

Westerners and their Water

November 2019 poll report

As part of our initial discovery and planning process, the Water Hub at Climate Nexus conducted a survey of 3,296 registered voters in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming¹ from October 30-November 6, 2019. Our goal was to learn more about how Westerners perceive water challenges, explore support for water solutions, and test various messages used to promote water conservation or supply efforts.

Key Findings

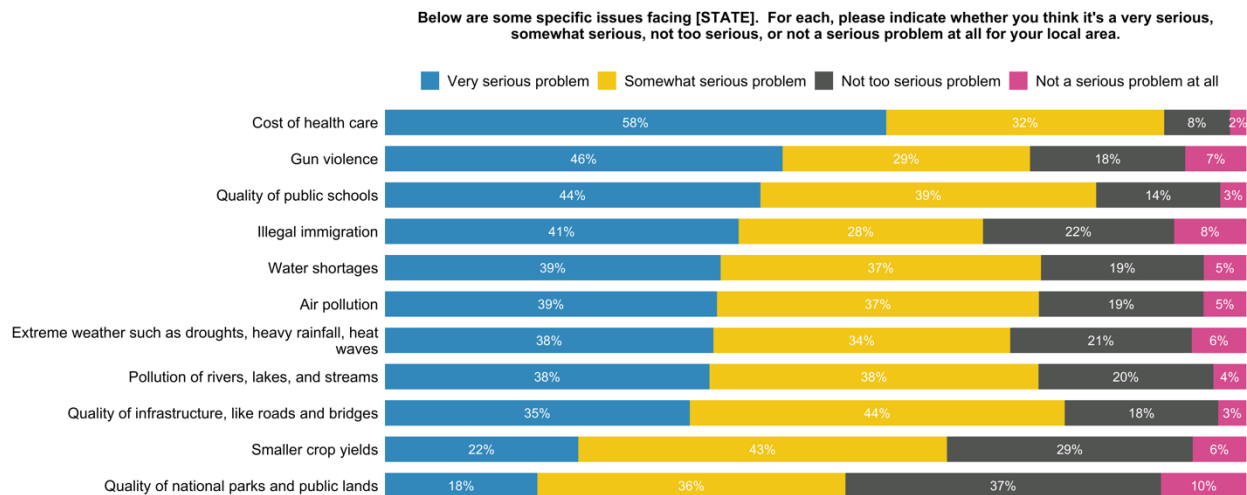
- Water shortages, pollution, and extreme weather are perceived as problems in their state by roughly three-quarters of Western voters.
- Water supply tends to elicit more concern among Western voters than water quality.
- More than 7 in 10 Western voters say climate change is affecting their water supply and quality.
- Voters want their government and utility companies to do more on water issues.
- While water infrastructure is not top of mind for voters, there is broad support for updating aging infrastructure.
- Voters support a range of water solutions, but most want utilities to focus on maximizing local supplies rather than increasing the reliability of imported water.
- Most voters in the West believe that we all have to sacrifice to ensure sustainable water supplies.
- Messages that reference drier weather and a growing population are considered most convincing as arguments for saving water and developing new sources, followed by a message about the potential to work together to ensure healthy rivers and a thriving economy.

In the pages that follow, we dig further into specific questions and responses. If you would like to learn more about the survey results, we would be glad talk with you and share the full crosstabs. Please reach out to Water Hub Managing Director Nicole Lampe at nlampe@climatenexus.org.

¹ The sample size of Wyoming voters in this survey is n=50; interpret results among Wyoming voters with caution.

Voters Are Concerned about Water Supply, Quality and Climate Impacts

Water concerns rank high for Western voters, especially among environmental issues. When asked to rate a range of issues facing their states, more than three-quarters say water shortages (76%) and pollution of natural waterways (76%) are very or somewhat serious problems in the places they live, and more than seven in ten (72%) say extreme weather, such as droughts, heavy rainfall, and heat waves, is a serious problem. Roughly two-thirds (65%) say smaller crop yields are a serious problem.



When asked to name the biggest water-related problem in their state, Westerners tend to focus on water quantity over water quality. Lack of rain and snow was the top pick across the region (21%), followed by wasting or overusing water (17%), low levels of water in lakes and rivers (12%), and aging infrastructure (10%). The biggest challenges in each state are as follows:

- Arizona: Lack of rain and snow (21%), wasting or overusing water (18%)
- California: Lack of rain and snow (23%), wasting or overusing water (15%)
- Colorado: Lack of rain and snow (16%), wasting or overusing water (15%), aging infrastructure (14%)
- Nevada: Low levels of water in lakes and rivers (29%), lack of rain and snow (19%), wasting or overusing water (18%)
- New Mexico: Lack of rain and snow (24%)
- Utah: Wasting or overusing water (26%)
- Wyoming: Aging infrastructure (22%)

Voters recognize the impact climate change is having on water. At least three-quarters say climate change is having a large or some impact on water supply (78%), their state's agriculture (78%), and extreme weather (75%). Roughly seven in 10 say climate change is affecting water quality (71%), recreational

activities like fishing and boating (67%), and the health of people in their state (66%). Notably, nearly 6 in 10 (58%) say climate change is impacting their family’s health.

