

# Metro Recycling Resident Survey

September 2018



## Research Purpose

- Assess perceptions of, and trust in, regional recycling program, and establish baseline for benchmarking attitudes over time
- Measure confusion about contamination
- Inform future communications that will reduce contamination and confusion
- Design research that considers all diversity of residents, especially low-income residents and also communities of color

# Methodology

- Online survey of 600 residents of Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington counties (n=200 each county). Margin of error  $\pm 4\%$
- Conducted September 17–28, 2018; 15 minutes to complete
- Quotas set and data weighted to match makeup of region by age, gender, education, and race/ethnicity
- Due to rounding, some totals may differ by  $\pm 1$  from the sum of separate responses.

## Key Takeaways: Values and Awareness

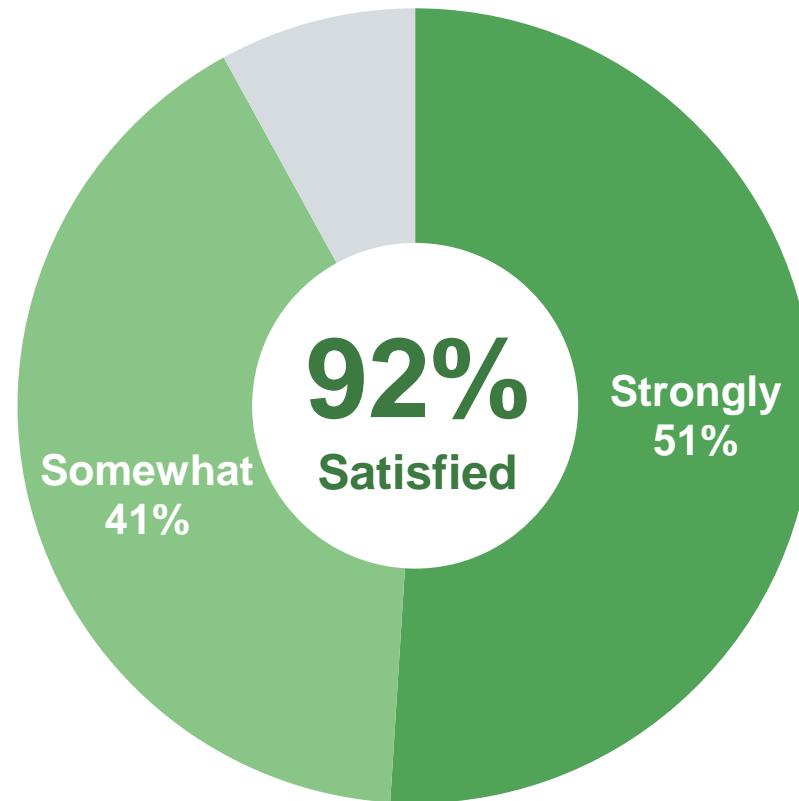
- Residents in the greater Portland believe recycling is important. They are satisfied with the system and place high trust in it. They think they get good value for a quality service.
- Residents express clear confusion about what types of items are accepted in home recycling bins. Confusion is highest when it comes to frozen food boxes and rigid plastics.

## Key Takeaways: Communications

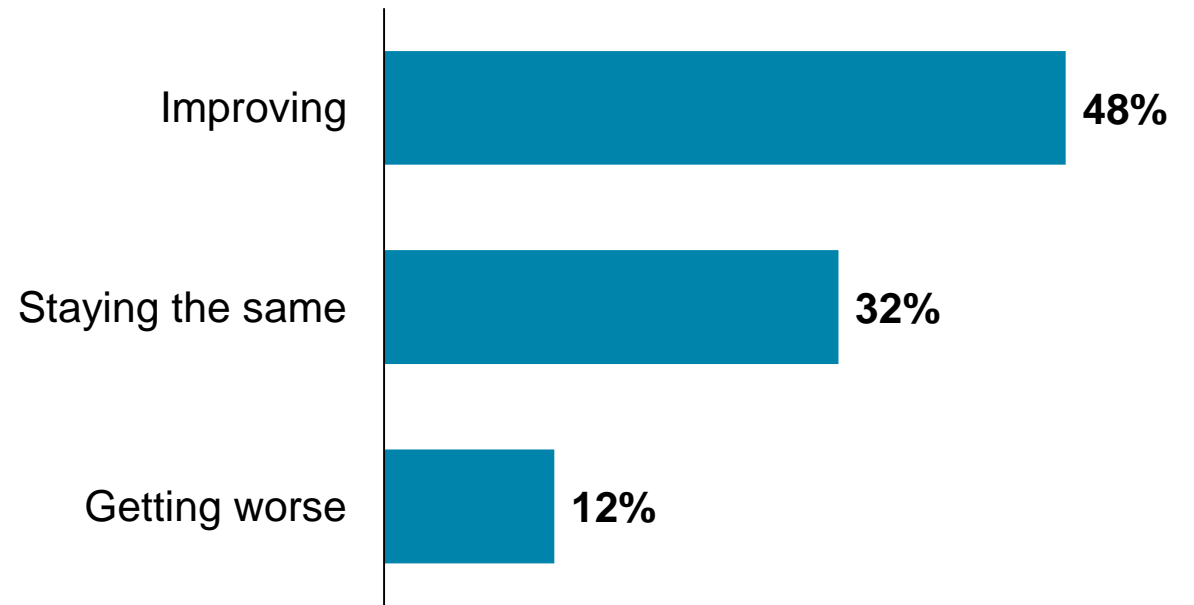
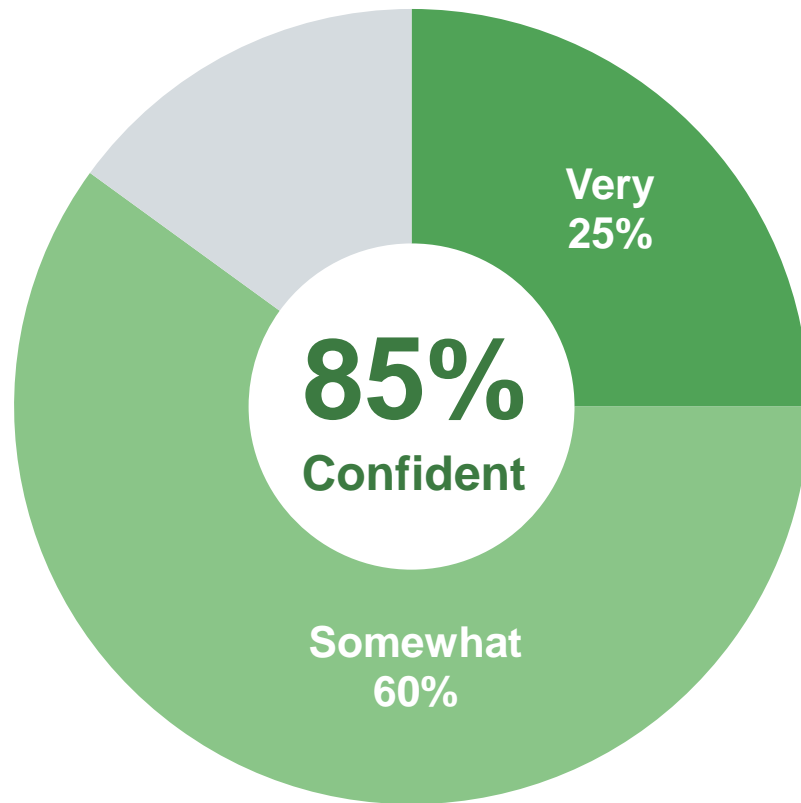
- Defining what items should not go in the home recycling bin is by far the most effective information for reducing contamination caused by plastic items—but it may cause people to throw away recyclable tubs.
- College graduates, women, and people who live in single-family homes are less likely to contaminate the recycling bin with the wrong items.

# **Satisfaction and confidence in the regional recycling system**

# Resident satisfaction with home recycling service in the greater Portland area is high across all groups.

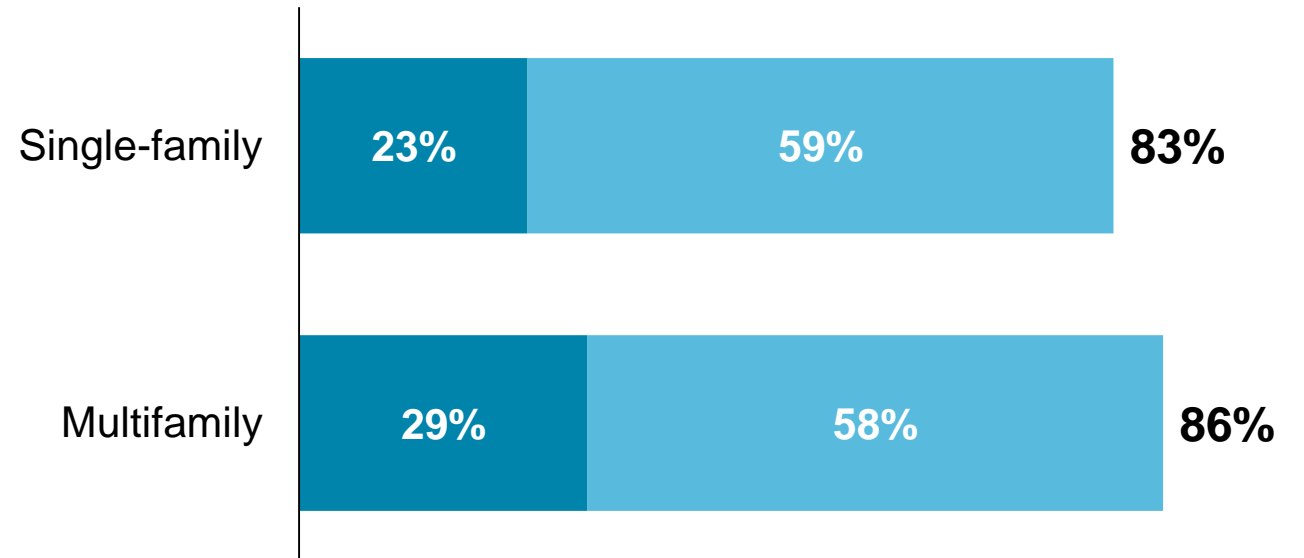
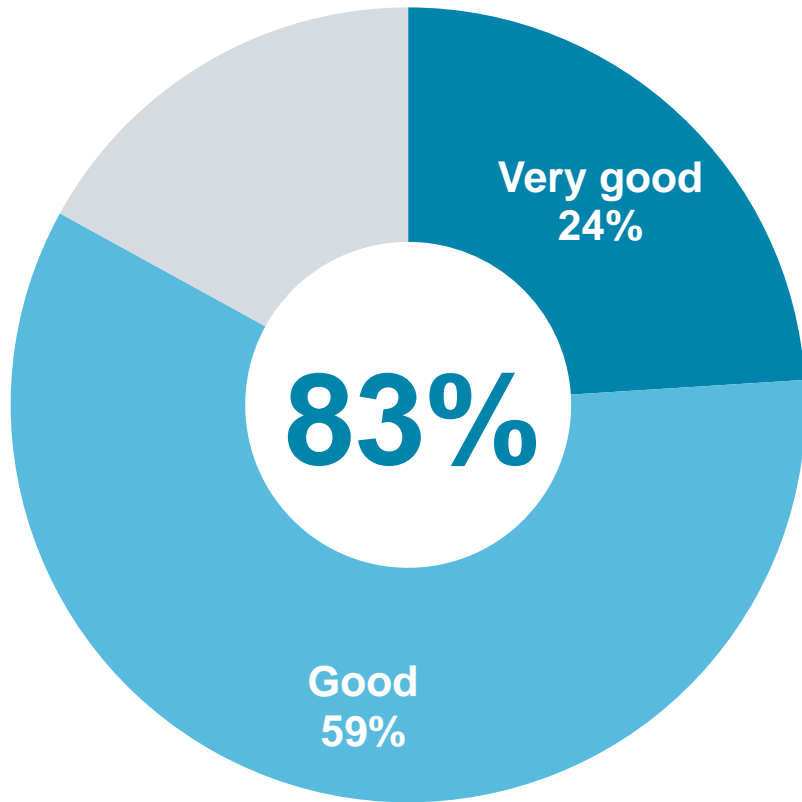


# Residents place their trust and confidence in our region's home recycling program.

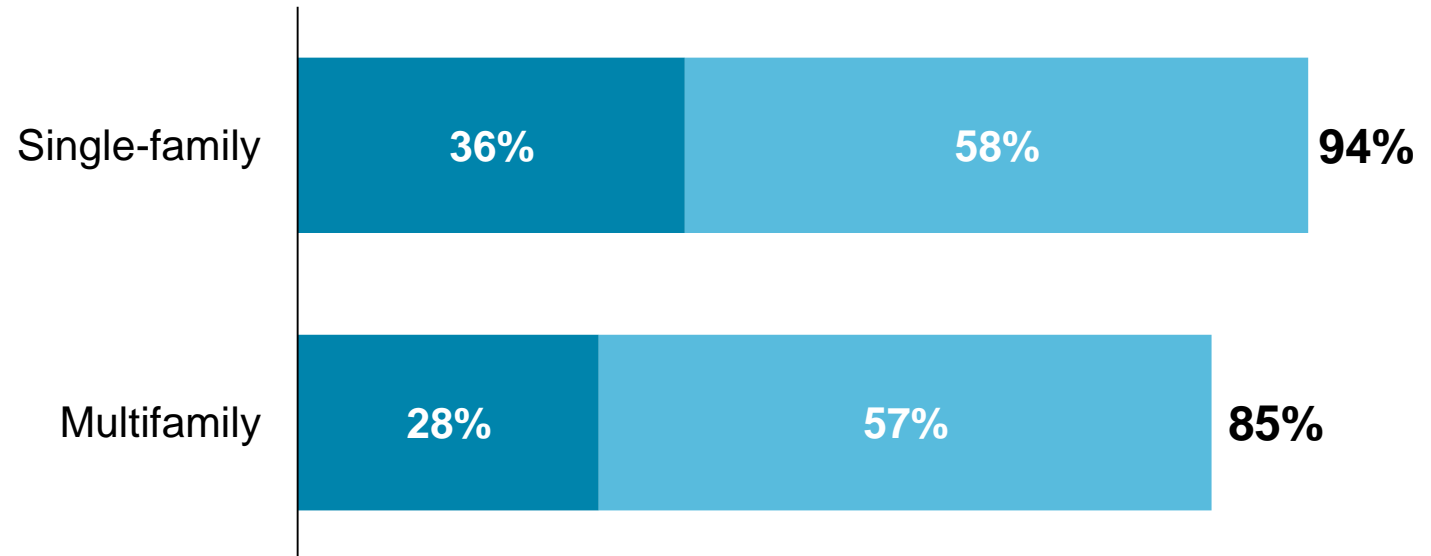
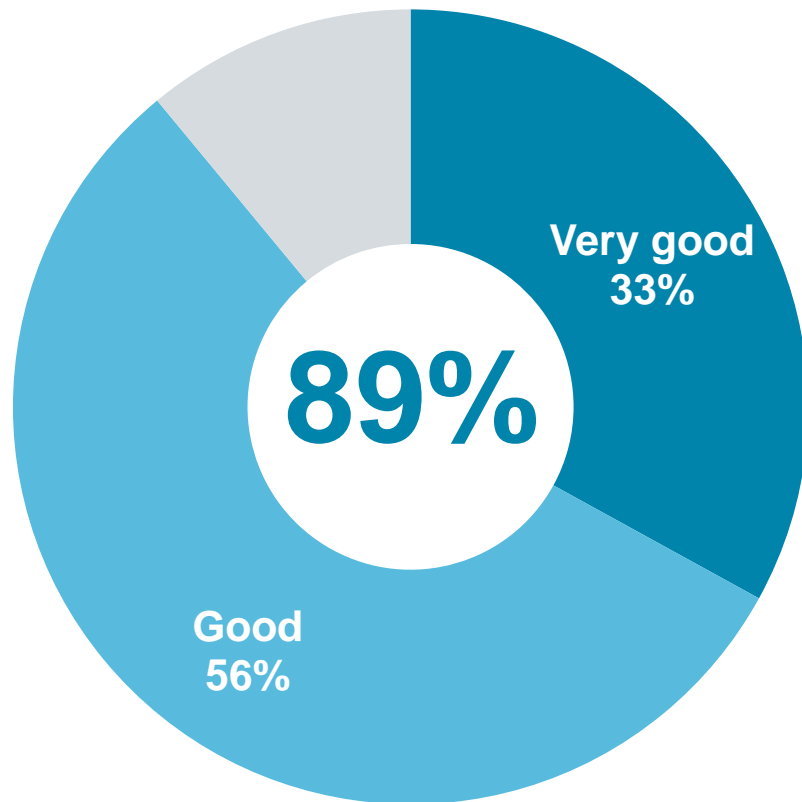




