

# WATER MESSAGES THAT MOBILIZE

DOs & DONT'S FOR ADVOCATES, COMMUNICATORS, & ELECTEDS



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## Background: Strengthening Our Calls For Clean Water

American Rivers Action Fund is the 501(c)4 affiliated organization of American Rivers. We are the nation's leading voices for rivers and the people and wildlife who depend on them.

We plan to unite a diverse, ideologically expansive coalition of voters and leaders to safeguard our nation's clean, safe, reliable drinking water and the rivers at the source. To do that, we must mobilize people around a pro-water agenda and effective call to action. The motivation to protect clean drinking water and flowing rivers is growing, and smart advocates across the country have the policy solutions we need to further safeguard one of our basic human rights. In order to build public momentum to elevate solutions and the leaders who embrace them, we must also have a strong, unified, and persuasive call for clean water that can move voters to action.

### This messaging guide includes:

1. A summary of what current public polling, focus groups, and message tests can tell us about voter attitudes and beliefs about water and what messages move certain audiences. ([Skip ahead](#))
2. A review of insights and lessons from the field, including what local and state advocates know is breaking through the noise in their communities. ([Skip ahead](#))
3. Regional messaging insights that speak to the water-related fears and concerns of people in different parts of the country. ([Skip ahead](#))
4. A simplified list of best practices for water messaging and messaging campaigns. ([Skip ahead](#))

## How We Developed This Guide: Research & Polling Meets On-The-Ground Success

Over several months, the American Rivers Action Fund compiled and analyzed a large body of polling, focus groups, and message tests on water-related issues across different regions from the past five years. We also interviewed six state-based advocates to understand recent successful water advocacy and accountability campaigns and the messages and outreach strategies that can drive public action.

This guide is the first of its kind, drawing upon the expertise and experience of national, state, and local water advocates to craft messages that move people to action as well as the professionals who have put thoughtful effort into the research and polling data and analysis that is guiding these results. We are incredibly grateful to the experts who offered their time, stories, and expertise to shape this guide.

### Who this guide is for and when to use it

Are you:

- Planning or currently running a water-related advocacy campaign?
- A funder looking to better understand best practices, the application of research, or the realities and needs of on-the-ground groups?
- An aspiring or current political candidate who needs to understand how to reach and persuade voters with a pro-clean water and healthy rivers agenda?
- An elected official who wants to better spotlight and communicate your clean water priorities and successes to the public?
- A local, state, or national advocate who regularly speaks publicly about drinking water or healthy rivers-related issues?
- A volunteer who wants to have more impactful conversations with your friends and family?

.....then this is for you!

Please note that the guide is not strictly a policy-focused tool. All the recommendations included here are to help drive action and attention from the greater public for increased voter engagement and advocacy efforts.

## How Water Stacks Up

Water, particularly clean, safe, reliable drinking water, is consistently a top-of-mind issue for voters, even compared to other issues like the economy, health care, and education. And across most of the country, the main source of this clean water is healthy rivers.

A new era of water awareness has arrived in American politics. This shift is likely due to the high-profile water crises and the subsequent highly strategic community organizing in places like Flint, Michigan, when an unaccountable unelected leader switched Flint's water supply from Lake Huron to the Flint River, ultimately contaminating the water relied upon by thousands of

residents, and destroying countless lives in the process. Local, state, and federal election campaigns for candidates of both major parties have increasingly focused on drinking water as a result.<sup>1</sup>

For the fourth year, the Value of Water Index reported that ensuring a reliable water supply is voters' top priority. This was followed by reducing inflation and strengthening the economy.<sup>2</sup>

Water-related issues, specifically clean, safe, reliable drinking water, are powerfully motivating and top of mind for voters of all backgrounds, political ideologies, and races. Water is a bridge-building issue that connects people in a moment when division is the norm. As many advocates shared in shaping this guide, access to clean drinking water is the environmental movement's strongest mobilizing issue. We need more voices leaning in.

