



National voter poll on water access, affordability, and safety

August 2023

Water pollution and drinking water safety remain top priorities for U.S. voters. As communities, utilities, and advocates work to channel federal infrastructure dollars from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act, we wanted to evaluate how voters are feeling about water infrastructure priorities, water access and affordability, and the emerging threat of PFAS “forever chemicals” to drinking water.

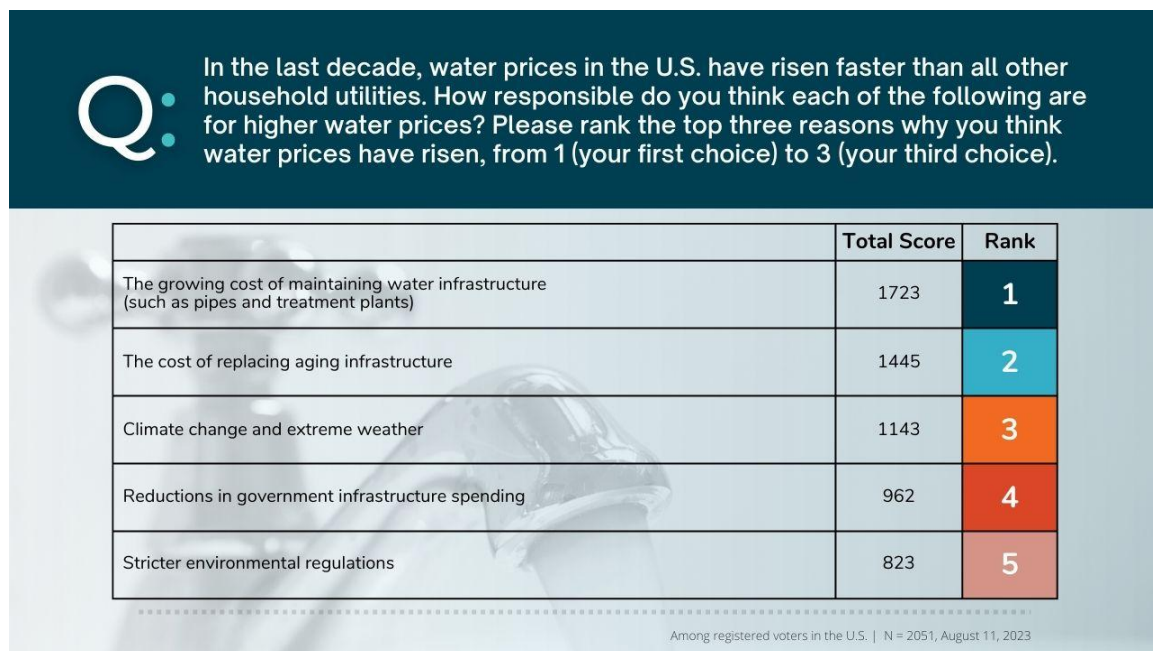
We partnered with Climate Nexus Polling, the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication on this national poll of 2,051 registered voters in the U.S. Key findings include::

- Water tops the list of investment priorities for voters. 68% of voters say drinking water and sewage infrastructure should be a top priority for investment by the U.S. government compared to other infrastructure priorities like renewable energy (59%), the electricity grid (56%), roads (49%), or flood defenses (32%).
- When asked about potential investments in community water infrastructure, voters say drinking water safety (92%) and affordable water bills (85%) are important goals.
- When asked about current water challenges, voters are most concerned about pollution of lakes and rivers (89%), flooding (88%), and drinking water contamination (86%).
- 58% of voters are concerned about the impact of climate change on drinking water safety.
- Voters are concerned that PFAS (“forever chemicals that do not break down”) (67%), outdated infrastructure (63%), lead in drinking water (62%), and agricultural pollution (62%) threaten drinking water safety.
- Voters overwhelmingly agree (89%) that access to safe, affordable water is a human right, consistent with [last year’s results](#).
- 79% of voters support the U.S. government helping lower-income families with their water bills.

Water access and affordability

As funding for the federal government's temporary low-income water bill assistance program is set to run out at the end of 2023, we wanted to understand how water affordability affects voters and test support for permanent federal assistance.

