

[Monkey Cage](#)

Analysis

It's World Water Day. Here's why democracies do better at delivering water equally to all.

Climate change is boosting the demand for clean water around the world.



A girl holds a hose to fill a container with water from a mobile water tank in Hyderabad, India, on Saturday. (Mahesh Kumar A./AP)

By Sijeong Lim and Aseem Prakash

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March 22 is [World Water Day](#) — an annual call to action to help the millions of people who lack access to safe water sources. [Water availability](#) is an important global policy objective, listed as U.N. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) # 6: “[ensure access to water and sanitation for all](#)” by 2030.

But [climate change](#) is making water availability [less predictable](#). Droughts are often followed by extreme precipitation that does not sufficiently recharge groundwater, leading to water runoff and contaminated water sources. More [than 2 billion people](#) are now living in countries experiencing high water stress.

Arguably, technology can address water collection and distribution issues. As part of climate change adaptation, [public utilities](#) are expected to strengthen their water infrastructure by creating new water collection systems to deal with irregular rainfall, especially storm surges. Because water runoff from intense rainfalls causes rivers to silt up, many [water treatment facilities](#) may need upgraded equipment to deal with the [higher sediment loads](#).

[Biden called climate change an ‘existential threat.’ Can the U.N. Security Council help?](#)

But utilities and governments don't simply invest in water infrastructure in the most water-fragile areas. Our [recent paper](#) shows that politics shape government decisions about water. We find that democracies worldwide lead the way in providing equitable access to clean water. Thus, in the time of [democratic recession](#), World Water Day highlights how democracy remains a pillar of sustainable development.

Why governments favor urban infrastructure needs

Creating and maintaining water infrastructure is expensive. Because governments work with limited budgets, they ration money to extend or improve infrastructure. And because water access is critical to human existence, politicians have control over a valuable resource. This encourages them to locate water infrastructure projects in areas that would benefit them politically — that's why politicians favor cities for water projects, even if rural water access is a bigger issue.

Industrialization creates jobs, encouraging people to migrate from rural areas to cities. Cities grow in population and also in density. Many industries that emerge in urban areas also have unions, making it easier for workers to organize as a political force. These factors make protests easier to organize in urban areas. From [Michigan](#) to [Mexico City](#), water issues in cities often ignite protests and create political problems for the government.

Because urban jobs in manufacturing and service industries tend to offer higher wages than farming, urban areas are also richer than rural areas. And because the rich tend to be more [politically assertive](#), this again favors urban interests.

Government offices tend to be located in urban areas as well. This means that the policymakers who decide where the next water project should be located also reside in urban areas. And [scholars note](#) that urban areas have better access to the media and urban news gets more media coverage, which adds to the urban bias in government resource allocation.

Governments are thus likely to be more attentive to water needs in urban areas, including access to drinking water. Our [recent paper](#) finds that the pro-urban bias in the provision of drinking water services is particularly pronounced in the industrializing countries of the Global South.

Foreign aid could help rural areas — but only in democracies

Can international pressure offset the domestic political drivers that lead to an urban bias in water access? After all, foreign donors don't face the same sort of political pressure to appease local groups. Further, if the urban bias is a reflection of budgetary problems, foreign aid could be helpful. When provided with additional funding, governments will not have to make the tough choice between urban and rural water projects. They could do both.

Our research finds that, yes, foreign aid can correct urban bias — but only in democratic countries. Here's why: Although cities worldwide have grown in size, rural voters still tend to be in the majority in most developing countries. With competitive elections, politicians pay closer attention to rural needs, including access to drinking water.

Democracies under pressure may be bad news for water access

However, democracy is [in retreat](#) worldwide, according to political science research — and that's bad news for rural areas and for water equity. Our research suggests that foreign aid to a country with a [weak democracy](#), i.e., where competition for political influence at the national level is not free and fair, actually worsens urban bias in water access.

The 2015 Paris agreement identified [climate aid](#) as a global priority. Rich countries, which historically have generated much of the world's carbon emissions, pledged to provide aid to help developing countries with [climate resilience projects](#), including [water infrastructure](#).

The [preamble](#) of the 2015 Paris agreement emphasized the importance of climate justice, which includes equitable distribution of governmental services. But it is less clear that aid-receiving governments will locate climate aid projects in ways that correct the urban bias in water infrastructure provision.

The United Nations has declared March 22 [World Water Day](#). It notes that this day is “about water and climate change — and how the two are inextricably linked. Adapting to the water effects of climate change will protect health and save lives.” But this day also underlines the importance of democracy, which has become a critical cornerstone in the quest for greater equity in the provision of basic services such as access to clean water.

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