## What The Current Polling Tells Us: Messages, Messengers, Villains

Much of the current polling on clean water occurred in the lead-up to and aftermath of the disastrous Supreme Court decision to upend decades of clean water protections. Because of this, many of the takeaways included in this guide are actionable insights into building winning campaign messages as the fight for clean water shifts to the states. See the end of this document for a complete list of polls reviewed to develop this guidance.

### What works: How to change voters' opinions, motivation, and understanding

**The bottom line:** Prioritize threats to drinking water. Note that all waters are connected and that most of the drinking water supplied in the US comes from rivers. Talk about "pollution" as a threat to public health and wildlife. Do not incorporate education on wetlands or the Clean Water Act in any short form, "take action" messages.

Not all water messaging is equal. However, across all available polling and conversations with practitioners, one universal frame repeatedly beat out the others:

#### ***Clean, safe, reliable drinking water.***

Connecting water policy to drinking water and healthy rivers is the most powerful way to bring the issue into people's homes and lives. Referencing efforts to protect clean, safe drinking water as the underlying motivation for water policy beats out every other argument by a wide margin. You should repeat "clean, safe, reliable drinking water" as much as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> David, Olivia and Hughes, Sara. "Ten Years Later: How Water Crises in Flint and Detroit Transformed the Politics of U.S. Water Policy" *The Forum*, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2024-2013>

<sup>2</sup> "VOW Poll 2024 Fact Sheet." \*US Water Alliance\*, Apr. 2024, <https://uswateralliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/VOW-Poll-2024-fact-sheet.pdf>.

Protecting drinking water is a tangible outcome of water policy that is easy to understand, taps into fear and growing awareness ignited by recent crises, and connects to people's lives. Furthermore, it's easily recognizable - nobody wants their kids, pets, or livestock drinking polluted water. Messaging that focuses on the "why" instead of the process or how (support for a certain policy or educating people about the importance of certain kinds of waterways) will always be more effective in terms of driving action.

*Note: clean drinking water is the most persuasive frame, even for voters who tend to start out not supporting clean water laws or protections. It is also the hardest to undermine from the opposition.*

***All waters are connected. Toxic pollution in wetlands or small streams threatens the rivers and lakes we rely on for drinking water.***

This is straightforward, easily understood, and makes a compelling case for why protecting smaller streams and wetlands is important, for people and wildlife. This frame stood out as the most compelling reason to protect and restore protections for small streams and wetlands across all groups in recent polling focused on defending the Clean Water Act.

***"We need more clean water protections" vs restoring or protecting the Clean Water Act or pushing back on Supreme Court decisions.***

The Clean Water Act is popular, much more so than either presidential candidate, Congress, or the Supreme Court. However, most people don't know much about the Clean Water Act, and messages about restoring clean water protections are more salient than messages about restoring the Clean Water Act. Referencing the Sackett vs EPA decision also does not help persuade voters and is not necessary to build support for expanded clean water protections. With limited space and attention, avoid unnecessary education prior to driving home the most impactful messages.

***Water as a "human right" and "basic need."***

There are important differences between Black voters and voters of color and white voters in terms of issues of importance and messaging. Black voters respond more favorably to messages about water as a human right. White voters, especially Republican women, prefer the phrase "basic need." Black voters are also more likely than all other voting groups to doubt the safety of their drinking water and local water infrastructure.

***The most convincing opposition messages are not overburdening farmers and supporting states' rights.***

In binary questions that pit farmers' bottom lines and states' rights against clean drinking water, clean drinking water wins every time. However, opposition messages that focus on overburdening farmers and not infringing on states' rights do pull some support away from clean water protections, particularly from rural voters and those who lean toward conservative viewpoints. Farmers can also be a politically powerful constituency, so knowing how to respond and neutralize these attacks, and ideally creating alliances with food producers, can make or break the success of a campaign and give people who may be confused a reason to get off the sidelines.

