

**THE 2020 ELECTION  
SEASON & THE  
GREAT LAKES**

A toolkit for getting involved

# INTRODUCTION

The Great Lakes define the eight states they touch, providing drinking water for roughly 30 million Americans and driving our region's economy. And because of this, support for their protection transcends political and geographic divisions like few other environmental issues.

As the 2020 election season ramps up, voters are getting ready to mark their ballots on Election Day. They're researching candidate platforms, attending events and asking tough questions of candidates, and talking with family, neighbors, and friends about the election.

But this election season is dramatically different.

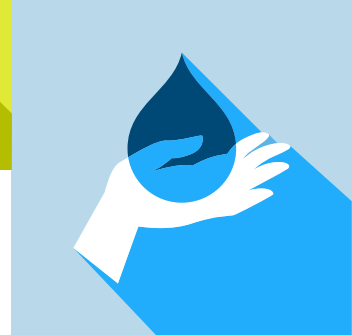
From the issues voters and candidates are discussing to how candidates are campaigning for office, the 2020 election season has dramatically changed over the past few months. The COVID-19 global pandemic and the related economic crisis have upended our daily lives. And several high-profile racial incidents, from the murders of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery to the viral video of racist threat against Christian Cooper, a black birder in Central Park, have thrust social and racial justice issues to the forefront of the national conversation.

In the midst of all of this, clean water is more important than ever. Handwashing is one of the top public health recommendations for reducing the spread of COVID-19. This basic advice is a stark reminder of the critical importance of clean water to our personal health, and the health and safety of our families and our communities.

While the presidential election is driving much of the election year conversation, candidates are running for offices at the local, state, and federal levels. Every office on the ballot, from mayors to the President of the United States, will have the opportunity to influence Great Lakes and water issues once in office.

To protect the lakes, we need to defend existing clean water laws while pushing for stronger, better protections for the world's largest source of surface freshwater. And, we must ensure that everyone in the Great Lakes region has access to clean, safe, and affordable drinking water.

The Great Lakes have long enjoyed strong bipartisan support, because people of all backgrounds can see the value of clean water. Right now, we have an opportunity to encourage candidates to stand up for the Great Lakes and hold them accountable once elected. You can have an impact by using this toolkit to join the conversation today.



## PROTECTING WATER, SUSTAINING LIFE

The Alliance for the Great Lakes is a nonpartisan nonprofit working across the region to protect our most precious resource: the fresh, clean, and natural waters of the Great Lakes.

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, the Alliance for the Great Lakes cannot support or oppose candidates or political parties. However, we can, and do, educate candidates and voters on Great Lakes issues.

Learn more at [greatlakes.org](https://greatlakes.org).

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## About this toolkit

Your voice and your vote matter. We've developed this toolkit to help you get involved this election season. In this toolkit, you will find:

- The Top Five Questions to Ask Candidates for Elected Office
- The Top Five Ways You Can Get Involved, including helpful templates and resources
- Background on Key Great Lakes Issues with Deep Dive Questions for Candidates

## How to customize this toolkit for your community

While federal and state office holders and agencies have great influence on the health of the Great Lakes, your local mayor, city council members, and state house representatives also have a big impact. They make decisions on issues from local drinking water quality to parks and recreation to your water and sewer bills.

The key to advocating locally is to connect the dots between the issue you care about, the public institution responsible, and the public office holder who has the most influence on that institution. For example, if you're concerned about increasing water and sewer rates, your city's water department is responsible for setting rates, and your mayor has influence over the water department.

Some quick detective work by searching the local government webpages will describe which office holders are responsible for the issues you are concerned about this election. After you have identified the local issue you care about and the candidates who are seeking offices that influence that issue, you can use the tips in this guide to connect with them directly.



