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CIRCULAR ECONOMIES: POLLING ON ZERO-WASTE

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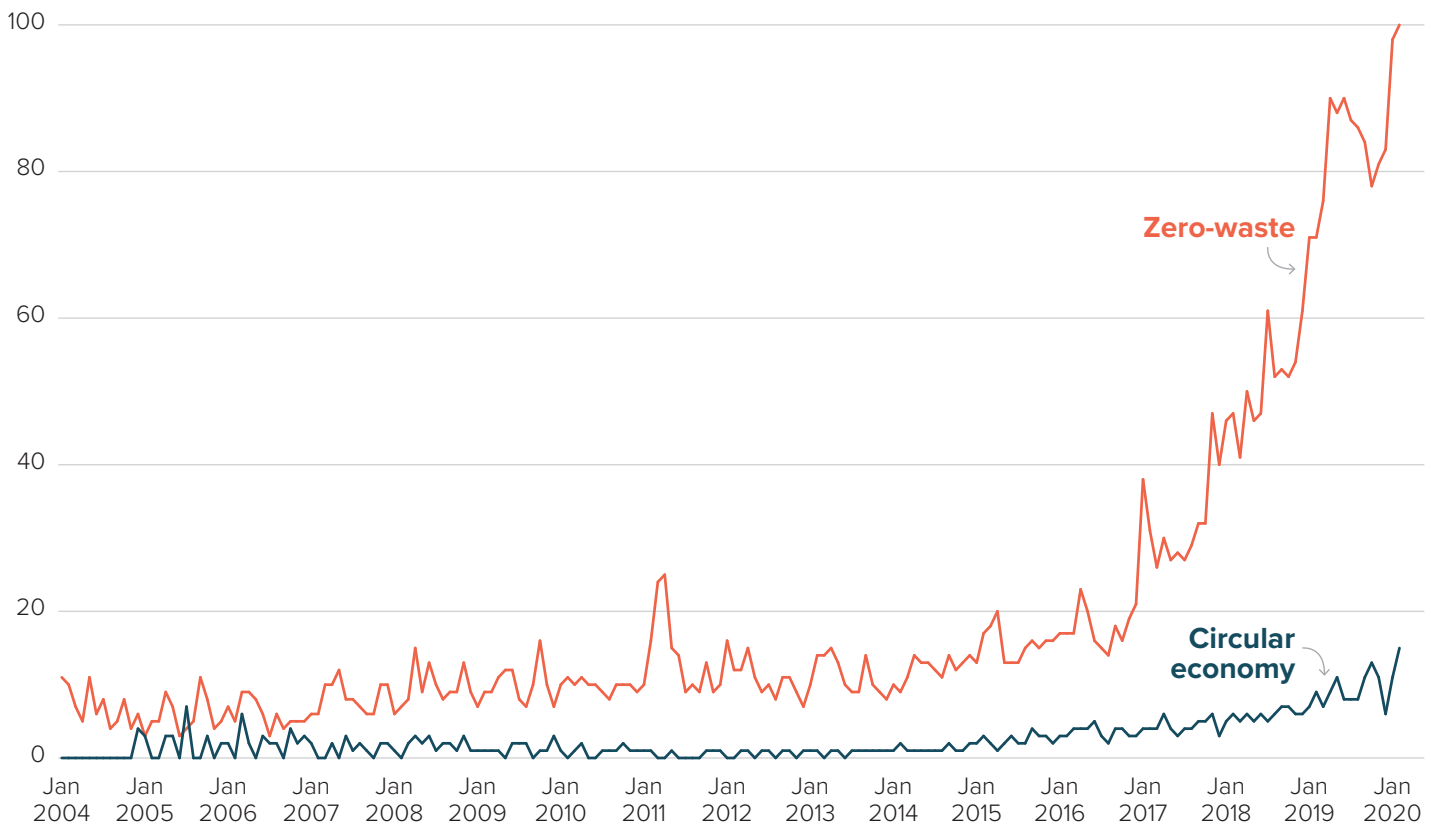
The release of greenhouse gases is not the only negative byproduct of modern economies; they also produce staggering amounts of waste. National Geographic estimates that there are 6.9 billion tonnes of plastic waste accumulated in the world, of which only 8.6% will ever be recycled. And that is just plastic waste. According to the LA Times the world produces 1.3 billion tons of all kinds of rubbish every single year. All of this waste kills wild animals, facilitates the spread of disease, and pollutes soil, air, and water.

However, as with climate change, some politicians are stepping forward with proposals to change the “take, make, and dispose” model of our modern, so-called “linear economies,” with zero-waste “circular economies.” Last year, Ilhan Omar (D-MN) introduced the Zero Waste Act in the United States Congress and the European Commission adopted its ambitious Circular Economy Plan. These important, nascent political commitments are coinciding

with a greater interest in circular economic principles within academic/thought circles as well. In 2020 groups as disparate as National Geographic, Greenbiz, the Chamber of Congress, and Harvard will host programs dedicated to in-depth explorations of circular economies. While mass action within both the public and private sectors still appears far-off, these promising developments beg a larger question; where does the public stand on these concepts?