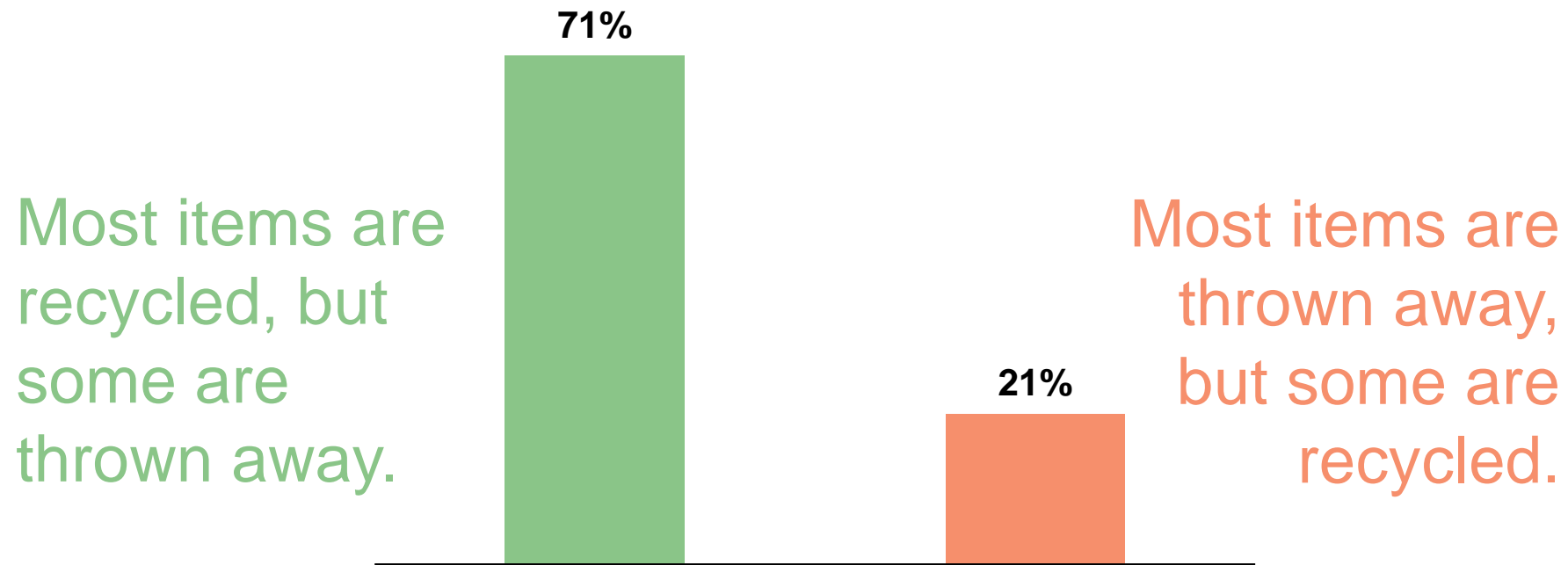
# Residents who pay their own garbage and recycling bill report good *value* for the money they pay.



# Those who do not pay their own bills directly were asked about *quality of service*—and they say it is very good.

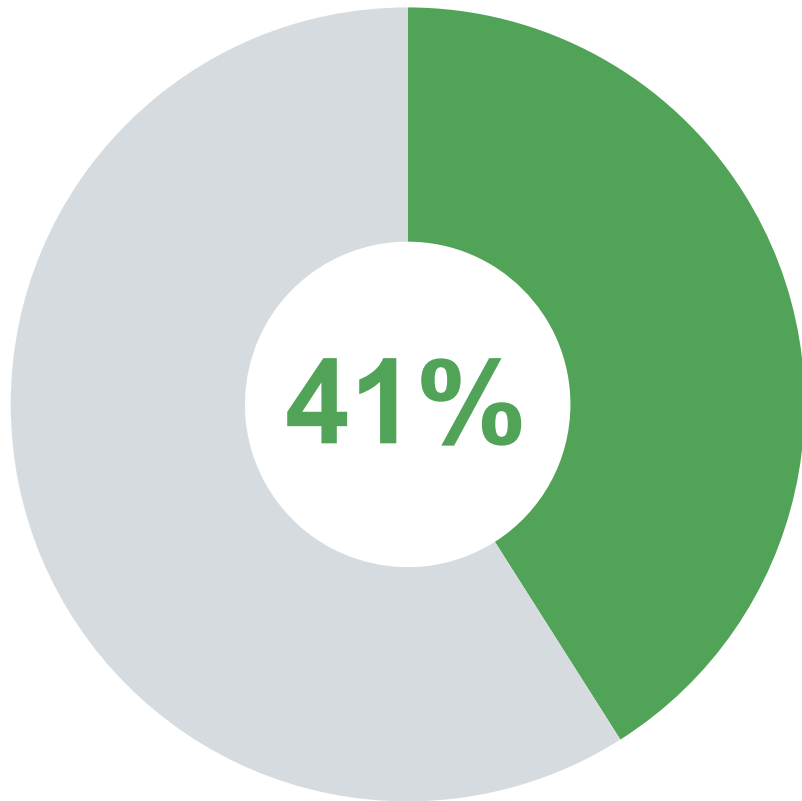


# Residents mostly believe that items recycled at home are actually recycled, not thrown away.



# **Awareness and personal behaviors**

# Fewer than half of all residents have heard about recycling recently. Some groups have heard more.



Those who **have heard or read** about recycling recently tend to be:

- 65 and older (50%)
- College graduates (48%)
- Hispanic/Latinx residents (46%)\*
- Those who recycle items at specific locations (45%)

\*Small sample size

## In their own words, residents heard . . .

**16%** China is not accepting some materials

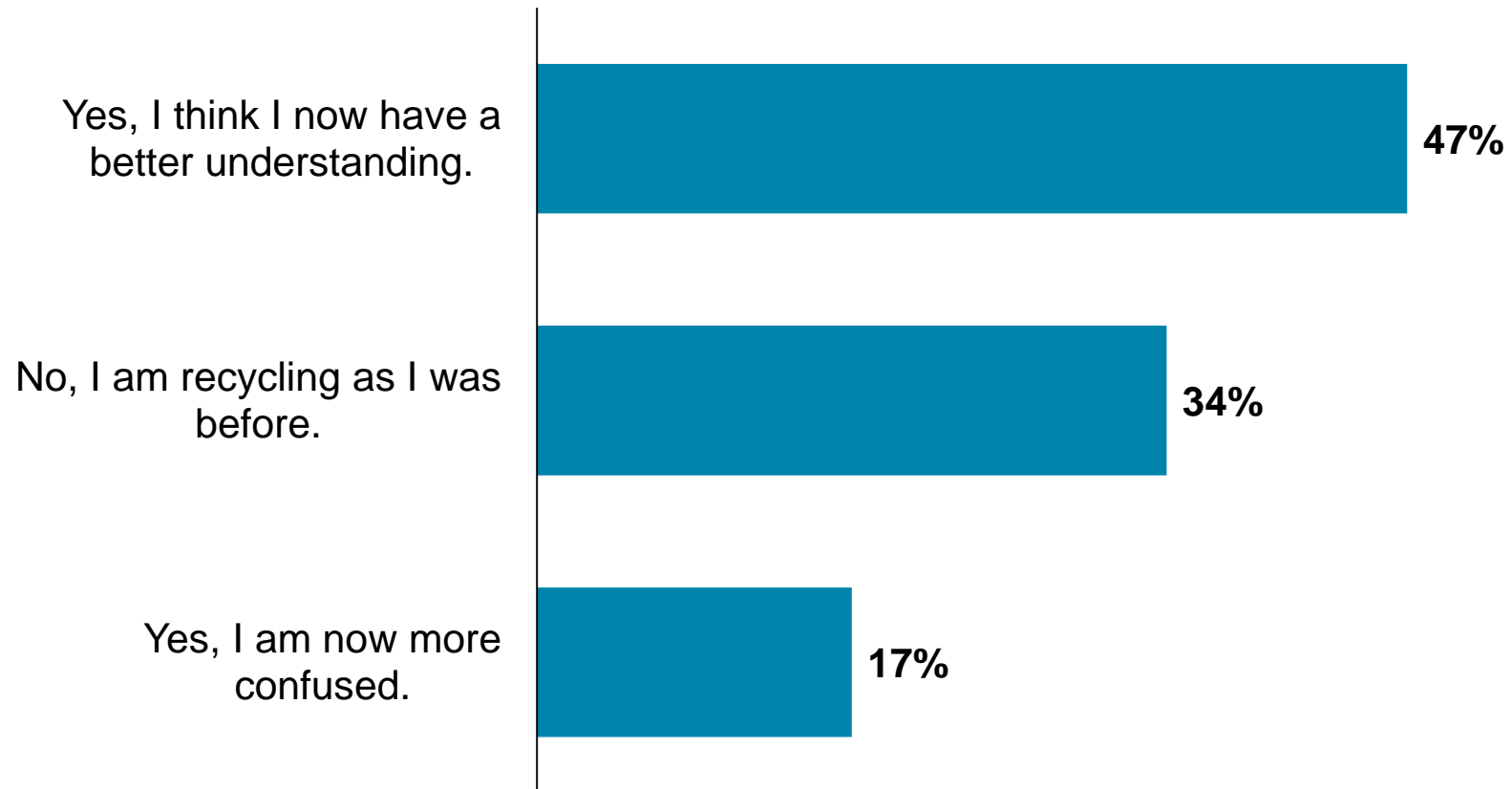
**13%** Information about what can be recycled and what cannot be recycled

**10%** Some items are not recyclable

**7%** Positive mention about recycling in area

**7%** Changes in policies and what is accepted

# Many of those who have heard about recycling recently may better understand what is recyclable.



## Recall about recent information about recycling is predominately good. Some residents fear the worst.

*“China refuses our recycling because it is too dirty.”*

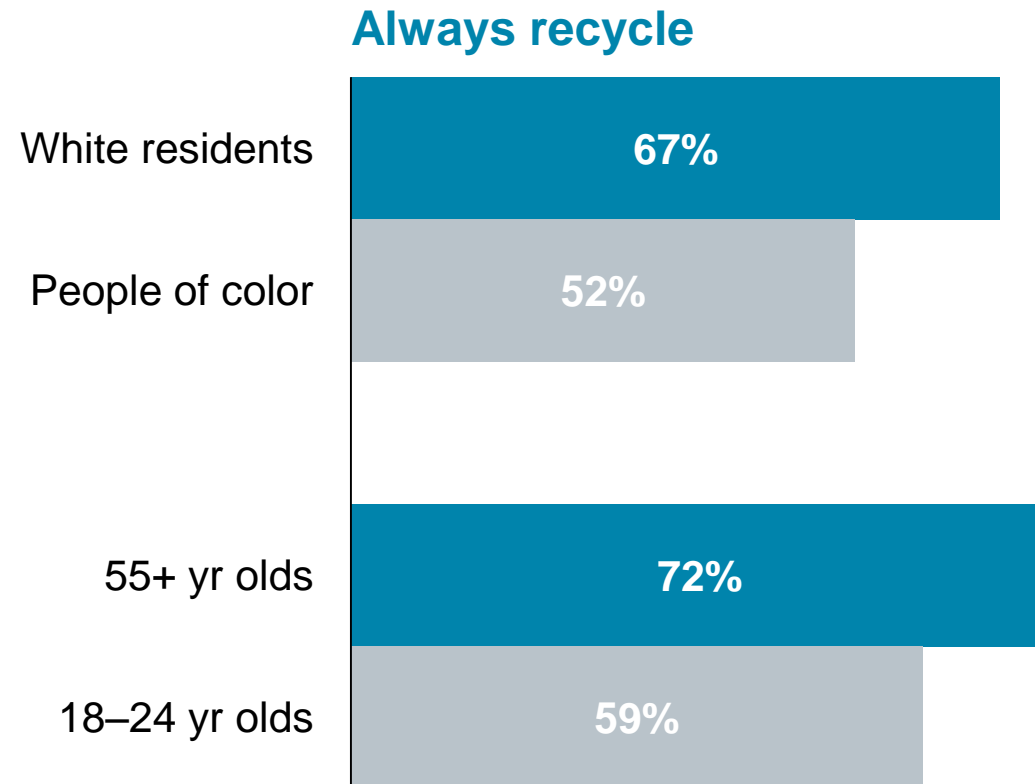
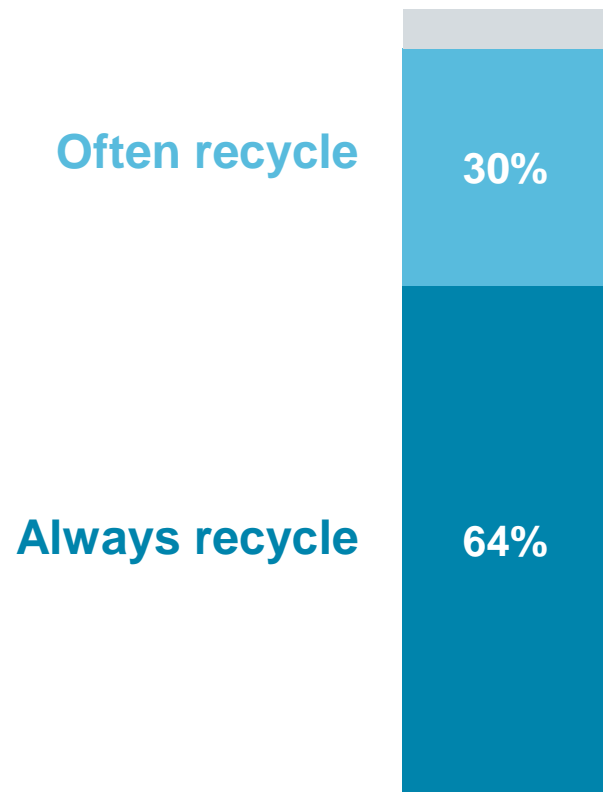
*“I see ads on Facebook.”*

*“That we are not putting the correct things in recycling. Many people put things in recycling that are not recyclable.”*

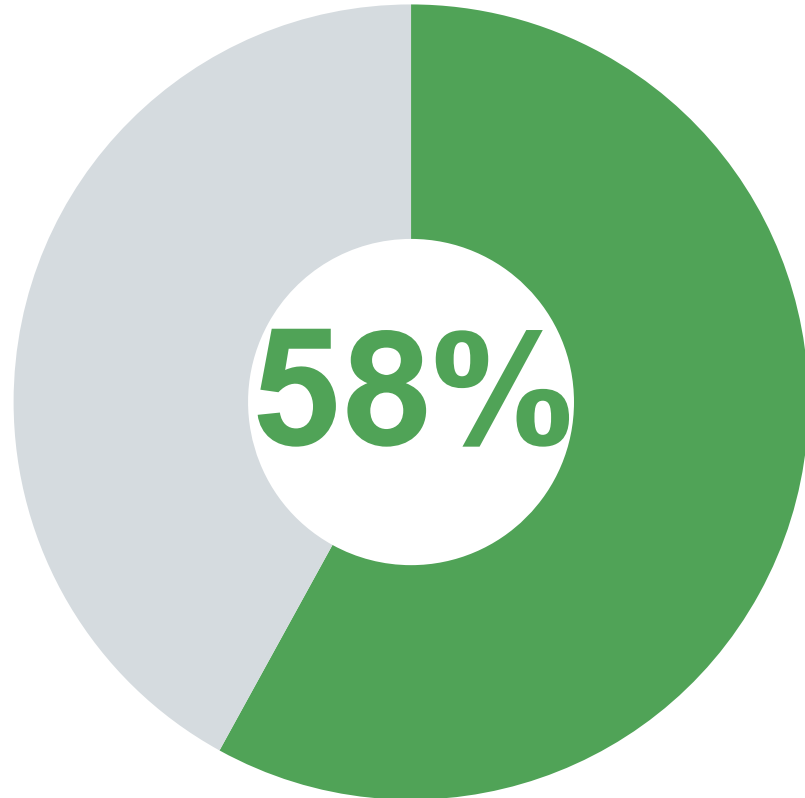
*“They are talking about discontinuing recycling due to people not sorting properly.”*



# Two-thirds of residents say they always recycle. Older, white residents are more likely to recycle often or always.



## People overestimate their knowledge about recycling compared to others.

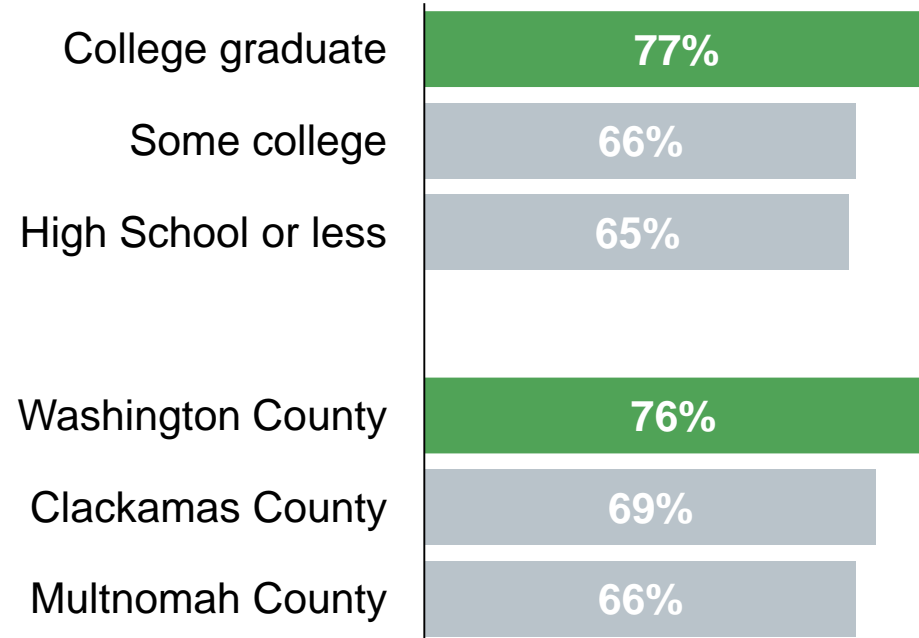


Percentage of people who say that they are more informed about recycling than most people.