## GREAT LAKES VOTER INFORMATION CENTER

Visit [greatlakes.org/VoterInfo](https://greatlakes.org/VoterInfo) to get the information you need to vote in 2020. You can:

- Check your voter registration status
- Learn about candidates on your local ballot
- Find your local polling location
- Learn about mail-in or absentee voting in your state



## TELL YOUR STORY

Incorporate your own story when asking questions of candidates for elected office. You can modify these questions by replacing “Great Lakes” with your home lake. And be sure to make these questions your own by sharing your personal experiences. Telling your story can be powerful and can help to get attention for issues you care about.

## TOP FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES FOR ELECTED OFFICE

Voters like you can make sure that the Great Lakes and clean water are part of the election-year conversation. In 2020, many federal, state, and local offices are on the ballot around the Great Lakes region. At the top of the ticket are the presidential candidates. Indiana has a gubernatorial election. Michigan, Minnesota, and Illinois have U.S. Senate seats on the ballot. And, all seats in the U.S. House of Representatives are up for election in the fall. And, numerous state and local offices are on the ballot.

Asking candidates for any office where they stand on Great Lakes issues raises awareness, highlights the issues, and allows us as constituents to hold elected officials accountable once they take office. To get you started, here are five questions to ask candidates for elected office.

1

What is your number one Great Lakes policy priority?

2

What policies will you put in place to ensure Great Lakes communities have safe, clean, and affordable drinking water?

3

If elected, what would you do in your first 100 days in office to protect the Great Lakes for people who live, work and play in the region and depend on them for drinking water?

4

What will you do to increase much-needed funding for the Great Lakes region's failing drinking and wastewater infrastructure and ensure that no one loses access to water and sewer services because of an inability to pay?

5

How will you ensure that businesses, from industrial facilities to industrial agricultural, are held accountable for pollution flowing into our waterways?

# TOP FIVE WAYS YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

Civic engagement is a critical part of protecting the Great Lakes. Whether it's asking questions at a candidate forum, chiming in on social media, or highlighting water issues in a letter to the editor, your voice makes a difference. People running for elected office pay attention to issues that bubble to the top in all of these venues. Here are the top five ways you can get involved.

## 1 Vote

Voting is the most important way for you to have a voice in how our elected officials protect our water. But unfortunately, voting today is not as simple as just showing up to mark your ballot on election day. Some states have reduced voting access by purging voter rolls and enacting new identity verification rules, which impact many people's ability to vote. And COVID-19 health concerns may impact Election Day with fewer polling places available.

It's important to make a voting plan to be sure your voice is heard on Election Day. Here's how to create your plan to be sure you are ready to vote in November:

***Make sure you're registered to vote.*** Visit our Great Lakes Voter Information Center at [www.greatlakes.org/VoterInfo](http://www.greatlakes.org/VoterInfo) and enter your address to check the status of your registration. You can easily confirm whether or not you are registered to vote. And, if you're not, you can easily find the information you need to register.

***Check your polling location (and check it again).*** COVID-19 health concerns may result in last-minute changes to your polling place or lead to a reduced number of polling places in some communities. Our Great Lakes Voter Information Center at [www.greatlakes.org/VoterInfo](http://www.greatlakes.org/VoterInfo) will help you find, and confirm, your polling location.

***Vote by mail or absentee ballot.*** Some states have expanded access to mail-in voting as an alternative to in-person voting. But the rules vary from state to state. Double-check the rules to be sure your vote is counted. You can learn more about the rules in your state at our Great Lakes Voter Information Center at [www.greatlakes.org/VoterInfo](http://www.greatlakes.org/VoterInfo)

- ***Check how to receive a ballot.*** Some states are mailing applications for voting by mail, which are not the same as ballots. Other states require voters to request an absentee or mail-in ballot themselves.
- ***Check the rules.*** The rules vary for absentee ballots. Some states allow coronavirus health concerns as an official excuse to request an absentee ballot, and others have "no-excuse" mail-in ballots
- ***Deadlines vary.*** It's critical to pay attention to deadlines. Some states have a deadline to request an absentee or mail-in ballot. And states have various deadlines for when ballots must be postmarked or received by election agencies.



