



water hub



The Opportunity on Water

How public opinion, politics, and decades of deep organizing 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 Outdated infrastructure has left families vulnerable to toxic tap water, sewage back-ups, flooding, and more.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



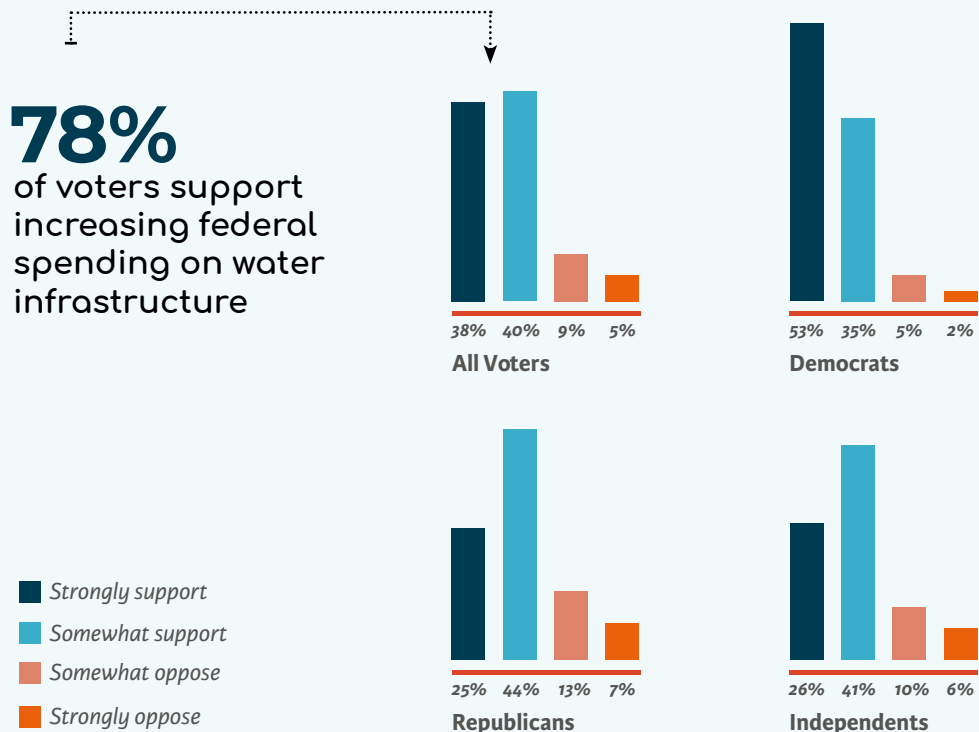
“ Water, which washes hands during the pandemic. Water, which is needed for factories to produce goods, farms to grow crops, and cities to reboot. Water, which has sometimes been denied to communities of color or delivered in polluted form. And water, which is how a warming planet will wreak much of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

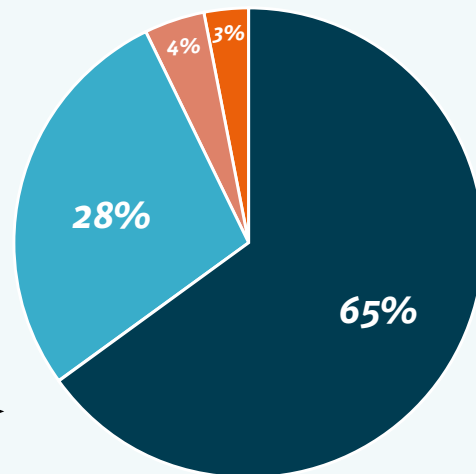
Reversing the [decades-long decline in federal spending](#) to update aging water systems will [put people to work](#) and [fuel economic recovery](#). It will also protect vital industries such as energy, manufacturing, education, and agriculture from the financial fallout of water service disruptions.

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.¹ 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.

¹ It's worth noting that the [energy sector is also a huge water user](#), with coal, oil, gas, and corn ethanol being especially water intensive.



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For many, the words ‘water is life’ are not an aspiration or a claim — it is simply an empirical fact. Water is not to be ‘managed’. It is to be related to... [This idea] is suppressed in mainstream Western culture because it is so threatening. It undermines the very basis of extractive, consumerist culture. If I am the relative of all other beings then I am responsible for their well-being.”

— Chas Jewett and Mark Garavan, [Water is life – an indigenous perspective from a Standing Rock Water Protector](#), Community Development Journal

The need — and opportunity — for culture change

While public opinion and current politics have put policy wins within reach, **water advocates and communities are looking beyond short-term fixes.** Many have been working for years to change the culture, in order to [advance the human right to water](#) (and the [rights of rivers](#)), recognize water's [spiritual and ecological value](#) and [ensure it's not taken for granted](#).

