

Partisan Polarization in Local Politics*

Justin de Benedictis-Kessner[†] Katherine Levine Einstein[‡] David M. Glick[§]
Maxwell Palmer[¶] Christopher S. Warshaw^{||}

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Abstract

A growing body of scholarship investigates the extent to which national partisan polarization filters down to the local level. There has been little evidence, however, on: (1) the size of the local partisan divide; (2) the extent to which it varies by policy issue; and (3) how these divides compare at the elite and the mass public levels. Using responses to questions about local policy preferences from nearly a decade of nationwide surveys of mayors and from 25,521 members of the public in 87 cities between 2020 and 2023, we uncover notable variation in local partisan polarization. We find substantial polarization across a number of local policy issue areas and less in others. Just as others have found at the national level, we find that elite partisan polarization is more substantial than it is among members of the public on nearly every policy issue for which we have directly comparable data. We also find, by using the subset of data for which we have mayors and their constituents answering identical questions, that mayors take positions aligned with their constituents' about 61% of the time. While Democratic mayors align with their Democratic constituents more than with their Republican ones, and Republican mayors do the opposite, the differences are modest against the background of polarization in America. Together, these results reaffirm the pre-eminence of partisanship in the formation of public opinion, challenge a traditional consensus that local politics is apartisan, and establish scope conditions on when partisanship might shape the policy outputs of local government.

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[†]Emma Bloomberg Associate Professor, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. jdbk@hks.harvard.edu.

[‡]Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Boston University. kleinst@bu.edu.

[§]Professor, Department of Political Science, Boston University. dmglick@bu.edu.

[¶]Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Boston University. mbpalmer@bu.edu.

^{||}Professor, McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University. chris.warshaw@georgetown.edu.

Introduction

Partisan polarization permeates seemingly all aspects of American politics. It makes the passage of federal legislation extraordinarily difficult (McCarty 2007, 2019), has led to growing divergence in state policymaking (Caughey, Warshaw and Xu 2017; Grumbach 2022; Hertel-Fernandez 2019). It also contributes to divides in the preferences of Democratic and Republican politicians (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2010), and politically engaged citizens (Abramowitz 2010). The wider public has largely followed suit (Caughey, Dunham and Warshaw 2018). Polarization among less engaged and informed individuals is often muted, though, relative to polarization among more engaged citizens and public officials (Hill and Tausanovitch 2015; Levendusky 2009; Levendusky and Malhotra 2016).

Most polarization research, however, focuses on national and state politics. We have comparatively little knowledge about the extent to which partisan divisions extend to local governments (Anzia 2021*b*). The existing local politics scholarship tends to focus on whether partisanship has *any* impact on policy outcomes. While a famous urban politics aphorism holds that there is “no Democratic or Republican way to clean up the streets,” there is ample evidence that Democratic and Republican cities (and liberal and conservative ones) do operate at least somewhat differently from each other (Einstein and Kogan 2016; Hajnal and Trounstein 2010; Schaffner, Rhodes and La Raja 2024; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014; Warshaw 2019).¹ For example, Democratic and liberal cities tend to spend more across a variety of policy areas (Einstein and Kogan 2016; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014).

Attitudes among the local public and local public officials similarly show evidence of some divisions along partisan lines. Public attitudes about local politics align with national partisan cleavages (Schaffner, Rhodes and La Raja 2024). Multiple studies have also identified significant ideological and partisan divides between local political leaders (Bucchianeri et al. 2021; Lee, Landgrave and Bansak 2023; Lucas and Armstrong 2021). Democratic and Republican mayors have

¹This quotation is often attributed to New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia (see, for example, <https://www.governing.com/now/the-pandemic-and-the-strengths-of-our-networked-governance.html>), but many mayors have echoed the same line or similar variations. Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter suggested that local governments deal with infrastructure in a non-partisan way: “There is no Democratic or Republican way of filling a pothole.” (<https://thehill.com/homenews/house/81587-dems-weigh-job-creation-cutting-deficit/>)

different views on welfare spending (Einstein and Glick 2018), racial issues (Einstein, Godinez Puig and Piston 2018), and climate action (Gerber 2013). When the partisanship of the mayor and their state government differs, mayors are significantly more likely to rate their relationships with their state governments negatively (Barber and Dynes 2023; Einstein and Glick 2017).

Overall, recent research shows that local politics are not immune from the partisan divides that permeate national ones (Schaffner, Rhodes and La Raja 2024; Warshaw 2019)—and the impact of national partisan politics on the local level may be growing (Hopkins 2018). On the other hand, partisanship and polarization are not as obviously, or thoroughly, dominant locally. Many of the studies find only modest causal effects of partisanship on policy outcomes (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016, 2020; de Benedictis-Kessner, Warshaw and Jones 2025; Ferreira and Gyourko 2009; Gerber and Hopkins 2011) or no effects at all in some issue areas (de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2025; Thompson 2020). More generally, we still have limited evidence about the full scope of local partisan cleavages. On what policy issues is polarization most prominent? How large are partisan divides on local issues? How does polarization about local issues among the mass public compare to polarization among local politicians? How much, if at all, does polarization in opinion affect the quality of representation in local government generally?