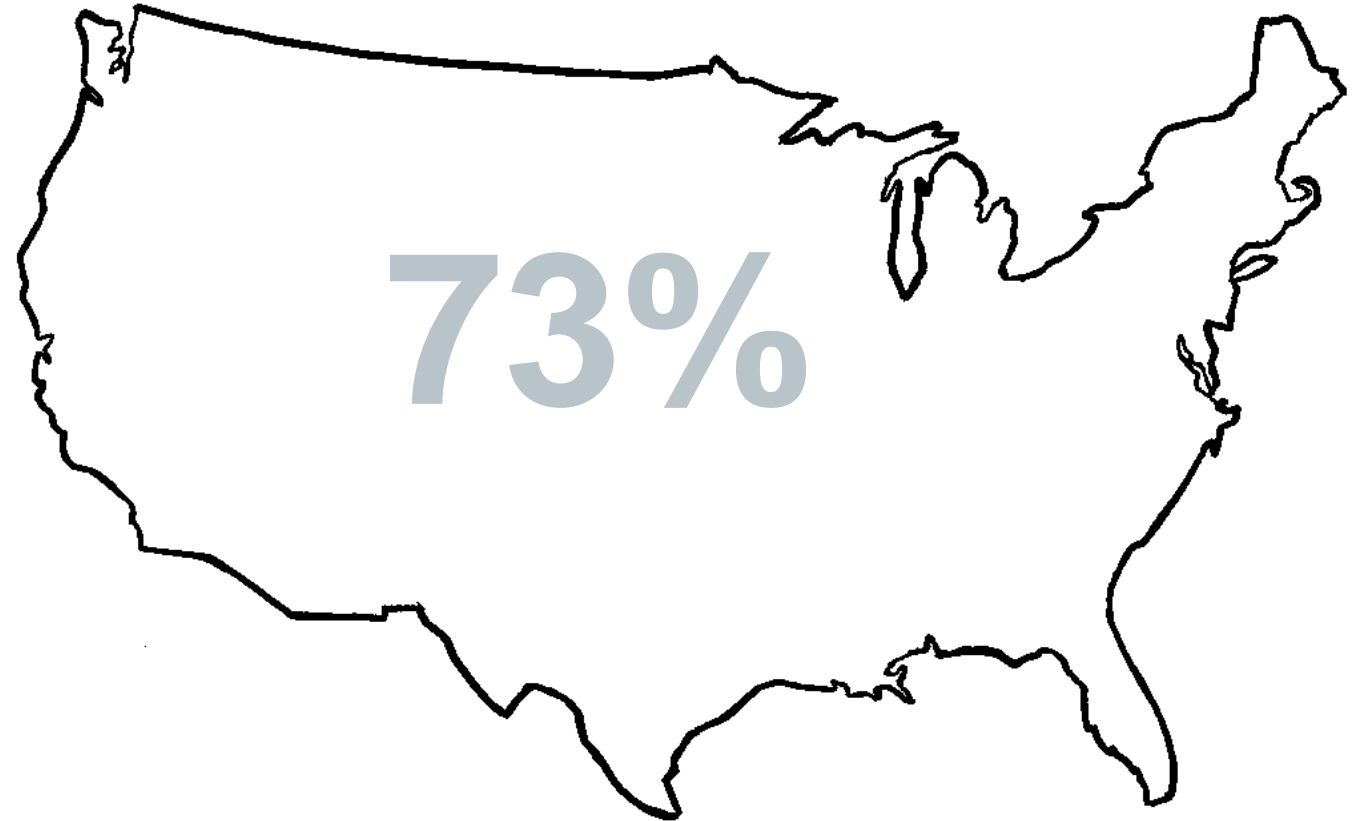
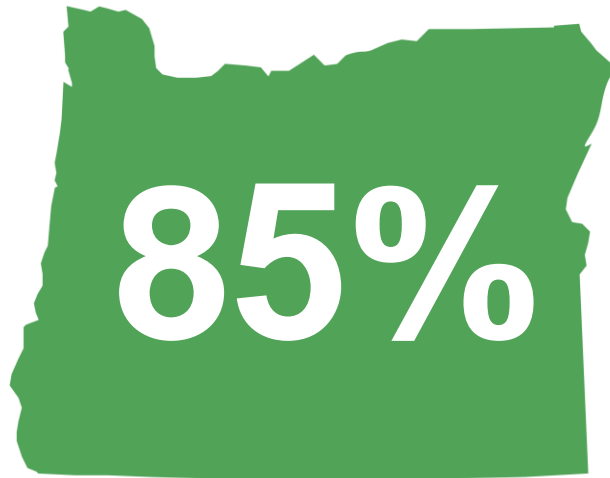
# “Super recyclers” are more likely to have higher levels of education and live in Washington County.



**Recycle items like paint, batteries, electronics and plastic bags at a specific location**



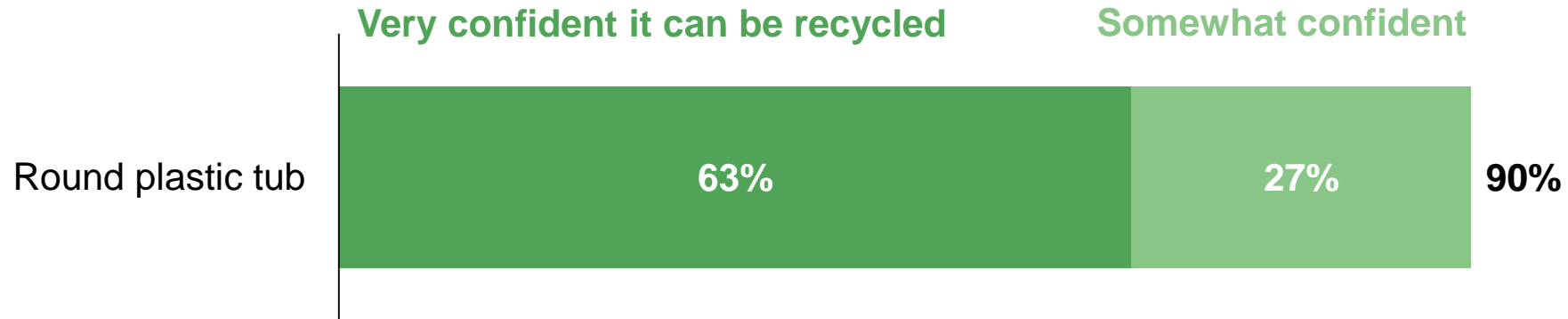
# Residents in the greater Portland region are more likely to express strong emotions about recycling.



*“It bothers me a lot or some to see people throwing away things in the trash that can be recycled.”*

**Sorting recycling and garbage**

# Most residents know round plastic tubs, like cottage cheese containers, can be recycled at home.



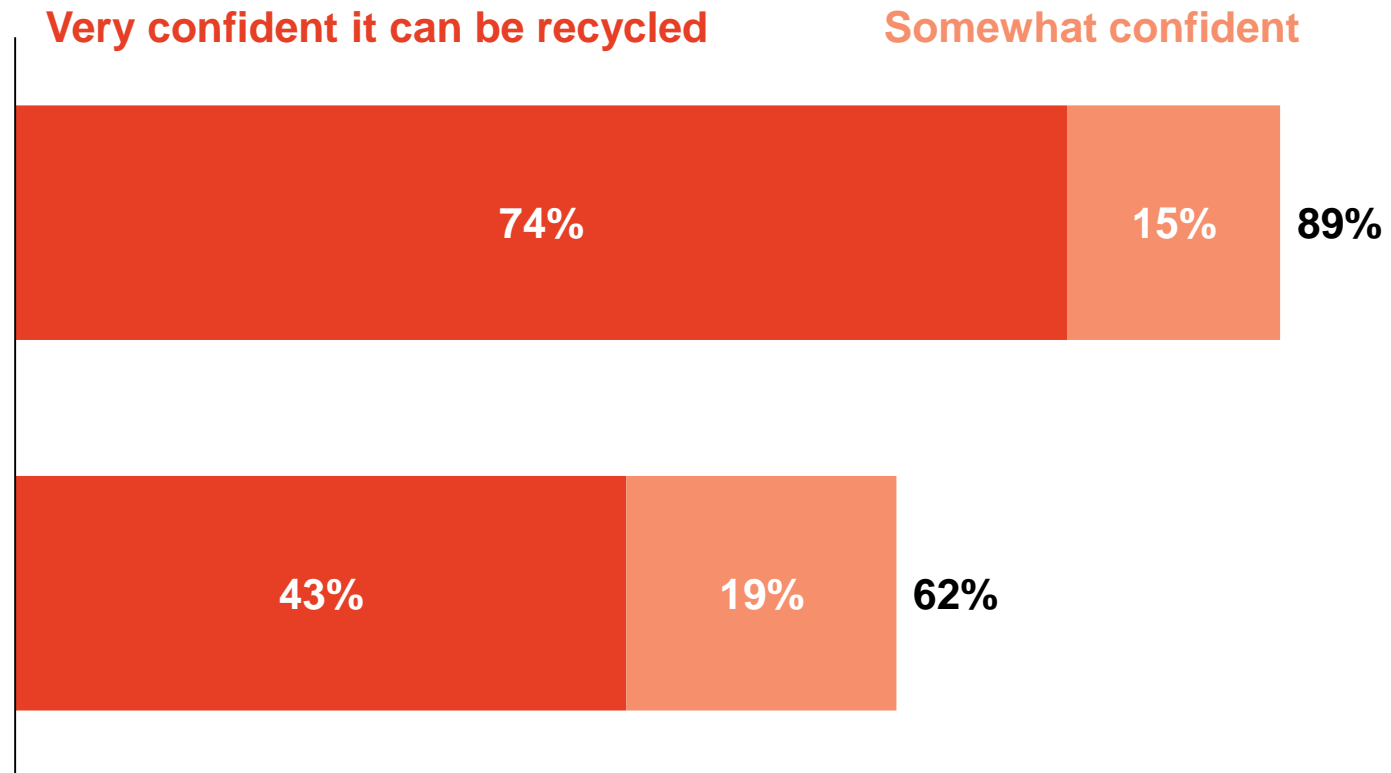
# Of non-recyclable items, residents are most likely to put frozen food boxes in the home recycling bin.



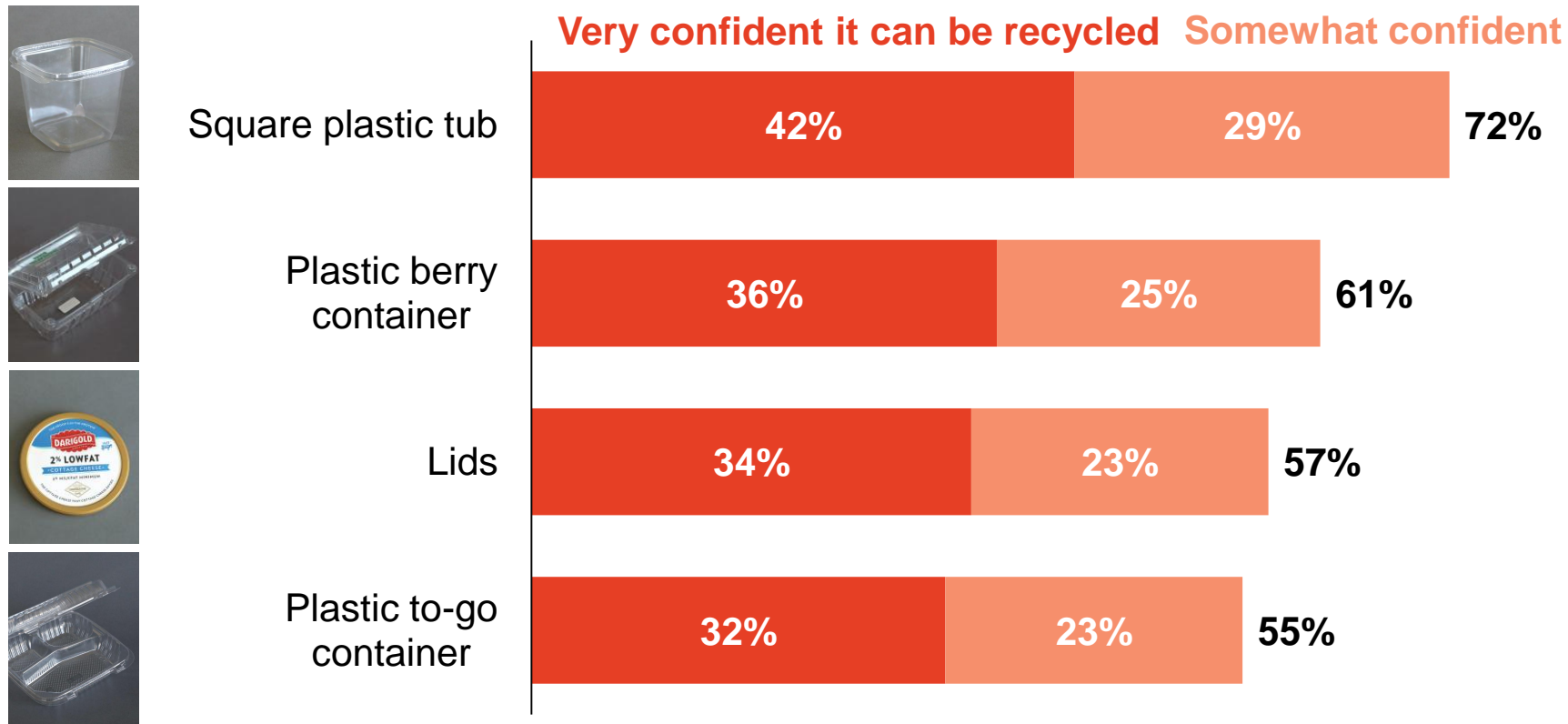
Frozen food box



Paper coffee cup

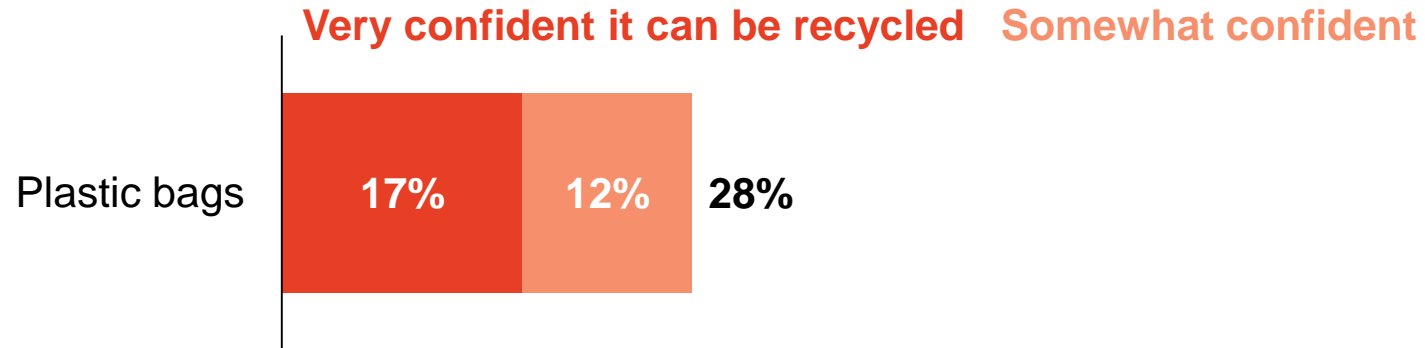


# Residents aren't likely to know that some rigid plastics can't be recycled at home—especially square tubs.

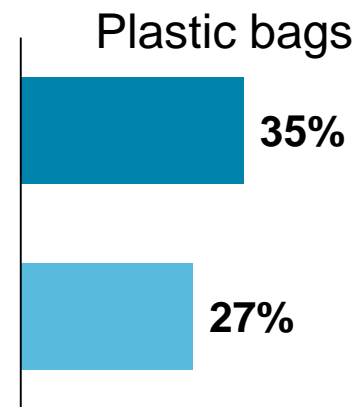
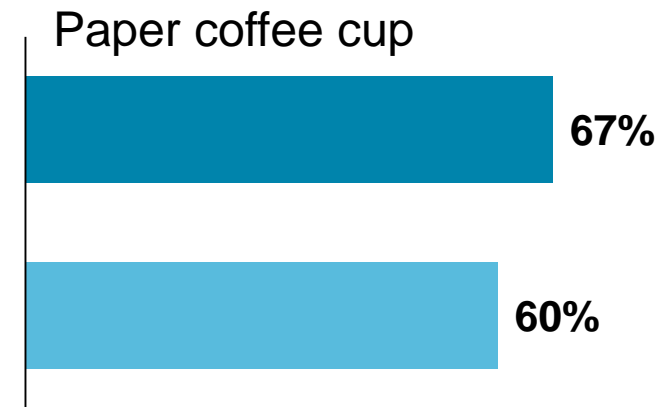
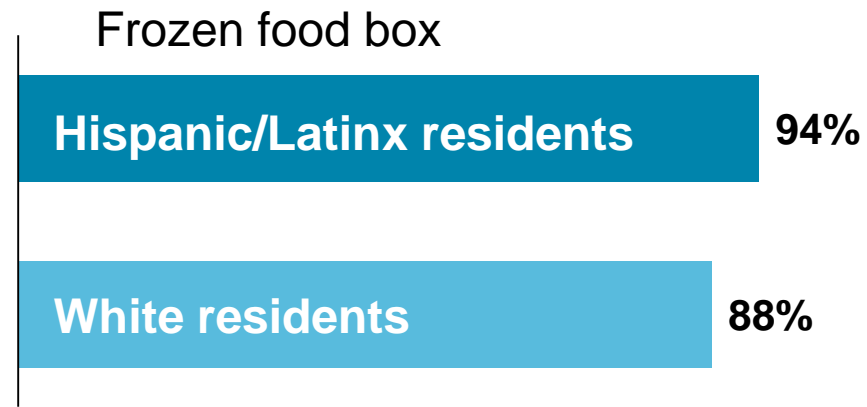




