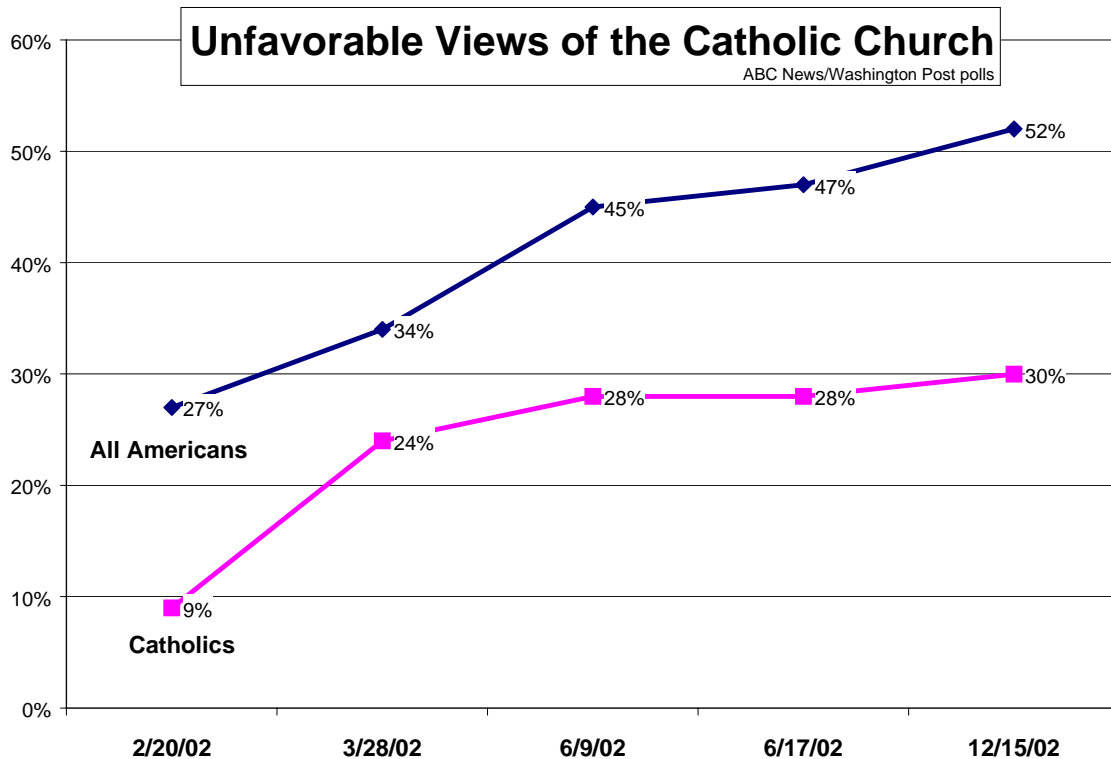


Church's Image Weakens Further As Vatican Moves on Abuse Policy

Public confidence in the Catholic Church has fallen to its worst since the child sex-abuse scandal erupted early this year, with favorable opinions of the church, approval of its response and trust in its future efforts to deal with the crisis all reaching new lows.

These views underscore the Vatican's newly announced approval of a revised policy drafted by the U.S. bishops to handle sexual abuse by priests. Announcing the approval, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re wrote, "it appears necessary to devote every available resource to restoring the public image of the Catholic priesthood."

Indeed this ABC News/Washington Post poll finds 52 percent of Americans, including three in 10 Catholics, expressing an unfavorable opinion of the Catholic Church, both new highs. Unfavorable views of the church have risen by 25 points among all Americans, and 21 points among Catholics, since February.



Considerably more, 76 percent of all Americans and about seven in 10 Catholics, disapprove of the church's handling of the issue of sexual abuse by priests – up 10 points

since June to a new high. And the intensity of these feelings is deep: Among the 76 percent who disapprove, 58 percent do so “strongly,” as do 51 percent of Catholics.

Looking ahead, confidence in the church to handle the issue in the future is also bleak. Fifty-four percent of Americans, including about four in 10 Catholics, express distrust in the church’s ability to handle the issue properly in the future, up 11 points since June.

	Disapprove of Church’s response		Distrust Church’s future response	
	All	Catholics	All	Catholics
Now	76%	69	54%	39
June	66	61	43	29
	+10	+8	+11	+10

NEW POLICY – It remains to be seen whether the Vatican’s approval of a revised policy does much to assuage these concerns. But after the U.S. bishops’ meeting in Dallas last June, just 38 percent of all Americans, and 44 percent of Catholics, thought the meeting produced meaningful improvements in church policy. And that was before the policy was revised.

CHURCHGOERS – As would be expected, views of the church are most positive among regular churchgoing Catholics. Among those who attend Mass weekly, 82 percent have a favorable opinion of the church and 70 percent trust it to deal with the sexual abuse issue properly in the future. However, even in this loyal group, most, 58 percent, disapprove of the church’s current handling of the issue.

	Church attendance among Catholics	
	Weekly	<Weekly
Opinion of church:		
Favorable	82%	63
Unfavorable	16	35
Handling of issue:		
Approve	39	21
Disapprove	58	75
Future handling:		
Trust	70	49
Don’t trust	25	46

METHODOLOGY – This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone Dec. 12-15, 2002, among a random national sample of 1,209 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Fieldwork by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, PA.

Analysis by Dalia Sussman.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:

<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

Media contact: Cathie Levine, (212) 456-4934

Results follow; more to be released.

*= less than 0.5 percent

35. On another subject, overall would you say you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the Catholic Church?

		Favorable	Unfavorable	No opinion
12/15/02	All	40	52	8
	Cath.	69	30	2
6/17/02	All	45	47	9
	Cath.	69	28	3
6/9/02	All	47	45	7
	Cath.	70	28	2
3/28/02	All	55	34	11
	Cath.	73	24	3
2/20/02	All	63	27	11
	Cath.	88	9	4
8/30/99*	All	68	19	13

*Wash Post/Kaiser/Harvard, asked "very/somewhat" follow

36. Do you approve or disapprove of the way the Catholic Church is handling the issue of sexual abuse of children by priests? Do you approve/disapprove strongly or somewhat?

		-----Approve-----			-----Disapprove-----			No op.
		NET	Strongly	Somewhat	NET	Strongly	Somewhat	
12/15/02	All	20	7	12	76	58	18	4
	Cath.	27	16	11	69	51	18	4
6/23/02	All	23	8	15	66	46	21	11
	Cath.	32	12	20	61	44	17	7
6/9/02	All	22	8	15	73	53	20	5
	Cath.	34	16	17	63	41	22	3
4/30/02	All	25	7	17	59	41	18	16
	Cath.	35	13	22	59	42	17	7

37. Do you think the church can or cannot be trusted to handle this issue properly in the future?

		Can be trusted	Cannot be trusted	No opin.
12/15/02	All	42	54	4
	Cath.	56	39	6
6/17/02	All	50	43	6
	Cath.	67	29	4
4/21/02	All	40	52	8
	Cath.	59	36	5

END