This paper focuses on these questions concerning issue opinion polarization in cities. In doing so, it contributes to an important area with limited existing evidence. In her review of the literature on party and ideology in local politics, Anzia (2021*a*) argues that there has been too little systematic evaluation of the issues on which national partisan divides manifest at the local level—and too little focus on local policy issues, in particular. Trounstein (2020) similarly notes the paucity of information about local preferences: “We know almost nothing systematic about the preferences of residents and elites over the kinds of decisions that *cities* have the power to make.” This gap is largely a consequence of data availability. Collecting the necessary data on local partisan polarization is difficult. Studying mass municipal public opinion requires surveys focused explicitly on local issues. Understanding local officials’ views requires surveys of hard-to-reach local leaders such as mayors or city councilors. Analyzing mass versus elite opinion not only requires both, but requires both with overlapping questions.

We combine public opinion data from surveys of city residents with data from a long running survey of mayors to learn more about the impact of partisanship on local policy preferences among the general public and political elites. Our public opinion data comes from 87 U.S. cities. It comprises 25,521 respondents' answers to a variety of questions about local policies and tradeoffs collected between 2020 and 2023. The mayoral opinion data come from 1,121 interviews of 491 different mayors representing 382 different U.S. cities with over 75,000 residents collected between 2014 and 2023. In all, we asked mayors 251 questions across an enormous array of policy areas. Some questions identified mayors' policy preferences (this paper's focus), while others centered on their perceptions of facts, policy mechanisms, and the extent of various challenges. Some questions were asked in more than one survey year allowing us to trace any changes in elite partisan cleavages.

Using these data, we assess partisanship in the public's and local leaders' preferences across a range of issues. We analyze how local attitude polarization varies by issue and how it varies between elites and the constituents they represent. We go further and compare polarization among mayors and among members of the public on issues for which we asked identical questions of both groups. Finally, we examine policy representation by focusing on the subset of the data for which we can match mayors' responses to their constituents' within the same city, and assess the degree of overall agreement on policy preferences as well as agreement with co-partisans relative to out-partisans.

Our findings fall into three categories. First, we show that there are substantial differences across issue areas in the extent to which Republican and Democratic mayors are polarized. In some policy areas, such as policing, elite partisan polarization is limited. In contrast, there are large partisan gaps in other policy areas such as race and identity or climate policy. Within policy areas, we also observe wide variation in the amount of polarization across different questions. For example, mayors were divided across party lines on some housing policies, such as whether to increase housing density, while they were more united on others such as whom to prioritize for subsidized housing.

Second we find that members of the public also exhibited polarized opinions about local policies, but these divides were nearly all smaller than they were among local leaders. While city residents were polarized on policies concerning race/identity and climate, the degree of this polarization was

smaller than among mayors. Policing is a notable exception to this pattern. Here, the mass public exhibits large partisan divides on nearly all policy questions—a contrast to mayors’ relatively united views.

Our third finding concerns partisan divides’ implications for representation. We calculate alignment in the preferences of politicians and the public within the same city, and show that it varies by the partisanship of the mayor and by which partisan subgroup we are considering. Mayors represent the policy views of their residents – but do so better for members of their own party in nearly all cities and across most policy issue areas.

Our results demonstrate that partisanship has firmly penetrated local politics. Mayors and their constituents are substantially divided along partisan lines in their opinions about important local policies. As a result, people in cities tend to see their views represented through aligned leaders who tend to match the partisanship of the majority of city residents. These findings show that partisanship is an important vehicle by which the public can attain policy representation even in the arena of local government.

Partisanship and Local Politics

While there has been considerable research, especially recently, into partisanship and local government, the literature remains limited compared to the extensive work focused on other levels. Among other things, this literature as a whole has lacked sufficiently detailed data on local government policies and policy preferences to distinguish where partisan divides manifest in local politics—and where they do not (Anzia 2021*a*).

In his seminal work on local politics, Peterson (1981) argues that cities face highly constrained policy choices due to economic competition from surrounding local governments and regulatory limitations from above. In Peterson’s framework, Democratic and Republican cities alike largely pursue developmental policies that enhance their local tax base. A growing body of political science scholarship questions this economically deterministic framework, suggesting that cities do in fact implement policies consistent with the ideological and partisan preferences of their residents and elected officials.