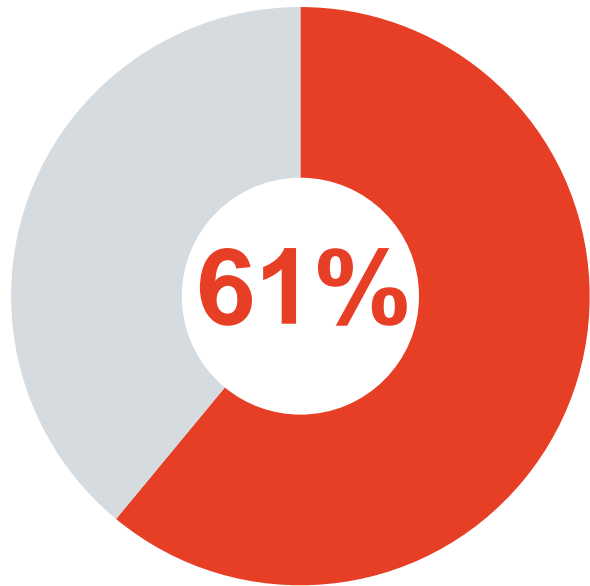
# Residents are less likely to recycle plastic bags at home, but one in four still believe they are accepted.



# Hispanic/Latinx residents are slightly more likely to put non-recyclable items in the bin.



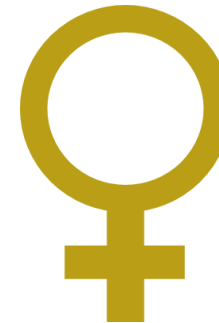
# College graduates, women, and people in single-family homes are less likely to put non-recyclables in the bin.



Average percentage of residents who are very/somewhat confident



53%  
(-7)

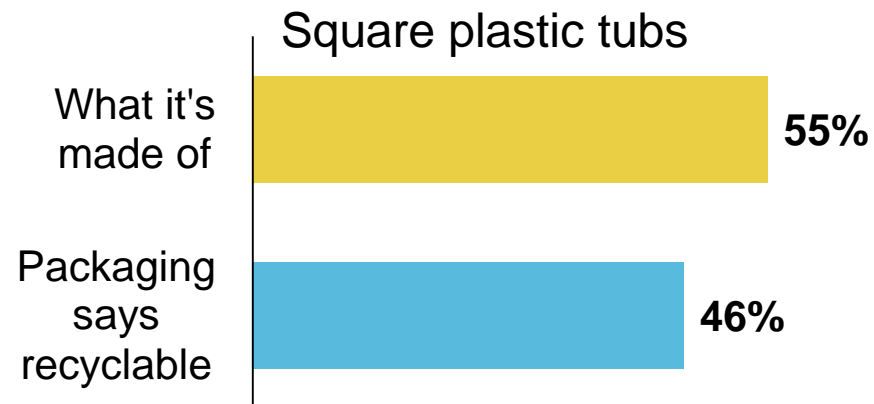
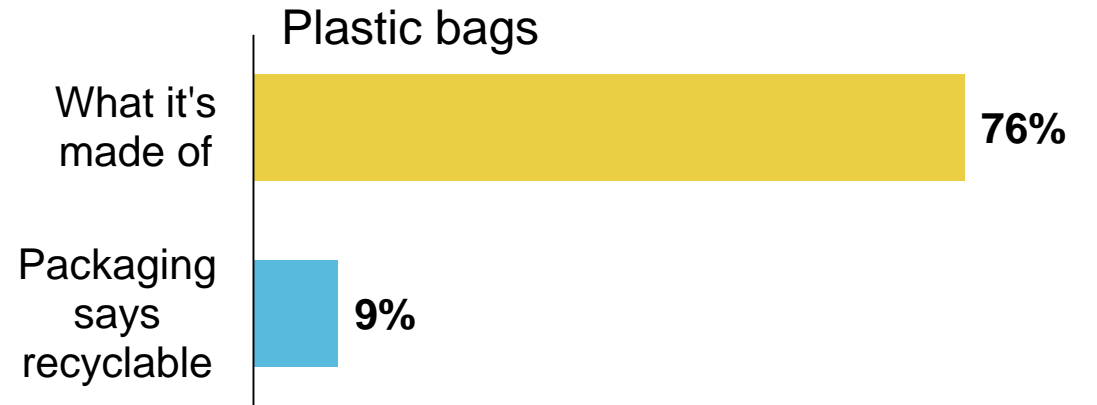
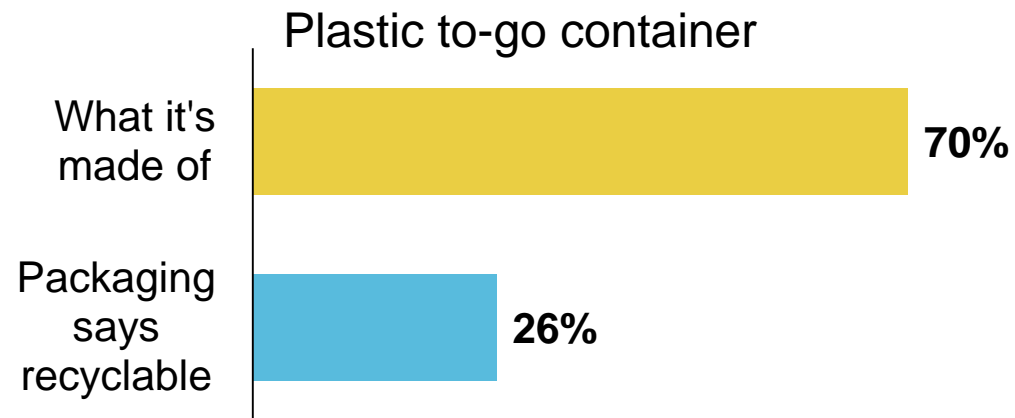


56%  
(-4)

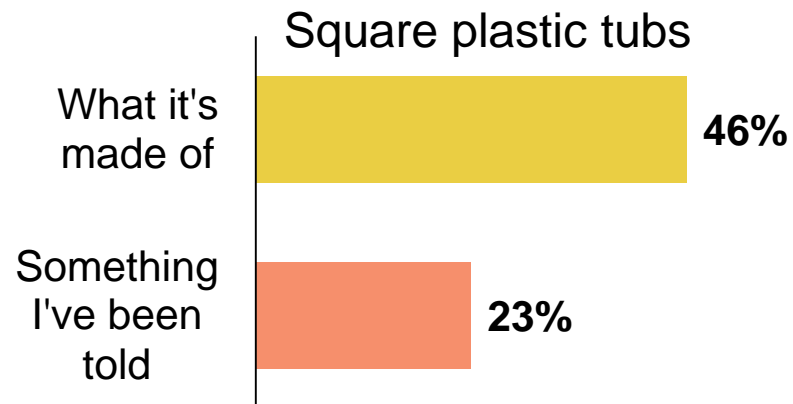
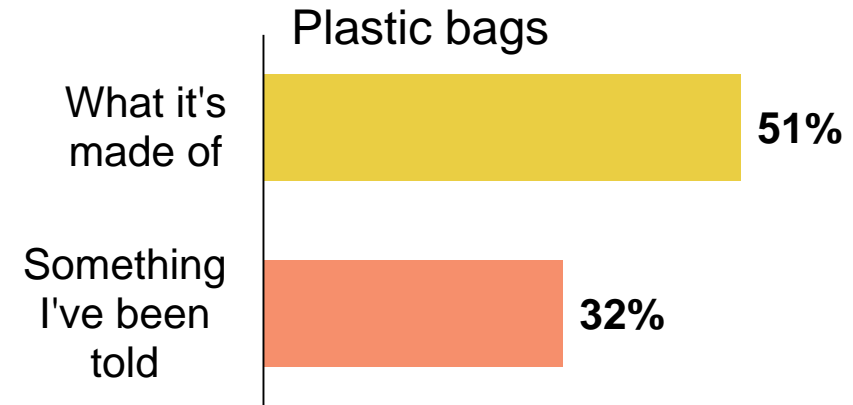
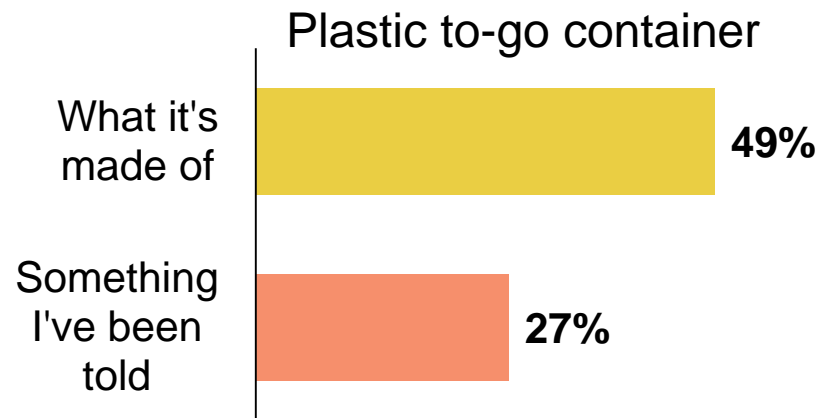


58%  
(-2)

# People tend to put the wrong things in the recycling bin simply because of the material—or a misleading symbol.



# Those who know not to put these items in the recycling bin often say it's just something they've heard.



# All respondents saw one of three pieces of information that explained how to recycle.

## What Goes in the Bin

Three general categories of mixed materials, with descriptions and examples of each

THESE DON'T BELONG  
IN THE TRASH!

### RECYCLE THESE

#### CANS

Aluminum and Steel Cans



#### CARTONS

Food and Beverage



#### GLASS

Bottles and Jars



Empty, rinse and discard caps

#### PAPER

Mail, Boxes and Cardboard



Empty and flatten

#### PLASTIC CONTAINERS

Kitchen, Laundry and Bath



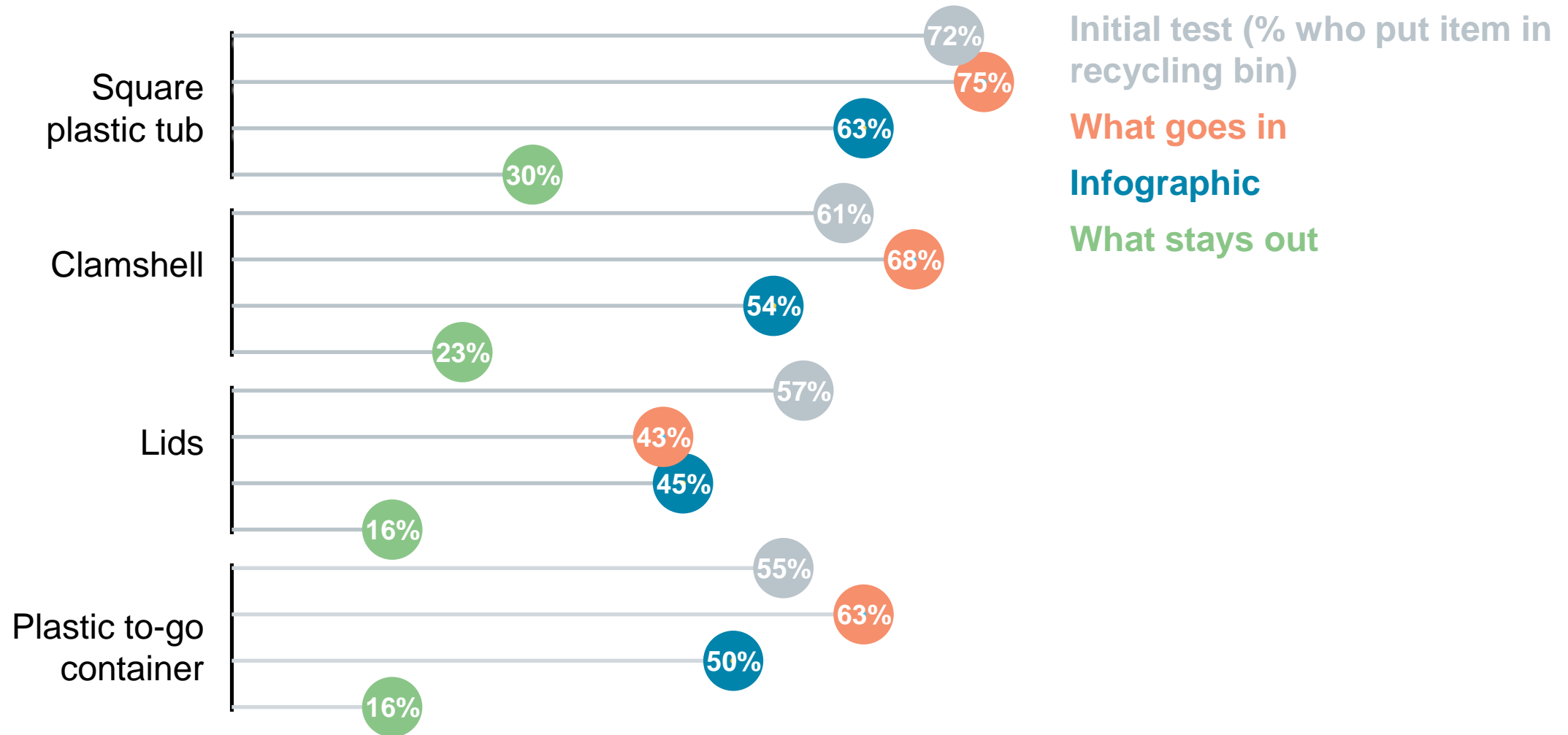
Empty, rinse and discard caps

Thank you for recycling.

