4 Public participation

Katherine Levine Einstein, David M. Glick and Maxwell Palmer

Community input is a cornerstone of urban planning and policy. Politicians and bureaucrats alike laud public process as a critical tool for ensuring that new developments meet the needs of the broader community. Transparent community processes can build trust in local government. For example, one mayor recently said, while explaining their support for public meetings, "I call public meetings 'mutual educational opportunities'. People know their neighborhoods better than we do."

The institutionalization of a public process in city policymaking and development feels like an essential bulwark against the historical excesses of urban renewal and its elite-driven development.³ Urban renewal policies in the 1950s and 1960s led to the wholesale destruction of working-class and low-income neighborhoods in many cities. The new development of highways, shopping centers, and higher-end residential units replaced these so-called blighted neighborhoods—all with no input from the communities targeted by these initiatives.⁴ These highly centralized, developer- and bureaucrat-driven policies spurred planners and policymakers to subsequently favor processes that empowered the voices of neighbors and community residents.

Consequently, in most cities, the public now has the opportunity to comment on most new multifamily housing developments.⁵ Because of stringent land

¹ Jonathon Collins, Does the Meeting Style Matter? The Effects of Exposure to Participatory and Deliberative School Board Meetings, 115 Am. Pol. Sci. Rev. 790 (2020).

² 2022 Menino Survey of Mayors, BU INITIATIVE ON CITIES (last accessed Mar. 16, 2023), https://www.surveyofmayors.com/files/2023/01/2022-Menino-Survey-Climate-Report.pdf (last accessed July 5, 2023).

³ See e.g., Douglas W. Rae, City: Urbanism and Its End (2005).

See id.; Claire Dunning, Nonprofit Neighborhoods: An Urban History of Inequality and the American State (2022).

David Schleicher, City Unplanning, 122 YALE L. J. 1672, (2013).

use and zoning regulations, many housing development proposals involving the construction of more than one unit of housing must obtain a special permit, rezoning, variance from the existing zoning code, or other administrative permission. These processes trigger public meeting requirements: developers present their plans before relevant government bodies (typically either planning or zoning boards). Members of these bodies then have the opportunity to ask technical questions about the proposal. After this initial presentation period, proceedings are typically turned over to members of the public, who have the opportunity to express their support or opposition for the proposed housing development. Developers usually must notify neighbors and abutters within a certain geographic radius of a proposed development in writing about the opportunity to participate in this public hearing process.

In our 2019 book, Neighborhood Defenders, we argue that the very structure of political participation incentivizes an unrepresentative, privileged group of community residents to attend public meetings in order to block new housing.⁶ Attending a public meeting is a costly form of political participation. Participants must have the time, economic resources, and political knowledge to attend. All of these drivers of participation are, of course, not evenly distributed by socioeconomic demographics; rather older, white, affluent homeowners are more likely to have the resources necessary to participate in these forums. Just as importantly, though new housing developments come with real, or perceived, concentrated costs: neighbors will see rapid changes to their surrounding environment. They may worry (wrongly, as recent research shows7) that new development, especially new affordable housing development, will negatively affect their property values. Class and race biases may lead to anxiety about new neighbors. All of these factors serve as powerful motivators to participate in public meetings in opposition to new housing. In contrast, the benefits of new housing are diffuse. While research shows that the construction of more market-rate housing reduces housing costs,8 each additional new unit has, at best, a marginal effect. Consequently, even the most

KATHERINE LEVINE EINSTEIN, DAVID M. GLICK & MAXWELL PALMER., NEIGHBORHOOD DEFENDERS: PARTICIPATORY POLITICS AND AMERICA'S Housing Crisis (2019).

Christina Stacy & Christopher Davis, Assessing the Impact of Affordable Housing on Nearby Property Values in Alexandria, Virginia, URBAN INSTITUTE, (April 2022), https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Alexandria%20Affordable %20Housing%20Brief.pdf (last accessed July 5, 2023).

See e.g., Edward L. Glaeser, Joseph Gyourko & Raven Saks, Why Is Manhattan So Expensive? Regulation and the Rise in Housing Prices, 48 J. of L. & Econ. 71 (2005).

fervent supporter of new housing has little incentive to show up to every public meeting about the construction of a few units of new housing.

