



# WATER + US:

## HOW WE THINK, FEEL, AND TAKE ACTION ON WATER

the  
**WATER**  
**MAIN**



# KNOW

## Americans don't have deep knowledge of water issues.

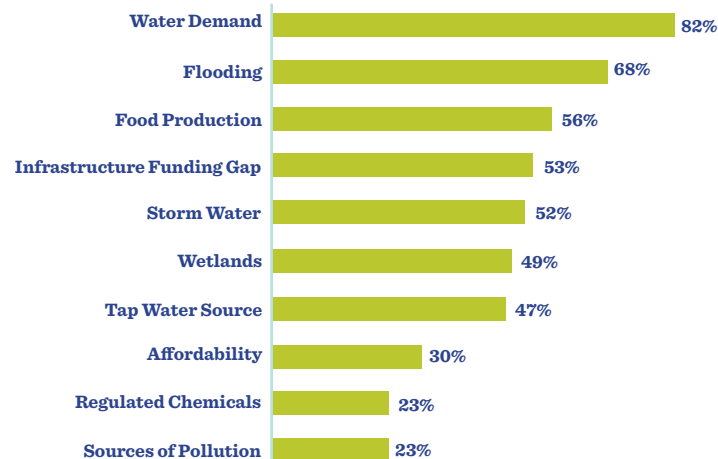
And what knowledge they do have varies greatly from topic to topic. Generally speaking, we know more about water topics related to the natural environment and the hydrological cycle, and less about water topics related to infrastructure and human activities.

### Knowledge Scale: 48%

On average, people correctly answered 4.8 out of 10 questions about water.

Adults with a college degree averaged just 51% correct.

**%** Percentage of people who correctly answered each water knowledge question.



# What we KNOW

We asked questions across 4 aspects of water:

- QUALITY
- THE HYDROLOGICAL CYCLE
- INFRASTRUCTURE
- QUANTITY & AVAILABILITY



## Wetlands

49% understand the role of wetlands in filtering water and helping to prevent flooding.

## Source

47% say they know where their tap water comes from.



## Affordability

70% didn't know that about 15 million people in the US a year have their water shut off for non-payment.



## Stormwater

Only about half of Americans know where stormwater, a major contributor to pollution, ends up.



## Pollution

Only 23% correctly identified surface water runoff from farms, streets, and lawns as the single largest source of water pollution. 38% incorrectly believe that waste from factories is the largest source.



## Regulations

35% of people incorrectly believe the EPA regulates "just about all" chemical water contaminants, when in reality about 100, out of tens of thousands, are actually regulated.



## Demand

82% of Americans understand that demand for water is going to increase in the coming years.

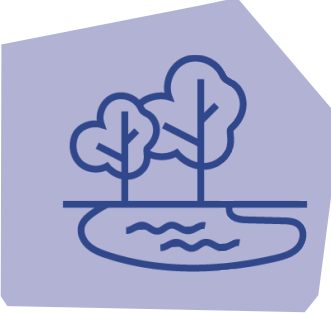
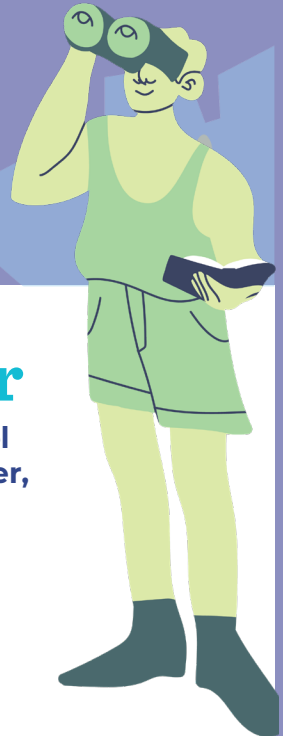
# So ??? What

Traditionally, scientific and environmental organizations have focused on educating others about water. And yet, this study shows that people can and do care about water, and are concerned for its future, even without deep knowledge.



# How we CONNECT

We asked questions that assess people's relationship to water, including both emotional and behavioral connections.



## Specific Body of Water

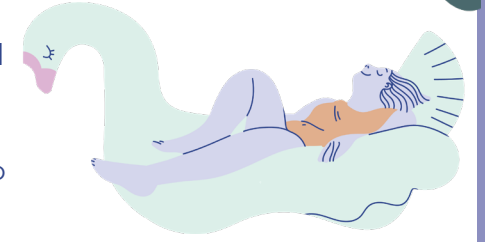
About half of Americans indicate that they feel a personal connection with a specific lake, river, or ocean.

56% of those 65 and over felt this sort of connection, compared to 40% of adults under age 45.

## Recreation

62% indicate that they spend free time in or around bodies of water at least once per month during the warmer months of the year.

People with incomes under \$25,000 were twice less likely to spend time near water as those in higher income brackets.