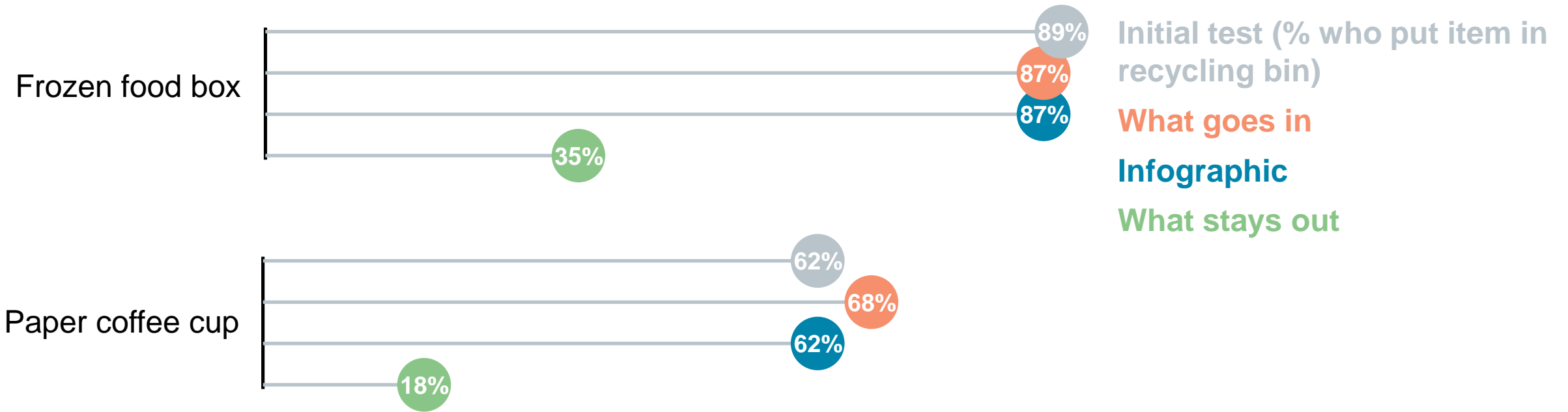
## What Stays Out

8 things you want to recycle at home—but please don't

# Telling residents what stays out of the recycling bin may significantly reduce contamination of rigid plastics.

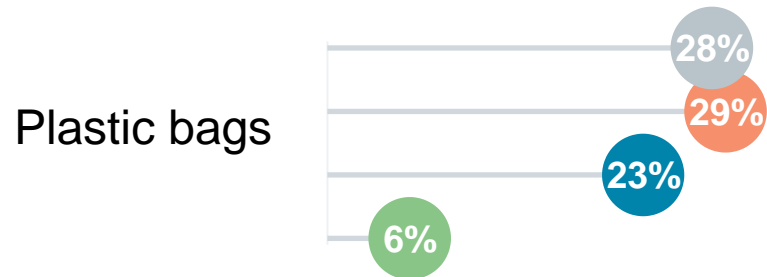


# Providing information on what is not recyclable also has a major impact on paper goods.





# Reiterating that plastic bags *do not belong in the bin* helps residents understand or remember.



Initial test (% who put item in recycling bin)

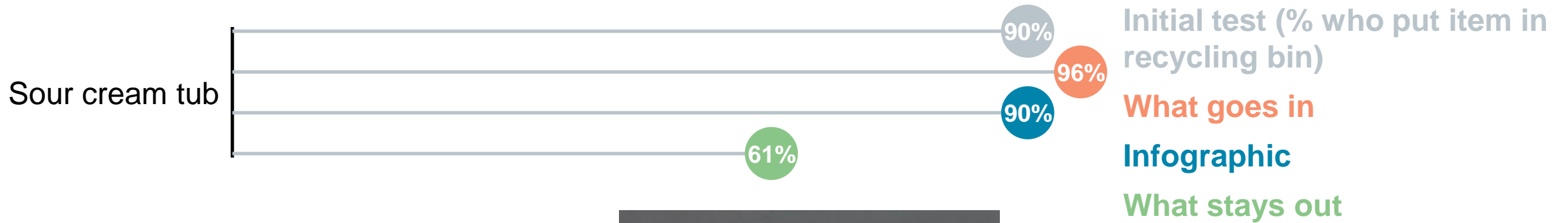
What goes in

Infographic

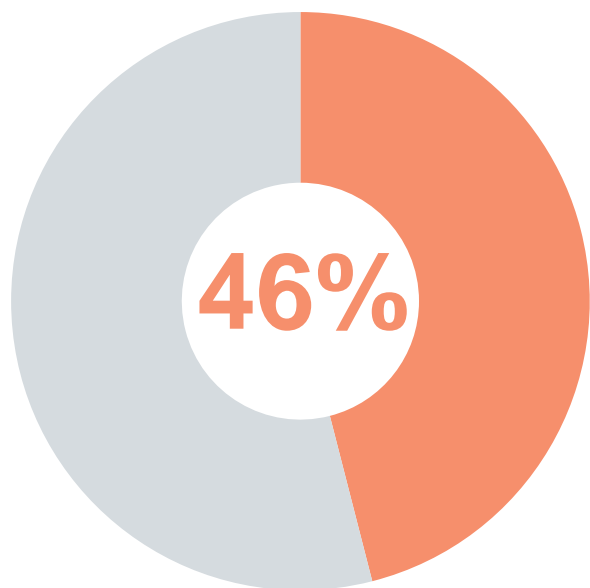
What stays out



# But telling residents what not to put in the recycling bin also makes them less likely to recycle round tubs.



## Marginal differences between college grads, women, and those in single-family homes remain identical in the retest.



Average percentage of residents who are very/somewhat confident



39%  
(-7)

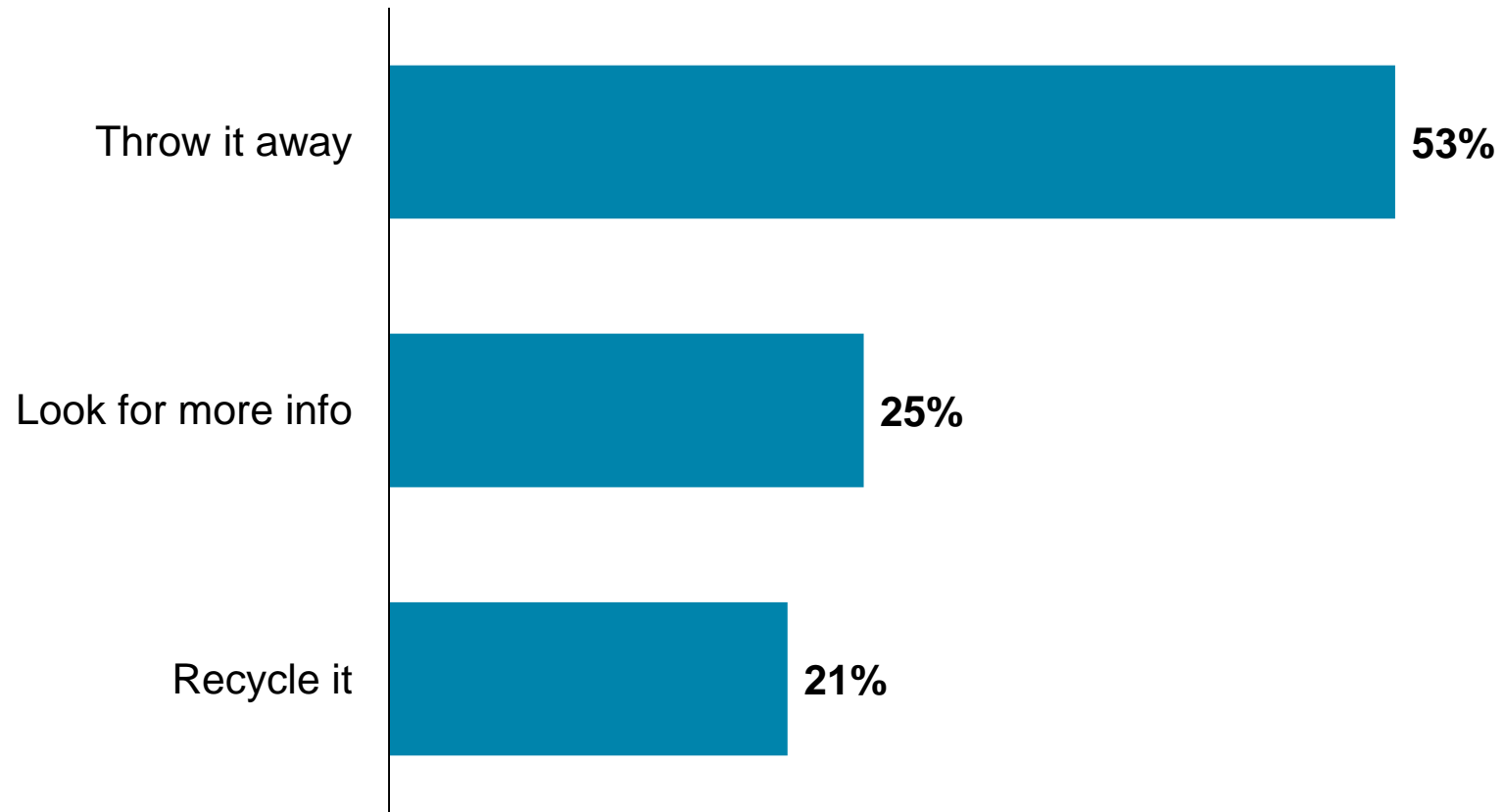


41%  
(-4)



44%  
(-2)

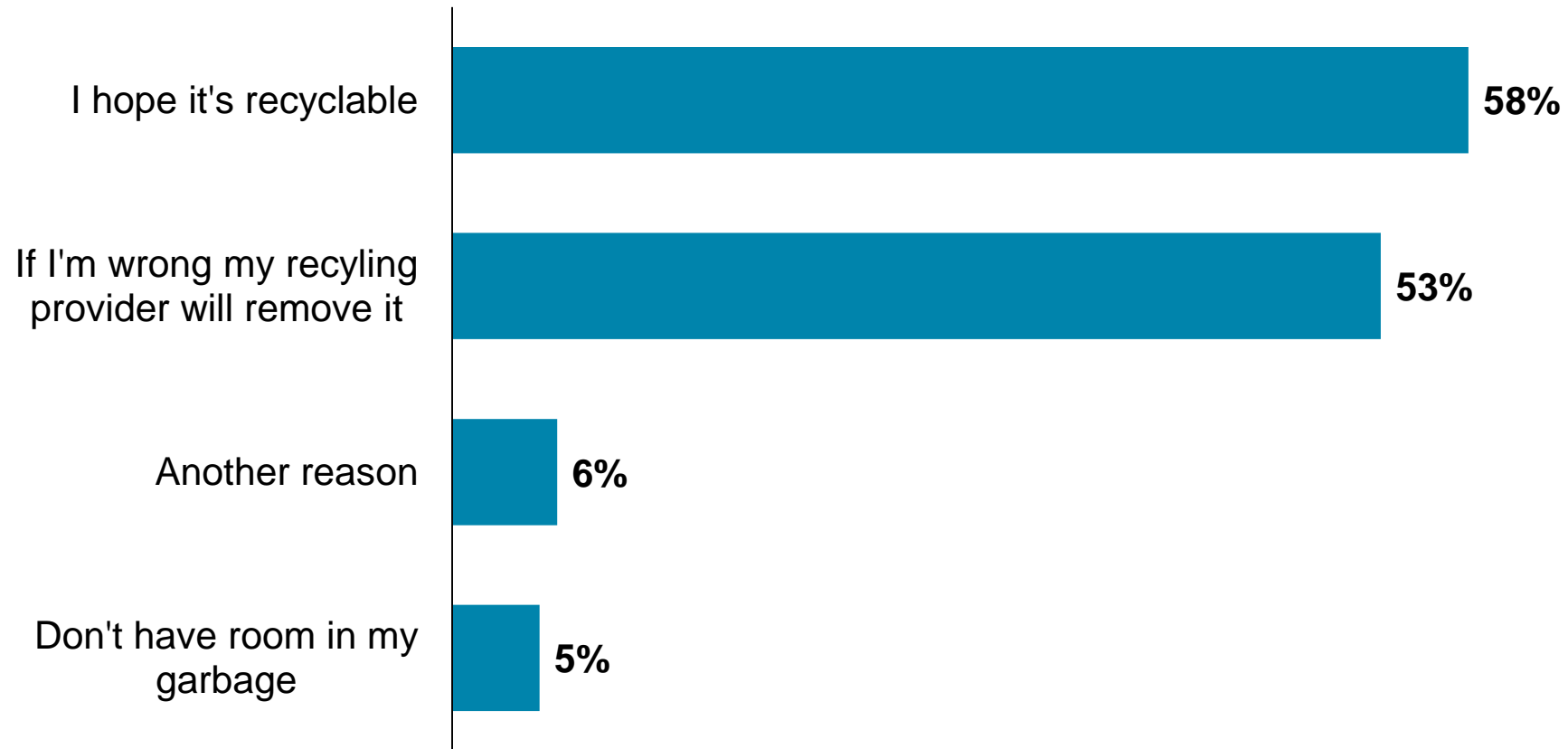
# When in doubt, half of people say they throw items away. One in four say they would look for more info.



**However, comments from the open-ended questions show that people believe they already know the rules.**

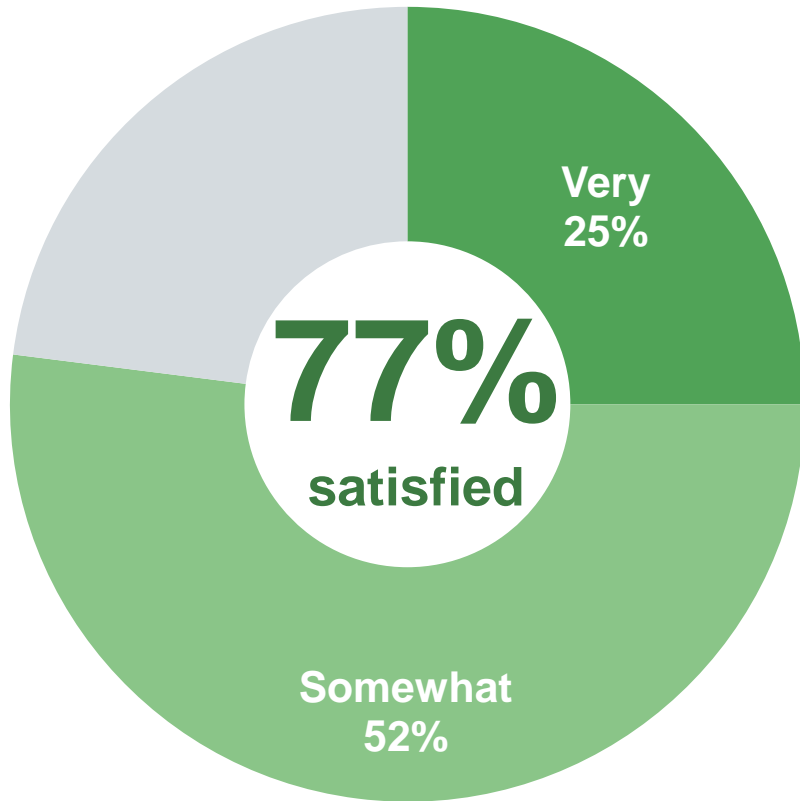
*“I am very able . . . I don’t believe I need anymore knowledge.”*

# Those who recycle items when they are not sure are wishful, rather than trying to save garbage bin space.



# **Motivations and messaging**

# Three-quarters of residents say they are happy with information about recycling—but questions remain.

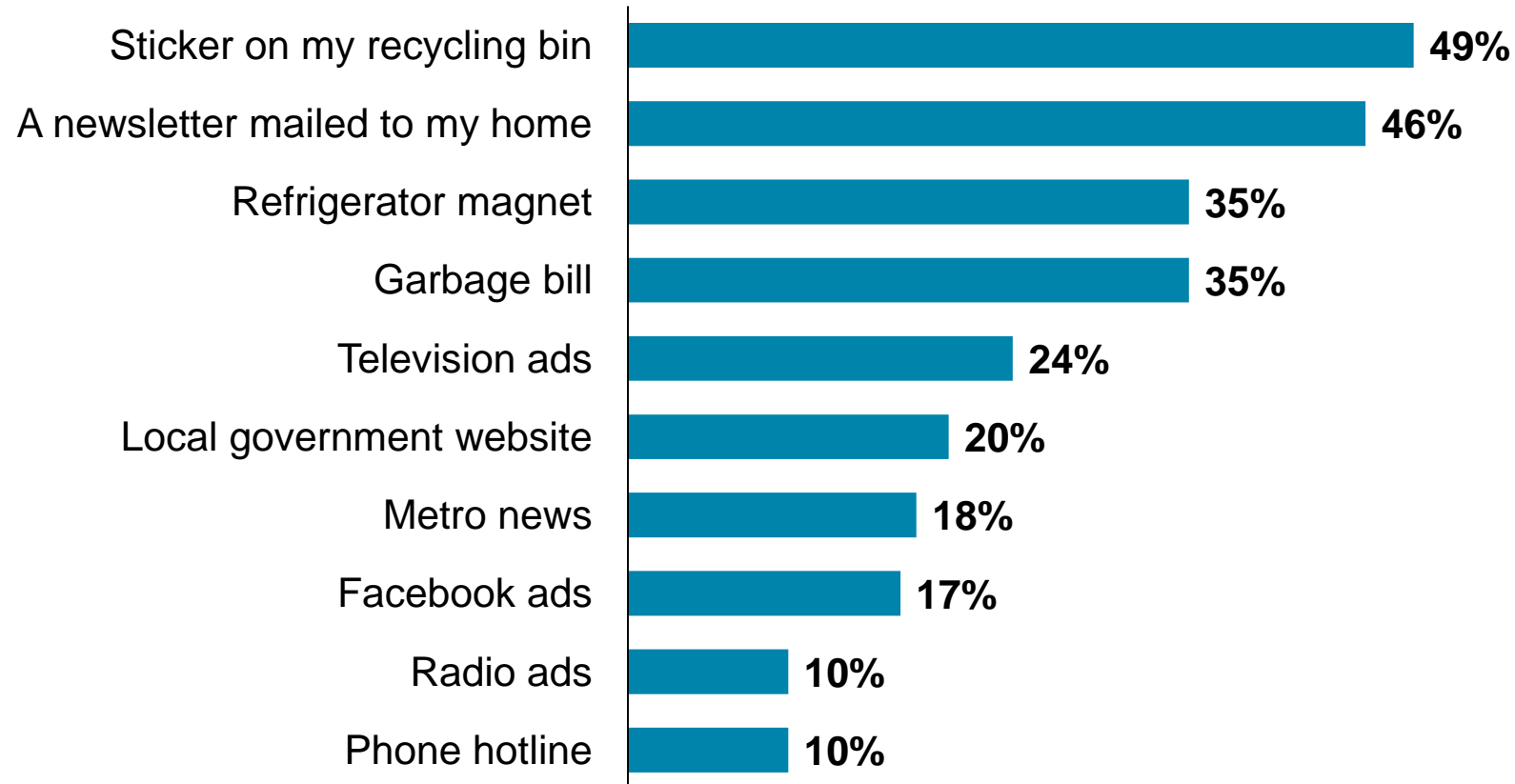


*“While I know recycling is important to our region, I feel like it needs to be better communicated what is and is not acceptable for recycling.”*