One prominent strand of research uses (often national) vote returns and public opinion measures to explore whether policies in Democratic (or liberal) cities differ from those in Republican (or conservative) ones (Einstein and Kogan 2016; Hajnal and Trounstein 2010; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). To the extent local government research has focused on partisanship, it has primarily focused on spending and revenue outcomes. The central aim of these studies is not to measure polarization, but to assess whether policies reflect differing general ideological preferences. These studies provide evidence that Democratic and Republican cities exhibit important differences across an array of fiscal policies. Another line of scholarship uses regression-discontinuity designs to causally identify the effect of politicians’ partisanship on outcomes (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016, 2020; Gerber and Hopkins 2011). The outcome variables of these studies are also typically spending and revenue data from the Census Bureau or fine-grained data on a single policy arena (de Benedictis-Kessner, Warshaw and Jones 2025; de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2025; Ferrer, Geyn and Thompson 2024).

The designs and data in many of these studies prevent scholars from being able to fully evaluate issue-level *variation* in local partisan divisions. For example, many studies’ independent variables rely on public opinion data summarizing ideological and partisan views on *national* political issues (Anzia 2021a; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). These survey data (or vote returns) can tell us how liberal or conservative (or Democratic or Republican) a particular locale’s residents are. They cannot, however, reveal on which *local government issues* there are larger (or smaller) partisan divides (Anzia 2021a).

Most of these studies also rely on fiscal policy data from the U.S. Census Bureau – either the Census of Governments (COG)² or the Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances (ALFIN)³ – as their dependent variables to measure policy outcomes. While these data are standardized and comparable across cities, the fiscal policy buckets within them are coarse. For example, the COG “health and welfare” category includes spending on health, hospitals, housing and community development, public welfare, social insurance administration, and Veterans’ services. This necessarily limits the extent to which scholars can use these data to fully measure the

²<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cog.html>

³<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/gov-finances.html>

scope of partisan polarization across a variety of policy areas.

Surveys, Local Politics, and Partisanship

Scholars who hope to understand partisan differences across more fine-grained policy areas have turned to surveys of the mass public and public officials (Anzia 2022; Barber and Dynes 2023; Einstein and Glick 2018; Gyourko, Saiz and Summers 2008; Jensen et al. 2021). Recent public opinion research by Schaffner, Rhodes and La Raja (2024) most directly tests the relationship between partisanship and a variety of local policy preferences. Using two surveys, they measure whether local policy attitudes are structured by liberal-conservative ideology, and the extent to which this local ideology corresponds with national political preferences. Though their primary focus is not on identifying variations across issues in the influence of partisanship on local policy preferences, Schaffner, Rhodes and La Raja (2024) uncover some intriguing differences. While most of the local policy areas they study map onto the left-right ideological divide, policies such as tax breaks for local businesses and increasing the number of local police officers do not correspond with a liberal-conservative ideological structure.

Another line of scholarship focuses on the preferences of public officials. While elite surveys cannot directly capture policy action, they enable researchers to conduct in-depth studies of leaders' preferences and perceptions in important policy areas such as racial equity, land use regulations, welfare spending, climate policy, and city-state relationships. Many of these are areas in which systematic city-level administrative policy data are not available. Elite surveys also enable researchers to better understand officials' perceptions of policy domains. For example, researchers might explore how Democratic and Republican mayors vary in their perceptions of racial inequality (Einstein, Godinez Puig and Piston 2018) or climate change (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2020). They might also explore views on new issues or ideas before they can manifest in administrative policy outcome data.

Elite survey data have also allowed scholars to explore the dimensions of policy preferences in local politics (Bucchianeri et al. 2021; Lee, Landgrave and Bansak 2022). Lee, Landgrave and Bansak (2022) survey subnational officials and uncover significant party sorting on topics including

refugee resettlement, gun control, marijuana legalization, and Medicaid. While this work has developed an important base of knowledge about local government officials' opinions on salient issues, it has largely left aside issues of *local* policies. To date, research by Bucchianeri et al. (2021) provides the most complete picture of the underlying ideological dimensions of local politics. Their survey evidence from officials across a dozen policy tradeoff questions shows that local politics is composed of two cleavages rooted in partisanship and market orientation to the provision of local services.

This paper complements previous work highlighting the dimensionality of opinion in local politics. Most notably, previous elite survey projects have aimed to extract a small number of latent cross-cutting ideological dimensions from policy tradeoff questions across issues. One of our goals is to document the variation in partisan divides by policy issue area among both elites and the mass public. Accordingly, we use a wide range of question types and question. We also analyze policy areas separate from each other rather than pooling them. For example, we are interested in both local officials' and the public's agreement with abstract goals, such as increasing housing density, and support for specific policy tools, such as the elimination of single-family zoning. Past work on local party sorting has focused on national policy topics, and focused less on the politics and polarization of opinions about key *local* policy issues such as land use, local transportation, and policing. Assessing attitudes and partisan sorting on these policies over which local politicians have significant control and influence is critical for any understanding of democratic representation in these important policy areas.