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## Learn about the elected offices on the ballot

Elected officials set program and funding priorities that can lead to better protections for the lakes or leave them more vulnerable to pollution. They oversee agencies that implement clean water laws and regulations. And they make budget decisions that impact Great Lakes programs.

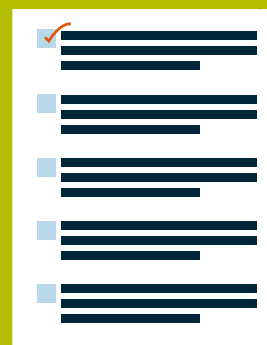
In 2020, many federal, state, and local offices are on the ballot around the Great Lakes region. At the top of the ticket, the presidential election is this year. Indiana has a gubernatorial election. Michigan, Minnesota, and Illinois have U.S. Senate seats on the ballot. And, all seats in the U.S. House of Representatives are up for election in the fall.

While federal and state office holders and agencies have significant influence on the health of the Great Lakes, your local mayor, city council members, and state house representatives can have enormous impact on local environmental issues. They oversee agencies that implement clean water laws and regulations, like those set by local environmental departments. And, agencies make budget decisions that impact your drinking water quality or your water bills.

**Research the elected offices on the ballot.** The list of local elected offices sometimes seems incomprehensible. But, understanding local offices and their role(s) can help you make informed choices on issues you care about. For instance, a city comptroller is essentially the city's chief financial officer and can have major influence over how local governments spends taxpayer dollars. Knowing the role(s) elected officials play can help you ask informed questions. You can find out about the elected offices that will appear on your ballot by visiting our Great Lakes Voter Information Center at [www.greatlakes.org/VoterInfo](http://www.greatlakes.org/VoterInfo)

**Connect the dots between the issue you care about, the agency responsible, and the public office holder who has the most influence on that agency.** Some quick detective work through searching the webpages of your local city or village, as well as drinking water, stormwater, and sewage treatment service providers, will describe which office holders are responsible for those agencies and their budgets.

After you have identified the local issue you care about and the candidates who are seeking offices that influence that issue, engage them on the issue. For instance, if you are concerned about rising water and sewer bills, your local water and sewer district sets the rates, but your mayor or city council may have influence over those decisions.





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## Attend a (virtual) candidate forum

Candidate forums provide an opportunity to engage with individuals running for office and ask important questions about their platforms and positions. Events hosted by a variety of organizations, such as civic groups and media outlets, provide these opportunities.

The format can vary, but they generally allow time for participants from the audience to ask questions of the candidates. Some events ask for questions to be submitted ahead of time and sometimes questions can be asked right there on the spot. Candidate forums are an important way for you to get your issue on the agenda by asking questions about how the candidate plans to take action if elected.

Below are tips to help you find candidate forums and ask important questions of candidates in your area.

**Find a forum.** Due to COVID-19, most candidate forums have been moved online and are held via Zoom meeting, Facebook Live, or another digital format. Check with groups like local media outlets, civic organizations, and chambers of commerce that regularly organize these events and follow them on social media or sign up for their email lists to receive announcements.

**Know the format.** Forums may be public or private, may accept questions only in advance, and may follow other specific guidelines. Check on the rules before you plan to attend so you know what to expect.

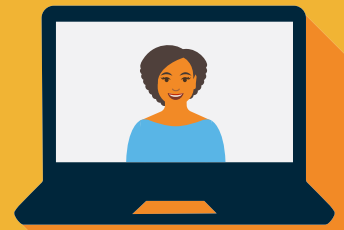
**Ask your question and make it personal.** Keep your questions direct and to the point, giving only as much information as is necessary. Make your question more impactful by sharing why it is personal to you and your community.

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## Speak out on social media

Voters like you can make sure that the Great Lakes and clean water are part of the election-year conversation. A great place to start is speaking out on social media. Here are some tips to get you started:

**Use a #hashtag.** Tapping into trending hashtags — #GreatLakes, #election2020, #vote, etc. — is a great way to track a conversation and follow key issues.





