



water hub



The Opportunity on Water

How public opinion and current politics have set the stage for real progress, right now

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The confluence of the COVID-19, racial justice, and climate crises has brought new attention to deep-rooted challenges and created a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build a more equitable and resilient water system. Rising rates have put millions of people at risk for water shutoffs at a time when handwashing literally saves lives. Outdated infrastructure has left families vulnerable to toxic tap water, sewage back-ups, flooding, and more.

As federal lawmakers consider trillions in infrastructure spending, **water has the potential to unite interests that are typically at odds** and deliver meaningful benefits in the form of public health and safety, jobs, racial justice, and climate preparedness.

Water is the thread that runs through the Biden administration's four initial priorities:

- COVID Relief
- Economic Recovery
- Racial Equity
- Climate Change



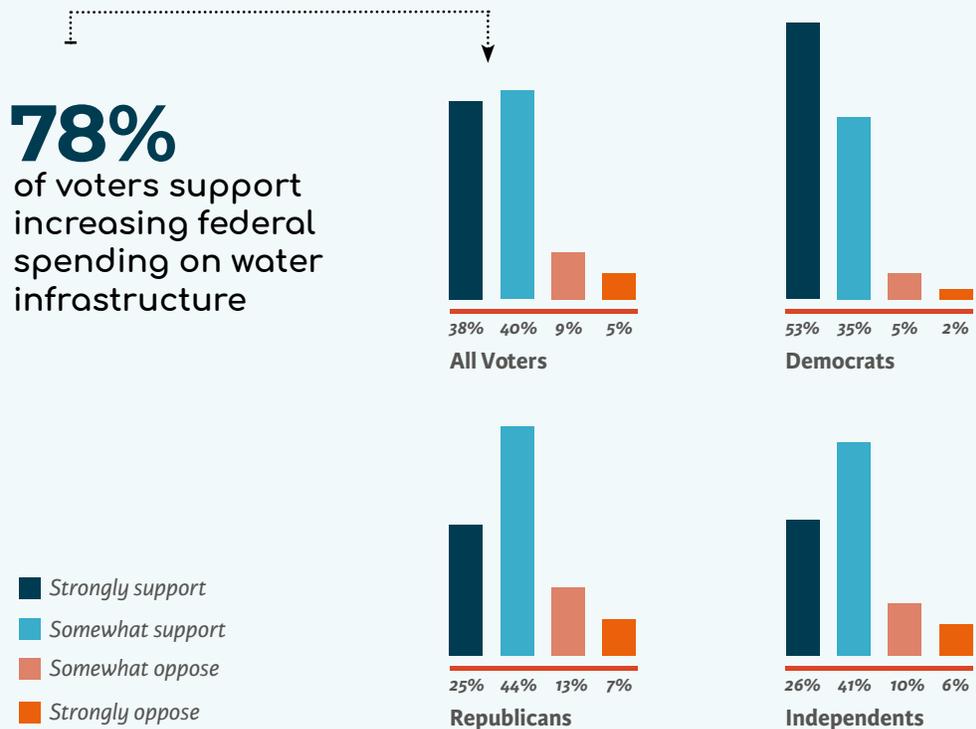
“ Water, which washes hands during the pandemic. Water, which is needed for factories to produce goods, farms to grow crops, and cities to reboot. Water, which has sometimes been denied to communities of color or delivered in polluted form. And water, which is how a warming planet will wreak much of its havoc.”

— Brett Walton, [Will Water Unite Us?](#), Circle of Blue

Water is a political winner

Water [plays a central role in people's lives](#). We all touch it daily — at work and at play — while caring for home and family, growing and preparing food, and connecting with nature and one another.

It's no surprise, then, that **water routinely polls as a top issue for voters — across state and party lines**. Water pollution has been the [No. 1 environmental concern](#) in Gallup's annual poll [for 25 years](#). It is also the area in which [the most voters](#) want to see more regulation. As [Barb Kalbach of Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement Action Fund](#) says, "There is no red or blue water — it's clean or it's dirty."



While public opinion on climate change [remains polarized](#), **water worries and priorities are remarkably bipartisan**. In fact, Republican voters are the most likely to [view clean water as an “essential right”](#) and [signal the strongest support](#) for infrastructure updates. When asked what kind of infrastructure investments should be prioritized, [voters rank public water systems](#) right below roads and bridges.

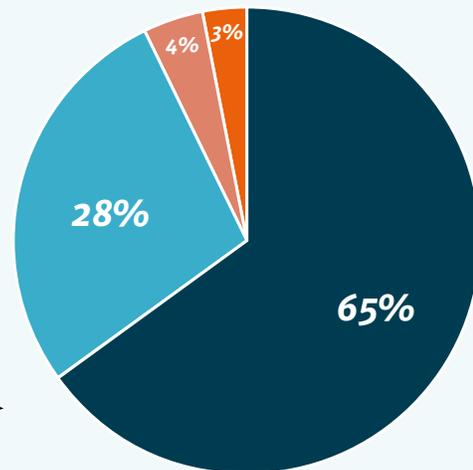
Reversing the [decades-long decline in federal spending](#) to update aging water systems will [put people to work](#) and [fuel economic recovery](#). It will also protect vital industries such as energy, manufacturing, education, and agriculture from the financial fallout of water service disruptions.

Water can help [bridge partisan differences](#), as well as the racial divide that has left many Black, Indigenous, and other people of color communities without safe water and sanitation, and struggling with higher water debt.