This structural problem poses a more significant challenge to making meetings representative and productive forums for discussing new housing. There are a variety of ways entrepreneurial policymakers might reduce *barriers* to participation: they might hold meetings in more convenient locations (or online); provide food or childcare to make participation more attractive and easier; or carefully select times to maximize participation. None of these policy proposals changes the inherent *structural problem*: opponents have a stronger incentive to show up to public hearings than proponents because of the concentrated costs (and diffuse benefits) of new development.

This chapter explores this structural challenge in greater depth. We first present existing evidence on the unrepresentative nature of public meetings, and discuss the benefits of empirically documenting participatory disparities. We then consider initial evidence and new questions about some potentially promising municipal-level reforms. Next, we examine avenues for future research on the key structural challenges that affect who attends meetings and what happens in them. Finally, we conclude with additional questions for research and practice that expand the scope of inquiry in new directions.

I. What we know about political participation

Studying political participation in public meetings is a formidable task. Local governments do not collect systematic data on who participates in their public forums. There are no central state repositories for participation as there are for, say, voting. Moreover, survey self-reports on political participation are notoriously unreliable.⁹

Fortunately, Massachusetts open meeting laws allowed for an unusual opportunity to precisely measure who showed up to public meetings surrounding housing development. In *Neighborhood Defenders* we assembled meeting minutes for all central and eastern Massachusetts planning and zoning board meetings discussing the construction of more than one housing unit between

See e.g., Ted Enamorado & Kosuke Imai, Validating Self-Reported Turnout by Linking Public Opinion Surveys with Administrative Records, 83 Pol. Rsch. Q. 723 (2019).

2015–2017. We were able to obtain information about political processes in 97 cities and towns that covered a wide variety of community types, ranging from economically struggling, racially diverse cities like Lawrence to privileged, homogenous suburbs like Weston. We focused on Massachusetts because minutes from these 97 cities and towns included the views of participants in public meetings as well as information about the commentators that enabled us to merge in administrative data to learn their age, name, vote history, homeownership status, and gender.

Evaluating participation at these meetings revealed important attitudinal and demographic disparities: public meetings were biased in favor of opponents and privileged, older homeowners. Section (a) of Table 4.1 below reports the results of this analysis. These concrete findings—along with studies that have replicated these results in California and Texas—pushed against a wide strand of planning research and practice that suggested these meetings were critical sites of empowerment for underrepresented voices. 10 In communities big and small, rich and poor, the findings remained remarkably consistent: privileged opponents to new housing disproportionately participated in public hearings. Providing hard data ensures that policymakers and advocates do not need to speculate about the role of public meetings, or combat people's often flawed perceptions of political dynamics.

Jesse Yoder, Does Property Ownership Lead to Participation in Local Politics? Evidence From Property Records and Meeting Minutes, 114 Am. Pol. Sci. Rev. 1213, (2020); Alexander Sahn, Public Comment and Public Policy 1-43 (Princeton University, Working Paper, 2022).

(a) In-Person Public Meetings, 2015–2017 ^a							
Demographic	% of Commenters	% of Voters	Difference				
Women	43.3	51.3	-8.0				
Democrats	32.0	31.7	0.2				
Whites	95.0	86.7	0.2				
Age >50	75.0	52.6	22.4				
Homeowners	73.4	45.6	27.8				

Table 4.1 Disparities in participation in land use meetings

(h)	Onlina	Dublic	Mootings	March S	contambar	2020b
(D)	Onune	Public	weeunes,	iviarch-s	September	2020

Demographic	% of Commenters	% of Voters	Difference
Women	46.9	52.8	-6.0
Democrats	32.7	30.9	1.8
Whites	82.5	69.7	12.8
Age >50	73.0	50.7	22.3
Homeowners	78.3	53.0	25.3

^aKatherine Levine Einstein, David M. Glick & Maxwell Palmer., Neighborhood Defenders: Participatory Politics and America's Housing Crisis (2019). ^bKatherine Levine Einstein et al., Still Muted: The Limited Participatory Democracy of Zoom Public Meetings URB. AFF. REV. (2022).

