

What Americans Want from Recycling, Reuse and Packaging Waste Policy

A new Harris Poll survey finds broad support for clearer rules, producer accountability, stronger infrastructure and solutions that help recycling, reuse and waste reduction work at scale.

WHAT THE SURVEY SUGGESTS

60%

say the current recycling system is either struggling to keep pace with today's packaging and waste streams or requires major redesign

People want a better system for packaging waste
The findings suggest Americans want clearer, more consistent and more accountable systems that make better outcomes possible.

92%

agree national standards for recycling and packaging could improve efficiency



91%

agree reducing packaging waste requires changes from consumers, companies and government



91%

believe that companies will be more likely to invest in improvements when regulations are consistent



62%

say the most effective approach is both improving recycling systems and reducing overall plastic use

This is slightly over three times more than those who chose either approach alone

 REUSE  RECYCLING  WASTE REDUCTION

89%

agree they would prefer products they can reuse or refill rather than needing to dispose of them

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY IS A CONSENSUS VIEW

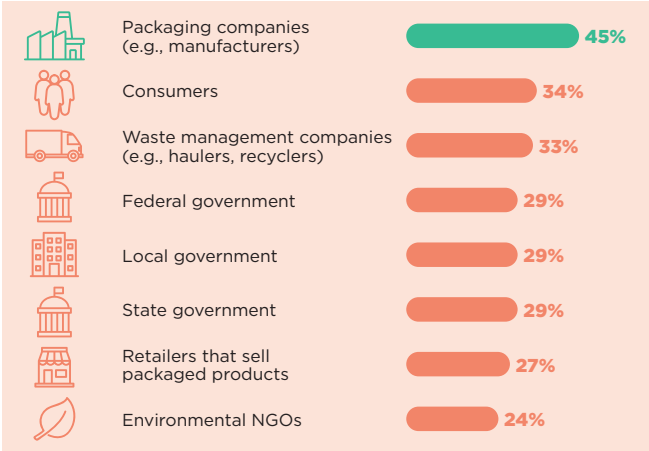
Americans do not see plastic waste as the responsibility of consumers alone
They support a more accountable system in which producers help fund solutions.

90%

agree that consumers, companies and government all share responsibility for reducing packaging waste



People most often assign primary responsibility for reducing plastic waste to packaging companies, with shared accountability across consumers, government and industry

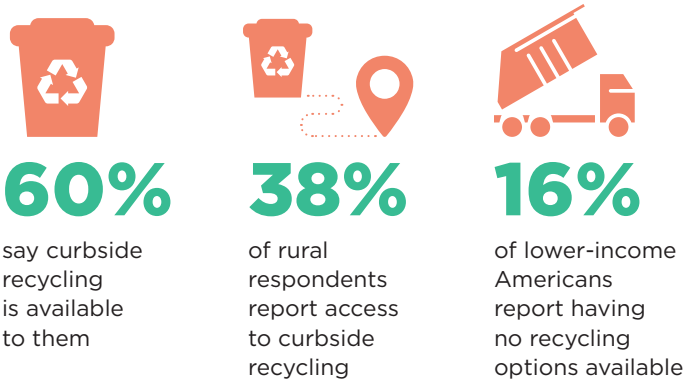


THE SYSTEM IS NOT KEEPING UP

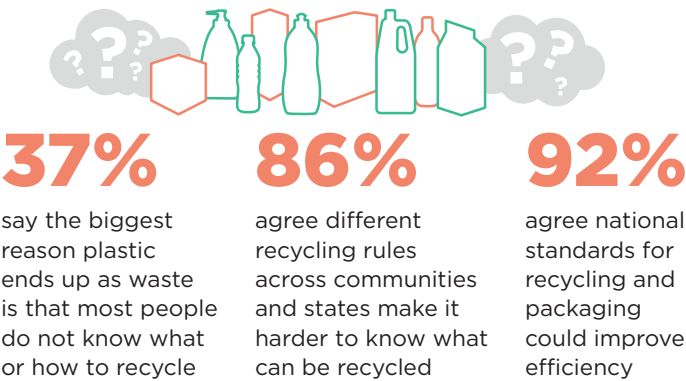
The current system feels uneven and confusing

Americans are participating, but the system does not always make recycling or waste reduction clear, convenient or effective.

