

To: Interested Parties
From: Center for Climate Integrity and Data for Progress
Date: September 2024
Re: MEMO: Voters Support Litigation to Hold the Plastics and Fossil Fuel Industries Accountable for Their Role in the Plastic Waste Crisis

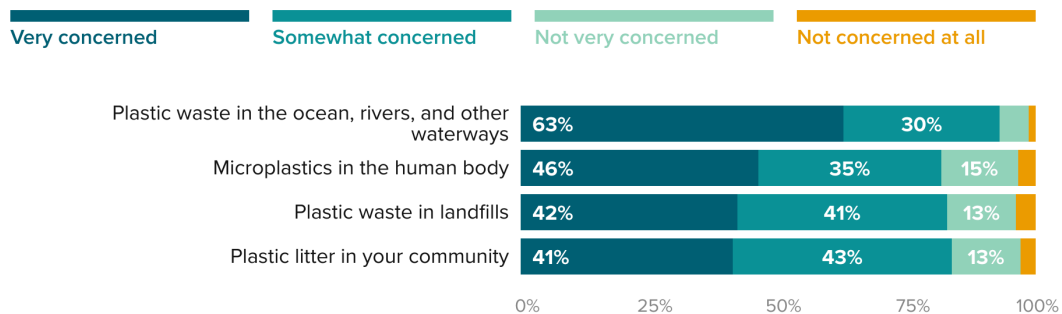
Summary

New research has revealed that the plastics and fossil fuel industries deceptively promoted recycling as a solution to plastic waste management for more than 50 years, despite their long-standing knowledge that plastic recycling is not technically or economically viable at scale. In light of these findings, the [Center for Climate Integrity](#) and [Data for Progress](#) recently [surveyed](#) 1,231 likely voters in the U.S. to understand perceptions of plastics and plastic recycling, investigate attitudes toward municipal plastic waste problems and solutions, and assess reactions to learning about the plastics and fossil fuel industries’ deception regarding the viability of plastic recycling.

Respondents were first asked about concern over plastic waste in a variety of places, where *plastic waste in the ocean, rivers, and other waterways* receives the most intense concern (63% very concerned), particularly among Democrats (73% very concerned) and Latino voters (68% very concerned). Black voters are notably more concerned about *plastic litter in your community* (52% very concerned) compared with voters overall (41% very concerned).

Voters Express the Greatest Concern Over Plastic Waste in the Water

How concerned, if at all, are you about each of the following?



August 15–17, 2024 survey of 1,231 U.S. likely voters

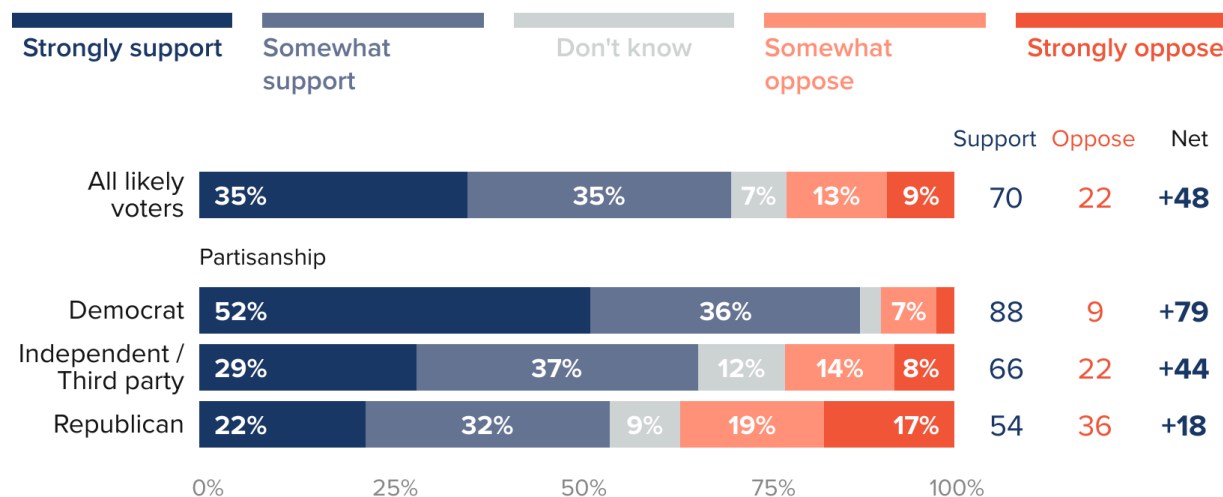
After reading a brief description of [potential legal action](#) against the plastics and fossil fuel industries, voters across party lines express strong support for litigation against these industries over their role in deceiving the public about the viability of plastic recycling, including 66% of