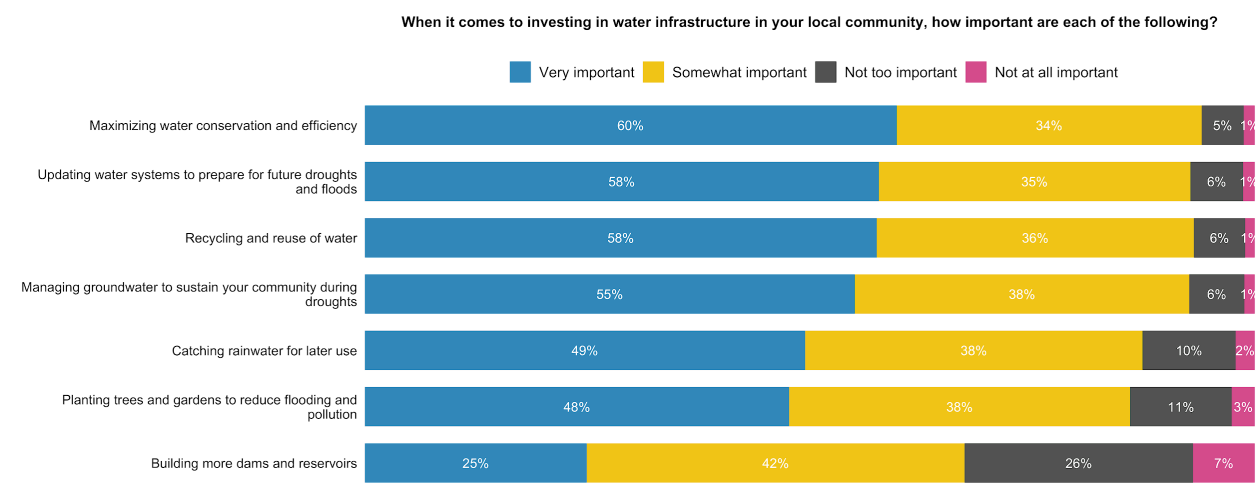
Additionally, most voters report experiencing extreme weather. More than 6 in 10 (61%) say their local area has been impacted by extreme heat, and roughly half report their local area has been affected by drought (52%) or wildfires (47%). Just 17% say their local area has been affected by flooding. Arizonans (76%) and Nevadans (73%) are more likely to have experienced heat in the last year, and New Mexicans (63%) and Californians (60%) are more likely to report experiencing drought. Notably, black voters in the West are more likely than white voters in the West to report their local area experienced extreme heat (73% vs. 60%) and flooding (29% vs. 17%).

Westerners Support Infrastructure Investments, Want Agencies to Focus on Maximizing Local Supplies

When asked what comes to mind first when thinking about infrastructure, the majority (56%) of voters in the West say “roads and bridges.” Far fewer think of water infrastructure like drinking water systems (7%) or sewage and wastewater disposal (2%).

While water infrastructure is not top of mind for voters, there is broad support for updating aging water systems. Less than half (44%) consider the condition of water infrastructure in their community excellent or good, and eight in 10 voters (80%) support increasing government investments to update aging water infrastructure.

Voters support a range of water infrastructure investments.