Nearly 1 in 3 registered voters (30%) say what they currently pay for water and wastewater service is unaffordable, regardless of whether voters live in urban (30%), suburban (29%), or rural (32%) communities. Asked to rank the top three reasons for rising water rates, voters blame the growing cost of maintaining water infrastructure, the cost of replacing aging infrastructure, and climate change and extreme weather.

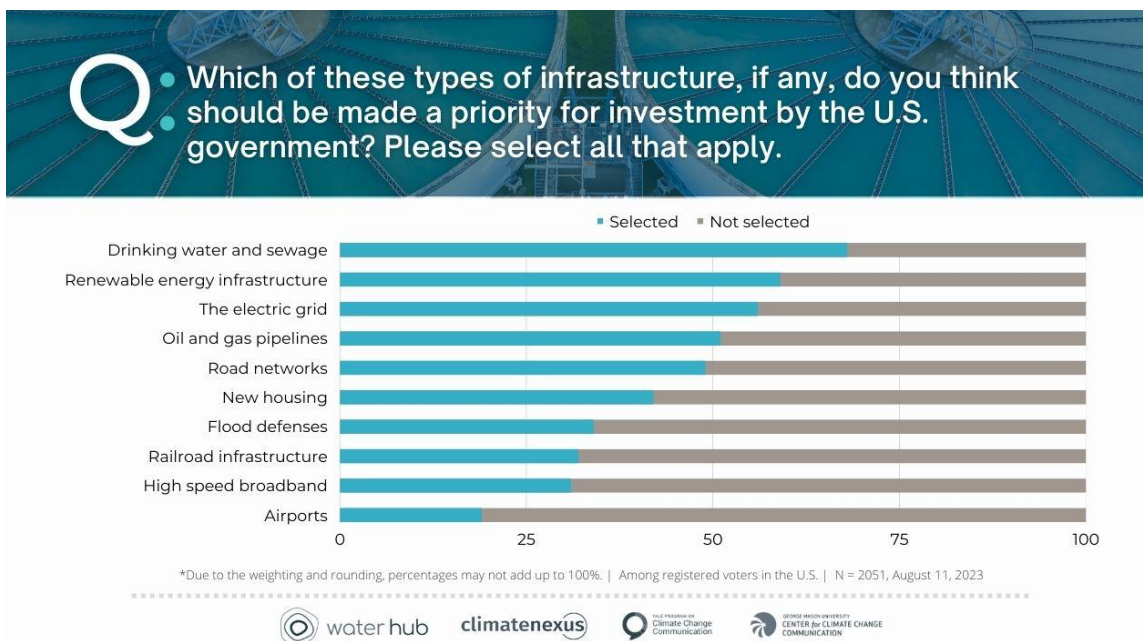


Voters support programs that keep water running in low-income households struggling to pay their water bills. 76% support extending funding for a national program to help lower-income families with their water bills when the temporary Low Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) expires. 74% of voters support banning water shutoffs so that lower-income families can maintain water access even when they fall behind on their water bills. We wanted to gauge support for banning water shutoffs after a majority of voters expressed support for pausing shutoffs during the pandemic (63% in [2020](#) and 77% in [2021](#)) in past polls.

When asked which term best describes efforts to ensure all communities have access to safe, affordable water, 74% of voters preferred the term water equity over water justice (20%).

Investing in water infrastructure

Consistent with [past results](#), more voters (68%) selected drinking water and sewage infrastructure as a priority for federal investment than energy infrastructure or road networks. Voters say drinking water safety (72%), clean water for fish and wildlife (49%), and affordable water bills (48%) are *extremely important* goals when investing in their community's water infrastructure.



While voters support targeted water infrastructure investments, they are not always sure what kinds of programs are eligible for federal funding. When asked if the following projects were eligible for U.S. government funding for infrastructure improvements:

- Voters are less aware that distributed water conservation programs like lawn removal at homes and businesses (19%) and drought friendly gardens (35%) could be eligible for funding through federal infrastructure programs.
- 46% of voters say water efficient appliances and sprinkler systems for homes and businesses are eligible for U.S. water infrastructure funding.
- Voters are more aware that large capital projects like water recycling plants (56%), desalination facilities (44%), and irrigation canals (41%) could be eligible for federal infrastructure investments.

