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Promising New Scholarship and Complexity Conference: Presentation “Solving the Water Infrastructure Crisis: Clues From Public Opinion, Media Coverage and Policymaking”

A brief history of water and wastewater infrastructure (W&WI) development and management reveals policy-making and monetary support to be inadequate and unable to respond to the growing needs in real time. The creation of USEPA and the passage of Clean Water Act of 1972 vastly expanded the role of federal government in this process. By late 1980s however, budget constraints and rapidly evolving needs converted a capital improvement grants program to a loan program (called the State Revolving Fund or SRF), forcing state and local governments to take ownership of maintaining local assets such as treatment plants and pipes. As a result, these costs have been passed on to consumers over time. Currently, ratepayers pay about 90% of the capital costs for W&WI through direct local financing and repayment of federal and state loans.

This paper offers a comprehensive view of decision- and policy-making on W&WI investments through the lens of public opinion, media coverage and federal policy. Public opinion on infrastructure and government involvement, like any other topic, is malleable, responsive to events, and subject to issue framing. We asked three questions related to W&WI in an omnibus telephone survey of U.S. households as part of the Cornell National Social Survey (2012) (Vedachalam et al., 2014). When given a choice of government entity to finance large W&WI investment, a plurality chose local government over their state and federal counterparts. Even though trust in government has been declining for the past three decades (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006), local governments have enjoyed higher levels of trust as compared with other levels of government. That combined with a deeply embedded preference for local autonomy in American culture suggests that the preference for local decision-making is more a reflection of the values and beliefs rather than a wish for the future.

A near-majority of respondents felt that public and private entities were equally suited to manage W&WI such as treatment plants. The remaining respondents preferred public water and sewer boards over private corporations by a 2:1 ratio. We need further information to sort the “equally suited” respondents into truly indifferent, ambivalent and unaware groups. Except in few jurisdictions, Americans do not have an extensive experience with privatization of water and wastewater services, even though private water utilities operate in more than 40 states. Despite the alarming reports on the state of W&WI issued by government agencies and private think-tanks, respondents in our survey skewed toward the “not concerned” end of the scale when asked about the level of concern regarding their local infrastructure.

Presenter

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