Access gaps shape how people experience the plastics and recycling challenge

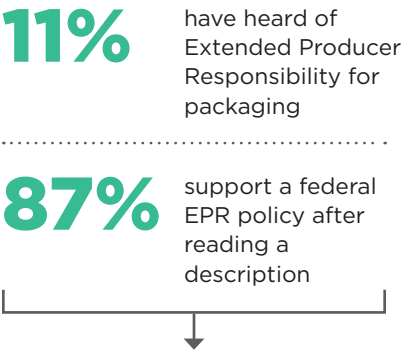


Consumers experience inconsistency as confusion; companies experience it as complexity



EPR PRINCIPLES RESONATE

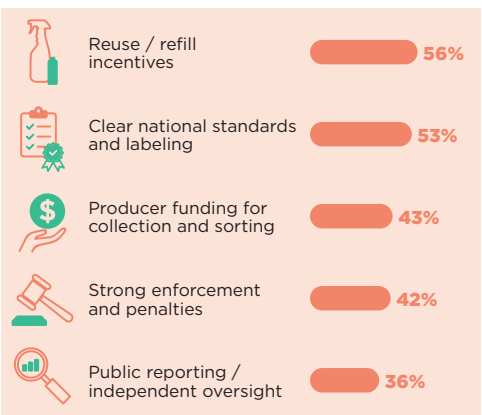
The EPR acronym is unfamiliar



EPR principles are familiar



% who say each approach is important to include in a federal policy to reduce plastic waste

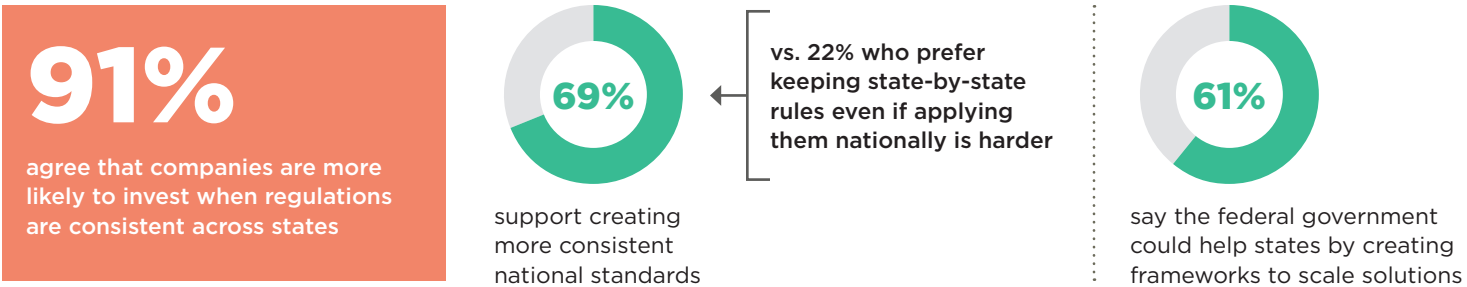


HOW EPR WAS DESCRIBED

"Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is a policy that shifts responsibility for the end-of-life management of products and packaging to the producers (manufacturers, brand owners, and importers). Under EPR, producers help fund and/or manage collection, recycling, reuse, and disposal of the products and packaging they put on the market."

CONSISTENCY AS A BRIDGE

People believe consistency can unlock investment and help communities and states scale solutions



ECONOMIC UPSIDE

People see reuse and recycling as an economic opportunity

Findings suggest the public sees recycling and reuse policy not only as an environmental issue, but also as an infrastructure, jobs and local investment issue.