## Regional Message Screens

Region	Distinct messages, values, & fears
Great Lakes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasize the connection between drinking water and Great Lakes protections.</li> <li>• Highlight that 9/10 Midwestern voters want expanded funding for drinking water, including rural areas.</li> <li>• Note that flood protection is also an important water-related concern for both environmental and economic impacts.</li> <li>• Highlight aging infrastructure and the need to modernize to prevent public health crises such as Flint</li> </ul>
West	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drought, declining river health, and competing water needs are the underlying causes of water fear and concern in the West.</li> <li>• Drinking water is the number one water priority, followed by farming and ranching. Recreation is of the least concern.</li> <li>• Avoid framing issues as city vs. rural/farming. Instead, use inclusive narratives: "No matter where you live, where you come from, or how you make a living, we all deserve/need clean drinking water."</li> <li>• Emphasize messages that speak to concerns about water scarcity and diminishing water supplies, and the need to manage and protect our rivers to reduce risk to the West's overall water supply system.</li> </ul>
Coastal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simplify messaging to focus on common and easily understood issues like plastic and water pollution.</li> <li>• Avoid technical terms and emphasize tangible threats rather than climate change, which is less understood.</li> <li>• Know that certain policies related to ocean conservation are very popular, including creating protected areas that prevent drilling and prohibit fishing.</li> </ul>

### Framing the villains: Big polluters, factory farms

Holding polluters accountable and “polluter pay” villain frames are highly impactful. When undertaking accountability or electoral-specific work, naming bad actors and their association with big polluters is also persuasive. When addressing farming-related pollution, talk about “factory farms” and “big agriculture.” Avoid criticizing family farms or small-scale ag producers.

Naming specific villains is important because “government” can become the default enemy when discussing policy failures, making it difficult to mobilize voters for policy and political change.

**Local scientific experts and impacted citizens are the most trusted sources.**

Messengers can be even more important than the message. According to some recent polls, scientists at a local university are the most trusted messengers on water-related issues. A close second is people impacted by drinking water issues such as shutoffs, boil advisories, etc. Don't forget about people speaking on behalf of healthy rivers for water supply, agricultural production, municipal users, and the economy.

Storytelling is always a powerful persuasion and narrative approach and should be incorporated into voter engagement and advocacy programs as much as possible.

## What The Field Tells Us

### American Rivers Action Fund accountability outreach: Persuade voters with water!

In July 2024, the American Rivers Action Fund, with the League of Conservation Voters and National Wildlife Federation Action Fund, conducted two message tests to understand the impact of our clean water accountability outreach on voter attitudes and how their Congressional member voted. The outreach incorporated the guidance above into [15-second videos](#) highlighting how four different congressmen voted against clean water protections. We tested these in Michigan-10 and New Jersey-2.

#### How we measured impact:

- Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of Congressman Jeff Van Drew/John James?
- How likely are you to consider safe and clean water when voting this year?
- If the 2024 election for Congress were held today, would you vote for Jeff Van Drew/John James (the Republican candidate), the Democratic candidate, or another candidate?

Some key results include:

- Topline: Drinking water-focused accountability messages are *extremely persuasive* with women, parents, political moderates, 18-24-year-olds, and households that earn less than \$100,000 annually when attempting to lower favorability for a particular candidate.
- Clean water messaging in accountability outreach has massive potential for moving voters away from supporting bad actors with virtually no threat of any backlash.
- After seeing our videos, considering safe and clean water when voting increased by 19% with moderate voters, 16% with 18-34-year-olds, and parents in NJ-2 testing.
- Women, people with children, and households earning under \$100,000 annually moved away from voting for the highlighted congressperson by as much as 17% after viewing our ads.
- In Michigan, conservative support for Congressman John James fell by 11%.

## Regional insights: Michigan

### ***Flint & Detroit water crisis: When the right messengers share their stories and take the reins***

Water policy scholars have argued that the Flint and Detroit water crises were instrumental in ushering in a new era of water policy awareness and politics in the US. This awareness did not magically happen. It was the result of very strategic and deliberate on-the-ground mobilization and messaging efforts.

3



In 2018, a group of 16 high school and middle school students in Flint and Detroit led an advocacy and protest movement to restore water in schools. The school systems largely responded to the water crisis by shutting off water without a plan to address water needs and fears around contamination moving forward. We the People of Detroit, a water justice organization working to pass water affordability policies and provide direct water services to families in crisis, supported these students with teach-ins as the young people proactively sought the partnership and information of community leaders to strengthen their call to action.