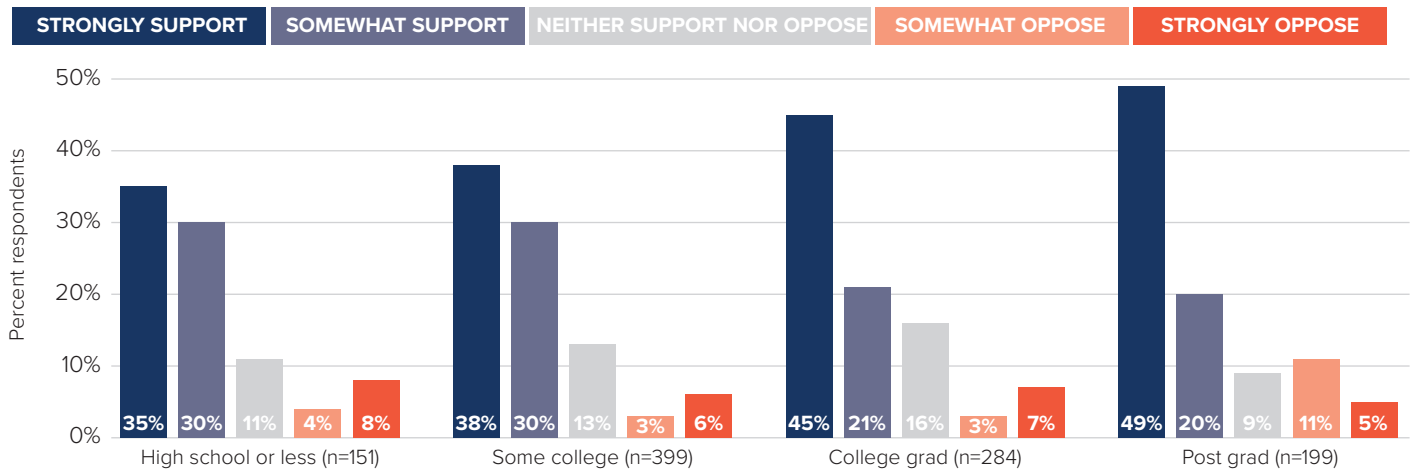
Data For Progress has conducted polling which suggests that in the last year the public is receptive to reducing waste. While the lexicon around “circular” economies has not entered the wider mainstream, the concept of “zero-waste” has. Below is a chart of the relative search volume of zero-waste (in red) and circular economy (blue) since 2004. Both concepts have gained volume over two decades, but “zero-waste” was a far more popular search term than “circular economy.”

INTEREST OVER TIME



Source: Google Analytics.

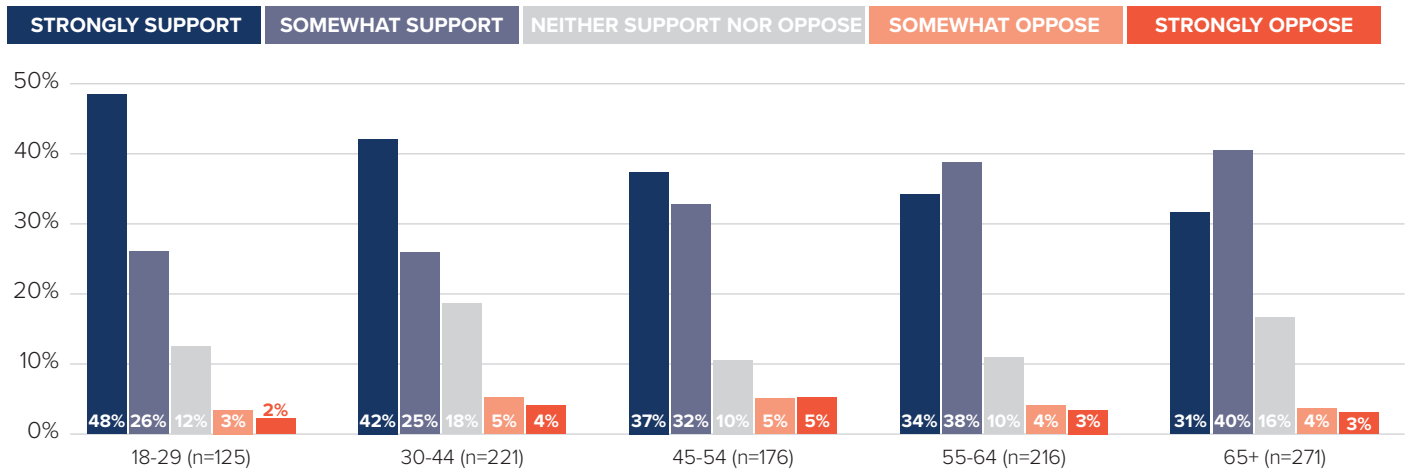
ZERO-WASTE PROGRAM SUPPORT BY EDUCATION



Source: SunriseGND fielded by YouGov Blue. Responses are weighted to represent the population of registered voters.

