NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Benedict XVI's poll numbers can't match John Paul II's

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Washington

Pope Benedict XVI never inspired the deep love and admiration enjoyed by his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, but Americans -- and American Catholics even more so -- still look favorably upon the soon-to-be-former head of the Roman Catholic Church.

A newly released Washington Post-ABC News poll also shows that nearly two in three Americans (64 percent) strongly approve of the pope's unexpected decision earlier this month to retire because of his failing health.

More than half (54 percent) of Americans and three-quarters of Catholic Americans look favorably upon Benedict, who will retire Feb. 28. Before he died in 2005, John Paul's positive ratings were higher: 67 percent among all Americans, and 87 percent of American Catholics.

John Paul was also more popular than his church, but the current pope is not: 62 percent of Americans look favorably upon the church today, according to the poll.

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, in its new poll of American Catholics, also found that John Paul's favorability ratings eclipsed Benedict's.

Among other findings, a solid majority of U.S. Catholics (58 percent) told Pew researchers that they hope the next pope will permit priests to marry, and 46 percent hoped the new pope would take the church in "new directions." A slim majority (51 percent) want him to "maintain traditional positions."

The Post-ABC poll of 1,006 adults, conducted Feb. 13-17, had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. The Pew poll of 1,504 adults, conducted between Feb. 13 and 18, had a margin of error of 2.9 percentage points.

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