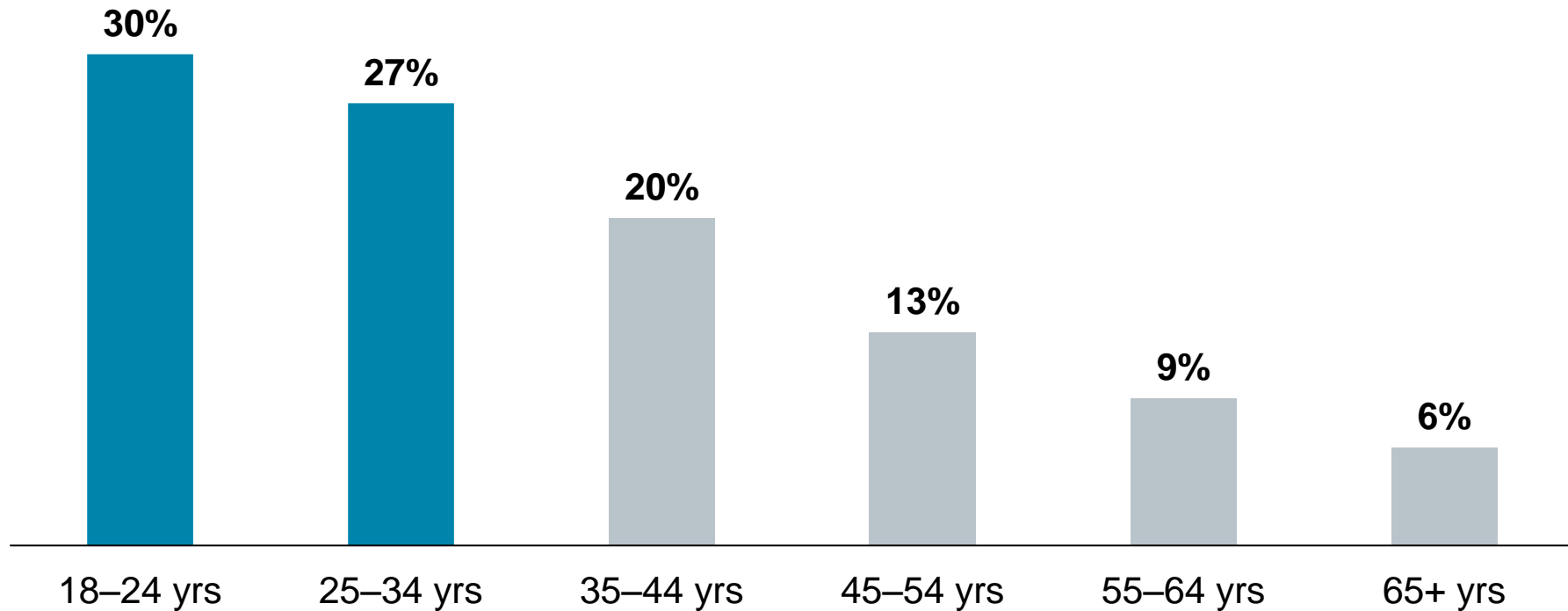
*“I know what I can recycle at home, but I’m not sure where to go to recycle other items.”*



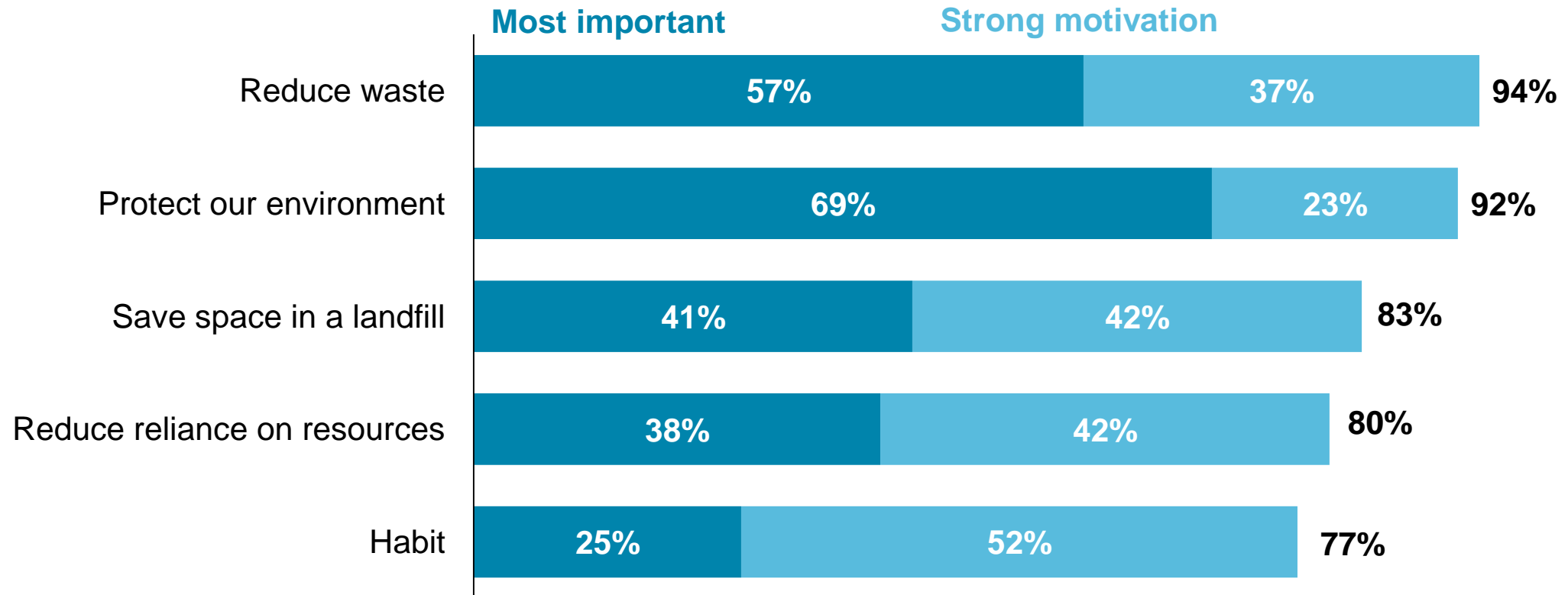
# Stickers, newsletters, and magnets are likely to be most helpful to residents in combatting contamination.



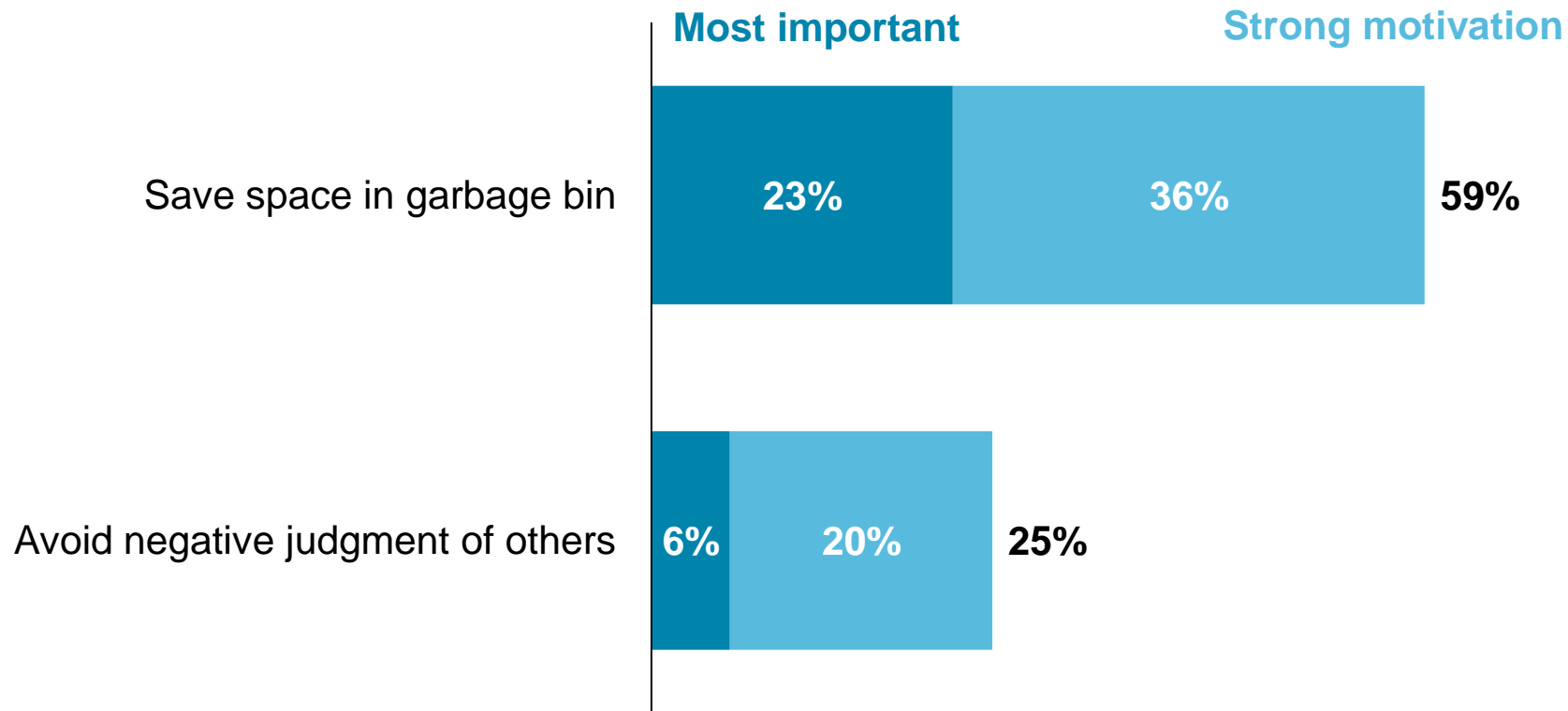
# Social media may be a strategy for younger residents.



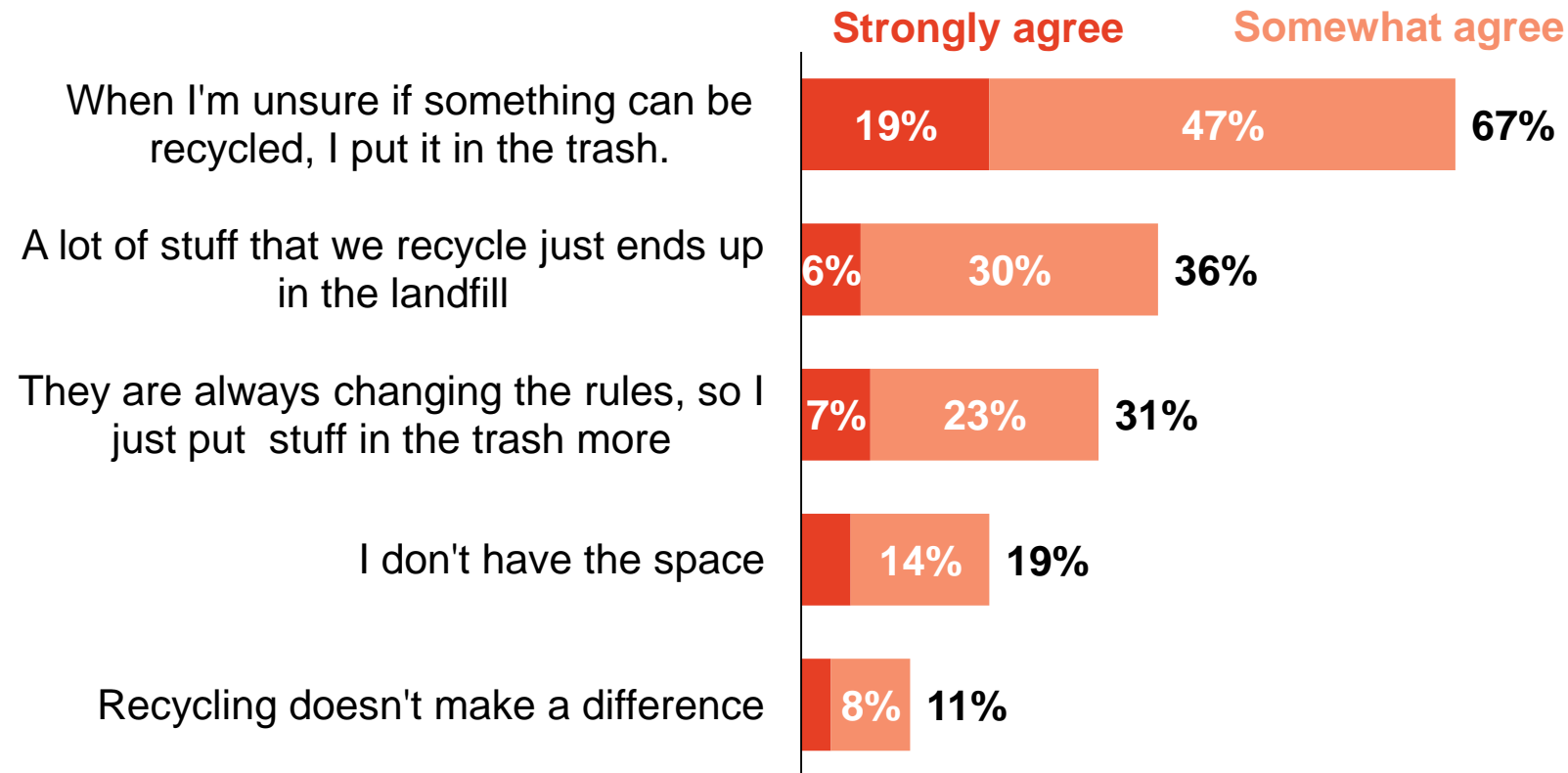
# Reducing waste is the strongest motivator, along with protecting the environment for future generations.



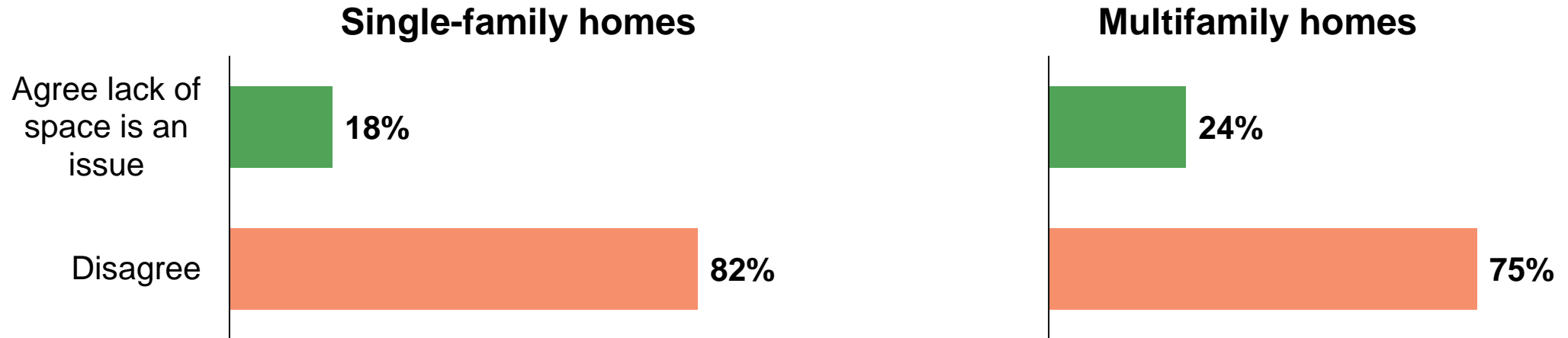
# Avoiding judgment and saving garbage bin space aren't as powerful motivators.