Unanswered Questions about Partisanship and Local Politics

We focus on important questions about whether the policy and political views of city residents and their leaders align with national partisan divides. That is, whether there are large gaps between the proportion of Democrats taking a particular position and the proportion of Republicans taking it. We describe the structure and variation in local attitude polarization on local issues and its implications for representation. We focus on two closely related types of variation: 1) differences **across issues** among leaders or the mass public, and 2) differences **within issues** between leaders

and the mass public. While this work is primarily descriptive, here we delineate some general expectations about these two types of difference, some factors that may shape them, and some examples of how they may manifest in different policy areas.

The first of these questions is how views differ by partisanship **across** issues and policy areas. There is good reason to expect that the level of partisan polarization will vary considerably across issue areas. Indeed, it would be surprising if it did. The extent of an **issue’s nationalization** is one factor that we expect to shape whether it is more or less polarized. Some local issues are likely more nationalized or map onto national partisan splits to a greater degree than others (Anzia 2021*a*; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). We should expect these issues to exhibit wider gaps locally.

Issues related to climate change and the environment would fit the “highly nationalized category,” for example. On the other hand, issues areas like housing and small business matters might be more localized. By this logic we would expect housing policy to operate differently—and be relatively less susceptible to partisan forces. Homeowners dominate local politics (Trounstine 2018), housing priorities may be shaped more by non-partisan economic incentives and self interest (Fischel 2001; Hankinson and de Benedictis-Kessner 2024), and more generally residents and especially homeowners may be more concerned about change in their neighborhood than they are about partisan positions (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019). Previous housing politics research shows that Republicans and Democrats do differ in their views on housing policy (de Benedictis-Kessner, Warshaw and Jones 2025; Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019; Hankinson 2018; Marble and Nall 2021), but that partisan gaps generally pale in comparison to gaps between homeowners and renters.⁴ By similar logic we would expect muted polarization on small business issues. Analogous to homeowners in the housing case, local business interests exert powerful influences in urban governing regimes (Logan and Molotch 1987; Stone 1989) and have local special priorities that likely take precedence over partisanship. This influence may lead local leaders and the general public to support policies that they perceive to be business-friendly across party lines. Recent survey

⁴Of course, it is also quite possible that some issues may be primarily local and not obviously related to differences between the national parties — but may still exhibit surprisingly polarized opinions. Recent research shows that policy areas in many housing policy domains are quite divided along liberal-conservative lines (Schaffner, Rhodes and La Raja 2024).

research highlights these limited ideological divisions (Schaffner, Rhodes and La Raja 2024).

We also explore variation **across levels** (mass vs. elite) **within** issue areas. Mayors' views may indeed be more polarized than many – including mayors themselves (Lucas 2021) – believe, but there is still reason to expect them to be less polarized than national politicians or the mass public. In some cases, this may be because the national issues or even the dimensions of national issues that most energize partisans do not map neatly to local policy or do not matter as much locally. It may also be that the urban-rural divide (Rodden 2018) mechanically suppresses elite partisan divides locally. In particular, it may just be very difficult for someone who looks like the median Republican member of Congress to be elected mayor even in a Republican-leaning city.

Organized special interests could also serve as a de-polarizing force in local politics, especially among elites. For example, given the political power of public sector unions over local politics and policy (Anzia 2011, 2022; Anzia and Trounstine 2025; Gaudette 2024), we might expect policy areas in which these unions are more active to exhibit less notable partisan differences in elite preferences. For instance, policing is an area in which strong union interests may pull mayors' policy preferences in the same direction irrespective of partisanship. This type of interest group activity may lead to more polarization among the public than among elites on similar issues.

Any differences in the degree of polarization between elites and the mass public may have implications for the quality of local representation. In particular, the degree of partisan polarization can affect, among other things, policy alignment: the degree to which public opinion matches policy outcomes. In places where elite polarization is significantly larger than that of the public, for example, we might expect local policy outcomes to look somewhat different than public preferences or for substantial groups of residents to see their preferences rarely represented.

Data

To examine these questions, we harness data collected from mayors and the mass public that measures their preferences on local policy issues.⁵

⁵We discuss the ethical treatment of our research participants in Appendix A. While both sets of surveys included questions about national policy preferences as well, here we focus on the responses of both population to questions about *local* policies. This enables us to best assess representation on the policy issues for which mayors are actually

Surveys of Mayors

We surveyed 491 mayors of cities over 75,000 every year from 2013 to 2024. In these surveys, we asked hundreds of questions about a range of policy areas, including housing, climate change, COVID-19, and racial inequality. Virtually all interviews were conducted in person or over the phone, allowing us to obtain mayors' direct views, and not those of staffers or others. In all years, our surveys had a response rate of greater than 20 percent, similar to other surveys of public officials (Anzia 2022; Giger and Pereira 2025; Lee, Landgrave and Bansak 2023), though slightly lower than the rates reported by Kertzer and Renshon (2022) and far above typical response rates for surveys of the mass public (Kennedy and Hartig 2019). Our sample of mayors consistently resembled the country as a whole both in terms of city- and individual-level demographics.⁶ Perhaps most importantly for our analysis, the partisan composition of our mayors was consistently similar to that of mayors nationwide (Gerber and Hopkins 2011). Across all years of survey data 68% of mayors were Democrats, 25% Republicans, and the remaining 7% were independents or belonged to a third party.

