Abstract: The year 2014 is a notorious landmark for U.S. water policy. During that year, water crises in two Michigan cities – contamination in Flint and water service shutoffs in Detroit – brought renewed attention to the inadequacies of U.S. drinking water policy for ensuring access to safe and affordable water. The crises exposed the cities’ shared economic challenges rooted in histories of disinvestment and racial inequality. The events drew national and international responses, in part from the hard work and political successes of local resident-activists, ultimately leading to state and federal level policy change. Ten years later, we see three ways the water crises in Flint and Detroit transformed the politics of U.S. water policy: greater visibility of water politics and infrastructures, greater focus on water access and affordability in addition to historic focus on quality, and greater attention to the racial dimensions of water policy decisions. These shifts are evident in federal and state policy and administrative agendas, political coalitions’ priorities and strategies, and narratives of water policy in media coverage and public discourse. Despite historic progress and investment, the U.S. still lacks the necessary structures for comprehensive policy reform to ensure equitable access to safe drinking water, and public trust in water utilities is at an all-time low. Continuing to advance on water justice requires taking full advantage of the new landscape of water politics, including by engaging in scholarship and praxis that take intersectional approaches, and implementing policies that promote systemic reform rather than individual crisis response.

Keywords: water policy; infrastructure; water affordability; activism; racial politics; environmental politics
The year 2014 is a notorious landmark for U.S. water policy. During that year, residents of Flint, Michigan experienced the deadly impacts of city leaders’ decision to inadequately treat water supplies drawn from the Flint River and their denial of residents’ valid, evidence-based concerns. At the same time, over 30,000 Detroit households were subject to the largest residential water shutoff for nonpayment in U.S. history as policymakers grappled with municipal bankruptcy – the product of decades of depopulation and disinvestment. The Flint water crisis and Detroit mass shutoffs were outcomes of shared economic challenges with roots in histories of deindustrialization, racial inequality, and “white flight” to suburbs (Clark 2020, 177). The policy decisions that led to both crises also shared an austerity-driven rationale, abetted by the state’s emergency manager law (Hughes 2021; Krings, Kornberg, and Lane 2019). So too, the Flint and Detroit crises were mutually constitutive: “Flint’s decision to disconnect from DWSD (Detroit Water and Sewerage Department) was also bad news for the people of Detroit as it resulted in an annual loss of some $22 million from the system and created pressure to increase rates for remaining customers” (Clark 2020, 177), adding to DWSD’s fiscal stress and exacerbating unaffordability conditions. The crises revealed not just cracks but gaping fissures in the ability of current drinking water policies to ensure equitable and consistent access to safe and affordable water.

In the years leading up to 2014, many of Michigan’s cities were grappling with significant financial distress, growing racial inequality, and failing infrastructure. Between 2000 and 2014, 11 Michigan cities, including Flint and Detroit, fell under state emergency management due to significant fiscal challenges (Hughes, Dick, and Kopec 2021). Emergency management often created conditions of “governing by debt” (Lazzarato 2015) whereby “utility governance becomes centered around debt servicing” (Furlong 2021, 3). In these cases, emergency managers can use municipal debt to rationalize policy decisions that do not necessarily prioritize public wellbeing (Furlong 2021). While Michigan is one of several U.S. states with municipal financial emergency laws (MSU Extension 2017), Michigan’s is the most restrictive nationally, eliminating electoral accountability and any semblance of democratic decision-making; in the Detroit and Flint cases, “the health and safety of residents effectively ceased to be a priority” (Clark 2020, 178). Racial segregation and inequality have characterized Michigan cities since the Great Migration of the early 20th century, but were exacerbated by deindustrialization, population loss, and disinvestment. Combined with a highly rationalized and technocratic approach to drinking water policy and management (Hughes 2021), access to high-quality and affordable drinking
water was becoming a more tenuous prospect in both Flint and Detroit (Mascarenhas 2024).