# Residents agree confusion is the only good reason not to recycle, but most don't consider themselves unsure.



# Lack of space to keep and recycle items at home is not a major reason that people choose not to recycle.



**The most helpful words are specific. Telling residents why contamination matters may be helpful.**



**Plastic tubs 6  
ounces or larger  
Deli containers and salad  
containers  
Sort by shape not number  
Contamination lowers quality**

**Although “sort by shape” may sound helpful to some residents, it might be confusing in practice.**

*“Not vague things, like ‘sort by shape.’ What the heck is that supposed to mean? If you say, ‘no to-go containers and boxes, that’s pretty clear.”*



**Too much information about the recycling system isn't as helpful. The chasing arrows message may get lost.**



**China is no longer willing to sort....**

**Recycling rules haven't changed**

**Chasing arrows symbol...does not indicate what you can recycle**

**Aseptic containers**

**More expensive to sort**

## About one in six residents ask for recycling bin stickers that could help reduce contamination.

- 17%** A sticker with a brief description on bins
- 16%** More education about how to recycle
- 14%** Easy graphic information and labeling, online guide
- 12%** Refrigerator magnet chart
- 11%** List what can and can't be recycled
- 8%** Allow to recycle more items

## Suggestions for information include repetition—and hint that many people believe the rules are always changing.

*“Receiving a paper bulletin in the mail that specifically lists each item that can or can’t be recycled.”*

*“A list and pictured details of exact yes and no items that are acceptable or not acceptable delivered in the mail so I can post on my fridge.”*

*“Newsletters mailed to each residence whenever what can be recycled or not changes, maybe even a monthly flyer.”*

## Some comments about additional information demonstrate a reticence that may pose a challenge.

*“Just take it. If it’s not food or plastic bags or wrappers take it. Otherwise, recycle everything in the bin.”*

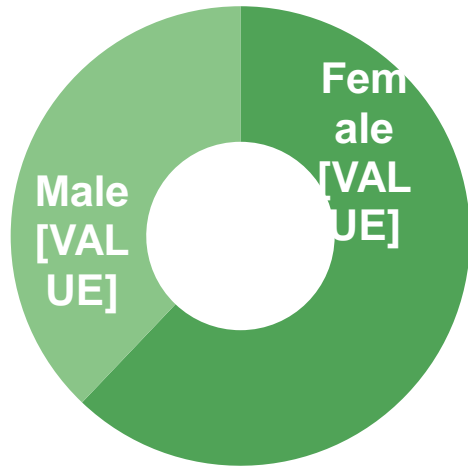
*“Clear guidelines on the bin, possibly noting what numbers are [accepted].”*

*“Be able to trust the recycling symbols on plastics.”*

**Opt In community engagement**

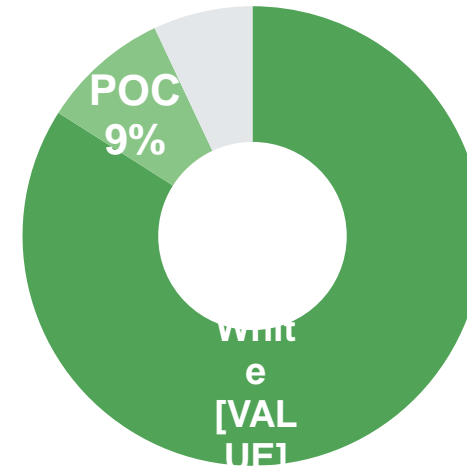
# Opt In participants are more likely than residents overall to identify as female and white.

## Gender

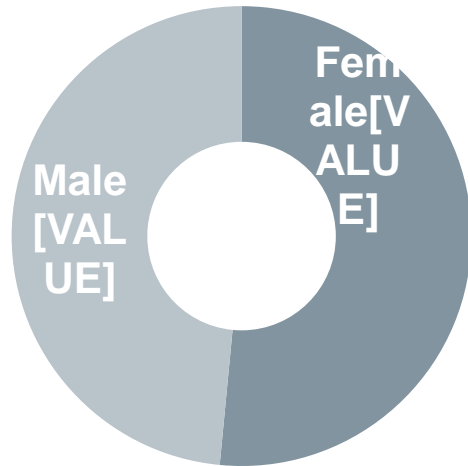


Other gender identities:  
<1% each

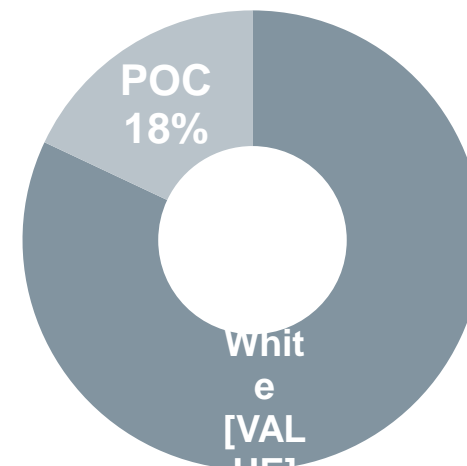
## Ethnicity



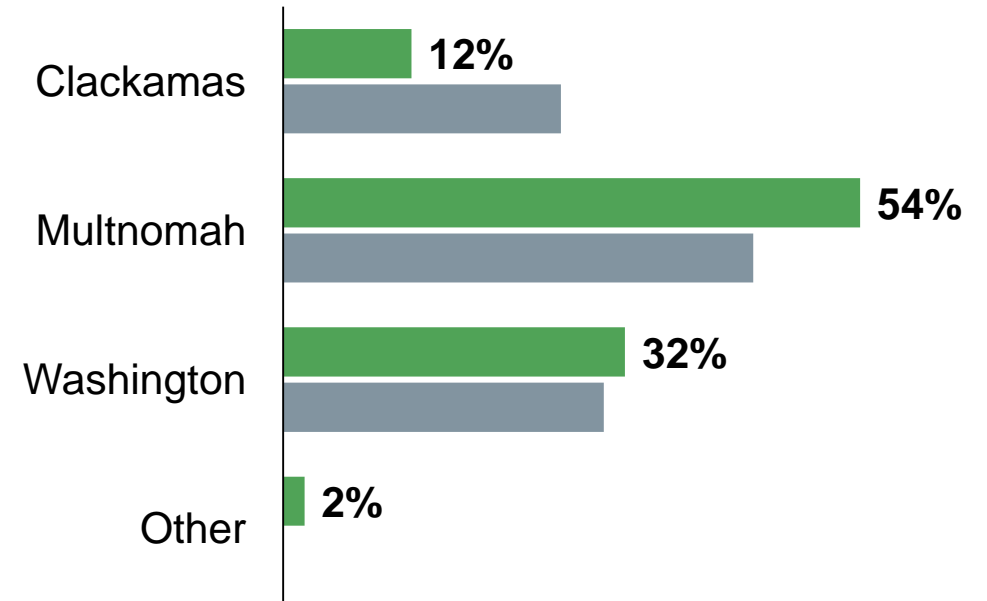
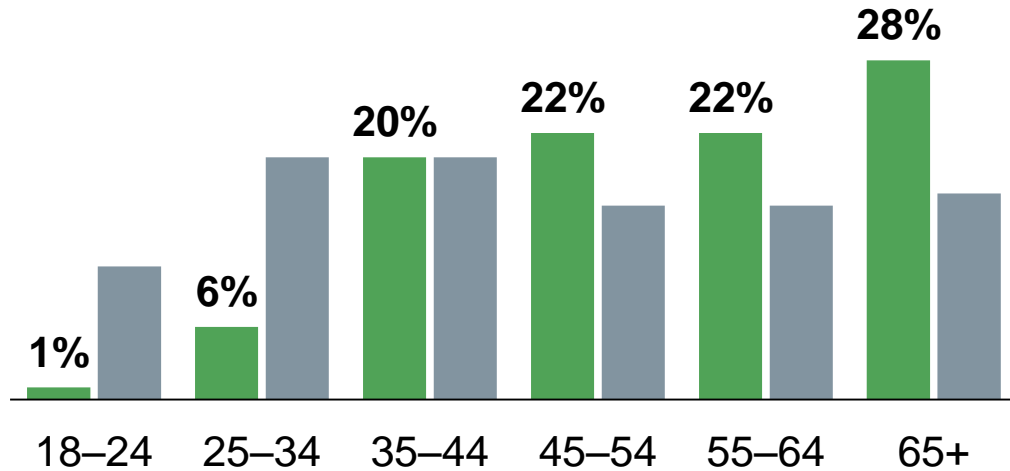
Prefer not to respond: 7%