The table reports comparisons between the estimated demographics of meeting participants and voters from two studies conducted in Massachusetts. Panel (a) reports results from Einstein et. al. 2019, which examined public meetings in 97 cities and towns in eastern Massachusetts from 2017 to 2019. Panel (b) reports results from Einstein et. al. 2022, which examined online meetings in 76 cities and towns (a subset of those in Einstein et. al. 2019). The demographics of the voters differ between the two panels because of changes in the sample of included municipalities and changes in the demographics of the voter registration file from 2017 to 2020.

II. Strategies for obtaining representative community input

In response to political inequality in public meetings, a number of planners and policymakers have experimented with ways of gathering more representative community input on housing policy. Some of these initiatives attempt to reduce barriers to participation. Others take on a bigger reform by changing the topic under consideration at public meetings, in an effort to address the structural bias in favor of housing opponents. Here, we begin to evaluate several different approaches: moving public meetings online; distributing public opinion surveys; and convening zoning focus groups. We also consider additional research questions related to these new efforts in the field.

A. Online public meetings

The first intervention we evaluated was the replacement of in-person meetings with online meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the goal of this intervention was to ensure *safe* public participation in government processes, advocates for more transparent and inclusive government processes wondered whether the shift to online meetings might produce less politically unequal participation.¹¹

Online meetings may make it easier to participate. Prospective meeting attendees no longer have to spend hours in a municipal building room, waiting for their two minutes of speaking time. They do not have to obtain childcare, sacrifice mealtime, or deal with the hassle of getting to the meeting location. Some scholars and policymakers cautioned that inequality in internet access by age and socioeconomic status might generate barriers to attending online meetings, 12 but many expected online public meetings to reduce obstacles to participating in local politics, thereby diminishing participatory disparities.

While moving meetings about housing developments online renders them more accessible for most, it does not make them *more interesting or beneficial* to participate in. Indeed, the same structural problem that distorts in-person meetings also plagues online forums: the people with the most personal stake in a proposed project will be immediate neighbors facing the concentrated costs of new development. Thus, moving meetings online may do little to redress the oppositional bias of public forums.

Between March and September 2020, we collected information on all online planning and zoning board meetings in the same communities we analyzed

Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century, American Academy of Arts & Sciences, (last accessed: Jan. 14, 2021), https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/publication/downloads/2020-Democratic -Citizenship_Our-Common-Purpose.pdf.

Emily A. Vogels, Digital Divide Persists Even As Americans With Lower Incomes Make Gains in Tech Adoption, Pew Research Center, (June 22, 2021), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/22/digital-divide-persists-even-as-americans-with-lower-incomes-make-gains-in-tech-adoption/.

in *Neighborhood Defenders*.¹³ We obtained information on 798 commenters making 1,078 comments across 76 cities and towns. Section (b) of Table 4.1 above illustrates that representational disparities remain sizable in online meetings: participants in online forums were significantly more likely to be over the age of 50, homeowners, and white. These figures are strikingly similar to those of in-person meetings: making it easier to participate does not appear to reduce demographic disparities.

It similarly had little effect on the strong representation of oppositional interests at public meetings. Only 13 percent of commenters showed up in support of new housing–again, virtually identical to in-person forums.

Simply making it easier to participate does not eliminate participatory disparities. This finding has analogues in multiple studies of voting reform. Policy efforts like early voting do not consistently reduce inequality in political participation, but may allow even greater participation from those most likely to participate already.

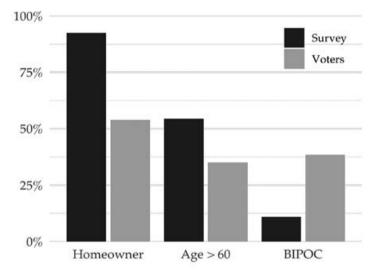
B. Surveys

Recognizing disparities in who shows up to public meetings, many communities have turned to surveys as a tool for obtaining more representative views. Unfortunately, there are substantial limitations to governments, or researchers, collecting and evaluating representative public views on housing and political power. The high, sometimes insurmountably so, costs of collecting representative survey samples at the local level make it especially difficult to evaluate true community sentiment. Typically, local governments will post a link online to a survey, and circulate it through email, social media, or fliers in public buildings. These "convenience samples" make sense for public officials who rarely have the staff capacity to implement more robust sampling procedures. Unfortunately, such convenience samples are vulnerable to the same dynamics that distort in-person meetings. Strong opponents (or supporters) of housing can organize to take a survey, and have their interests disproportionately represented. Moreover, socioeconomically privileged residents are more likely to have the time and interest to participate in a survey in the absence of more aggressive recruitment.

