

# JUDGING THE POPE BY THE POLLS

On the day Pope John Paul II celebrated his Silver Jubilee, the results of two new polls on his performance were released. For the purpose of simplicity, the USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup poll will be called the first poll; the Washington Post-ABC poll will be named the second poll.

Though both polls were conducted by reputable organizations, the sample size of Catholics was unusually small: there were 227 in the first poll and 504 in the second one. Thus there was a margin of error of 7 percent and 5 percent, respectively.

Fifty-three percent of Catholics in the first poll, and 62 percent of those in the second poll, said the pope is 'out of touch' with the views of American Catholics. Yet 63 percent in the first poll, and 80 percent in the second, said they approve of his leadership. Indeed, almost 90 percent of Catholics in the second poll (the first did not ask this question) gave the pope high marks for "preserving the church's traditions." What gives?

It is too easy to say that Catholics like the pope personally but don't like some of his teachings. To begin with, there is a strong correlation between Catholics who attend Mass on a regular basis and support for the Church's teachings. The obverse being true as well, it means little to factor non-practicing Catholics into any survey of Catholics (vegetarians who eat hot dogs at baseball games do not provide insight into the sentiments of vegetarians).

So what gives? Many Catholics are somewhat conflicted: they admire the pope for being the steady moral anchor that he is while continuing to express some of the more secular values of the dominant culture. What seems not to be understood is that if the pope sought to bring the Church's teachings more into

line with the values of the dominant culture, he would lose the respect of the very same people who voice a desire for change. People respect leaders for doing what is right—not for appeasing their preferences.

Furthermore, to suggest—as some aging dissidents have—that most practicing Catholics are up in arms over the absence of certain reforms is not only absurd (Catholics can leave and join any number of religions that have succumbed to the culture), it suggests a reluctance to credit them with good judgment for approving the pope's performance.

One more point: in 1995, the Catholic League commissioned its own poll of Catholics (with a sample size of 800), and we found that although many Catholics expressed a preference for some changes, 83 percent said their commitment to the Church would be as strong—if not stronger—if the Church *did not change its teachings*.

The only way to understand this is to make a distinction between a preference and a demand. For example, many Catholics may prefer celibacy to be optional, but they are not going to bolt if nothing changes. A preference is not a demand and should not be construed as such. Most of those who misconstrue this do so on purpose: their agenda is to upend the Church's teachings on sexuality, and they will distort the data to make their point.

In any event, the teachings of the Catholic Church are not subject to a referendum. The magisterium of the Church gets some additional help from upstairs that is not available on demand for everyone else.