The events of 2014 drew national and international attention – in part from the hard work and political successes of Flint and Detroit resident-activists and their partners (Krings, Kornberg, and Lane 2019; Nickels 2019; Pauli 2019) – and together have changed the landscape of drinking water politics in the United States. One decade since the Flint and Detroit crises, we see three key shifts in this landscape: (1) a shift from an era of invisibility for water politics and infrastructures to an era of awareness; (2) a shift from a dominant policy focus on water quality to a policy focus that includes access and affordability; and (3) greater attention to the racial dimensions of water policy decisions. These shifts are evident in federal and state policy and administrative agendas, political coalitions’ priorities and strategies, and narratives around water policy in media coverage and public discourse. In what follows, we document these shifts and their potential implications for policy, research, and activism going forward, as experiences of water policy continue to underscore racialized experiences of environmental injustice in the U.S.

2 Revisiting 2014: Water Crises in Flint and Detroit

In 2013, Flint’s City Council decided to switch the city’s water source from water purchased from DWSD to a yet-to-be-built pipeline that would bring water from Lake Huron to Flint and its neighbors. The decision to switch water sources emerged as a cost-cutting measure implemented by a state-appointed municipal emergency manager (EM) as the city confronted a $25 million municipal budget deficit and DWSD’s continued rate increases. Under state law, the EM had the authority to implement the change without public input or city council approval. Alongside direct cost savings, the EM and other city officials rationalized the switch as a way to increase Flint’s independence and provide the city greater control over the management and price of its drinking water (Pauli 2019).

In 2014, city officials decided to use the Flint River as its water source while the new pipeline was under construction. However, the city’s water treatment plant had been shuttered and understaffed for decades, and the Flint River proved to be a difficult source of water to treat and manage. Despite concerns raised by plant operators, the city fully made the switch in April 2014. However, the water lacked the anti-corrosives necessary for it to be safe for consumption and to meet federal drinking water standards for lead and other contaminants. Almost immediately, residents and manufacturers raised concerns that the water was discolored and had a foul odor, and the city issued three separate boil advisories in August of that year. Due to inappropriate and ineffective treatment methods, elevated levels of lead and
trihalomethanes littered the system, and there were up to 13 deaths attributable to bacterial contamination (specifically Legionnaires’ disease) (Zahran et al. 2018).

The real crisis in Flint was the lack of government response to these contamination events: it took nearly 18 months for officials to act and reconnect the city to high-quality water supplies. Ultimately, community organizing and activism, often in partnership with scientists and academics, succeeded in raising awareness and demanding action (Krings, Kornberg, and Lane 2019; Nickels 2019; Pauli 2019). In January of 2016, Flint’s mayor signed an emergency declaration; within days, Michigan’s Governor declared a state-level emergency and President Obama declared a federal-level state of emergency, triggering action from federal agencies including FEMA, CDC, and even the EPA, despite its months-long resistance to involvement (Pauli 2019, 176, 229).

Detroit’s water crisis was not one of widespread contamination but of widespread household water service disconnections. In July 2013, while under emergency management, the city filed for bankruptcy – the largest municipal bankruptcy filing in U.S. history (Rushe 2013). DWSD held one-third of the city’s overall debt. In July 2014, as part of implementing a bankruptcy plan, the city made moves to collect on past due water bills – some of which were the result of poor billing practices – estimated to total around $90 million (Helderop and Mack 2023). This resulted in the largest residential water shutoff event in U.S. history, ultimately preventing water access for more than 30,000 Detroit households. The event garnered national and international attention, largely due to the efforts of local resident-activists; Monica Lewis-Patrick, one of Detroit’s most prominent water justice advocates, noted that ‘it took organizers and leaders, much like what happened in Flint, to prepare the data and the research to alarm their neighbors and their own government’ of the public health crisis impacting their community” (Mascarenhas 2024, 167). At the request of local activists, UN human rights officials visited Detroit in October of 2014 and heard from affected residents. The UN Human Rights Office called for Detroit to restore water services, declaring the shutoffs a “violation of the human right to water and other international human rights” (UN OHCHR 2014), but this carried little sway with policymakers. This included Mayor Mike Duggan, who largely continued to promote the narrative that those who truly could not afford to pay their water bills would not experience a shutoff – attributing many Detroiter’s payment delinquency not to unaffordability or poverty but to a deliberate choice not to pay.