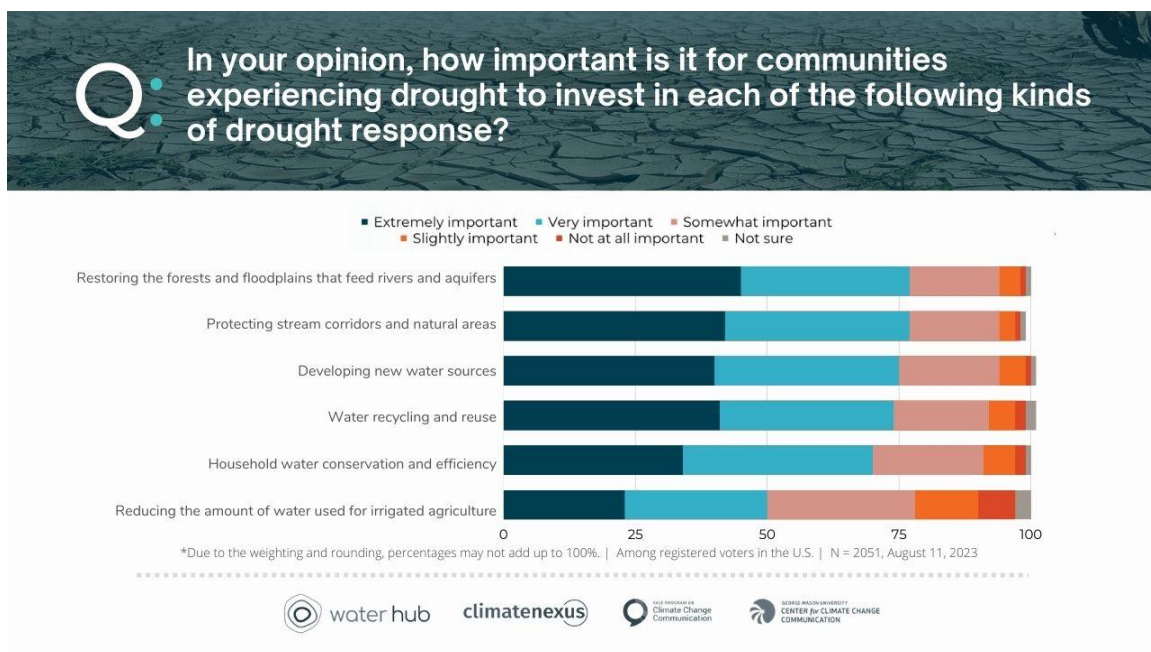
As federal agencies and states are delivering \$55 billion in water infrastructure investments through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and \$4 billion more in drought relief from the Inflation Reduction Act, there is an important opportunity to educate the public about the types of

projects and programs that could be funded through their state and local agencies and utilities beyond traditional concrete and canals.

Voters support investing in nature-based infrastructure in their community. On average, 82% of voters support investing in solutions like rain gardens and parks to manage water runoff in addition to storm drains and gutters. We found virtually no difference in support whether the benefits were framed around saving communities money (83%) or cleaning and cooling the air (81%).

We asked respondents specifically about the water infrastructure goals for communities experiencing drought, flooding, and pollution and found voters think natural infrastructure solutions are important alongside built strategies like pumps and levees:

- 77% of voters say protecting stream corridors and natural areas is an important investment for communities experiencing drought.
- 77% of voters say restoring the forests and floodplains that feed rivers and aquifers is an important investment for communities experiencing drought.
- Voters say natural flood controls like wetlands and floodplains (69%) and greenspace like parks (64%) are important investments for communities experiencing flooding.
- Voters say reducing agricultural runoff (74%) and reducing urban runoff (73%) are important investments for communities experiencing water pollution.