**Be relevant.** Hook your audience and stay relevant to candidates and others in the conversation. Use interesting facts, photos, or links. For example, link to a recent news article, refer to current events in your community, and use relatable material.

**Keep it simple.** It's great to provide interesting information, but a social media post is not an encyclopedia entry. Get to the point quickly and clearly.

**Make your ask.** Your posts should make it clear what questions you're asking and what action you want candidates to take.

**Tag candidates.** Ask candidates questions directly by tagging them in your posts by using the @ sign with their campaign handle. You typically can find candidate social media handles on their campaign website.

**Follow social media accounts that give you the information you need.** Keeping up with news outlets, issue organizations, and candidates is a great way to stay informed during election season. Understand that different accounts have different goals — from providing information to influencing opinion to winning your vote — so read with a critical eye. Find us on Twitter (@A4GL), Instagram (@alliance4greatlakes), and Facebook (Alliance for the Great Lakes).

**Submit questions for interviews and candidate forums.** Many news outlets will announce requests for question submissions for an upcoming interview or candidate forum.

**Share your participation in a candidate forum.** If you plan to attend an event, share information about the event on social media or with friends and family. This kind of activity helps spread the word and raise awareness of election season events.

## 5

## Get Out the Vote

So, you've followed along, participated in events, asked questions, and stayed informed on important issues. Now what? It's time to get out and VOTE! Once you've made sure you're registered and ready to vote, it's equally important to make sure friends, family, and other members of your community are registered and ready, too.

**Participate in a voter drive.** Check with local civic organizations for information on voter drives and other kinds of assistance available for people looking to vote. Volunteer to help get members of your community registered and to the polls.

**Encourage friends and family to vote.** Share information with family, friends, and your community — the more people involved, the better! Share our Great Lakes Voter Information Center at [www.greatlakes.org/VoterInfo](http://www.greatlakes.org/VoterInfo) where they can check the status of their registration and find polling locations



# BACKGROUND ON KEY GREAT LAKES ISSUES AND DEEP DIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK CANDIDATES

In this section, we've provided some additional background on some of the most pressing Great Lakes issues. You can use this information in a variety of ways, such as to tailor questions for candidates, to write a letter to the editor, or to share on social media. It's up to you!

If you have the opportunity to have a deeper conversation with a candidate running for elected office, we've included additional questions that can help you dig into an issue to learn more about their election platform. Some questions are for federal candidates while others are for candidates for state-level office. Many of these questions can be tailored to work for any candidate.

## Clean and Affordable Drinking Water

### DRINKING WATER

In its most recent infrastructure report card, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave our nation's drinking water system a grade of "D,"

saying that much of our drinking water infrastructure is nearing the end of its useful life. An estimated \$1 trillion is necessary nationally to repair, replace, and expand drinking water distribution systems over the next 25 years, and another \$30 billion is estimated to replace every lead service line in the country.

Current funding at local, state, and federal levels are not adequate to meet this overwhelming need. Increased state and federal funding to support drinking water infrastructure modernization is necessary to ensure all Great Lakes residents have access to safe, clean, affordable drinking water. One such federal program is the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund, which provides low-interest loans to communities to improve outdated and failing drinking water infrastructure.

**Do you support increased funding for the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund?**

**What would you do to increase funding to communities to pay for drinking water infrastructure upgrades?**

**How would you ensure communities are able to improve failing water infrastructure and provide safe, clean, and affordable drinking water to residents without financially burdening economically challenged families?**



**\$30B**





## SEWAGE AND STORMWATER RUNOFF

More than 70 percent of all combined sewers, which collect both wastewater and stormwater runoff in the United States, are located in the Great Lakes region. During heavy rains, combined sewers overflow, leading to raw or poorly treated sewage getting into the lakes. Heavy rains also cause flooding in many communities across the region and backups of sewage into basements.

Several Great Lakes cities, like Grand Rapids and Milwaukee, are leading our region in reducing combined sewer overflows through nature-based solutions like rain gardens and other green infrastructure practices that naturally filter stormwater before it reaches the Great Lakes.