Over the ten years of the survey, we conducted 928 interviews with mayors, where we asked a variety of different questions about their policy preferences.⁷ These questions were primarily concentrated in the latter seven years of the survey. We removed any questions about the factual state of mayors' cities, such as items asking mayors how they planned to allocate grant dollars, or questions evaluating mayors' broader perceptions of the world, but instead focused on the questions asking their preferences on local policies.

Questions about policy preferences took a variety of forms, and we display the full text of all survey questions used in Appendix A. Often, we used tradeoff questions, which required mayors to make constrained choices about preferred policies. For example, we asked mayors in multiple years about their agreement with the statement: "Cities should play a strong role in reducing the effects of climate change, even if it means sacrificing revenues and/or expending financial resources."

responsible.

⁶See [redacted for anonymity] for more details on the demographic composition of survey participants by year.

⁷Often we asked mayors a series of short questions in a "grid" with a common answer scale. This allowed us to ask mayors about a wide variety of topics or policies efficiently.

Other times, we simply asked mayors whether or not they supported a particular policy in a given issue area. For example, as part of a grid on housing we asked mayors: “Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement,” for statements including “the city should encourage increasing housing density in popular, established neighborhoods,” “it would be better if housing prices in my city declined,” and “building new market-rate housing in my city will reduce the cost of housing for residents.”

We assigned each question into one or more of seven policy categories: climate (20), housing (19), economics (13), other (10), policing (9), transportation (9), and race/identity (6). Some questions were assigned to more than one category. For example, the question “How equitable is treatment by police for white people compared with Black people in your city?” from the 2020 and 2022 surveys would be categorized as both “race/identity” and “policing.”

All of the questions we include here are ordered multiple-choice questions where the responding mayor chooses a single answer. Most of our questions used a five-point scale, but in a few cases, scales with fewer options were also used. Our most commonly used scale was a five-point agreement scale, but alternatives such as “A lot; Some; A Little; None” were also used. In some cases, we asked the same prefatory question and then walked through a series of items that mayors assessed independently. For example, “how much do each of the following hinder your city’s ability to address homelessness” would be the prefatory question followed by items such as “land use and zoning,” “limited funding” and so forth. Because the respondents rated each item separately we treat each as a separate question.

Mass Public Surveys

To investigate similar policy preferences among members of the public, we use data from surveys of 25,521 individuals in 87 unique cities. These combined data come from two separate data collection efforts about the preferences of the mass public on local issues, each of which targeted local cities and counties across the country using demographic quotas.

The first of these data collection efforts comes from surveys of 10,065 individuals in 60 cities fielded in the months after local elections in November 2020, April 2021, November 2021, November

2022, and November 2023. We designed a sampling process to match the demographics of each local community based on estimates from the 2014-18 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.⁸ All of these survey samples were recruited via the online survey marketplace PureSpectrum, which, like other survey sample providers, recruits its respondents from primarily commercial marketing survey panels.

The second of these data collection efforts comes from surveys of 15,456 individuals in 57 cities fielded over the period between April-November 2022. We picked these 57 cities in order to specifically enable a match between the locations where we conducted our mass public surveys and the locations where we had interviewed mayors in preceding years. As with the mass public surveys conducted via PureSpectrum, for these surveys we similarly designed a sampling process to match the demographics of the cities where we gathered responses using the 2015-19 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.⁹ All of these survey samples were recruited via the online survey sample provider Dynata, which maintains a panel of survey respondents.

Figure 1 shows the breadth of these survey samples across all six waves of the surveys and both data collection efforts. The left panel shows the number of respondents in each wave of the survey, while the right panel shows the number of targeted cities in each wave.

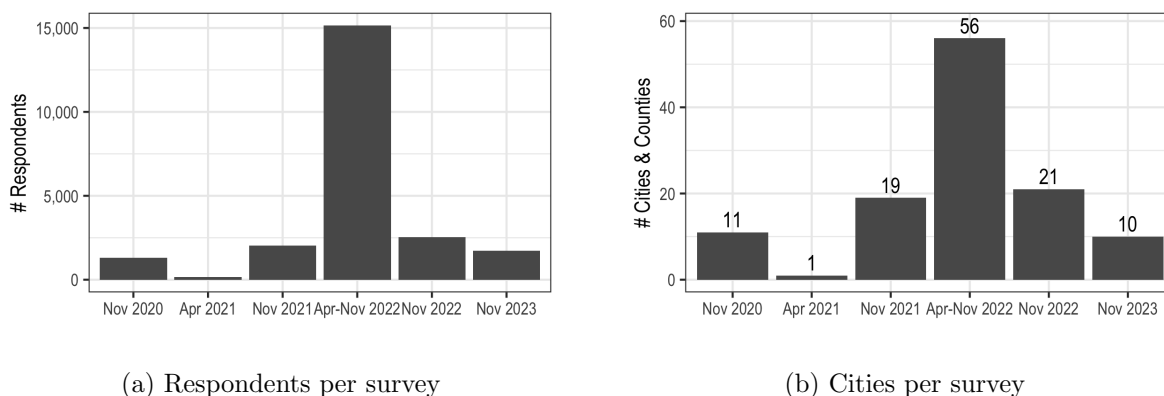


Figure 1: Survey sample size across waves

Across all these surveys, we asked a number of questions about respondents' personal char-

⁸To match our demographic targets for each city or county, we used quotas based on race, binned education, binned age, and gender.

