News



Pope Leo XIV arrives for his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, Aug. 6. (RNS/AP/Gregorio Borgia)

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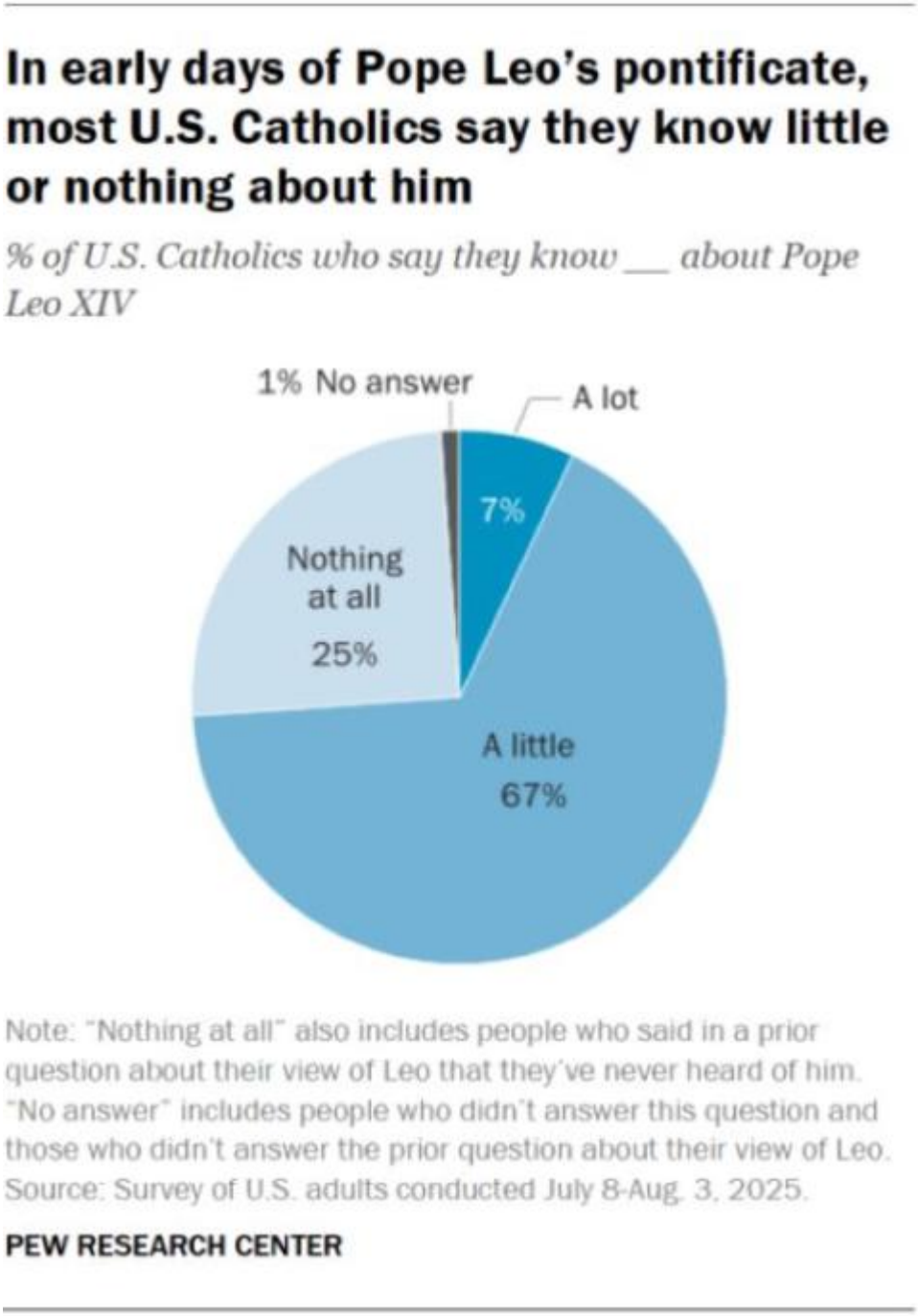
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A majority of American Catholics view Pope Leo XIV's papacy positively so far, though they admit they know little about him, a Pew Research Center survey released on Sept. 12 shows.