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ZERO-WASTE PROGRAM SUPPORT BY AGE



Source: YGBRegisteredVoterOmnibusJulyB fielded by YouGov Blue. Responses are weighted to represent the population of registered voters.

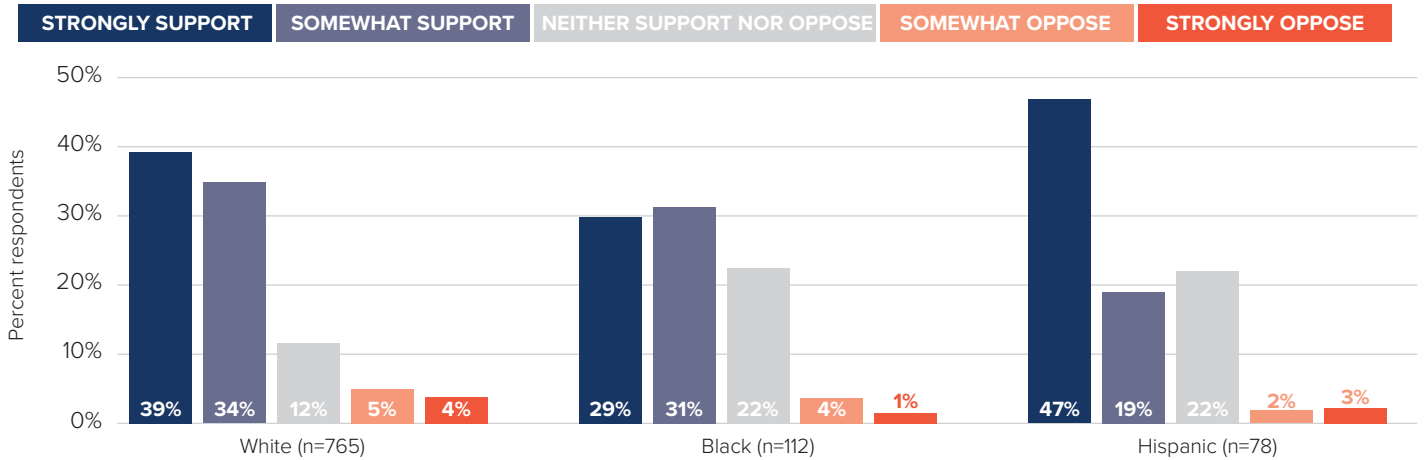
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As such, in two different surveys, one in partnership with Sunrise Movement, and the other a YouGov Blue poll of registered voters, Data for Progress asked respondents “Would you support or oppose a program that gives grants to states and cities to invest in composting and other waste disposal plans that don’t require new landfills or incinerators?”

The YouGov Blue poll found that 71.4% would support these initiatives, with less than 8% saying they were somewhat or very opposed. The Sunrise Poll found similar numbers; 67% in support and just 11% opposed. The polls also found those with college or postgraduate degrees were far more likely to “strongly” support zero-waste initiatives than those with only some college or high school education.

The polls also differentiated in the level of support by political affiliation. The YouGov poll found net support among liberal voters at nearly 80% while the Sunrise poll found it to be around 60%. For conservative and moderate voters, the numbers were lower, but net support still positive. With 43% and 22% net support among conservatives according to YGB and SR respectively, and 61% and 57% for moderates. However, this may belie softer support amongst these groups. While liberals were overwhelmingly “strongly” in support for zero-waste policy, moderate and conservatives were far more likely to be only “somewhat supportive.” In both polls, conservatives were more likely to “somewhat” support policies versus “strongly” do so, while among moderates, it was close to an even split.

ZERO-WASTE PROGRAM SUPPORT BY RACE



Source: YGBRegisteredVoterOmnibusJulyB fielded by YouGov Blue. Responses are weighted to represent the population of registered voters.

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Both polls showed a breakdown along racial lines as well. While all three races with statistically significant samples (White, Hispanic, and Black) had positive net support, Hispanics were most likely to be “strongly” in support. Moreover, in both polls, blacks were more likely to only “somewhat” support zero-waste initiatives while both Hispanics and Whites were more likely to be strongly in support.

Finally, both polls found strong support correlated with age. While all age groups had similar net support numbers, younger generations were *far* more likely to strongly support these initiatives. According to the Sunrise poll, over 50% of people aged 18-29 strongly supported the proposal, compared to ~35% for people 65+. Although even in older cohorts, zero-waste initiatives enjoy wide support, even if the support is “somewhat” rather than “strongly.”

These numbers suggest that a zero-waste bill akin to Ilhan Omar’s is popular across a wide range of demographic and political identifications. However, as is often the case on environmental issues, younger people are more likely to strongly support sustainable initiatives, and if circular economy advocates were looking for reasons to be concerned, the prevalence of only “somewhat” supporting zero-waste initiatives amongst conservative, less-educated, and older voters means there is potential for this support to dissipate or prove less salient as waste issues begin to take center stage. Still, in an era of supposed partisan divide, zero-waste initiatives have the potential for unusual bi-partisan appeal.

COVER PHOTO
Jilbert Ebrahimi/Unsplash