⁹To match our demographic targets for the survey sample, we used quotas based on race, binned education, binned age, and gender of the population of the 57 cities overall.

acteristics, policy preferences, voting behavior, political knowledge, and evaluations of their local government. Principally for the questions that we examine in this paper, we asked all respondents a number of policy preference questions across several domains of local policymaking, including housing policy, climate policy, transportation, and policing.¹⁰ Across all 6 waves of our survey, we asked approximately 40 questions related to local government policies, as shown in Figure 2. As we detail below, some of these questions were identical to those asked of mayors.

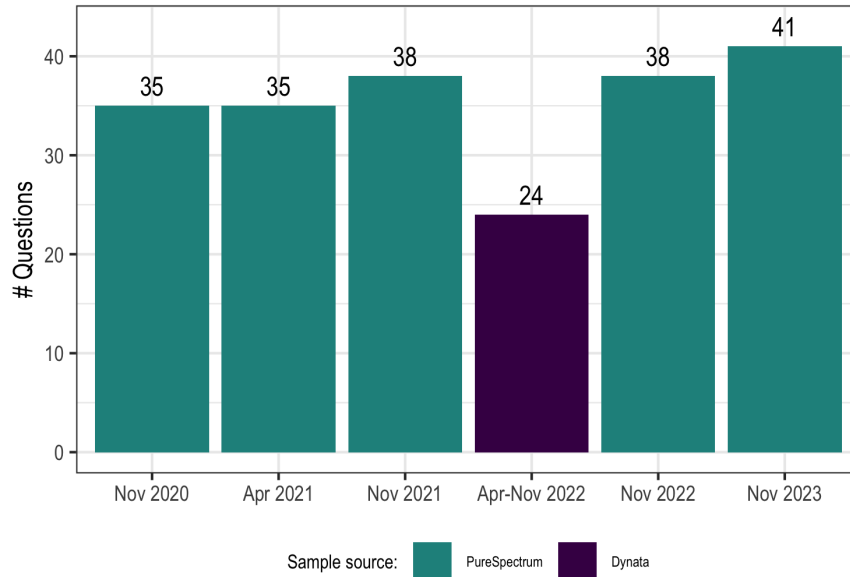


Figure 2: Survey questions asked across survey waves

Among the numerous demographic characteristics that we asked respondents to report, we also asked them which political party they most identified with in a standard two-question branching format. The first of these questions asked respondents “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a...” with response options of “Democrat,” “Republican,” “Independent,” “Other,” and “Not sure.” For those who reported that they were a Democrat or a Republican, we followed up with a second questions asking if they would call themselves a “Strong” or “Not very strong” member of that party, while for those who identified as an independent we followed up with a question asking “Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic or the Republican Party?” For the purposes of this paper, we classified all respondents who identified strongly, not very strongly, or simply

¹⁰In Appendix A we present the question wording for all questions on these surveys.

leaned towards one of the two major parties as partisans.

Methods

As all of the question scales were ordinal, regardless of the language on the scale or the number of points, we rescaled the ordinal values to binary measures of support or favor for the policy and used these rescaled variables for our primary analyses.¹¹

Given that we have 225 questions on mayoral and mass public political preferences, we take an inductive approach to evaluating our data for partisan differences. While our discussion above lays out some general expectations about potential variation in partisan gaps by issue and population, our primary goal is to let the data speak rather than test hypotheses. We should expect to find partisan differences in many of our questions, and with the number of policy areas about which we asked questions, it would not be surprising to find partisan differences in at least one category of questions.

We perform a t-test on the difference in responses by party for each question. We use these tests to evaluate the following research questions:

1. How often do Democratic and Republican mayors (members of the public) exhibit statistically and substantively significant differences in policy preferences?
2. How do the partisan differences on each question differ within and across different subject areas?

After conducting these analyses on the full set of mayors and members of the public we turn to the subset of cities for which we have responses from mayors and members of the public as well as the questions that were asked of both. We use these data to revisit polarization questions and turn to representation by focusing on how often mayors of each party align with their constituents of each party on identical survey items.

¹¹As the surveys address a wide number of topics, and questions are asked with different scales, a higher or lower value on the scale is not meaningful when making comparisons across questions.