Despite significant efforts by advocates, shutoffs continued in Detroit until the temporary halt on disconnections during the Covid-19 pandemic (City of Detroit 2020). Some estimate that 100,000 households have been disconnected since 2014 (Gaber et al. 2021), with Black households disproportionately affected (Helderop and Mack 2023). Detroit’s shutoffs reflect “a utility financing model that punishes low-
income customers without addressing underlying drivers of affordability,” creating a “downward spiral” whereby increased water rates spur greater payment delinquency rates, increasing operating costs, and so on (Swain, McKinney, and Suskind 2020, 2). In addition, Detroit residents have questioned why the city’s debt collection plans have targeted residential rather than commercial (city and business) accounts, which account for one-third of DWSD’s debt, “[calling] attention to the conflict between the justification for shutting of the water – lack of funds – and actions that would most efficiently pull the DWSD out of debt” (Grimmer 2017, 22). The city’s Covid-era moratorium has expired, leaving households vulnerable to shutoffs again.

Flint’s and Detroit’s water crises share root causes linked to histories of segregation, deindustrialization, and disinvestment; they also produced similar outcomes and shared experiences, jointly influencing state and national water policy landscapes (Howell, Doan, and Harbin 2019). The events and experiences of 2014 in Flint and Detroit brought water security, affordability, and infrastructure to the forefront of American politics and priorities for the first time since the 1970s, exposing the crucial link between water and racial politics in so doing. In both cities, as residents grappled with unprecedented levels of water policy failures, many became fierce advocates for water equity and justice; by August 2014, “both cities’ residents had begun protesting the inability to access clean and affordable water at home” (Grimmer 2017, 19). Groups like We the People of Detroit, the Flint Democracy Defense League, and Water You Fighting For? have led the charge in bringing local, state, national, and international attention to their situation in their communities.

This activism has also helped to shed light on where and how American ideals of democratic governance fail to materialize, or rather how water policy and politics contribute to the suspension or undermining of democracy. Many early water activists in Flint were long-time pro-union and democracy activists. In responding to the technocratic nature of emergency management, Flint and Detroit activists’ rhetorical focus on upholding or restoring democracy represented a “new political consciousness” of the broader implications of water policy and management for environmental justice (Pauli 2019, 6). Attention to the relationships between water users and providers in the U.S. reflects this new consciousness and awareness of the cyclical links between drinking water system performance, democratic engagement, and underlying trust in government (Teodoro, Zuhlke, and Switzer 2022). In exposing these dynamics, the Flint and Detroit crises and their aftermath have brought new and needed attention to the importance of water policy for upholding democratic governance and values. In the section that follows, we identify where and how U.S. water politics has shifted in the 10 years since Flint’s and Detroit’s crises as a product of this increased attention.
3 Ten Years Later: Identifying Shifts in the Politics of U.S. Water Policy

Ten years since the Flint and Detroit crises, we see three key, interlinked shifts in the landscape of U.S. water politics and policymaking. First, water policy and advocacy have become visible in important ways, contrasted with the relative invisibility of water in U.S. politics in prior decades. Second, water policy has placed a greater emphasis on issues of access and affordability compared to its historical and more narrow focus on regulating contaminants. Policymakers and publics increasingly recognize the links between water quality and water affordability, and increasingly view water access (not only quality) as a public health matter. Finally, we see greater attention to the racial dimensions of water policy, in terms of acknowledging racial inequities in experiences of water provision and use, and in terms of connecting water politics to racial politics more broadly and in intersectional ways. These three high-level shifts are evident in federal and state policy and administrative agendas, political coalitions’ priorities and strategies, and narratives around water policy in media coverage and public discourse.