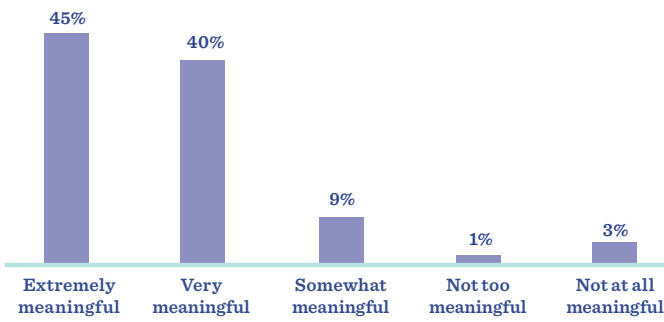


## A vast majority of people say that water plays a meaningful role in their life.

Virtually all people indicated some sort of connection to water in our survey, with older adults feeling a connection to a specific body of water more than younger adults.



**85%** of people indicate that water plays a meaningful role in their life.



## Educating Children

67% of adults feel that it is very important for children to learn how to protect water resources.

Adults from lower income/education households were more likely to emphasize the importance of children learning about water protection.

## Personal Learning

65% of people are at least somewhat interested in learning more about water and water-related issues.

- People with less formal education (high school diploma or less) are very interested in learning more about water-related issues compared to those with higher levels of education.
- Additionally, people with lower incomes, Latinos, and those who politically identify as either Democrats or Independents say they are very interested in learning more about water.



## So ??? What

Americans feel connected to water, transcending traditional societal fault lines—proving that water is one of very few universal connectors and highlighting the vast opportunity for translating that concern into action.

# What We Worry About

We asked questions about individuals' concerns related to drinking water; water infrastructure; our lakes, rivers, and streams; affordability; and regulation.



# CONCERN

## People share high levels of concern for water.

These worries include immediate concerns like affordability and drinking water safety, as well as concern about the future of the nation's water resources.



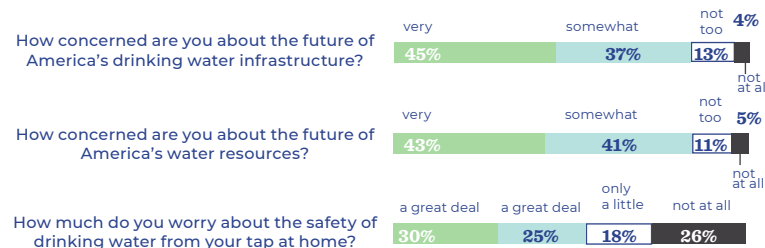
**Americans worry about...**

- Water Infrastructure
- Water Resources
- Drinking Water Safety

### Concern Scale: 61%

We assigned points to questions related to concern, and people averaged 61% of the total possible points.

Lower income, Black, and Latino households all scored in the high range, as did Democrats and women.



## Water Resources

84% are concerned about the future of water resources like lakes, rivers, & streams.



## Infrastructure

82% express concern for the future of the country's drinking water infrastructure.

Surprisingly, younger adults—those with the longest future ahead of them—indicate less concern than do older age groups.

## Water Regulation

About half of people feel there is too little government regulation protecting water, and another third think there is "about the right amount".

- Black Americans (62%) are more likely to feel that the government is doing too little to protect water than Whites (48%) or Latinos (44%).
- 59% of Democrats indicate that the government is doing too little, compared with 41% of Republicans. However, when coupled together, over 80% of Republicans feel that the government is either doing too little (41%) or about the right amount of regulation (40%).
- People in western states were less likely to say there is too little regulation compared to those elsewhere in the country.



## Drinking Water Safety

55% worry about the safety of the drinking water from their tap at home.

Black and Latino Americans (39% each) are more worried than Whites (28%) about the safety of the drinking water in their home.