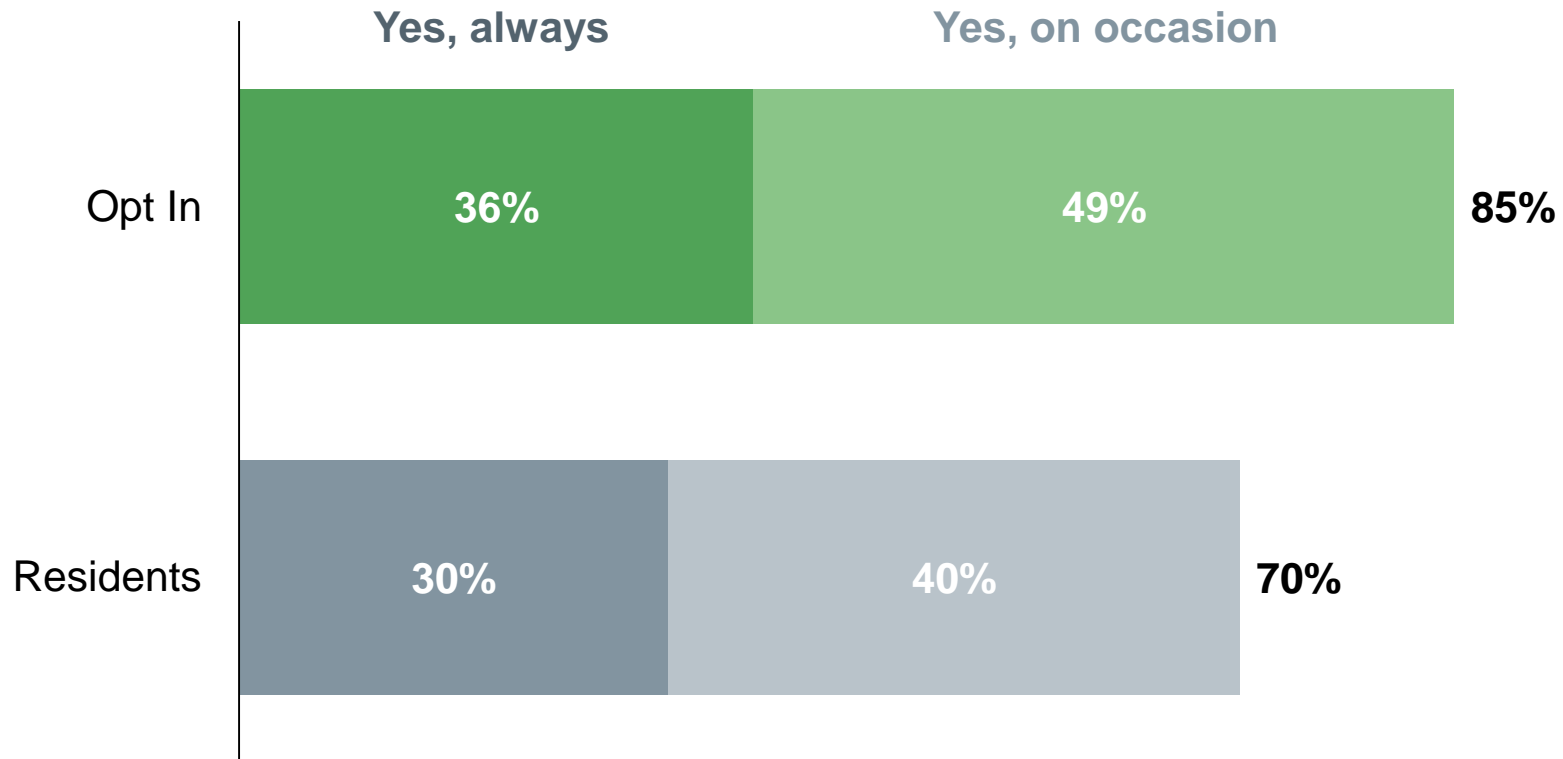
Other gender identities:  
<1% each



# Opt In participants are older and disproportionately from Multnomah County when compared to all residents.

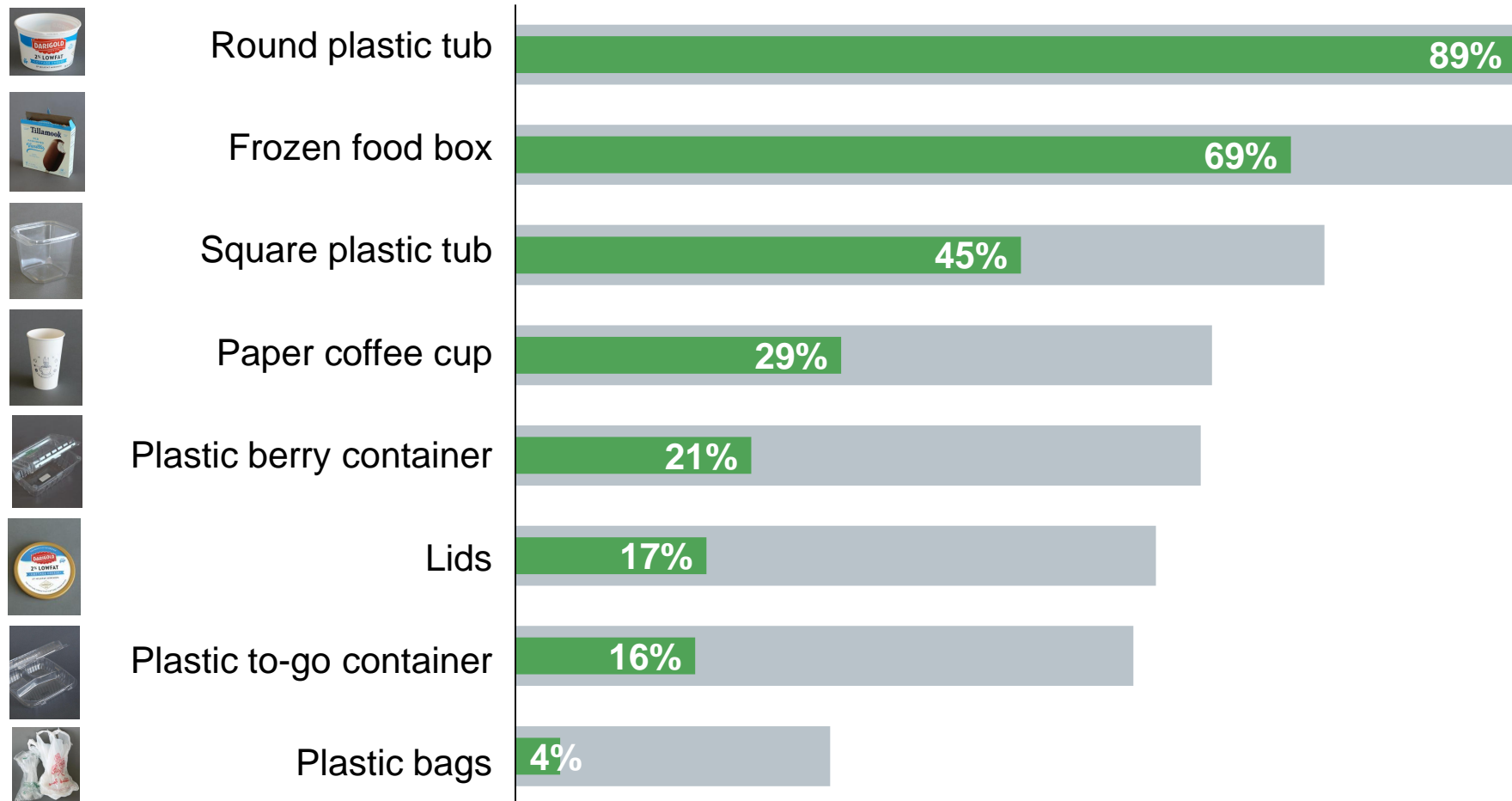


# Opt In participants are more likely than typical residents to recycle items at specific locations.

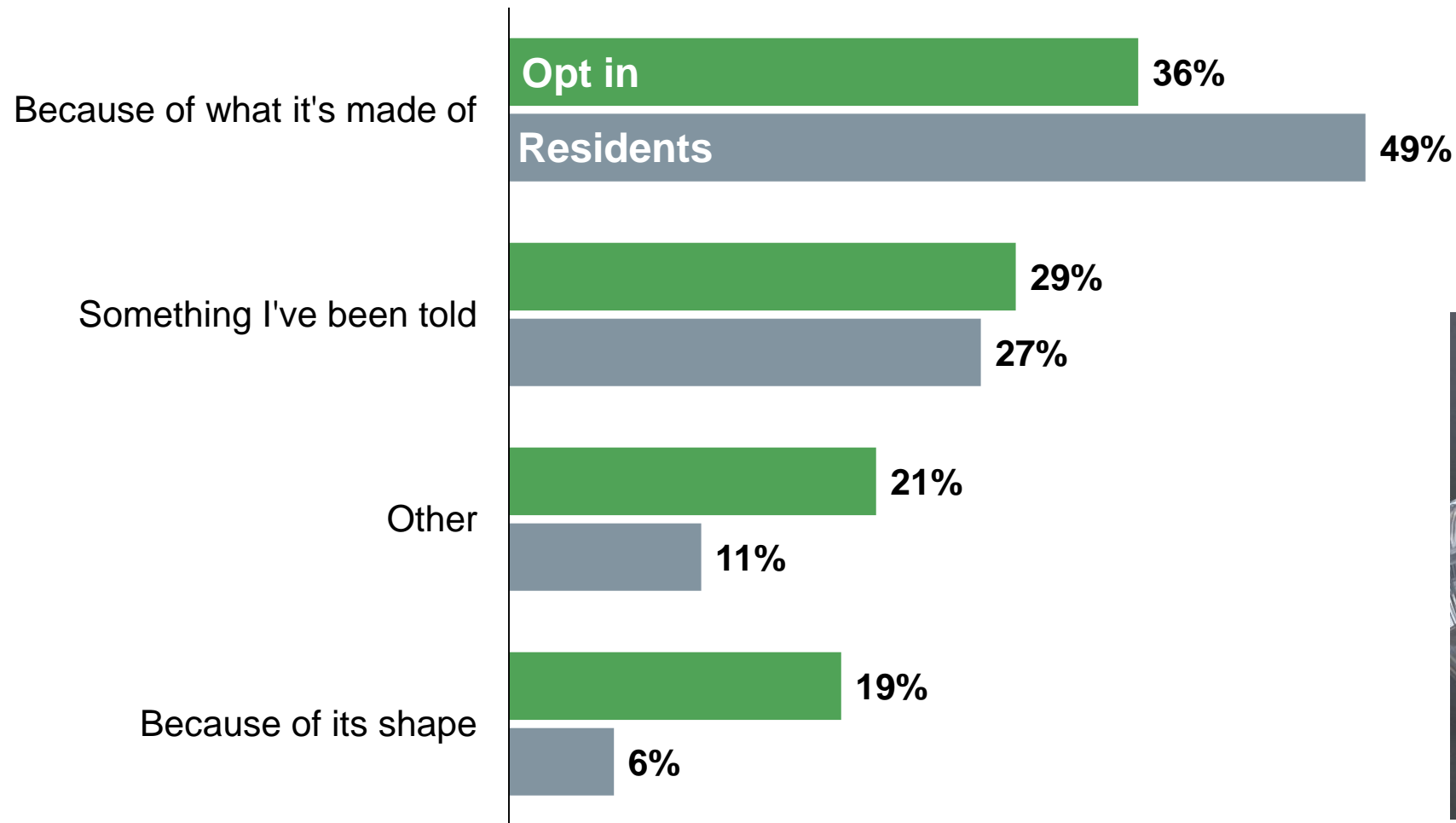




# Compared to typical residents, **Opt In** respondents were much less likely to mistakenly recycle items in the survey.



# Opt In participants who know clamshells can't be recycled at home are less likely to rely on the material.



## They said clamshells, like the hinged to-go container pictured, cannot be recycled at home . . .

*“Because it is a clamshell.”*

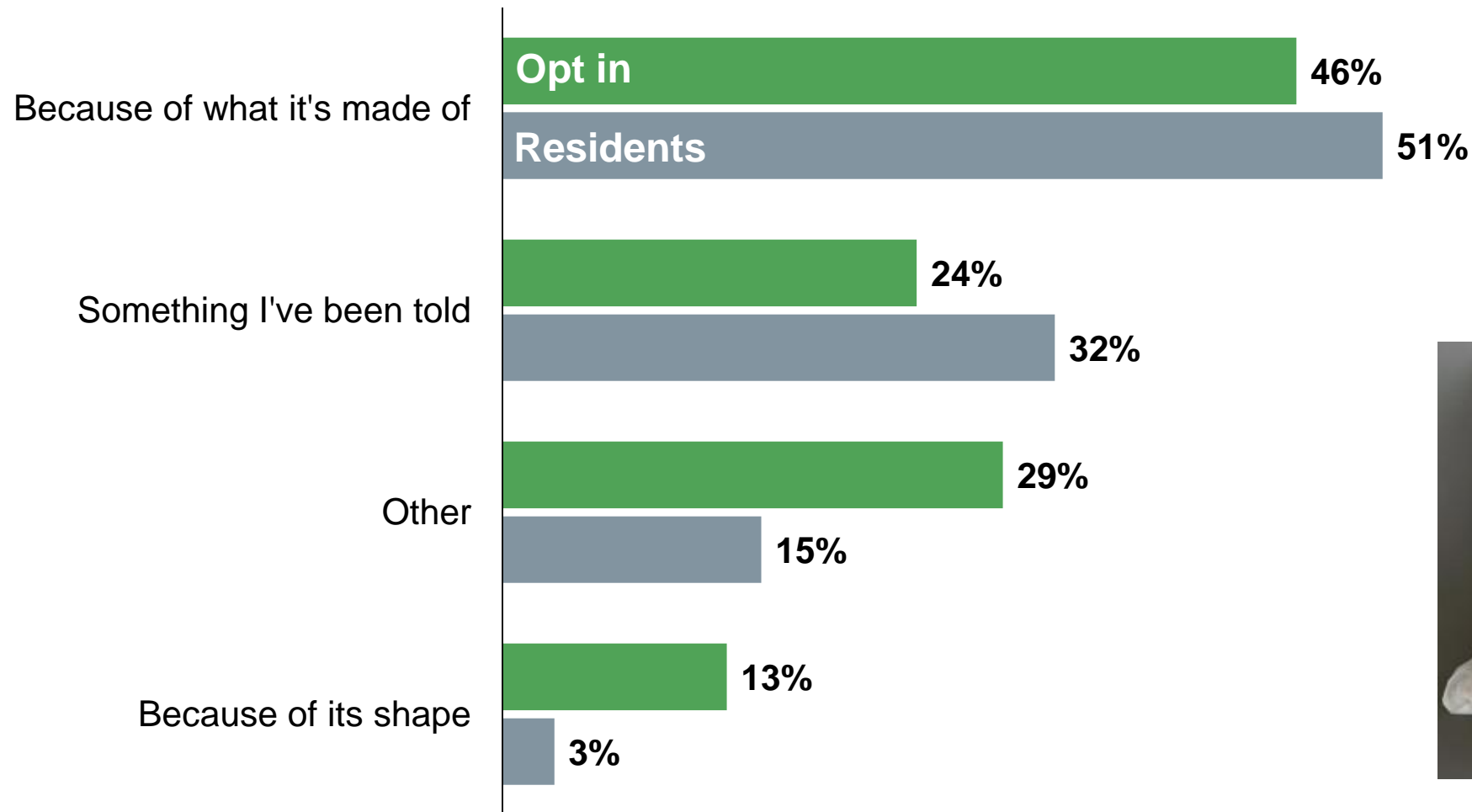
*“Because it is a takeout food container.”*

*“Because it is flimsy and doesn’t recycle well.”*

*“BPS flyer shows a similar item as garbage.”*

*“Can’t read the number but most to-go food packaging is a 5 or 6.”*

# One in three **Opt In** participants said they had another reason plastic bags could not be recycled at home.



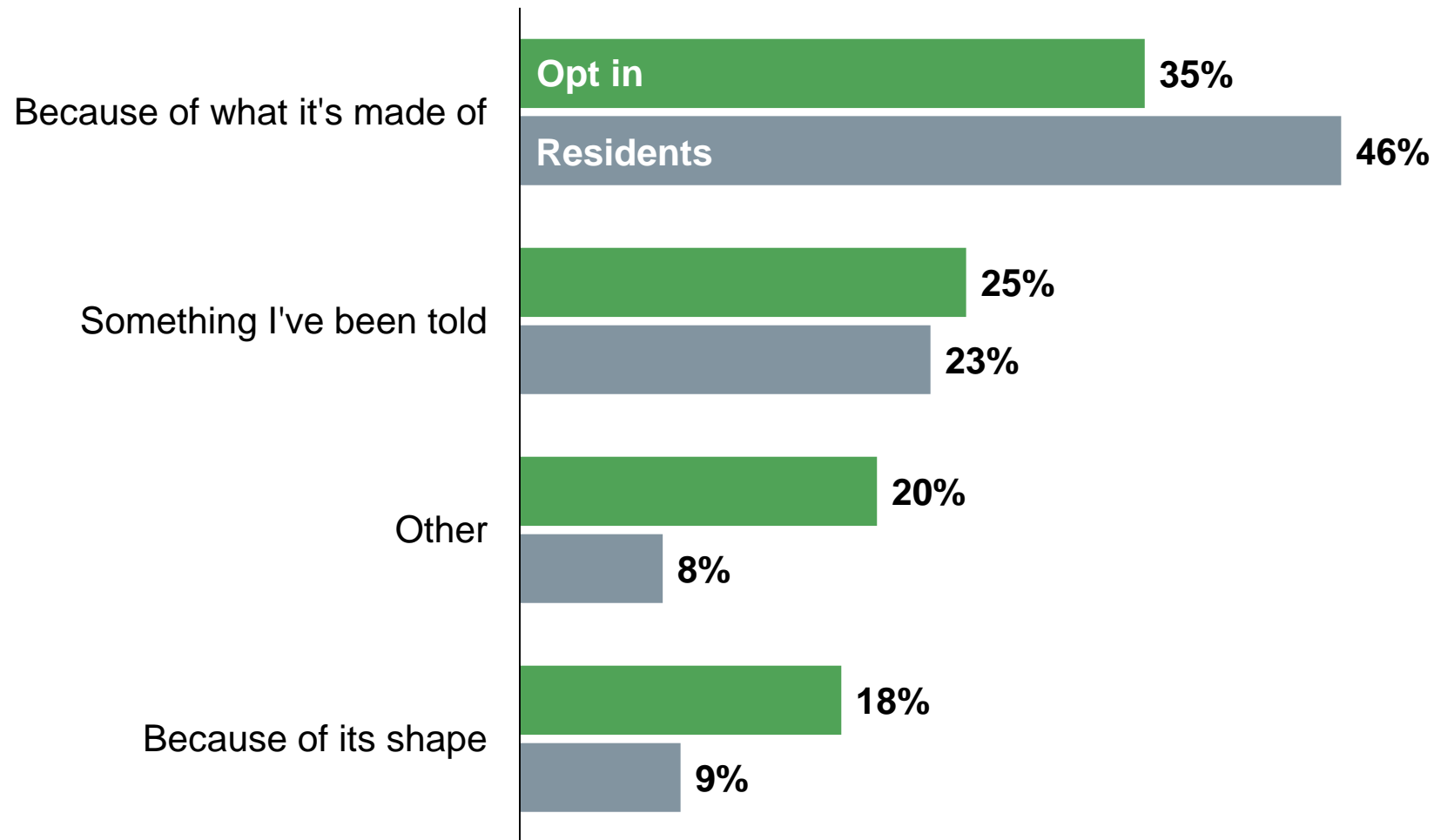
## Commonly, responses explain that bags get stuck in machines. Bags are also described as “film.”

*“All communications from the City on recycling say not to recycle plastic bags ever—they gum up the recycling sorting machinery.”*

*“These go to a grocery store for recycling.”*

*“Wrong type of plastic.”*

# One in six Opt In participants said the shape of a square tub means it cannot be recycled at home.



# Square tubs are confusing to most residents—including Opt In participants.

## Can be recycled at home

*“Because it is larger than 6 ounces.”*

*“Because it is similar to tubs.”*

*“This seems like a rigid plastic container more than 6 ounces, so I would actually say recycle at home.”*

## Cannot be recycled at home

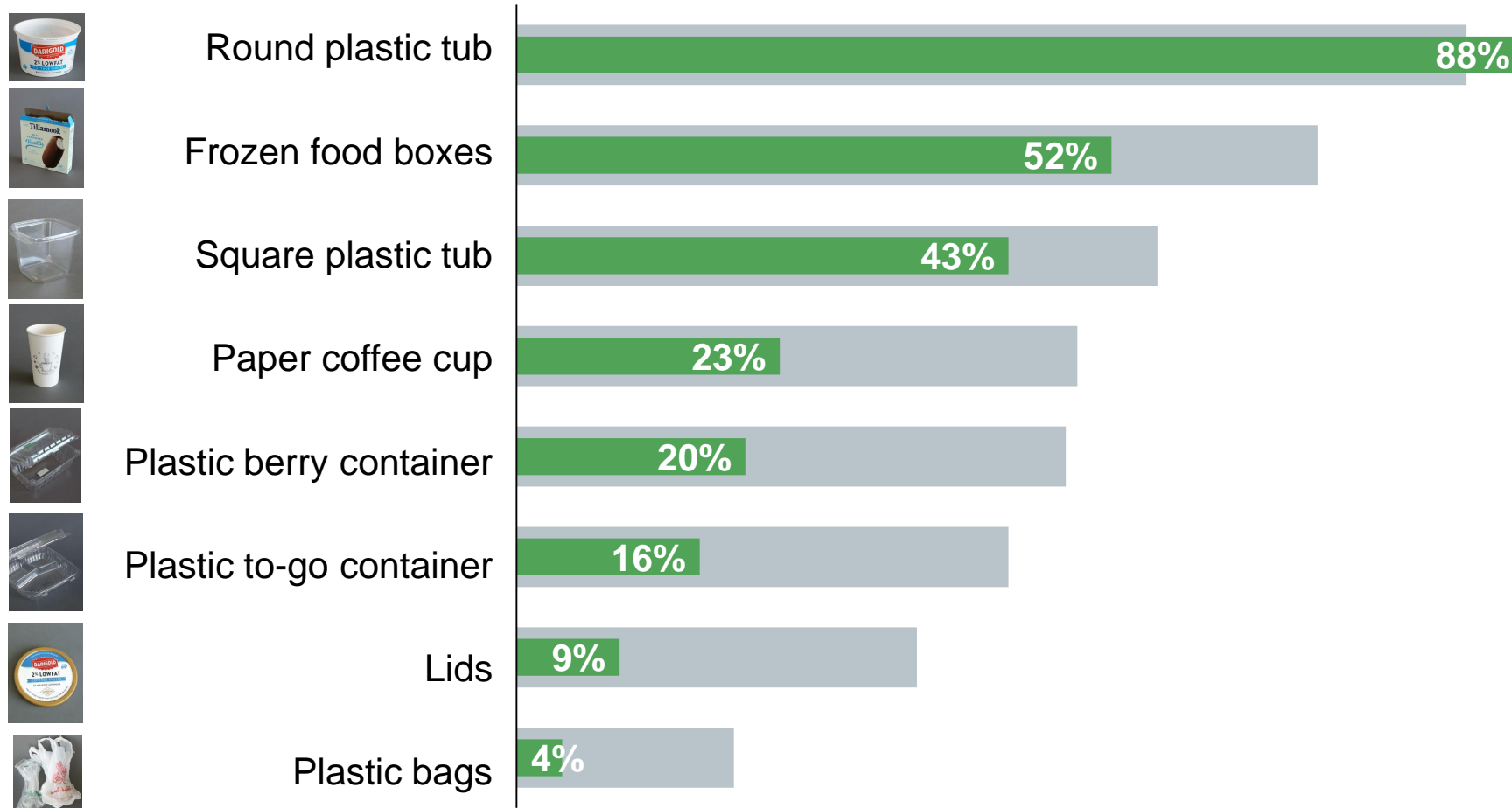
*“Looks like a deli container.”*

*“Would likely be contaminated with food.”*

*“Too thin of plastic.”*

*“Unclear if this counts as ‘something that has a neck.’”*

# With more information, fewer than 25% of Opt In put cups, clamshells, lids, and plastic bags in the recycling bin.





## Next Steps: Qualitative Research

- Conduct qualitative research with Hispanic/Latinx residents and determine whether communications materials resonate with these populations
- Determine which communications materials to test and prioritize
- Collect more nuanced information about why “what stays out” messages may be more helpful—and whether they cause residents to throw away recyclables



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