Independents and 54% of Republicans. Black voters (81% total support), voters under 45 (78%), and Latino voters (76%) report the greatest support for this proposed litigation.

Across Party Lines, Voters Support Litigation Against the Plastics and Fossil Fuel Industries

Officials in some states have recently proposed taking legal action against the plastics and fossil fuel industries to hold them accountable for their role in plastic pollution. The officials cite evidence that the plastics and fossil fuel industries deceived the public about the viability of plastic recycling.

Would you support or oppose officials **in your state** taking similar legal action against the plastics and fossil fuel industries?



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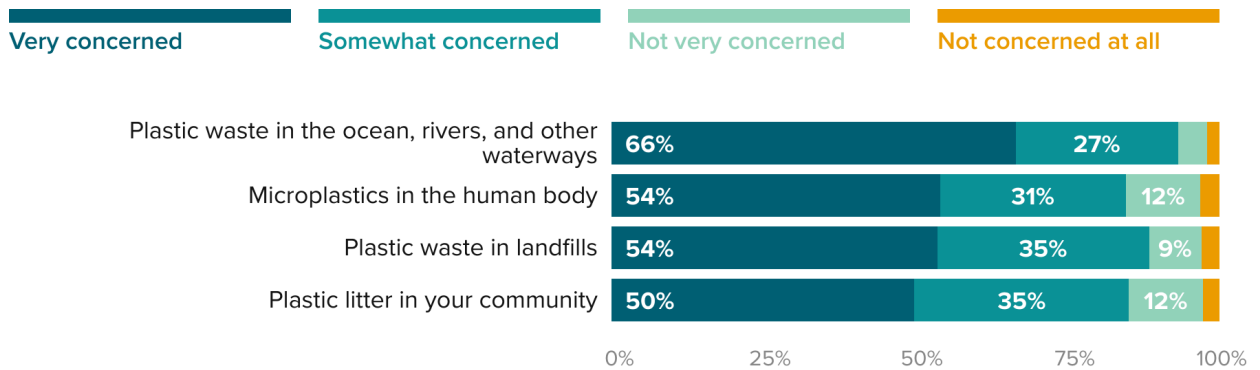
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Respondents were then asked to guess the percentage of plastic recycled in the United States. On average, voters guess that just under 45% of U.S. plastics are recycled. In reality, this number is far lower: **Only about 5% of plastics in the United States are recycled in any given year.** Once respondents were informed of the actual percentage of plastics recycled in the United States, concern for plastic waste was reassessed, revealing that concern regarding *microplastics in the human body*, *plastic waste in landfills*, and *plastic litter in your community* each rises by about 10% from the initial ask.

Concern for Plastic Waste Rises After Learning How Little Plastic Is Recycled in the United States

Despite the widespread adoption of recycling, in the end only about **5% of plastics** in the United States are recycled in any given year.

Knowing this, how concerned, if at all, are you about each of the following?



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The survey then shifted to cover the familiar “chasing arrows” symbol (shown below), as respondents were informed that the symbol is not regulated and that there’s no entity responsible for ensuring it has a clear definition that is properly used.