## Affordability

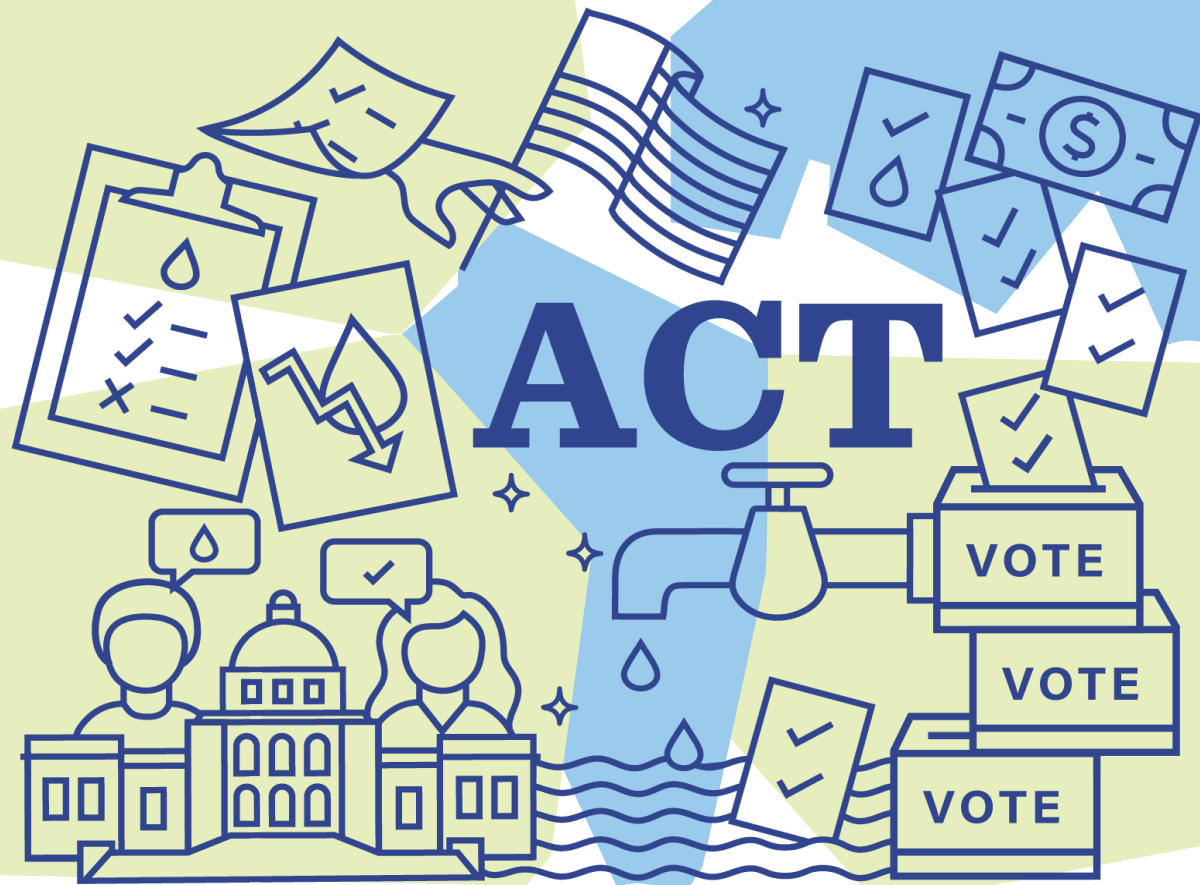
Half of Americans with annual incomes under \$25K worry that they may not be able to afford their water bill over the next two years, along with 32% of those with incomes \$25K-\$50K.

## So ??? What

Despite not having high levels of knowledge about water, people living in the U.S. are very concerned about the future of our water resources. While this concern cuts across demographic categories, marginalized communities are acutely aware of issues facing our water resources.

# How We Take Action

We asked questions about how people take action on water, including sharing information, contributing time or money, voting choices, and action in their day to day lives.

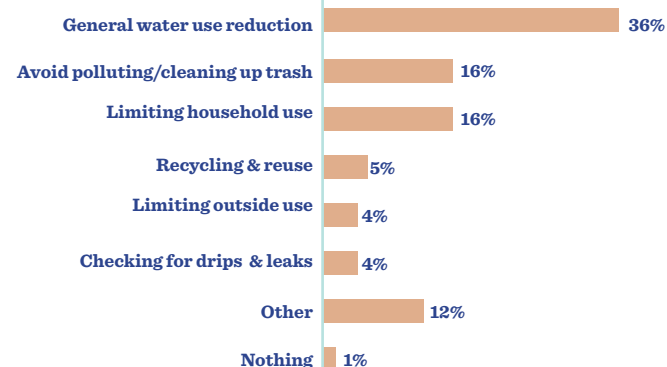


**A majority of Americans report that they are taking some action to protect water in their daily lives.**

Still, our actions do not match the scale of the problems. Most people report actions that focus on their immediate, individual impact on water.



## What actions are American adults taking to conserve water?



### Action Scale: 51%

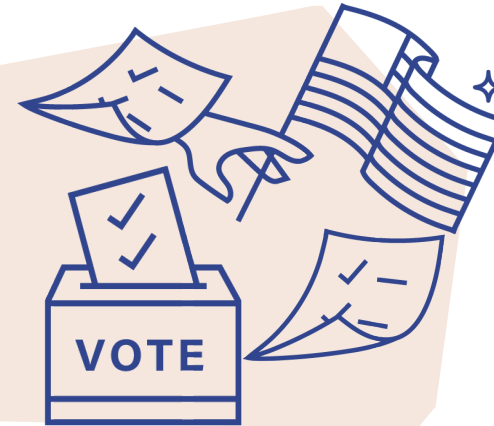
We assigned points to questions related to action, and people averaged 51% of the total possible points.

