



## American Rivers Action Fund 2024 Research Summary

Rivers are essential to life, yet they are disappearing at an alarming rate due to pollution, floods, and droughts. The public overwhelmingly supports clean water protections, but this broad support has yet to translate into widespread policy action. The American Rivers Action Fund is bridging this gap by turning public sentiment into policy wins at the state and local levels. Strategic messaging that goes beyond educating, and mobilizes support for popular ideas into action and engagement is needed now more than ever.

Further, to date, very little research and testing of this kind has been done. While there is extensive guidance for how to talk to voters and the public about climate, water specific narratives are under-tested and under-utilized.

We set out to understand the full mobilizing potential of water, and uncovered that water is incredibly persuasive, can be a bridge to other environmental issues when framed appropriately, and cuts across the political spectrum.

Below is a summary of the American Rivers Action Fund’s clean water and river message testing and research findings.

### 2024 Election Cycle Highlights

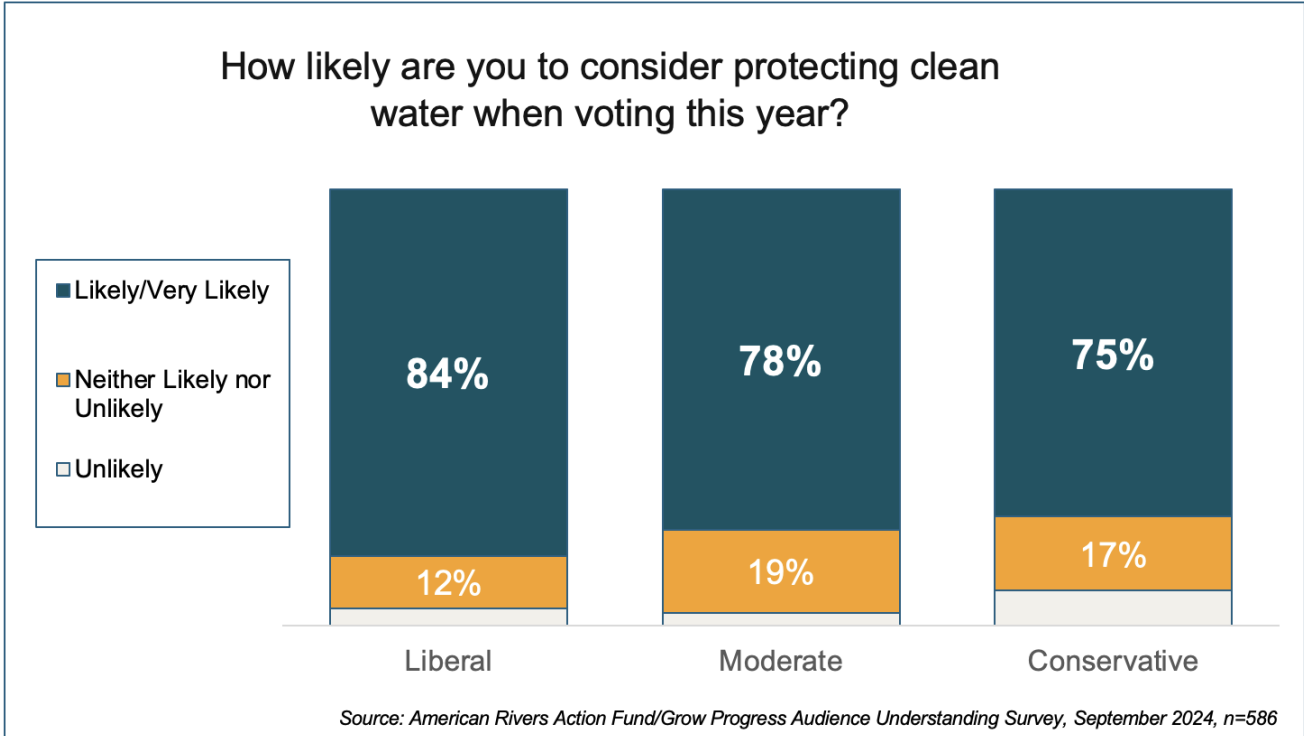
Our 2024 water message testing and research shows that water is:

- **An urgent public health and safety priority**
- **A nonpartisan, shared value**
- **A unifying issue across demographics and ideologies**

Developing date-informed messaging strengthens the river movement, influences elected leaders, and accelerates policy changes.

### Water as a Unifying Force

At a time of deep national division, water is a unique source of connection. Water issues transcend partisanship, mobilizing voters across the political spectrum. The Action Fund ensures people understand how our rivers provide clean, safe drinking water and foster healthy communities, while mobilizing the public around key opportunities to expand river protections and pro-river leadership.



## Proven Impact: Water Messages Can Mobilize

Over the past year, the Action Fund analyzed polling data, focus groups, and message tests. We crafted and tested messages that clearly outperform standard climate messaging, reinforcing that the climate crisis is fundamentally a water crisis.

### Key findings show:

- **Water consistently ranks as a top voter priority** – often surpassing healthcare, education, and the economy.
- **Clean water messages depress voter support for candidates opposing protections** with little risk of backlash.
- **Populism, community safety, and race-class narratives** resonate broadly and mobilize moderate and conservative voters.
- **Clean water wins.** Our ballot initiative work in Colorado saw bipartisan victories, aligning with the national trend of winning water-related measures.

## Strategic Accountability Outreach

In July 2024, we partnered with the League of Conservation Voters and National Wildlife Federation Action Fund to test voter responses to accountability ads in Michigan and New Jersey. Short videos highlighting anti-clean water votes significantly decreased support for targeted candidates, particularly among moderates, young voters, and parents.

A Candidate In...	% Favorability	% Likelihood to Vote For
Michigan	-13%	-7%
New Jersey	-29%	-7%

## Identifying and Activating “Water Voters”

In September 2024, we conducted a digital focus group to identify which voters may be motivated by water, and to better understand the electorate's views on rivers and clean water. **What we found is:**

- **Water voters skew slightly conservative or moderate**, emphasizing water's bipartisan appeal.
- **Populist, safety, and future-focused themes** consistently resonate.
- **Over 25% of likely water voters did not vote in 2020** but indicate they would if water were on the ballot.



### **Future Plans: Scaling Our Impact**

We are planning additional message tests to deepen voter engagement and prepare for future ballot initiatives. In light of the extreme polarization and the current political climate, we recognize that having smart policy ideas alone is not enough. We need sophisticated, pro-water campaigns that can compete in today's information warfare landscape, responding swiftly to threats and opportunities with persuasive, resonant messaging.

The American Rivers Action Fund aims to unite the broader environmental and water movement around strategic, impactful narratives that mobilize action and influence public opinion. This approach will position advocates to effectively counter misinformation, engage new audiences, and elevate clean water as a leading policy issue. Through continued research and strategic messaging, we can expand our reach, sharpen our strategies, and secure more victories for clean water and healthy rivers nationwide.

Water is a basic human right that unites voters across divides. In 2024, all 23 water-related ballot measures across the country passed, safeguarding clean water for millions. We can harness this momentum, mobilize communities, and drive transformational policy change.

**When water is on the ballot, water wins.**