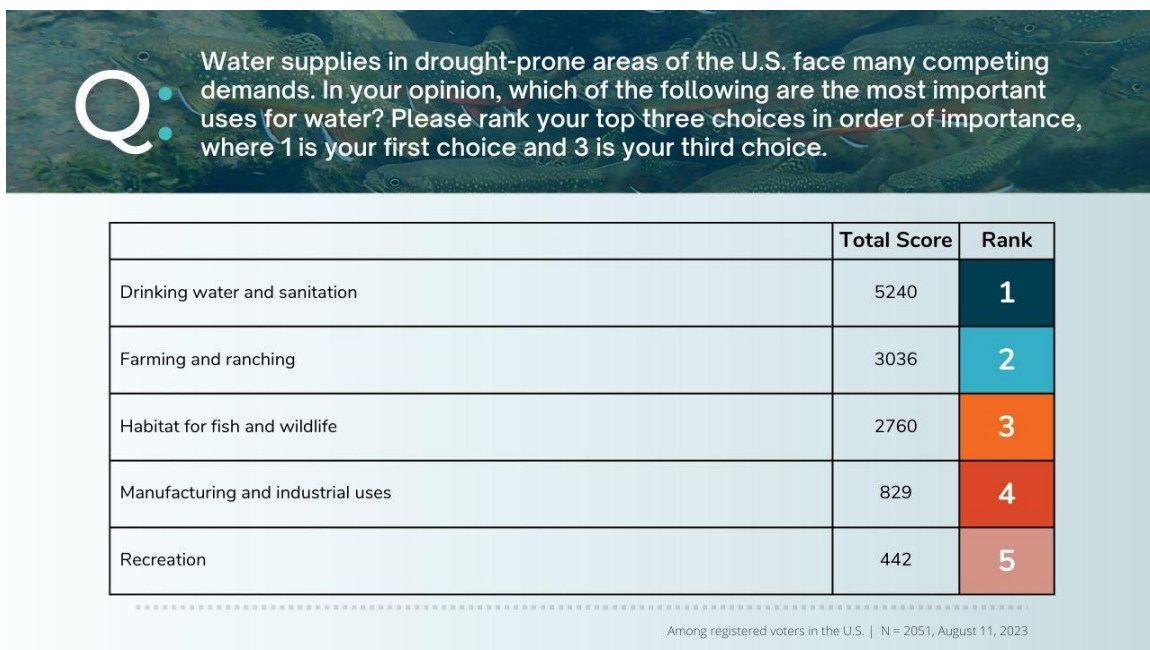
When asked what term best describes using planted areas alongside gutters and storm drains to soak up rain and stormwater runoff, voters slightly preferred the terms nature-based solutions (33%) and environmental infrastructure (28%) over green (21%) or natural (18%) infrastructure.

When testing the terminology around targeted water infrastructure investments, we found a majority of voters support the goals of the Justice40 initiative whether communities targeted are described as overburdened (69%), disadvantaged (69%), marginalized (66%), or environmental justice communities (62%). 69% of white voters support Justice40 goals when we use the term overburdened communities compared to 59% support when using the term environmental justice community. A strong majority of Black voters support Justice40 goals regardless of whether they are described as benefiting overburdened communities (78%) or environmental justice (76%) communities; however, the intensity of support from Black voters is higher when using environmental justice (51% strongly support) compared to white voters (25%).

Water projects and priorities in drought-prone areas

Despite above average precipitation, strategies to more sustainably manage the West's limited water supplies are important to invest in now. When asked to rank different uses for water infrastructure funds, voters ranked water recycling plants as the best use of infrastructure funds to conserve water in the U.S., followed by desalination facilities and water efficient appliances.

In the West, news stories about shrinking water supplies often pit the demands of growing cities against those of farms and ranches. When we asked voters to rank uses for water in drought-prone areas, drinking water and sanitation topped the list, followed by farming and ranching and habitat for fish and wildlife. Manufacturing and other industrial uses and recreation rank far lower for voters.