Results

In this section, we discuss our findings. First, we discuss polarization of local policy preferences among mayors. Next, we discuss polarization in the mass public. Finally, we compare the two groups in the subset of cities and local policy preference questions for which we have answers from both mayors and their constituents.

Mayoral Polarization

To assess polarization among mayors who responded to our survey questions, we calculate the percentage of mayors from each party who responded in support or in favor of each local policy. These results reveal notable partisan gaps on some questions, though with some remarkable similarity in the views of respondents across party lines on others. For instance, one question asked mayors whether they agreed that fighting climate change must involve costly regulation on the private sector. 27% of Democratic mayors agreed with this position, while only 10% of Republican mayors did – a large gap of 18 percentage points.¹² In contrast, some other questions demonstrated very little partisan division. Another question asked mayors whether they agreed that their city should evaluate police efficacy using arrest and crime statistics. 75% of Democratic mayors and 79% of Republican mayors supported this – a negligible gap in opinion. We report the results of these calculations for each individual question on our survey of mayors in the Appendix in Figure A1, which plots levels of support among Republican and Democratic mayors by issue area.

To more systematically assess partisan divides in policy preferences, we calculate simple t-tests for the differences in means between Democratic and Republican mayors for every question in our sample. Figure 3 presents these differences for all questions by policy area for the mayors in our data. The horizontal axis displays the partisan difference in support or agreement, with each policy question plotted on the vertical axis. Each panel shows a different issue area. Of the 98 questions we asked about political preferences, we found statistically significant differences by party on 48 questions (55%).

There is also interesting variation in these partisan gaps across policy areas. At the top of each

¹²The difference is also statistically significant ($p = 0.04$).