3.1 Shift 1: From an Era of Invisibility for Water Politics and Infrastructure to an Era of Awareness

The visibility and potency of water as a policy arena has shifted several times over the past century (see Figure 1): from the “big dam era” (1930s to mid-1970s), to what we call the era of invisibility (mid-1970s to 2000s), era of crisis (2010s–2020), and the present era of awareness (2021–present). The Flint and Detroit crises were the hallmark crises of their era, providing new context for understanding other emergent water contamination events in Toledo, Ohio (2014) and Newark, New Jersey (2016); conflicts over contaminated aquifers and access to increasingly scarce water in the western U.S. received national and international media attention. The Flint water crisis also attracted attention from scholars, producing a wealth of research and insights from sociological, political science, water resource management, municipal governance, and environmental justice perspectives (among many others: Clark 2020; Hughes 2021; Mascarenhas 2024; Mohai 2018; Nickels 2019; Pauli 2019).

Figure 1: Characterizing shifts in U.S. water politics, 1930s-present.
Water policy has not held this level of political salience since the 1970s, when Congress passed landmark legislation to introduce regulations on contaminants as America’s drinking water needs rapidly expanded: the Clean Water Act of 1972 (CWA) and Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974 (SDWA), which led to large-scale federal investment in water infrastructures. These infrastructures are largely hidden from the public eye – pipes buried underground, treatment plants sited far from residential areas – embodying the *out of sight, out of mind* rationality that characterized this era of invisibility for water politics (Lach, Ingram, and Rayner 2004). After initial construction, federal investment in water infrastructures decreased from 63 percent to 9 percent of total federal spending between 1977 and 2017 (ASCE 2021). Water systems and investments became relatively invisible to the general American public, and, it would seem, policymakers.

The Flint and Detroit crises shone a spotlight on water policy, shifting water policy from an invisible exercise for technocrats to an arena of contemporary U.S. politics. The experiences exemplified the notion that infrastructure is “invisible until it fails” (Star 1999), but also exposed the consequences of that invisibility. As discrete events, the crises made water policy and politics visible, but also challenged conventional thinking around crisis response, as their impacts demanded a longer-term, more systemic view of infrastructural failure. The fallout of the crises transformed water from an issue that “consistently [polled] as the most important environmental issue in people’s minds, yet [remained] largely neglected in the halls of Congress, the White House, and in our federal agencies” (Christian-Smith and Gleick 2012, xv) into one that federal legislators and agencies could no longer sideline. This new awareness of water policy as politically salient was also reflected in media coverage. For example, Flint activists received heavy and high-profile national media coverage, becoming the subject of collections of articles in the New York Times (https://www.nytimes.com/news-event/flint-water-crisis) and virtually every other major national and international news outlet, plus local media outlets nationwide.

Election campaigns at local, state, and federal levels have increasingly included a focus on drinking water, leading to new policy initiatives at all levels. In some cases, attention to these issues now seems paramount to successful election, particularly in the Great Lakes region and drought-prone states and cities, but also in majority-Black cities nationwide, as communities view Flint and Detroit residents’ experiences as harbingers of possibilities in their own cities. After seeing Flint’s and Detroit’s crises unfold, Black communities nationwide increasingly distrust government and public drinking water systems particularly, as they identify with the majority-Black victims of Michigan’s crises (Teodoro, Zuhlke, and Switzer 2022, chap. 2). In her 2018 campaign for office, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer promised that “[r]esidents’ concerns about drinking water will no longer fall on deaf ears” (Gretchen Whitmer for Governor 2018). As part of this promise, Whitmer’s office would go on to
create an ombudsman, invest in water infrastructure, address PFAS contamination, and implement shutoff protections, among other policy initiatives.