The youth-led campaign organized meetings with the local school board and school administrators and [staged a walk out](#) and #DoWeCount strike on “count day” in order to garner statewide and national attention for their cause. Ultimately, this advocacy work [led Michigan to pass the strongest testing measures for lead in schools and childcare centers in the nation.](#)

### ***Our Water Our Vote: Water-first branding and inspiring volunteer action***

Michigan LCV had long seen the power of its drinking water messages in advocacy and voter engagement work. So, the MLCV team started incorporating drinking water into regular polling to demonstrate that drinking water was consistently one of the top, if not the top, concerns for all voters, not just environmentalists. However, despite those clear indications of water’s mobilizing power, candidates and electoral campaigns were not incorporating safe drinking water into their messaging or agendas.

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<sup>3</sup> Source: *The Detroit News*

<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2018/10/03/detroit-students-demand-clean-water-count-day-strike/1512727002/>



That's when Our Water Our Vote was born. Our Water Our Vote not only sent a clear message to everyone about what leading with a water focus looks like but also allowed for a clear, compelling way to bring water into the political spotlight as an issue that resonates deeply with majorities of voters. Our Water Champions was also formed as a volunteer door-knocking team that knocked on thousands of voters' doors to talk about candidates and issues impacting the health and safety of Michigan waters. Ultimately these efforts culminated in flipping the Michigan Senate and House to pro-conservation majorities in 2022.

## Regional insights: South Carolina

### *Driving public awareness and creating urgency about forever chemicals*

PFAS, or forever chemicals, pose a major health risk and are everywhere. However, the federal government has not provided clear guidelines, and states have only recently started to recognize the threat forever chemicals pose to drinking water.

In South Carolina, advocates like Conservation Voters of South Carolina wanted to drive attention and create the urgency needed to push for new protections. Due to the political climate, they knew they couldn't start with regulations without mobilizing opposition from powerful voices in agriculture and manufacturing. Instead, they pushed for both widespread testing and the creation of a dedicated state fund that would provide grants to address drinking water contaminated with PFAS. Testing showed unsafe levels of PFAS pollution in virtually every South Carolina waterway.

Advocates then leveraged these test results to drive a strategic [earned media campaign](#), using the rightful outrage about the scale of the contamination to grab the attention of the public and of key lawmakers who could champion dedicated funding for addressing PFAS contamination. By focusing on incentives over regulations and keeping the public-facing messaging focused on the connectedness of South Carolina's waterways, drinking water, and public health, CVSC galvanized broad, bipartisan support for policy solutions.

Almost immediately following the creation of the state PFAS fund, federal health advisory limits for PFAS exposure were lowered, making nearly every drinking water system or community water system eligible for grants from the fund. CVSC is now working with the state to inform water



systems and private well owners about the fund, drive more water quality testing, and provide treatment solutions for contaminated water sources.

## **Regional insights: Colorado**

### ***Expanding clean water protections in the states***

The Water movement is responding to the Supreme Court's decision in Sackett vs. EPA, which gutted parts of the Clean Water Act and left more than half of our nation's wetlands and streams without strong protections. State-based advocacy coalitions, like Protect Colorado's Waters, were ready to step in and push their state legislatures to take the reins.

**Colorado has become the first state to [win a major victory](#) in restoring key clean water protections that may no longer be enforced at the federal level.** Organizations, including Conservation Colorado leveraged their environmentalist base to drive residents to action through messages that spoke to core fears of dwindling water supplies and threats of increased pollution in drinking water. This was especially important to help hold the line on core policy components as negotiations mounted between two competing bills.

The legislative campaign in Colorado showed the importance of deftly defining villains, and framing potential solutions in common-sense ways that were difficult to argue against. For example, as opposition from development companies came in, advocates pushed back with "responsible development shouldn't fear responsible clean water protections." There were also thoughtful sample messages and Letters to the Editor in local newspapers specific to different political interests, including public health, outdoor recreation, and agriculture.