Figure 4.1 below illuminates these concerns using data from a community's effort to collect views through surveys. We collected information on the demo-

Einstein, et al, *supra* note 6.

graphics of respondents to a 2020 survey in Newton, MA, an affluent, and well resourced, inner-core suburb of Boston in the midst of a multi-year rezoning process. ¹⁴ Residents who took the survey were significantly more likely to be white, over the age of 50, and homeowners than voters in the community as a whole. They were also overwhelmingly opposed to the construction of new housing. We coded open-ended comments respondents provided about their hopes and preferences for Newton's housing stock: we found that only 12 percent were supportive of greater housing density in Newton, mirroring opposition to housing at in-person meetings.



Note: Figure reproduced with the permission of The Boston Foundation.

Figure 4.1 2020 Survey respondents compared to voters in Newton,
Massachusetts

C. Focus groups

While Newton's survey did not succeed in obtaining more representative input from housing supporters, another of the city's engagement strategies was

Katherine Levine Einstein & Maxwell Palmer, Representation in the Housing Process: Best Practices for Improving Racial Equity, The Boston Foundation, (2022), (last accessed: Jul. 5, 2023) https://www.tbf.org/-/media/tbf/reports-and-covers/2022/june/final-representation-in-the-housing-process-report-20220615.pdf.

considerably more successful: equitable focus groups. Concerned about the unrepresentative nature of traditional meeting attendees, as part of its rezoning process Newton's planning team created a set of equitable groups for the following categories: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC); people with disabilities; young people (ages 15-25 and 25-35); creatives; renters; LGTBQ+; and elderly people (ages 65+). These groups took place in spring and summer 2021, and were moderated by members of the community or relevant commissions

Participating in these focus groups were 139 Newton residents who volunteered, responding to a broad set of questions posed by the moderator. For example, renters considered the following four questions:

- (1) As a renter, do you feel connected to Newton's village centers? If so, how? What do you go [to the village centers] for?
- (2) If there were no limitations or barriers to think about: what would make your most ideal village center? What would exist there, what would it look like?
- (3) In our past engagement, we have seen a large disparity between participation from homeowners and from renters. As we consider zoning changes for village centers, how can we make sure renters are heard in the process?
- (4)Is there anything else about village centers that you want the city to consider? (For example, the environment, accessibility, housing, inclusivity, transportation, and more.)

Members of the planning staff transcribed these meetings, allowing us to code the proportion of comments supporting greater housing density. Figure 4.2 below displays support for greater housing density among these focus groups, comparing them to support for housing expressed in the December 2020 survey described above and a traditional public meeting held concurrently with the focus groups. Support for housing was significantly higher in these focus groups: notably, among renters and young people, all comments expressed support for greater housing density. Even among the elderly—a group traditionally more opposed to new housing at public meetings¹⁵—43 percent of focus group participants expressed support for greater housing density.

Multiple focus group participants expressed qualms with more traditional community meetings—and excitement about the novelty of equitable focus

Einstein, et al, supra note 6.

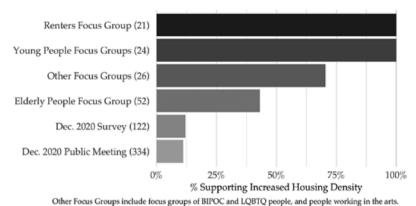


Figure reproduced with the permission of The Boston Foundation.

Figure 4.2 Support for increasing housing density by outreach Effort in Newton, Massachusetts

Note:

groups. Multiple BIPOC focus group participants described traditional public meetings as intimidating and unwelcoming. One said, "As a person of color, and having only lived here for a year, I have struggled to feel confident to engage in the process when people who are lifelong residents begin to get loud." Another similarly praised the inclusive atmosphere of the focus groups: "I would applaud what you're doing here tonight. I've lived here 23 years, and this is the first such invitation for communication, so showing that Newton is welcome to other voices...just showing that you're interested in other voices sends a message, so that's great." A renters focus group participant was thankful for the city's explicit outreach:

I have rented in Newton for more than 20 years and have never participated before. Typically, people in Newton get involved through their children's school. I do not have kids and always felt disconnected. I heard about this focus group through my landlord and just the fact that the City reached out directly to renters, like me, is why I am participating now.