At the national level, the water crises and their aftermath helped to propel a shift in infrastructure policy, a major focus of the Biden Administration, and drinking water regulation. The 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) includes the largest investment in drinking water infrastructure in U.S. history: $50 billion to the EPA for water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure improvements, including $15 billion for lead service line replacement and $12 billion for Drinking Water State Revolving Funds (US 2024). Also in 2021, Biden appointed Radhika Fox as Assistant Administrator for Water at the EPA, referring to her as “a widely recognized national thought leader on complex water issues facing the nation – including climate change, affordability, equity, governance, innovative finance” (The White House 2021). The former CEO of the U.S. Water Alliance, Fox’s appointment signified renewed attention to water infrastructure and equity. In 2023, the EPA published Clean Water Act Financial Capability Assessment Guidance, providing updated water affordability guidance for water utilities, along with a proposal for new limits on lead in drinking water. Radhika Fox praised the lead limits proposal as “the strongest lead rule the nation has ever seen … historic progress” (Davenport 2023). And in 2024, the Biden Administration committed $3 billion in additional funds to the EPA for replacing all lead service lines nationwide.

3.2 Shift 2: From a Focus on Quality to Focus on Access and Affordability, Public Health and Human Rights

The Flint and Detroit crises catalyzed a shift toward prioritizing water access and affordability in water policy along with the focus on quality seen in 20th-century legislation. They helped build an understanding that water access and affordability are public health issues, and brought human and civil rights discourse into U.S. water politics more prominently. This shift parallels broader changes in the environmental movement over the past 50 years from a focus on conservation toward acknowledging environmental issues as social and public health issues. We see the effects of the Flint and Detroit water crises in these trends in policy priorities and in the priorities and strategies of political coalitions.

Water policy of the 20th century established water quality regulations and standards for “navigable” (CWA) and drinking waters (SDWA). The CWA and SDWA led to huge investments in water infrastructure to address pollution and ensure safe drinking water that continued through the 1990s. This included construction of drinking water treatment plants and water and sewage distribution systems. Unlike the energy sector, these systems are highly decentralized and typically public, and
were not provided with any sort of state or federal financial regulation or disclosure requirements.

Recent policy proposals at all levels of government reflect new attention to water access and affordability alongside quality, framing these as public health issues. Notable examples include the EPA’s 2023 water affordability guidance; local- and state-level experimentation with new affordability and access programs, for example, Philadelphia’s recently expanded water bill discount program (Fofanability 2024); and legislation to ban privatization of Baltimore’s water utility (Biron 2018). Baltimore took additional steps in 2019, with its city council unanimously passing the Water Accountability and Equity Act, which “[overhauled] the city’s outdated water billing system, [set] up a percentage-of-income affordability program for low-income households, a customer advocate’s office with a mission of promoting fairness to customers, and a structure for appealing high bills and other problems commonly faced by customers” (Aguilar 2019). In Michigan, State Senator Stephanie Chang has led an effort to pass a water affordability bill package that sets up a statewide affordability fund, and includes shutoff protections and decriminalization of water reconnections (Chang et al. 2023). At the national level, Senator Alex Padilla (D-CA) introduced legislation to establish a permanent, nationwide water assistance program (Padilla 2024). The “Low-Income Housing Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) Establishment Act” seeks to restore funding for LIHWAP, which was created during the Covid-19 pandemic and expired at the end of the 2023 fiscal year.

Increased attention to water access and affordability reflects lessons from Flint and Detroit that coalitions of activists and researchers hold sizable credit for bringing to light. Many of these coalitions included residents who had not previously been involved in politics, but who were driven by their lived experience. This activation and activism around water access and affordability increased awareness of water as an intersectional policy issue, leading to expanded political coalitions and reach of water activists.

