

Editorial: Pope Francis' popularity & our faithfulness to Jesus

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Pope Francis has plummeted in opinion polls. But the Roman Catholic pontiff's plunging popularity tells us far more about Americans' values than it does about his vision.

A [new Gallup poll](#) indicates Francis' favorability rating among all Americans fell from a 76 percent peak last year to 59 percent this summer.

✘ Editor Marv Knox Among U.S. conservatives, he fell even further, from a high of 72 percent to 45 percent. Liberals like him less, too; their favorability rating fell from 82 percent to 68 percent. Although he held his ground best with moderates, his rating among middle-grounders dipped from 79 percent to 71 percent.

Francis declined almost as much among Catholics, 89 percent to 71 percent, as he did among Protestants and other Christians, 73 percent to 52 percent.

Why his popularity soared

Francis' popularity soared during a season when people across the spectrums—Catholic-Protestant, conservative-liberal, male-female—saw in him qualities they admire:

- He entered the papacy with an agenda to reform the Roman Catholic bureaucracy, the curia, which the vast majority of Catholics supported.

- He vowed to get to the bottom of the Church’s clergy sexual abuse scandal, something practically everyone on the planet affirmed.
- He shunned the regal trappings of his predecessors, moved into a simple apartment, and wore black oxfords instead of red slippers, which people of humility adored.
- He visited orphans and inmates, kissed deformed babies, called suffering Catholics on the phone, and touched Muslims, which inspired affection.
- He spoke compassionately of homosexuals and divorced couples and seemed to understand why some women seek abortions, which heartened liberals.
- He ran a tight ship and instituted administrative controls, which conservatives respected.
- If you sit and think for a moment, you probably can recall another “Francis moment” that moved you to admiration—gladly or grudgingly.

But opinions of Francis have turned. That’s not so much because Francis changed his tune so much as because, as people hummed the melody, it sounded out of sync. And since that trouble spans the spectrum, its source does, too.

Liberals realized that while Francis’ compassion obviously is deep and genuine, he’s still the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. Its doctrine, and his, has not changed. So, while he seems to understand the causes, Francis still opposes homosexual activity and abortion. And while he seems sympathetic, he still declines to ordain women or allow priests to marry.

‘Idolatry of money’

Gallup analyzes Francis’ fall among conservatives: “This decline may be

attributable to the pope's denouncing of 'the idolatry of money' and linking climate change partially to human activity, along with his passionate focus on income inequality—all issues that are at odds with many conservatives' beliefs.”

When Francis' papacy was new, Americans collected bits and pieces of his persona, refracted them through their own biases and aspirations, and projected them back into the white cassock he wears. What they got was a pope in their own image—a pope pixelated into the image of each viewer.

Across two years and some months, Francis' actions have turned the focal knobs on all those projectors. Americans are seeing a clearer image of this pope, and the audience—while still generally positive—doesn't like him as much as they thought they did.

Be sure of this: Francis has been consistent; Americans' attitudes have changed.

Liberals' approval rose when they mistook his compassion for agreement with their social agendas. But he remains true to Catholic moral teaching and will not change positions that have stood for centuries.

Conservatives' endorsement climbed when they latched onto his no-nonsense administrative reforms, for example. But when his pastoral compassion for the poor resulted in a rebuff of the excesses of capitalism, they rebelled.

Francis certainly isn't Jesus, and he seems to be the kind of humble pastor who would enumerate all the ways he falls short of the Christ. But in his polling pitfall, we can see a popularity pattern experienced by Jesus.

Jesus also dropped in the polls

Early in Jesus' ministry, vast crowds of people followed him, too. They

projected their aspirations for a messiah into his robes. They longed for him to be the military/political leader of their dreams. But then they began to hear his “hard teachings.” He refused to fulfill their expectations, and “... many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (John 6:66).

Of course, Francis is the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, and the vast majority of *Standard* readers are Baptists, Protestants, evangelicals. We will not agree on all points of doctrine. But Francis aspires to that noble Catholic virtue of striving for rigorous intellectual consistency.

Where he makes us uncomfortable—socially, morally, economically, politically—we should examine our own beliefs against Scripture. We must seek to learn whether our beliefs and attitudes are shaped by our own culture and desires or by the example and teachings of Jesus.