One Mandarin-speaking renter similarly appreciated the direct outreach: "I like that our opinions are getting directly asked by the Planning Department."

Focus groups both amplified the voices of those not typically heard from in public meetings and boosted feelings of political efficacy among those participants. In part, this was because they created set-aside spaces that underscored the value of participation from underrepresented groups. These groups also

may have been effective because of the level of policy for which the city sought public input. As we noted above, when public input processes center on specific housing developments, they naturally incentivize participation from neighbors who are facing the concentrated costs of development. In contrast, the Newton process solicited input about city-level rezoning. These types of higher-level considerations naturally create greater incentives for proponents of new housing to attend: from the perspective of a housing advocate, the benefits from a city-wide upzoning, for example, are far more perceptible than those from the construction of a three-unit condominium building. In concert with active recruitment efforts, these forums generated more representative, pro-housing feedback.

Ш. Obstacles to reform

Substantial political obstacles may prevent the widespread implementation of innovative reforms to the housing politics process. This section highlights some of these structural and systemic obstacles and outstanding questions related to them.

At a basic level, the current system—filled with delays—may feed into a human tendency to favor compromise as a fair solution. Indeed, when a planning board gives in to neighbors' concerns about project density and asks the developer to, say, produce additional parking and traffic studies, that may feel like a reasonable balance between neighbors' preferences and broader community needs. Unfortunately, in practice, these delays increase the cost of developing housing, and reduce the overall supply. 16 Overcoming this very understandable tendency towards compromise or pursuing more data—especially among public officials' whose careers have succeeded because of their proclivity towards coalition-building—is a formidable task.

Relatedly, planning officials are often residents in their communities. In smaller suburbs and towns, they know many community members. Consequently, the innate human desire to be congenial may also prevent public officials from supporting proposed housing developments in the face of strong neighborhood opposition. Furthermore, both city councilors and planning officials are

Einstein, et al, supra note 6.

highly likely to be homeowners themselves.¹⁷ Homeowners also participate in local elections at higher rates than non-homeowners,¹⁸ and volunteers and applicants for planning and zoning boards (and related bodies) may disproportionately consist of homeowners as well.

Moreover, programs that shift the balance of power and redress racial inequities—like affinity-based focus groups—are vulnerable to *backlash*.¹⁹ Newton illuminates this hostility to equity-oriented programs. After the equitable housing groups were rolled out, organized neighborhood associations expressed their strong opposition to their perceived exclusion from the rezoning process because they were not included in the focus groups. They wrote their city councilors and the mayor. One group, the Newtonville Neighborhood Association, suggested in a mailing that its members infiltrate the equitable focus groups: "If you don't fit into one of the designated focus groups, say, if you are a homeowner or a white, middle-aged person, be creative and sign on as part of the creative community. The idea, I've been told, is to maximize participation." Highly participatory groups that wield outsized influence over local land use planning have a strong incentive to organize to maintain their position of power.

Staff capacity and other resource constraints also prevent many cities from implementing expansive reforms to their land use and other processes. Oftentimes, when innovation does happen, it is the result of one or several particularly motivated and tenacious planners; programs dependent on such individuals may naturally fall by the wayside when these employees move on to other positions. Newton's process required a substantial outlay of time from three full-time staff members, multiple additional meetings (and all of the staff time and logistics meetings entail), and resources for at least two city-wide surveys.

Future research should investigate how municipal staff and staff capacity shape land use decisions. For example, how much capacity is necessary to accomplish some of the innovations in collecting resident input we discuss above? How

Einstein & Palmer, *supra* note 14 (estimates that public officials involved in the housing process are more than twice as likely to be homeowners as the average voter in their communities).

Andrew B. Hall & Jesse Yoder, *Does Homeownership Influence Political Behavior?* Evidence From Administrative Data, 84 The J. OF Pol. 351 (2022).

Lafleur Stephens-Dougan, White Americans' Reactions to Racial Disparities in COVID-19, Am. Poli. Sci. Rev. 8 (2022).

much capacity is required for things like translation and outreach? How much does having staff capacity matter to community participation?