The survey, part of Pew's ongoing research on Catholicism in the United States, polled American Catholics on their opinions of Leo, their thoughts on him being the first U.S.-born pope and how they think his pontificate will compare to that of his predecessors. It also highlights how Mass attendance and political affiliation factor into American Catholics' views of the new pontiff.

Eight out of 10 American Catholics said they had a favorable opinion of Leo, including 37% who said their opinion was "very favorable." A minority (4%) indicated they disapproved of Leo, while 11% said they had never heard of him. The survey was conducted between July 8 and Aug. 3 and has a margin of error for Catholics of +/- 3.1 percentage points.

For this first public opinion study on Leo, Pew researchers polled 9,916 American adults, including 1,849 Catholics.



Though more than half of non-Catholic Americans (56%) said they view Leo favorably, a third (31%) said they've never heard of him.

Leo, whose name alludes to Pope Leo XII, who championed the rights of the poor, was born in Chicago and served in Peru for many years. He succeeded Pope Francis after his death in April.

"I find it striking that the share of Catholics who view Pope Leo favorably today is identical to the share who had a positive view of Pope Francis back in the early days

of his papacy," said Gregory Smith, a senior associate director of religion research at Pew, in an email to RNS.

The share of Catholics and non-Catholics who said they still know little about the new pope also struck Smith as interesting. According to the survey, 67% of American Catholics said they know "a little" about Leo, and a quarter of them knew "nothing at all." Only 7% of American Catholics reported knowing a lot about the pope.

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Asked about how Leo's leadership will compare to Francis', half of the Catholics surveyed (52%) either said they were unsure or that they didn't know anything about him. One-third (33%) expected Leo to follow in the footsteps of Francis. And 13% of American Catholics expect Leo's leadership style to be different from Francis', according to the survey.

The survey shows American Catholics are generally enthusiastic about the idea of an American pope: 36% said they were "extremely" or "very" excited by the pope being American. Forty percent said they are somewhat excited, and 22% said they are not that excited about the first U.S.-born pope.



A Chicago Sun-Times newspaper front page shows “DA POPE!” at a grocery store in Mount Prospect, Ill., May 9. (RNS/AP/Nam Y. Huh)

The survey indicates Leo's approval rates largely match those of Francis at the beginning of his papacy. A March 2013 Pew survey noted 84% of American Catholics expressed favorable views of Francis. By comparison, 67% of American Catholics expressed favorable views of Pope Benedict XVI after his election in 2005. Pope John Paul II, who led the church from 1987 until his death in 2005, scored the highest among American Catholics in the early days of his papacy, with 91% expressing favorable views.

Though the survey shows a majority of Catholic Republicans and Democrats approve of Leo, 84% and 89%, respectively, it also points to divides that became more apparent between the two groups at the end of Francis’ pontificate.

There are about as many Catholic Democrats rating Leo favorably (89%) as were rating Francis favorably before his death (88%), but Republican Catholics seem to approve of Leo more than they did of Francis at the end of his pontificate. In

February, a month before Francis' death, 69% of Republican Catholics expressed positive views of Francis.

According to a June 2025 Pew report, 20% of American adults identify as Catholic, and 44% of registered Catholic voters are Democrats, while 52% are Republicans.

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The survey also shows that frequent Mass attenders were more likely to approve of Pope Leo compared to those who rarely attend Mass. A majority of American Catholics who go to Mass every Sunday said they viewed Pope Leo favorably (95%). In total, 84% of American Catholics who attend Mass monthly or yearly said they view him favorably, and 77% of American Catholics who never attend Mass said they view Leo favorably.

Still, weekly Mass attenders were as likely to know little about Pope Leo as occasional Mass attenders. Three-quarters of weekly Mass attenders (75%) said they know little about Leo, 68% of monthly and yearly Mass attenders said the same, and 60% of those who never go said they also know little about Pope Leo. Twelve-percent of weekly Mass attenders said they know a lot about the new pontiff, compared to 8% of monthly and yearly attenders and 4% of those who never go.

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