6/9/02	22	8	15	73	20	53	5
4/30/02	25	7	17	59	18	41	16

Among Catholics:

3/10/13	18	2	16	78	11	67	3
4/13/08	24	10	15	73	15	58	3
2/22/04*	40	17	23	53	21	32	7
10/13/03	27	8	19	70	17	53	3
12/15/02	27	16	11	69	18	51	4
6/23/02	32	12	20	61	17	44	7

6/9/02	34	16	17	63	22	41	3
4/30/02	35	13	22	59	17	42	7

*2/22/04 and prior: "is handling"

31. (ASKED OF CATHOLICS) Thinking about the next pope... Do you think the new pope should (maintain the traditional policies of the Church), or should he (change Church policies to reflect the attitudes and lifestyles of Catholics today)?

	Maintain policies	Change policies	No opinion
3/10/13	38	54	8
4/13/08*	50	45	5
4/24/05*	50	48	1
3/13/05**	41	57	1
10/13/03	33	64	3

*4/13/08 and 4/24/05: "Pope Benedict"
**3/13/05 and prior: "the next pope"

*** END ***