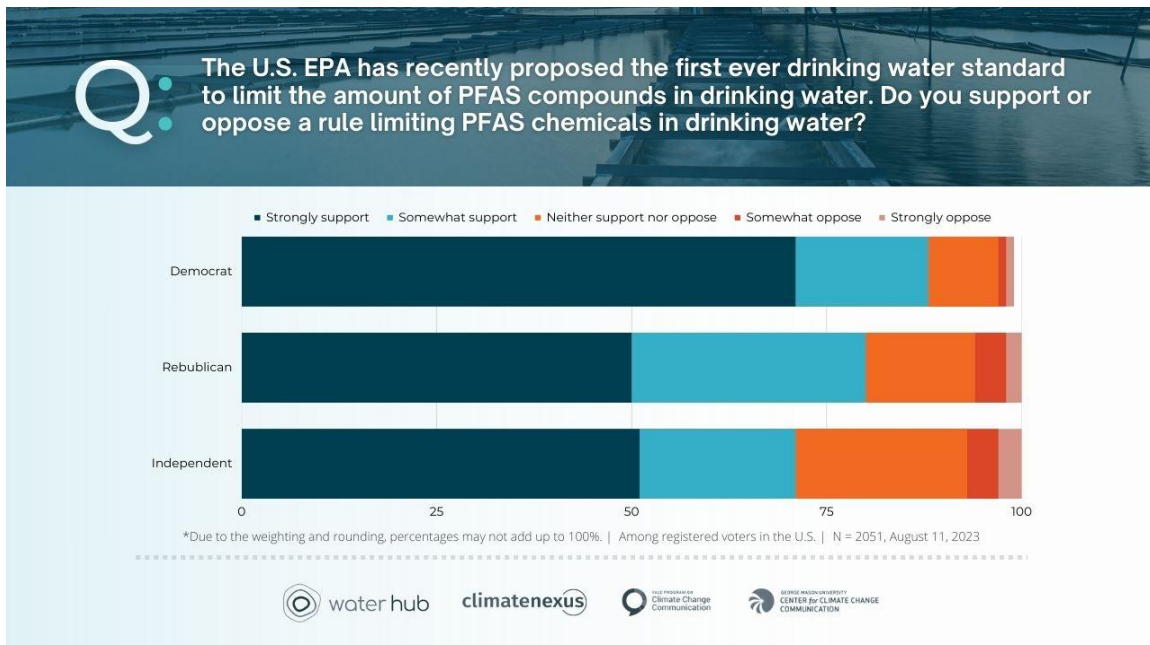


Voter views on farmland conversion:

- A plurality of voters (44%) support converting farmland in drought-prone areas for non-agricultural uses that require less water. While support is higher among urban voters (54%), 37% of rural voters support converting farmland (compared to 31% opposed).
- When there is no longer enough water to support irrigated agriculture, voters ranked replenishing aquifers, generating renewable energy, and rewilding the land as the top three ways to use former farm and ranchland.
- Voters say protecting water quality (84%), protecting communities from flooding and drought (79%), and supporting biodiversity (75%) are the most effective goals for land conversion.

Voters support limiting PFAS contamination

Many voters are not familiar (36%) with PFAS (perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances), often called forever chemicals; however, when educated about the impacts of PFAS, 75% or more support stopping the use of PFAS chemicals in household products. We tested both a public health and environmental message and found telling voters that PFAS “are harmful to the environment and take more than 1,000 years to degrade” resulted in more people strongly supporting a ban (51% versus 44% who received the message that PFAS are “linked to health problems such as cancer, asthma, and liver disease”). There is strong support (82%) for an EPA rule to limit the amount of PFAS chemicals allowed in drinking water across political affiliation.



Voters agree the companies that use PFAS in their products (44%) or manufacture PFAS (30%) are most responsible for the cost of removing PFAS chemicals from drinking water, compared to the federal government (14%) or water utilities (8%).

Full topline available [here](#). To access the crosstabs, please contact Sarah Bucci at sbucci@climatenexus.org.

Methodology: Climate Nexus Polling, in partnership with the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, conducted a representative survey for the Water Hub at Climate Nexus on August 11, 2023, of 2,051 registered voters in the United States. The margin of error for this survey is +/- 2.3% at the 95% confidence level.