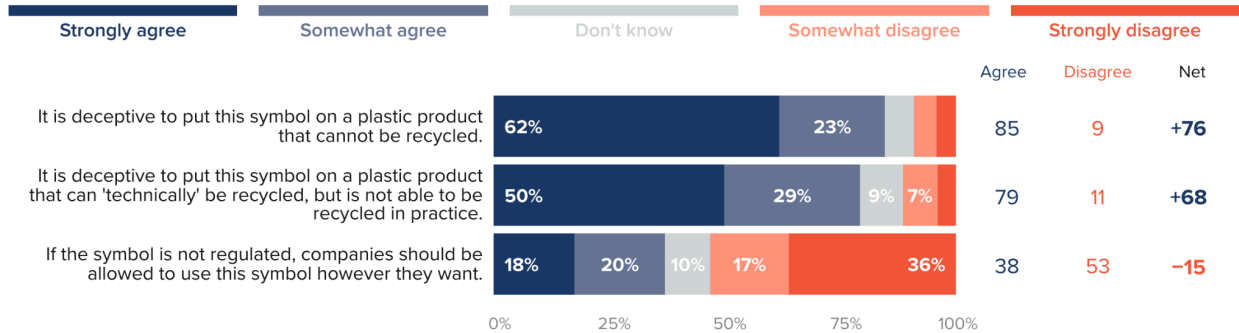
After learning this, 85% of voters agree that it’s deceptive to put the chasing arrows symbol on a plastic product that cannot be recycled, including 85% of Independents and 83% of Republicans. Even when a plastic product can “technically” be recycled, but is not able to be recycled in practice, half of voters remain in strong agreement that use of the symbol is deceptive (50% strongly agree).

Voters Agree That It Is Deceptive to Use the Chasing Arrows Symbol on Products That Cannot Be Recycled

As you may know, the use of the "chasing arrows" symbol is not regulated, meaning that no agency or group is responsible for protecting the use of the symbol and ensuring it has a clear definition.

[CHASING ARROWS SYMBOL SHOWN]

Knowing this, please indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statements about the "chasing arrows" symbol and plastic recycling.



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Next, respondents read and reacted to a series of published quotes from plastics and fossil fuel industry groups about the limited viability of plastic recycling. This exercise was followed by a binary question gauging how voters view the plastics and fossil fuel industries' actions in relation to the opioid and tobacco industries' attempts to downplay the harmful effects of their own products. A majority of respondents (54%) select the statement positing that the actions of the plastics and fossil fuel industries are *yet another example of big companies lying to their consumers*, including 67% of Black voters and 59% of female voters.

Voters Agree That the Plastic and Fossil Fuel Industries' Promotion of Plastics Recycling Is Another Example of Big Companies Lying to Their Consumers

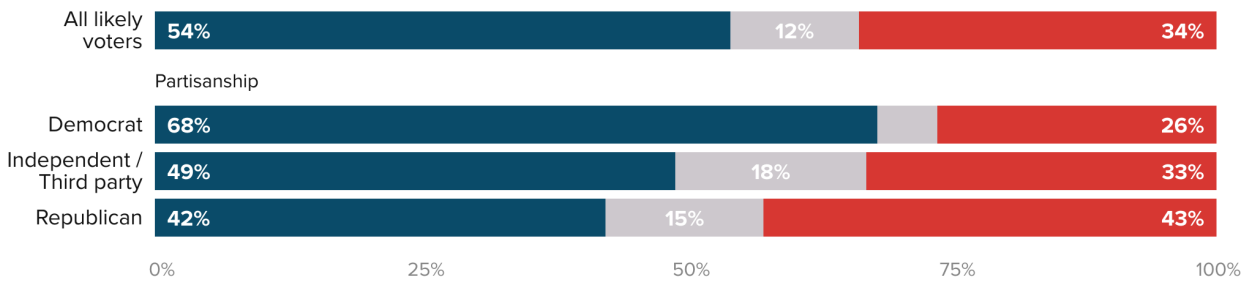
Some have compared the plastics and fossil fuel industries' promotion of plastic recycling to the opioid and tobacco industries' attempts to downplay or outright deny and lie to the public about the harmful effects of their products.

Considering this and what you've read about recycling plastic, which of the following comes *closest* to your view on this comparison?