Environmental advocacy groups have begun to see water access and affordability as relevant to their work. For example, the Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition (HOW) began using environmental and water justice lenses to frame their water restoration and protection agenda. HOW is a group of over 180 non-governmental organizations that engage in environmental advocacy at state and national levels. Prior to 2014, their efforts to promote and expand Great Lakes water policy and investment focused heavily on ecosystem protection and restoration, and membership largely reflected that focus. After the water crises of 2014, the coalition reoriented to include drinking water access and infrastructure as part of its vision of “healthy lakes and healthy people,” now including equity and justice, democracy, and public engagement as key organizational values. Water justice advocacy groups like We the People of Detroit joined HOW, signifying HOW’s
expanded advocacy goals. The coalition began seriously implementing these values in 2016, when it added the Equity Advisory and Action Committee to its Governance Board; the committee developed strategic plans to incorporate equity principles into HOW’s advocacy agenda (Walker 2019).

Similarly, racial justice advocacy groups have begun to see water access and affordability as central to their work. For example, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement incorporated water shutoff moratoria as part of their Covid-19 advocacy agenda, and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Michigan became a prominent organization in water justice advocacy. So too, local organizations that emerged around the Flint and Detroit crises expanded their reach: We the People of Detroit, for example, has become a national leader on water justice advocacy.

### 3.3 Shift 3: Exposing the Nexus of Racial Politics and Water Politics

The experiences and successes of Flint and Detroit activists helped highlight the crucial link between drinking water and racial politics, at a moment of increasing national attention to racial justice. Since 2014, attention to the racial politics of water and infrastructure has compounded as national expressions of discontent around racial injustice has escalated. Flint’s and Detroit’s crises marked water policy and decision-making as relevant to the BLM movement, for example, by demonstrating “how water regulation violently racializes” (Grimmer 2017, 20). This link has become even more apparent since 2020, as the BLM movement peaked and as the Covid-19 pandemic exposed stark racial disparities in public health infrastructures, including water and sanitation systems. As the Covid-19 pandemic emerged and worsened, it became clear that lack of water access presented a significant public health threat. Areas with less adequate water and sanitation infrastructures – generally those with higher proportions of low-income communities and communities of color – experienced higher rates of Covid contraction and spread, prompting temporary water shutoff moratoria in many cities and states (Warner et al. 2021; Zhang 2021).

Media coverage, public discourse, and policy action around the 2022 water crisis in Jackson, Mississippi reflect these shifts and their emergence in the shadow of Flint’s and Detroit’s experiences and BLM’s successes, as audiences were primed to understand Jackson as “another Flint,” or in other words, to more readily acknowledge Jackson’s crisis as an instance of environmental racism (Coleman 2022; Douglas 2016). Prominent news outlets covering Jackson’s water crisis liken it to the Flint water crisis, not only because of the common lead contamination issue but also, and more notably, because of the two cities’ shared infrastructural conditions rooted in histories of disinvestment and racial politics (Coleman 2022; Fentress and Fausset...
Jackson activists built their legitimacy on the successes of Flint resident-activists, who laid groundwork for Jackson residents’ concerns to more quickly and more powerfully gain traction and prompt government response. The federal government’s Justice40 Initiative and lead service line replacement agenda also reflect greater attention to the intersection of racial and environmental justice, and water justice especially. The Justice40 Initiative, launched in 2020, aims to ensure that 40 percent of federal infrastructure investments go to disadvantaged communities, and highlights water and wastewater infrastructure as critical to its agenda. In July 2021, the federal Office of Management and Budget provided the EPA with interim guidance for implementing Justice40 pilot programs, including the Drinking Water State Revolving Funds, Clean Water State Revolving Funds, and Reducing Lead in Drinking Water (US EPA 2022). So too, the Biden Administration named lead pipe replacement as central to its efforts to address racial disparities (Kanno-Youngs 2023), speaking to their intersectionality.