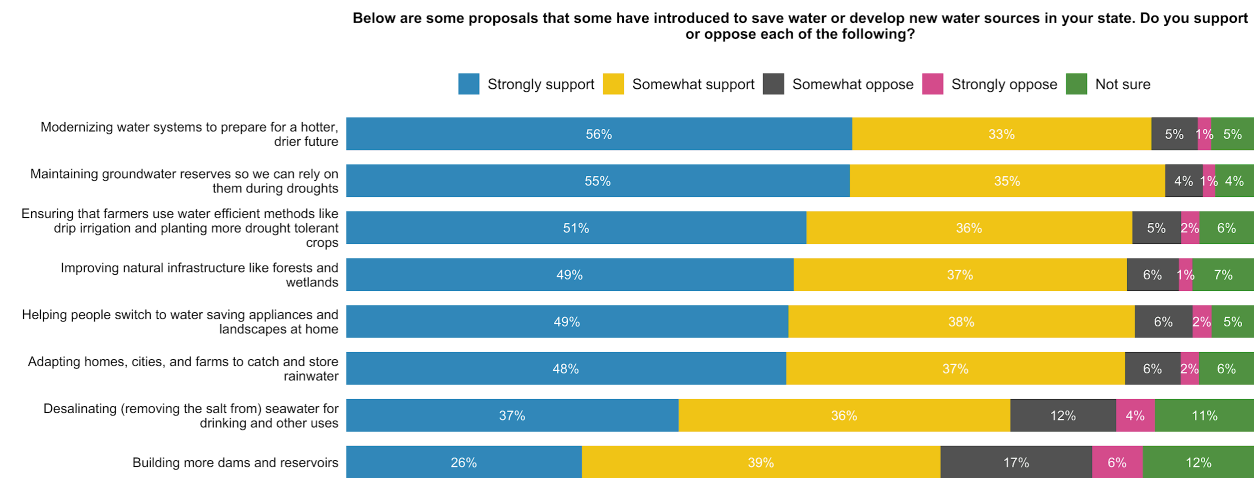


When asked how they would prefer for their local water agency to invest its funds, 8 in 10 voters (80%) said they want agencies to maximize local water supplies by developing new sources and boosting water efficiency, and 1 in 5 (20%) said they want agencies to increase the reliability of water imported from sources that are further away.

Residents Want Action on Water Issues, Support Range of Policies

Westerners believe government and utility companies have the most influence over their personal water supply and quality, and they want those groups and others to do more to prepare for a hotter and drier future. Close to 9 in 10 (86%) want utilities to do more on water issues. Roughly 8 in 10 also want their state government (85%), local government (82%), and the federal government (78%) to do more, though only about 6 in 10 (61%) are confident that their state government can solve the water issues faced by their state. Most Westerners also want businesses (79%), and farmers and ranchers (76%) to do more, and 6 in 10 say nonprofits (64%), as well as themselves (63%), should be doing more.

We tested support for a variety of programs and policies that have been introduced to save water or develop new water sources. Voters were quite supportive of all the proposals, although seawater desalination and building more dams and reservoirs generated less support and more opposition or uncertainty.

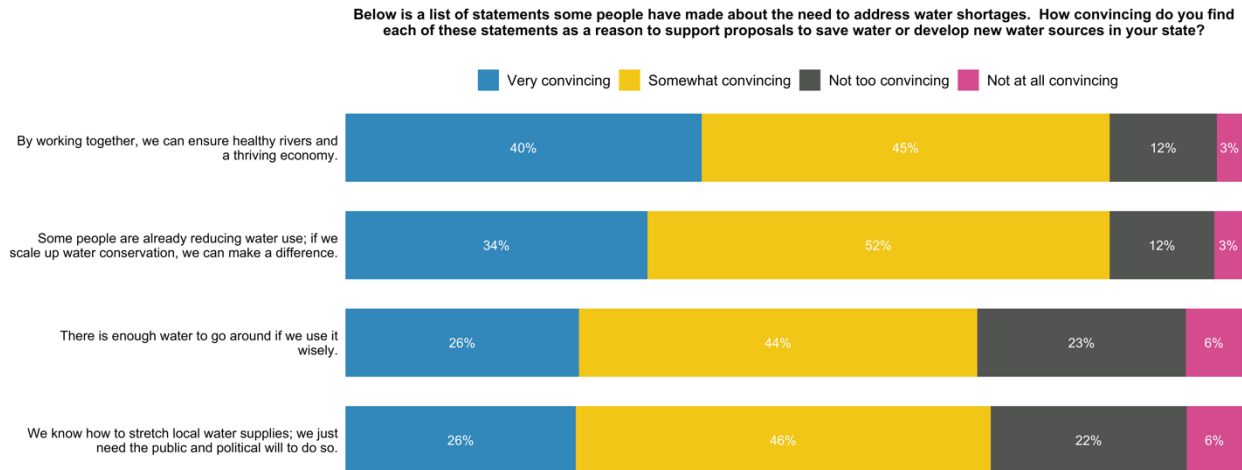


Voters Believe Water Security Will Require Sacrifice, But Rate Evidence-Based or Hopeful Messages More Convincing Than Alarmist Ones

