

A recent poll by Data for Progress is getting a lot of attention, in part because it shows incumbent County Executive Marc Elrich with a strong lead among Democrats over challengers David Blair, Peter James, and Hans Riemer.

At the same time, Thrive Montgomery 2050 advocates have touted the poll’s numbers regarding the proposed rewrite of the general plan, claiming that the poll shows strong support. (By the way, Elrich does not support Thrive.) Let’s take a closer look.

The question about Thrive has 5 categories of response: strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat oppose, strongly oppose, and don’t know. Although the pollsters combine the two “support” categories to show that a majority of respondents support Thrive, it’s possible and no less reasonable to combine the data somewhat differently. What’s not clear from the data is what changes would make Thrive more palatable to those who “somewhat support”, “somewhat oppose”, and even “strongly oppose”. Such a view can create a more nuanced picture and avoids the assumption that those who “somewhat support” endorse the passage of Thrive.

[11] The County Council is currently considering Thrive Montgomery 2050, an update to the county’s master plan that provides direction for decisions about land use, transportation, and related issues. It would also open up some single-family neighborhoods to a mix of housing types, such as duplexes and triplexes, but would not change zoning or other detailed land use regulations.

Do you support or oppose Thrive Montgomery 2050?

Response	Topline	Female	Male	Under 45	45+	No College	College	Black or African American	White	Latino/a	Definitely will vote	Might vote	Married	Separated/Divorced	Single	Own	Rent
Strongly support	18	17	19	25	15	17	18	24	15	10	21	13	16	17	19	15	25
Somewhat support	37	36	39	37	37	35	38	49	35	42	36	38	40	33	39	37	36
Somewhat oppose	12	11	15	12	13	11	13	7	13	21	9	18	15	12	12	15	8
Strongly oppose	9	10	8	4	12	10	9	3	11	7	10	8	12	2	5	11	5
Don't know	24	27	19	23	24	27	22	16	26	19	24	23	16	36	25	22	26
SUPPORT (TOTAL)	55	53	58	62	52	52	56	73	50	52	57	51	56	50	58	52	61
OPPOSE (TOTAL)	21	21	23	16	25	21	22	10	24	28	19	26	27	14	17	26	13
SUPPORT (NET)	+34	+32	+35	+46	+27	+31	+34	+63	+26	+24	+38	+25	+29	+36	+41	+26	+48
Weighted N	529	311	218	165	364	186	343	93	346	73	338	191	216	70	144	346	172

Even assuming that those who “strongly oppose” are immovable, it’s reasonable to assume that those who “somewhat” support and oppose would welcome certain unidentified changes. Combining those two categories results in 49% of respondents overall who would likely be receptive to changes that might affect their desire to see Thrive enacted. As the chart above shows, the numbers go higher in certain demographic categories: Male (54%), 45+ (50%), college (51%), Black or African American (56%), Latino/a (63%), married (55%), single (51%), and own (52%).

Let’s look at who conducted the poll. Data for Progress describes itself as “the think tank for the future of progressivism” and “Data for Progress is a progressive think tank and polling firm arming movements with the tools they need to fight for a more equitable future.” According to fivethirtyeight.com, Data for Progress gets a B for the accuracy and methodology of its polling

regarding 2020 races. (<https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/pollster-ratings/data-for-progress/>). Data for Progress ranked 12th out of 25 polls rated by fivethirtyeight based on its overall margin of error, right in the middle of the pack (<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-death-of-polling-is-greatly-exaggerated/>). Founder Sean McElwee describes Data for Progress as vertically integrated, encompassing both polling and “convinc[ing] people who are running for office to support your policy program.” In other words, Data for Progress polls for support for policies it supports so it can show candidates that these are policies they should espouse.

Because Data for Progress has these two strands of business, the average reader should be aware of where they’re coming from. It’s not a reprehensible business model, but it means the questions and answers in their polls, and the interpretations derived from them, deserve critical review. Are they simply measuring, or attempting to drive policy? Thrive advocates like the Coalition for Smarter Growth are trying to sell their view that the report shows overwhelming and unquestioning support for Thrive. Don’t take that at face value. The numbers also show that in many cases, majorities – particularly Black/African American/Latino/a democratic voters – have concerns about Thrive. The County Council’s additional public outreach, to be carried out by consultant Nspiregreen, transparently and fully illuminate any concerns generally and in the context of the racial equity report prepared by the Office of Legislative Oversight.