The COVID-19 and climate crises have revealed the vulnerability of our water system and created the opportunity to build it back better. Together, they have fractured the stubborn individualism that underpins [so many of our challenges](#) and underscored the life or death stakes of our nation's water safety and access issues.

Dam breaches, megafires, and the recent deep freeze that broke down power and water systems across the South have made it clear that people are not separate from the environment, nor masters of it. And, while the country is currently divided by clean water “haves and have-nots,” the pandemic has been a [powerful reminder of our interdependence](#).

While current law typically treats water as a resource to be managed for “[beneficial use](#)” and a service for those that can pay, research shows that most people recognize water's [intrinsic](#) and [public health value](#). **Voters want to see rivers and streams protected, and safe water provided to all.**



The emotional resonance is already there. Water is central to the human experience, showing up in myth, faith, song, and art. But advocates and decision-makers often gloss over this profound connection, focusing on process rather than purpose. **In order to harness the strong support for water solutions, we need to speak to people’s hearts as well as their heads.**

This is increasingly important as water supply and safety problems grow more acute — from aridification in the Southwest to agricultural pollution in the Great Lakes and flooding in communities across the country. In order to solve these challenges, we need new approaches and increased collaboration.

Black, Indigenous, and Latinx leaders have been doing this work for decades, using [arts](#) and [culture](#) to connect, facilitating community research, lifting up traditional ecological knowledge, [illuminating the intersections](#) between issues, [envisioning a regenerative economy](#), and [charting a path to get there](#).

Meeting this moment

We are living in a moment of tremendous opportunity. Water challenges are receiving unprecedented attention. Federal leaders are setting ambitious conservation goals and considering trillions of dollars in new infrastructure spending. Communities across the country are working to update water systems that are reaching the end of their useful life and/or unfit for the changing climate.

[Water agencies](#), [nonprofits](#), and [lawmakers](#) are all calling for massive investment in safe, affordable and equitable water. **How do we ensure the funds and policies that result truly transform the water sector, rather than replicating its current problems?**

In order to harness the momentum that is building and channel it into meaningful progress, we need to work differently ourselves.

Below, we offer a series of recommendations informed by conversations with Water Hub partners, funders, and advisors, as well as our analysis of public opinion research and earned media.



For funders

- **Resource frontline groups** that are addressing urgent community needs while organizing for long-term change.
- **Build power by investing in movement infrastructure**, including convenings, trainings, shared tools and technology, and professional support.
- **Fund communications and journalism** to harness and sustain this moment of heightened awareness.
- **Break down silos between program areas** that leave advocates competing for resources and share of voice rather than tackling problems together and pushing integrated solutions.
- **Address both the human and environmental stakes** of water issues, prioritizing multi-benefit solutions.
- Use your position to facilitate collaboration across campaigns and coalitions, and between the water and climate movements.
- **Provide multi-year grants and general operating support** to enable grantees to work on near-term policy campaigns (including lobbying, up to their c3 limit), AND long-term power building and systems change.
- **Remember that policy wins are just the beginning:** equitable implementation requires organizing and advocacy as well.
- Help funders in related spaces understand the case for investing in water and the real potential for meaningful progress on health, equity, climate, and more.

For advocates:

- **Center the leadership of impacted communities**, in the press, in policymaking, etc.
- Design communications to **connect with universal values like health, safety, family, and financial security**, while also tailoring to your target audience's specific concerns.
- **Tap into the emotion around water** by using imagery and language that locates it in our lives: bathing children, watering a garden, preparing a special meal, gathering at a local lake, etc.
- Think beyond factsheets, op-eds, and infographics; explore arts and cultural strategies to reach and move people.
- **Localize national issues**: what challenges might new federal infrastructure funding help solve in your community? What will be the impact on people's lives and livelihoods?
- Develop messaging and materials that emphasize the root causes of problems we can anticipate (like fires, floods, algal blooms, boil water notices, etc.), and the steps we can take to prepare and prevent future harm.
- **Ensure campaign materials focus on the why rather than the how** (purpose and payoff, not process!)
- **Paint a vivid picture of the way proposed solutions will help** — like how a green alley that captures the rain to reduce flooding also cools and freshens the air, attracts birds and butterflies, and offers a pleasant place for people to walk or ride safe from traffic.
- Highlight the vital role local, state and federal government plays in protecting clean water for people and nature.
- Emphasize the climate benefits of water solutions — from energy and emissions savings to flood and drought resilience.

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 5:** Standing Rock water protectors camp, photo courtesy Leslie Peterson via Flickr Creative Commons
- **Page 6:** “Water is a Right” light display, photo courtesy Joe Bruskey via Flickr Creative Commons
- **Page 8:** Inauguration Day demonstration, photo courtesy Mobilus in Mobili via Flickr Creative Commons
- **Page 11:** 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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