The plastics and fossil fuel industries' misleading promotion of recycling as a viable solution to the plastic waste crisis is yet another example of big companies lying to their consumers.

Don't know

The plastics and fossil fuel industries advertising to the public about recycling as a way to address the plastic waste crisis, even if it isn't effective, is not similar to what the opioid and tobacco industries did.



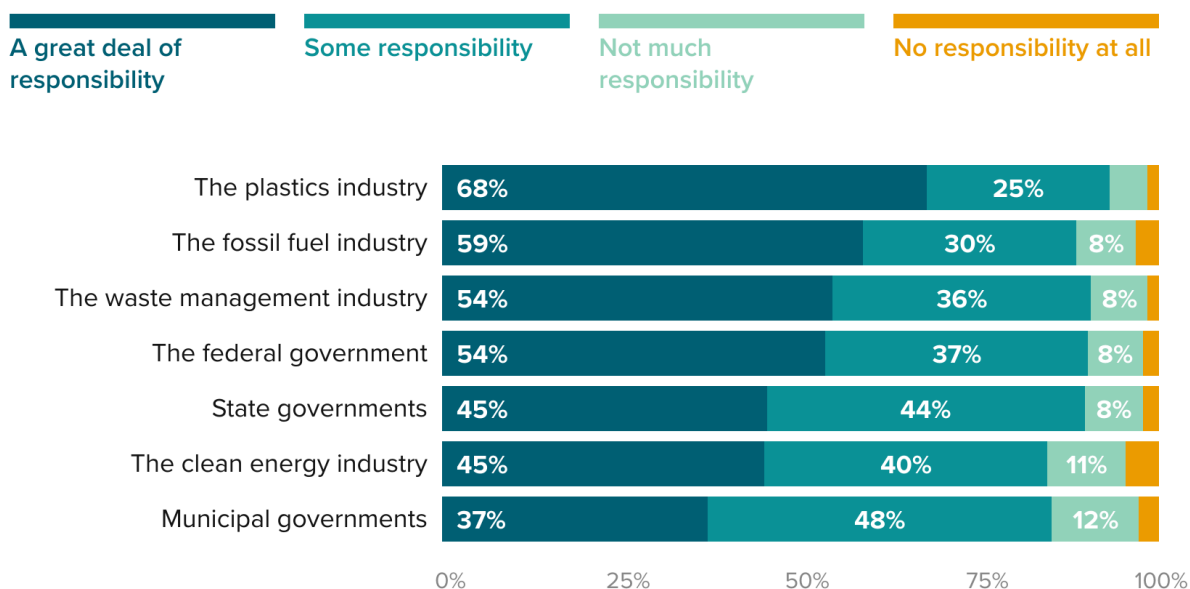
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After learning about the plastic waste crisis and the role of various stakeholders, voters strongly believe that the plastics (68%) and fossil fuel (59%) industries have *a great deal* of responsibility to address the plastic waste crisis.

Voters Believe the Plastics and Fossil Fuel Industries Have the Most Responsibility in Addressing the Plastic Waste Crisis

Knowing what you know now, for each of the following groups, please say how much responsibility, if any, you think they should have for addressing the plastic waste crisis:



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Conclusion

The plastics and fossil fuel industries continue to promote recycling as a solution to the plastic waste crisis despite their long-standing knowledge that plastic recycling is not technically or economically viable at scale. The data is clear: Voters view these practices as deceptive and believe these industries bear the greatest responsibility to address the plastic waste crisis. As such, voters support litigation against the plastics and fossil fuel industries to hold them accountable for their role in deceiving the public about the viability of plastic recycling.

Survey Methodology

From August 15 to 17, 2024, Data for Progress and the Center for Climate Integrity conducted a [survey](#) of 1,231 likely voters in the U.S. using web panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, geography, and 2020 recalled vote. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error associated with the sample size is ± 3 percentage points. Results for subgroups of the sample are subject to

increased margins of error. Partisanship reflected in tabulations is based on self-identified party affiliation, not partisan registration. For more information please visit dataforprogress.org/our-methodology.