Unsurprisingly, since their communities bear the brunt of water problems, **voters of color indicate the strongest support for water solutions**. More than 90% of Latinos [believe it’s important](#) for the President and Congress to protect drinking water from contamination. Black voters are [most likely to support](#) a review of Trump policies that harmed the environment.

93% of voters agree it's important to fix outdated or unsafe drinking water systems as part of the Biden administration's economic stimulus plan

- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not too important
- Not at all important



Water can also unite urban and rural interests. More than 90% of rural voters in the Upper Midwest [said that ensuring clean water is important](#) to them, compared with 80% that said it's important to conserve farmland, and 69% to increase the use of renewable energy.

Regardless of their views on climate change, **voters are [worried about flooding, drought, and stronger storms](#), and want action.** Eighty-five percent [want to strengthen requirements](#) to ensure new infrastructure can withstand future floods. More than three-quarters [want to see stimulus funds](#) go to boosting community resilience.

In addition to adaptation needs, **the water sector offers significant potential for climate change mitigation**, in part because it uses so much energy. In California, for example, one-fifth of all electricity and one-third of all natural gas is used to treat, heat, and transport water. Both [localized](#) and [statewide](#) research has shown that water conservation programs are a cost-effective way to save energy and emissions.

Canals, reservoirs, and water treatment plants are also potential sites for renewable energy development. Sonoma recently completed the [country's largest floating solar array](#) (Sayreville, New Jersey [has one nearly as big](#)). The [National Renewable Energy Laboratory estimates](#) that installing solar on the nation's 24,000 man-made reservoirs could supply 10% of our energy needs. A [University of California study](#) found that covering California's canals with solar panels would save billions of gallons of water while generating energy.

Snapshot of Water Challenges

- Much of the nation's water infrastructure was built a century ago, and is reaching the end of its useful life.
- In recent years, extreme weather has overwhelmed aging dams, levees, storm drains and sewage systems across the country.
- Increasingly, communities are turning to nature-based solutions to help shore up existing infrastructure, but many lack the resources for key investments.

- Federal water spending has been dropping steeply for decades, declining from 63% of capital expenditures in 1977 to less than 10% in 2016.
- This has shifted costs to local government and ratepayers, and left many critical updates unfunded.
- The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates that the U.S. needs to invest \$109 billion per year over the next 20 years to modernize and maintain our public plumbing.
- Of the nation's 50,000 community water systems, 40,000 serve fewer than 3,300 households. Small water systems have [far higher rates of Safe Drinking Water Act violations](#) and typically charge more.
- About [30 million people](#) are served by water systems that violated safety rules at the beginning of 2019, per EPA data. [Two million people](#) live in homes without running water or flush toilets.
- Millions of people are at risk of losing water service due to financial hardship. Since utilities are not required to report shutoffs in most states, we don't know the extent of the problem. But we do know that water debt is rising in places that track it, like California, where [households owe \\$1 billion in overdue water bills](#).



- Until recently, there was no federal program to assist low-income water ratepayers, and the funds allocated in recent COVID relief bills (administered through a [temporary program](#)) will only meet part of the need.
- Lost income from unpaid water bills is making it hard for water utilities — [especially rural and Tribal water systems](#) — to keep delivering safe water.
- This [revenue loss will prevent critical infrastructure updates](#) and slow economic recovery. [More than 60% of cities](#) indicated they plan to cancel or delay infrastructure projects because of pandemic-related financial challenges.
- Investing in water will not only protect public health, it will also [create jobs and stimulate the economy](#).
- In addition to replacing pipes, pumps, and treatment plants, water investments can help [protect and restore the waterways we rely on](#). Right now, [70%](#) of assessed lakes, reservoirs, and ponds and 55% of rivers and streams fail to meet federal water quality standards.

Meeting this moment

The COVID-19 and climate crises have shined a light on the vulnerabilities in our nation’s water system and created the opportunity to Build it Back Better. Below, we offer recommendations for how policymakers can harness the momentum that is building and channel broad voter concern about water into on-the-ground progress.

- **Tap into shared concerns across the aisle** about our aging infrastructure.
- **Talk about the way proposed policies address voter concerns** around drinking water safety, pollution of lakes and rivers, droughts, flooding, etc.
- **Address both the human and environmental stakes** of water issues: voters care about safe drinking water AND healthy rivers, and recognize the two are connected.



- **Be specific about the solutions increased funding will make possible**, such as replacing lead pipes that endanger kids' health or helping farmers save water so they can continue to grow food during future droughts.
- **Prioritize multi-benefit projects** that address water supply or quality issues while also greening and cooling communities, saving money and energy, etc.
- **Emphasize the jobs and economic benefits of investing in water**, and talk about the range of workers and businesses that benefit — from technology to manufacturing, landscaping to plumbing.
- **Highlight the role the government can play in providing an essential public service** that protects public health and powers the economy.
- **Leverage the strong support for water solutions to make progress on climate change**, tapping into energy and emissions savings in the water sector and helping communities prepare for future storms and droughts.

Photo Credits

- **Cover:** Sandra Garcia, co-director of Campesinas Unidas del Valle de San Joaquin and founding member of the AGUA coalition, drinks water in an orchard in California's San Joaquin Valley. Photo courtesy Community Water Center.
- **Page 2:** Washing hands in a sink, photo courtesy Community Water Center.
- **Page 6:** Water infrastructure photos from iStock
- **Page 8:** Rain garden construction in Portland, photo courtesy Verde
- **Page 10:** Avalon Green Alley opening celebration in Los Angeles, photo courtesy LA Sanitation and Environment
- **Charts** from a [March 2021 poll](#) conducted by Water Hub/Climate Nexus in partnership with Yale University Program on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication.



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