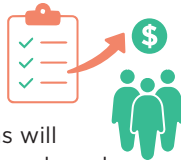
90%

agree improving recycling and reuse systems could strengthen U.S. manufacturing, supply chains and local economies



68%

believe policies that improve recycling and reuse/refill systems will create jobs and local investment



57%

believe these policies will strengthen domestic manufacturing



A majority support EPR and see an economic upside

Support EPR and believe policies create jobs and local investment



DEMOCRAT



REPUBLICAN



INDEPENDENT/OTHER

Believe in jobs / local investment

61%

support EPR and see economic upside



SUPPORT EPR

Do not / not sure

25%

support, but not convinced

7%

oppose, but see economic upside



OPPOSE EPR

7%

oppose and not sure

BROAD SUPPORT, CLEAR CONDITIONS

Across party identification, support is broad for the building blocks of a stronger packaging waste system

While debates about plastic waste solutions can often appear polarized, the findings suggest a surprising degree of alignment. Americans seem far more united around the outcomes they want than the public conversation often suggests.



84%+

support across party groups once EPR is explained

87%

TOTAL

support a Federal EPR policy once it's explained



69%

TOTAL

support consistent national standards



68%

TOTAL

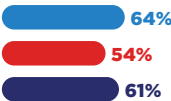
believe improving systems will create jobs and local investments



60%

TOTAL

say the current system is underperforming



COST SENSITIVITY SHAPES SUPPORT

People want progress balanced with affordability and proof that solutions work

Affordability and health are key concerns when people weigh stronger packaging and recycling policy.

45%

say **"it depends"** when asked about supporting a more effective policy that could increase costs

36%

support a more effective policy if it slightly increases costs



37%

say balancing environmental improvements with affordability is most important



41%

selected "reducing plastic pollution will protect human health" as the top reason that would make them more likely to support stronger action — twice any other option

PROOF AND TRUSTED MESSENGERS

People want credible messengers and proof that systems work



Collaboration can help build confidence, but transparency and proof are essential.

71%

say business and environmental organization partnerships make policy solutions more credible



74%

agree companies and organizations working together makes them more confident solutions will be widely implemented



35%

however, find "recyclable" or "eco-friendly" claims not at all or only somewhat believable



88%

agree packaging regulations should prioritize measurable outcomes rather than broad commitments

About the survey

This research was conducted online in the U.S. by The Harris Poll, funded by SC Johnson, with technical advisory support from World Wildlife Fund. The survey was conducted among 4,215 U.S. adults ages 18 and older between May 20 and May 28, 2026. Respondents were recruited through online research panels and were required to reside in the United States.

The total sample included a national sample of 2,206 U.S. adults and targeted oversamples of 2,009 respondents across ten states: Georgia, Texas, Alabama, Virginia, West Virginia, Colorado, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Tennessee, with approximately 200 respondents in each state. The survey explored attitudes, behaviors and opinions related to plastic packaging, recycling, waste reduction, Extended Producer Responsibility policies, and preferences for federal versus state action on packaging and recycling policy.

For analysis, states were grouped by political lean based on their voting outcomes in the four most recent presidential elections. States that voted for Democratic candidates in all four elections were classified as blue states, states that voted for Republican candidates in all four elections were classified as red states, and states with mixed outcomes were classified as purple states.

Data were weighted where necessary to align with actual population proportions by key demographic and geographic variables, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, region, household income, household size, marital status, employment status and state. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured using a Bayesian credible interval. For the national sample of 2,206 respondents, the credible interval is ± 2.8 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Credible intervals are wider for subgroups and state oversamples.

As with all survey research, results may be affected by sources of error that cannot always be quantified, including coverage error, nonresponse, question wording, response options, weighting and other post-survey adjustments. This report primarily presents national findings. Differences by state political lean and key demographic groups are noted where meaningful.