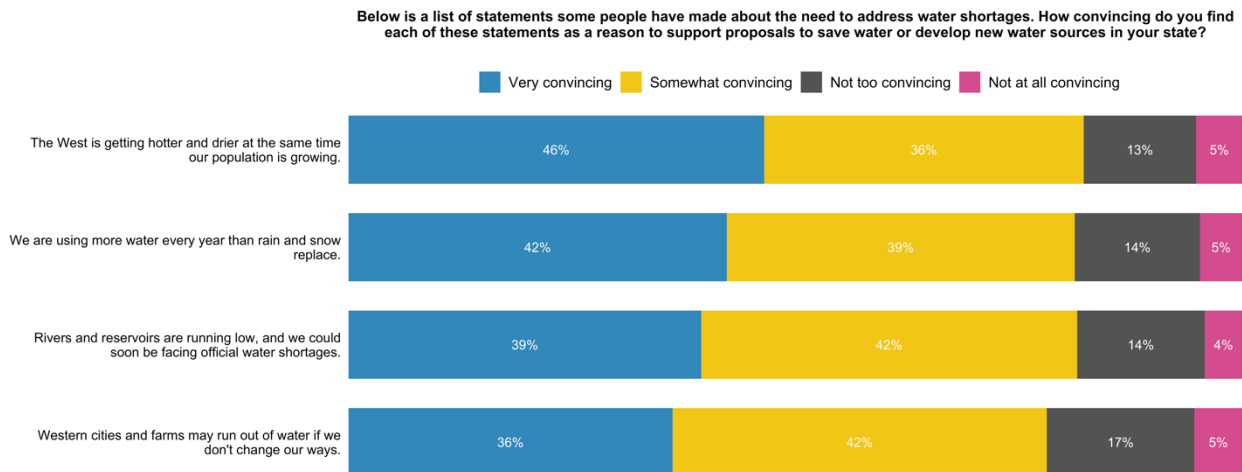
We tested a variety of messages to learn what voters find most convincing as a reason to support policies to save water or develop new water sources in their state. We developed two sets of messages: one set

focused on the idea of water *scarcity*, and another on the idea of *sufficiency*. Half of the respondents read messages in a scarcity framework and half of the respondents read messages in a sufficiency framework.

Here are the sufficiency message set we tested:



Here are the scarcity messages:



The results were mixed. While the two messages that most voters found either very or somewhat convincing used the sufficiency framework, more respondents found scarcity messages *very* convincing.

Digging into the specifics, we noticed some trends: the scarcity messages that were rated most convincing were evidence-based rather than alarmist, referencing weather and population changes that voters may already know about. Similarly, the most convincing sufficiency message referenced conservation progress that many voters have likely heard or read about. The other sufficiency message

rated as very convincing emphasized collaboration, a value we often see resonating with poll respondents.

We asked another, separate question to explore whether voters believe that water security will require sacrifice. More than 8 in 10 voters (81%) agree that we all have to sacrifice to ensure sustainable water supplies, while roughly 7 in 10 (69%) agree there's enough water to go around if we use it wisely. Most subgroups express higher levels of agreement with the idea that we all have to sacrifice, with the exception of Republicans (79% agree there's enough water to go around if we use it wisely, and 74% agree we all have to sacrifice to ensure sustainable water supplies) and voters in Utah and Wyoming (73% and 82%, respectively, agree with there's enough water to go around, while 72% and 68%, respectively, agree we all have to sacrifice).

We retested support for policies to save water or develop new water sources after respondents read the messages, and found it remained stable. Notably, support after messaging did not differ between the respondents who read messages from the scarcity framework and respondents who read messages from the sufficiency framework, indicating that while there is variation in how convincing respondents say they find the messages, neither frame significantly impacts policy support.

Voters Want the Media to Talk about Climate-Driven Events Before They Occur, Rely on a Variety of Sources for Water News

Voters in the West want the media to talk about the relationship between water shortages and droughts and climate change. A majority (51%) want the media to talk about how climate change impacts water shortages and droughts *before* those events occur, including through the use of seasonal outlooks and forecasts, and close to a quarter want the media to talk about the connection during (19%) or immediately after (4%) water shortages and droughts. Only 4% say the media should wait a week or longer, and fewer than 1 in 10 (9%) say the media should never talk about climate change's impact on water issues.

Slight majorities in the West say the media is not exaggerating water shortages (52%) or water contamination and pollution (51%), while only about a quarter say the media is exaggerating water shortages (28%) and pollution (27%).

Voters rely on a variety of news sources for in-depth reporting on water-related issues, including local television (25%), network television (13%), cable news (10%), and local newspapers (10%). Voters do not talk about water issues with friends, family, or coworkers often: One-quarter talk about water issues in their local area daily (9%) or weekly (16%), and another 19% talk about water issues monthly. A majority talk about water issues seldom (42%) or never (14%). Notably, Hispanic (38%), and black (37%) residents of the West are significantly more likely to talk about water issues daily or weekly.