Residents of western states scored higher on the water action scale than did residents of other regions.

## Taking care of water resources is an important voting issue for most people.

- 47% report it is “very important” for a candidate to prioritize taking care of water resources.
- 66% of households with annual incomes below \$25,000 indicated that water is very important to their candidate preference.
- 86% of Democrats and 76% of Republicans say it is somewhat or very important.

...but this prioritization has not crossed over into personal advocacy.



## Sharing Information

- 34% of American adults never share information with others about water and water-related issues, but a slightly higher proportion (38%) do so once a month or more.
- 10% of people age 18-34 share water information nearly every day.



## Time & Money

- Only about 1 in 5 say they have contributed money or volunteered for an organization that works on water issues.
- That is true for both Republicans, Democrats, and Independents alike.

## And yet, 7 in 10 people report taking action to protect water in their daily lives.

60% of whom specifically report limiting their water use.



## So ??? What

People tell us they are taking action on water, and that water is important to them. Our work as a water community must be to equip people with actions that will make a meaningful difference in the challenges we face.



# the WATER MAIN

## Everybody cares about water.

NOW, WE HAVE THE CHANCE TO BUILD ON PEOPLE'S DEEP FEELINGS ABOUT WATER TO DRIVE OUR COMMUNITIES TOWARD ACTION.

We've been focused on increasing knowledge—without much success.

Americans couldn't correctly answer close to **50%** of basic questions about water.

Despite that, people care about—and are concerned—about water.

**85%** say water plays a meaningful role in their life.

**84%** express concern about the future of water resources.

Water cuts across societal divides.

This high level of care and concern is true regardless of gender, age, parental status, income, education, race, locality, or political affiliation.

There is public will to take care of water.

Nearly half of Americans say water protection is very important to their voting decisions.

**22%** report that they have contributed money or volunteered for a water organization.

People are taking action.

About 7 in 10 Americans do things to conserve or protect water each day.



**60%** of whom specifically report limiting their water use.

**16%** try to keep water clean.

We need to focus all that energy toward action that matters.

Our task now is to provide Americans with tailored pathways toward meaningful impact.

LEARN MORE AT [THEWATERMAIN.ORG](http://THEWATERMAIN.ORG)



Here's the new conventional wisdom for water champions:

# Everybody cares about WATER.

This we know. But few people know how to steward it.

People are taking action because they feel connected to water. Our water holds a special place in our lives. And because of this, people do have time and energy to spend on water issues. The next phase of our work must be to focus that energy toward action that makes a difference.

To do so, we must also challenge our own beliefs about what works in engaging the public on water issues. We must see that people don't need to know a whole lot to care a lot.

And at the same time, we need to recognize our own responsibility. People want to take action. Our water community needs to work together to support them with tangible and coordinated ideas for action that will drive change.

**The good news:** This is a moment ripe for change, a window of opportunity opened by a generation of water advocacy.

**Now, we need to collectively rally around a set of actions that address the scale of the problem, and direct people's good intentions into solutions that make real impact.**

the WATER MAIN



## Methodology

The Water Main and APM Research Lab conducted the first nationally representative survey designed to measure United States residents' (referred to as 'Americans' throughout the report) knowledge, connection, concern, and action related to water issues facing the country.

Survey questions were derived from consultation with stakeholders representing a spectrum of water subject matter expertise and geographical diversity, in conjunction with literature searches and qualitative research that our teams conducted to better understand how Americans connect with water.

- 1,005 adults living in the United States were surveyed via landline (40%) and cellphone (60%) by SSRS, May 7-12, 2019.
- The survey was conducted using live interviewers in both English and Spanish.
- The survey's overall margin of error is +/- 3.62 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

The full report from the survey can be found at: [watermain.org/research](https://watermain.org/research)

## The Water Main:

*Building public will for clean, affordable, accessible water*

As a social impact arm of American Public Media, The Water Main harnesses the expertise and resources of APM—research, journalism, storytelling, convening, community engagement, and reach across an audience of over 20 million—to make a lasting difference in how Americans think, feel, and act on issues of water in their communities and across the country.

[thewatermain.org](https://thewatermain.org)

## APM Research Lab:

*Bringing facts into focus*

The APM Research Lab is a division of American Public Media whose mission is to inform and equip the communities we serve with both original and curated research, facts, and analysis. This work helps inform journalists, civic and business leaders, and others who want to know what the best data and the best research has to say about the challenges and opportunities facing families, communities, and organizations throughout the nation.

[apmresearchlab.org](https://apmresearchlab.org)

## Pollen Studio

Produced by Pollen Studio, a creative agency that brings visual and narrative storytelling services to mission-driven organizations.

[pollenmidwest.org/studio](https://pollenmidwest.org/studio)

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the  
**WATER MAIN**

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