4 Looking Forward: Implications and Priorities for Policy, Research, and Activism

Since 2014, the politics of water policy in the U.S. have shifted substantially. These shifts have helped reveal the widespread vulnerability of drinking water systems and the most critical gaps in policy and research, even as increased attention to the racial inequities embedded in U.S. water policy has laid groundwork for broader transformations through civic participation and empowerment.

First, in responding to the water crises in Flint, Detroit, and beyond, the U.S. still lacks the necessary structures for policy reform, and with new policy emphases come new data and information needs. In 2024, over two million Americans still grapple with equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water, even with federal investment in drinking water infrastructure and a noted focus on environmental justice in federal policy. This dissonance suggests a distributional issue: newly available infrastructure funding is not effectively reaching the systems most in need of investment, and access to federal funding is still very unequal along racial and spatial lines (Freemark et al. 2023; Mueller and Gasteyer 2021). So too, data on affordability and shutoffs are scarce and fragmented in the absence of federal reporting requirements for utilities and enforcement frameworks around the EPA’s water affordability guidance (Gerlak, Louder, and Ingram 2022).

Persistent inequities in water access combined with continued attention to structural racism guarantee that the politics of U.S. water policy will continue to intersect with racial politics, acknowledging “the disproportionate burdens related
to federally funded infrastructure that communities of color have faced – and continue to face” (Freemark et al. 2023, 5). Despite the 2014 events’ demonstration of “how racialization happens through regulation of and access to water” (Grimmer 2017, 19), Black communities nationwide continue experiencing the racialized violence of water injustice in Flint, Detroit, Jackson, and beyond; despite Justice40 goals, only 27 percent of BIL drinking water funding disbursed in 2022 went to “disadvantaged communities,” and most of this went to communities in states with populations that are less than 10 percent Black (Mahoney 2023). Two prominent Flint activists captured the frustration and irony of these enduring injustices: Claire McClinton said that “it’s bittersweet to watch Flint purportedly influence the nation for the better while things remain ‘broken’ for Black communities,” and Nayyirah Shariff likened the crisis itself to a “chronic illness” – “it never goes away” (Mahoney 2024).

Second, while the crises in Flint and Detroit have galvanized a new wave of policy and politics, they have also created cracks in the relationship between the public and the state. Trust in drinking water systems and providers is at an all-time low, particularly in low-income communities and communities of color – even if they themselves have not experienced a drinking water crisis or contamination event (Teodoro, Zuhlke, and Switzer 2022). A central question for policymakers will be how this trust can be repaired, and attention to “trustworthiness” can help emphasize the responsibility policymakers have to regain that trust (Wilson et al. 2023). The public and citizen activists have borne much of the responsibility for demanding and ensuring action, which may point to additional weaknesses in the system. Long-lasting change and reestablishment of trust relations must come from policymakers at all levels of government (Teodoro, Zuhlke, and Switzer 2022).

Taken together, the Flint and Detroit experiences and their lessons point to the need for systematic reform that moves decision- and policymaking away from “crisis response” to more holistic and equitable approaches to managing, regulating, and financing drinking water services. This requires building the capacity of communities as well as governments. There is some evidence of this approach in state and federal policy discourse and proposals, such as increased attention to affordability and needed infrastructure investments, but time will tell whether they take hold.

Finally, taking full advantage of the shift to greater awareness of the centrality and precarity of drinking water necessarily requires intersectional scholarship and praxis, to ensure these new politics advance social and environmental justice outcomes. Water policy scholarship and praxis must “[engage] with longer histories of systemic racism, capitalism, and colonial relations with Indigenous nations … to better understand the way social difference shapes access to, and quality and affordability of, water in the US” (Gerlak, Louder, and Ingram 2022, 8). As water policy and politics demand more intersectional approaches, there are increasing opportunities for researchers from diverse fields and backgrounds to contribute to
drinking water policy debates; we must approach these with nuance and care, seeking to uplift community-informed agendas.

Acknowledgments: OD received funding from the National Science Foundation, Grant Number DGE-2241144.

References