In its latest report card, The American Society of Civil Engineers' gave the nation's aging wastewater system a grade of "D+." Capital investment needs for the nation's wastewater and stormwater systems are estimated to total \$271 billion over the next 25 years. The Clean Water State Revolving Fund provides communities with funding and low-interest loans for wastewater infrastructure improvements.

**Do you support increased funding for the Clean Water State Revolving Fund to address outdated and failing wastewater infrastructure?**

**How would you ensure that funding solutions for economically disadvantaged communities are prioritized through the Clean Water State Revolving Fund?**

**Do you support funding for programs that invest in nature-based solutions to reducing stormwater runoff, such as green infrastructure?**



## DRINKING WATER AND SEWER SERVICE AFFORDABILITY

Costs for basic water and sewer services are rising in communities throughout the country. Yet water stresses, and the costs to fix them, are not shared equally. Paying for basic water and sewer services is a challenge for many around the Great Lakes region. And the current economic crisis due to the coronavirus has deepened economic instability for many.

The COVID-19 crisis reminds us of the intrinsic connection between water and public health. Several Great Lakes states and cities have temporarily halted residential water shutoffs. But addressing the long-term water affordability crisis is going to take a commitment to addressing this issue at all levels of government.

Currently, the federal Low-Income Heat and Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) provides aid to families in need to cover heat and energy costs. Water and sewer bills, on average, are even higher than heat and energy bills, yet they have received little attention in federal programs. Some water providers have customer assistance programs with discounted rates for low- and fixed-income households or structure their water rates to ensure that people can afford enough water to meet their basic needs.

**What steps would you take to ensure that low-income households can afford their water and sewage bills?**

**Do you support a permanent stop to residential water shutoffs? What steps will you take to ensure service is returned for households currently without service?**

## SAFE DRINKING WATER

Lead service lines that provide drinking water to homes in cities around the Great Lakes are a serious health threat, particularly for children. Even small amounts of lead in drinking water can lead to lifelong learning and behavioral issues. It's estimated that there are thousands of miles of lead service lines in Great Lakes cities.

Lead service lines must be replaced in full, including both publicly and privately owned portions of the line. However, some communities are moving forward with only partial lead service line replacement. Partial replacement increases the likelihood of lead contamination at the partial connection joints, exacerbating the problem.

Funding for full lead service line replacement is desperately needed, but it is expensive, estimated to cost billions of dollars. Equitable funding and financing programs are necessary to ensure the cost of these infrastructure improvements does not disproportionately burden those who can least afford it.

**Do you support more funding for programs to replace lead service lines?**

**Do you support the creation of government-funded grants to private homeowners to address lead service line and fixture replacement?**



## AGRICULTURAL POLLUTION

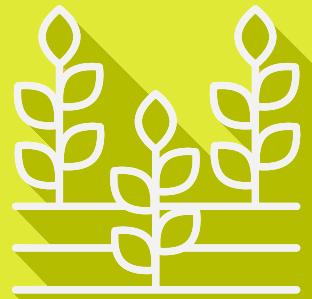
Runoff pollution from agricultural lands carries excessive nutrients into our waterways, which fuels harmful and at times toxic algal blooms across the Great Lakes region. This is a significant threat to the region's drinking water, quality of life, and economic well-being. Agriculture is the largest contributor to pollution in western Lake Erie where, in 2014, nearly a half million people lost access to tap water from two days to more than a week because toxic algae contaminated water sources. Large scale algal blooms are also a problem in other parts of the Great Lakes, including Green Bay, Wisconsin and Saginaw Bay, Michigan.

**Do you support full funding for Farm Bill Conservation Programs?**

**Do you support prioritizing Farm Bill conservation dollars toward practices and locations that improve water quality?**

**What would you do to reduce runoff pollution from agricultural lands?**

**How will you help the public get accurate information on whether or not pollution is being reduced in impaired waterways in your state?**



**\$475M**



## Environmental Protection & Restoring the Great Lakes

### GREAT LAKES RESTORATION INITIATIVE

The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) supports projects to clean up toxic pollution, restore fish and wildlife habitat, combat invasive species like Asian carp, and prevent polluted runoff from farms and cities. It also supports federal agency collaboration on critical issues such as the Asian Carp Regional Coordinating Committee.