A second, and related, avenue for future research might explore the extent to which staff and decision-maker goals are aligned. Newton's novel community input process will only be meaningful if the board members and elected officials responsible for rezoning incorporate focus group preferences into their policy proposals. Researchers might explore the power dynamics between professional staff, citizen board members, and elected officials, and have these dynamics shape the strength of staff members in land use decision-making processes.

IV. Moving forward

Researchers and practitioners have made considerable progress on these issues in recent years, with far greater public and scholarly awareness of the structural challenges to conducting fair input processes. Yet, there are many unanswered questions about how to resolve problematic public meeting dynamics. Throughout this chapter we have noted areas we believe are ripe for new, pioneering, empirical research. We conclude by raising a few more. Because the bulk of the work to date has focused on questions of who gets to meetings in the first place, we focus here on what happens at meetings.

Future research should dig into the preferences and knowledge of the board members who are hearing from their fellow residents and making critical decisions. How aware are board members of participatory inequalities, and does it matter if they are? How do they perceive their roles and responsibilities when facing a group of angry community members telling them they have the power to prevent great harm to their neighborhoods? Are they biased in favor of perceived compromise with community members, even if it means making decisions that are at odds with broader community goals and interests? Some of the questions about staff capacity above are closely related to these questions about board members.

Scholarship might also consider the broader timing and structure of the meetings themselves. For example, in what ways, if at all, does the timing of voting matter? How might the timing of public comment shape board decisions?

Future research should also begin to untangle the direct effects of public meetings. Such causal inquiries are thorny as a consequence of selection issues. For example, are public officials responsive to public comments? Identifying the causal effect of public comments on officials' decisions is challenging because we do not see how the officials would have decided if participants did make comments, or if the people making the comments or the substance of the commenters themselves were different. One empirical avenue that may be promising would be to focus on the use of studies in local government delays. Members of the public frequently call for additional "study" of a proposed development as a delay tactic. How often (and under what circumstances) do boards call for additional environmental, traffic, and engineering studies, for example? Are such studies more frequent after contentious public meetings? How much time and money do such studies require? Quantifying such issues would help the field better understand (and potentially reform) this important lever of delay.

In addition to these and other questions about what goes on during meetings and how it affects board members' decisions, there are fundamental questions about participation in the first place. Our study of online meetings used data after a sudden pandemic-induced shift. We believe there is a need for additional studies of online participation as individuals, groups, and governments get more accustomed to this format. There are many anecdotes about how online meetings have improved participation in some communities; further testing would be valuable to either identify new opportunities or negate some overly optimistic misperceptions. The early evaluations of the innovations in Newton are also only the first step in assessing alternative ways to gather community input.

More generally, there are important research needs about input and voice that are not observable at official public meetings. Such questions include things like the formal and informal ways that community members convey their opinions to staff and board members through electronic comments, social media, and other methods. They also include ways that local residents organize and motivate themselves before coming to meetings, as well as questions about which voices may wield significant influence outside of public comment periods.

Similarly, while our data clearly show representational disparities in who participates in public meetings, we cannot observe whether developers are *also* able to wield disproportionate influence.²⁰ Developers are deeply unpop-

²⁰ Katherine Levine Einstein, et al., Developing a Pro-Housing Movement? Public Distrust of Developers, Fractured Coalitions, and the Challenges of Measuring

ular and widely cited as unscrupulous and predatory by opponents of new housing.²¹ In official meetings they are often in the seemingly weak position of supporting housing proposals alone against affected community members. A quantitative evaluation of public meetings reveals that traditional allies of developers, such as trade unions, are seldom present at public hearings.²² But, an analysis of public forums cannot show whether developers are, say, making backroom deals with public officials to push projects through the approval process or how much of the action takes place outside of public view more generally.

In the last analysis, we hope that future research tackles changing the way that local governments conduct public input for housing and other arenas. The system, as it is currently structured, biases outcomes in favor of homeowners with an entrenched interest in opposing change. Addressing the housing affordability crisis and other pressing issues of our time—like climate change—necessitates developing new tools for land use planning while maintaining democratically legitimate processes.

Political Power, 11 Interest Groups & Advocacy 189 (2022).

^{2.1} See e.g., Paavo Monkkonen & Michael Manville, Opposition to Development or to Developers? Experimental Evidence on Attitudes Toward New Housing, 41 J. of URB. AFF. 1123 (2019).

See Einstein, supra note 25.