## **Regional insights: Vermont**

### ***Extreme weather survivors tell their stories to create change.***

In 2023, devastating floods in Vermont connected to climate change had severe economic and human impacts. Small businesses struggled with damages from the flooding, and residents faced ongoing trauma. In response, [Extreme Weather Survivors](#) was created in order to support those affected by the flooding in a variety of ways, including how to tell their stories effectively and highlight the unfair burden placed on small businesses and community members as a result of increasingly extreme weather.

These stories were transformed into [powerful TV ads](#) and local paper campaigns to push the state government to pass a historic "climate superfund bill," which would hold the biggest fossil fuel polluters financially liable for damages resulting from climate change.

Storytelling put faces and dreams to the dire economic stats dominating the conversation about the severe flooding in Vermont. Ultimately, the powerful network of storytellers that emerged from the Vermont flooding helped pass historic legislation that ensures big polluters pay their fair share and small businesses aren't left to bear all the financial burden of extreme weather and flooding.

## Best Practices For Advocates: The Dos and Don'ts

Attention is currency in today's information warfare landscape. If you're in the heat of an advocacy campaign, you do not have time for a public education gap.

Advocacy campaigns are not the same as long-term public awareness campaigns. A long-term strategy for some water groups should perhaps be a larger education effort. For those working toward shorter-term advocacy or electoral campaigns, your objective is finite - short-term - and the strategy cannot merely be public education but must motivate action with people for whom you will have seconds to reach and engage.

Below is a quick summary of how to begin implementing lessons from the field and the polls today.

<b>Do</b>
Use this guide as a starting place for developing impactful voter engagement and advocacy campaigns
Repeat "clean, safe, reliable drinking water"
Remind people that all water is connected and pollution in rivers threatens their drinking water
Know your audience and who - specifically - you want to mobilize or neutralize. This includes doing an early opposition scan to know what opposition voices will line up to counter your message with voters and lawmakers.
Lead your message with a reminder that many cities and towns suffer from contaminated drinking water. Reference the problems in Flint (especially impactful in the Great Lakes region).
Cite local examples of water solutions and threats whenever possible.
Share stories of affected people and amplify impacted communities' organizing and messaging strategies.
Refer to safe drinking water as a "human right" with lower income voters and voters of color and a "basic need" with conservative and white voters (especially conservative women)
Name your villains, including big polluters, corporate agriculture, factory farms, and corrupt politicians (stay away from villainizing family farms or community food producers)

Highlight messages of unity that counter attempts to pit cities against rural areas. Emphasize that water transcends political party or persuasion - everyone relies on clean, safe, reliable drinking water and the healthy rivers that provide most of it across the country.

Make voters the hero of your story with a bold inspiring call to action that meets the scale of the challenge you've identified.

Launch water-focused campaign brands separate from your organization or coalition.

Leverage earned media for legislative campaigns to speak directly to lawmakers and to specific political constituency groups (farmers, developers, communities of color, faith communities, etc)

Build paid media budgets that send clean water calls to action, as well as accountability ads, to low-income households, parents, moderate women, and 18-34-year-olds.

Always tell your victory story! If you win, make sure everyone knows it, and make sure the story builds momentum for your next campaign.

## **Don't**

Assume you don't need your own polling, research, or message testing for the specific dynamics of your fight.

Lead with recreation, which is seen as a luxury, and is not convincing against opposition messages about farmers/ranchers and states' rights.

Make your message about saving the Clean Water Act or educating voters about its historic contributions.

Identify your audience as "the general public" unless you have a long-term campaign timeline and millions of dollars for public education alone.

Make your villains and their misdeeds the whole story, or over-inflate the perception of their power. This can make people who care feel defeated before the fight even begins!

Fall into any message traps that pit cities against rural areas, economy vs. environment, fish vs. farms, or one state against the other, etc.

Educate about *Sackett v EPA*. Messages about expanding clean water protections are stronger without additional education about the recent Supreme Court decision.

## **Thank yous**

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Sinjin Eberle, American Rivers

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[2024 National Azul Poll. Latinos and the Ocean.](#)

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