Increased federal funding of the GLRI to \$475 million annually ensures that this work continues and accelerates, and the Great Lakes continue to thrive. A 2018 study from the University of Michigan showed that every \$1.00 of federal spending on GLRI projects between 2010 and 2016 will produce \$3.35 in additional economic activity in the Great Lakes region through 2036.

**Do you support increasing federal funding for the GLRI to \$475 million annually?**

**What priority projects would you like to see funded with GLRI dollars?**



## U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency plays a critical federal role in safeguarding the Great Lakes, protecting public health, and keeping our water safe and clean. In recent years, however, more than 80 rules and regulations that the U.S. EPA has used to accomplish these goals have been rolled back. These changes, together with funding and staff cuts, have reduced U.S. EPA's ability to enforce the Clean Water and Safe Water Drinking Acts.

To protect public health and keep our water safe and clean, the U.S. EPA must receive funding and policy direction that ensures federal Great Lakes efforts do not backslide.

**How will you ensure that the states and tribes have the resources needed to protect the Great Lakes and other water resources from pollution?**

**How will you ensure the U.S. EPA is able to continue to support critical Great Lakes programs?**



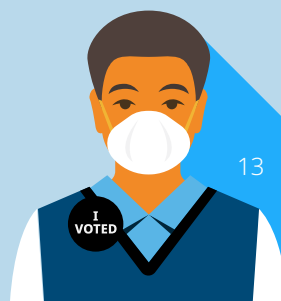
## AQUATIC INVASIVE SPECIES

**Asian carp.** Invasive Asian carp pose a serious threat to the Great Lakes regional economy and ecosystem. These fish have been found in the Chicago River as close as nine miles from Lake Michigan and past existing electric barriers that are the last line of defense. A University of Michigan study suggests that Asian carp are capable of living — and even thriving — in a much larger portion of Lake Michigan than previously thought, which only adds to the threat these invasive fish pose to the Great Lakes.

Congress authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to study options for preventing invasive Asian carp from reaching the Great Lakes. The Corps identified several solutions that would add more protections at Brandon Road Lock and Dam in Joliet, Illinois, to reduce the risk that Asian carp will reach Lake Michigan. Now is the time for Congress and Great Lakes states to move swiftly to advance the Brandon Road project.

**What would you do to keep invasive Asian carp out of the Great Lakes?**

**How would you ensure that the Brandon Road project to prevent invasive Asian carp from reaching the Great Lakes get implemented quickly?**



**Ballast water.** Aquatic invasive species, such as zebra and quagga mussels, round goby, and spiny water flea, have irreparably harmed the Great Lakes and cause more than \$200 million in damage annually to the region. Ballast water discharged by oceangoing ships entering the Great Lakes is the single largest source of aquatic invasive species.

The U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency are working in partnership to develop and implement new ballast water treatment standards to reduce the risk of invasion. However, currently, “Lakers” (ships that operate only in the Great Lakes) are exempt from these rules. Research from the Great Waters Research Collaborative found that lakers contribute to the spread of aquatic invasive species around the Great Lakes.

**If elected, how would you ensure that the Great Lakes are protected from aquatic invasive species that can be carried into and around the lakes in ships’ ballast water?**

**Do you support mandating ballast water treatment for all vessels that operate in the Great Lakes, including “Laker” vessels?**



## REPORT BACK

Thanks for using our toolkit—we’d love to hear how it went! If you attended a candidate forum and asked a Great Lakes question, tell us what questions you asked and how candidates responded. If you wrote a letter to the editor, got active on social media, or helped get out the vote, we’re interested to hear what you learned or heard.

Share with us how you got involved to protect the Great Lakes this election season by emailing us at [alliance@greatlakes.org](mailto:alliance@greatlakes.org).

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