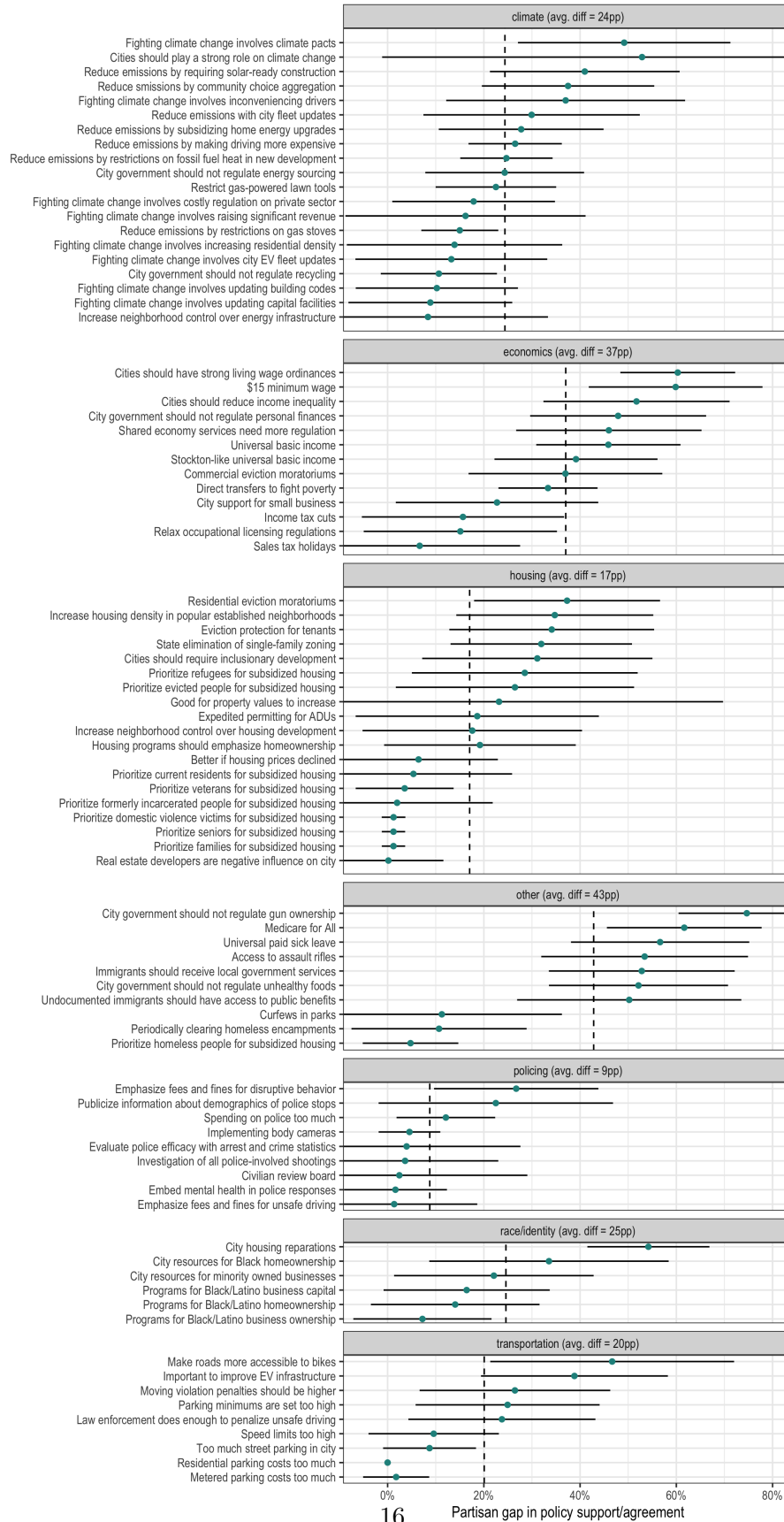


Figure 3: Estimated Mayoral Partisan Differences by Policy Area

panel we present the average of the absolute partisan gap in opinions for each issue area, which we also display as a vertical red line in each panel. For some, more nationalized policy areas – such as climate and race/identity – there are generally large partisan gaps in opinions, and for others – such as policing and criminal justice – there are much smaller partisan gaps among mayors.

Partisan gaps on housing policy fell in the middle. Overall, the average gap between Republican and Democratic mayors across our housing policy questions was 17 percentage points. But the gap between Democratic and Republican mayors varied substantially across different types of housing questions. For example, a question asking about developers’ influence on their city elicited negligible partisan differences. Previous research has shown that the public strongly distrusts developers which may generate widespread opposition to new housing projects (Broockman, Elmendorf and Kalla 2025; Marble and Nall 2021; Monkkonen and Manville 2019). However, mayors nearly universally *disagreed* with the statement that developers have a *negative* influence on their city. They did so at similar rates by party. In contrast, other questions had large partisan gaps, contra our expectations. Questions about an eviction protections, increasing density, or eliminating single-family zoning all exhibited partisan gaps of over 30 percentage points.

Mayors’ responses to transportation preference questions appear to split along partisan lines to varying degrees, with an average level of partisan disagreement similar to housing ones (15 percentage points). Mayors across party lines held similar views about the price of parking and the current safety of various groups of people in their city. They showed sharper divides on some (though not all) cycling issues. Mayors most strongly disagreed across partisan lines when asked their agreement with the statement: “Cities should make their roads more accessible to bicycles even if it means sacrificing driving lanes and/or parking.” Democratic mayors were significantly more likely to adopt a pro-cyclist stance. Democratic and Republican mayors were also divided about the extent to which their cities should be oriented towards cars, with Democratic mayors significantly more likely to describe their cities as currently over-prioritizing cars.

The partisan splits on survey questions about policing were much smaller – nine percentage points on average – than those in other policy areas. This is consistent with our expectations. Mayors from different parties held similar views (with statistically insignificant differences between

parties) on policies to require body cameras, evaluate police department efficacy based on arrest and crime statistics, independent investigations for all police related shootings, civilian review of complaints about police officers, embedding mental health professionals in police responses to emergencies, and whether cities should emphasize fees and fines for unsafe driving to maintain order. This is despite the fact that many of these questions were asked after the killing of Michael Brown in 2015 and after the killing of George Floyd in 2020 – both times when police civilian relations were highly contentious and salient.

Despite these small partisan gaps on policy questions relating to policing, the questions we asked about race and identity in general elicited disparate responses from Democratic and Republican mayors. On average, the partisan gap on questions asked of mayors about race and identity was 25 percentage points. Democratic and Republican mayors strongly disagreed with one another when asked their policy preferences on housing reparations, using city resources to increase Black homeownership, and business incentive programs targeted at non-white business owners.

Questions about climate policy also drew polarized responses among Democratic and Republican mayors (on average, 24 percentage points). There was a 52 percentage point gap on a question about whether “cities should play a strong role on climate change.” The divisions among mayors on climate change largely mirror polarization among elites at other levels of government (Bergquist and Warshaw 2020; Shipan and Lowry 2001).

While few questions show marked longitudinal shifts (perhaps, in part due to the relatively short time frame encompassed in these surveys), we observed significant changes in Republicans’ views on climate change and both parties’ views on policing. In both cases, we observed modest decreases in partisan polarization over time. In 2017, 28 percent of Republican mayors strongly disagreed that cities should address climate change, even if it meant sacrificing revenues or expending financial resources. By 2022, that number had declined to 19 percent, a nine percentage point change over five years. One of our policing questions showed an even sharper change over a two-year period. In 2020, 14 percent of Democrats and 73 percent of Republicans believed that treatment by the police was equitable for white people compared with Black people in their cities. Just two years later, 31 percent of Democrats and 79 percent of Republicans felt similarly, representing a 17 percentage

point shift for Democratic mayors and a six percentage point shift for Republican mayors.

Mass partisan polarization

How do these partisan differences among mayors compare to partisan divides among members of the public? We now assess whether members of the public from different parties reported different preferences for the various policy issues in our surveys. In the Appendix, Figure A2 shows the reported levels of support among members of the mass public who responded to our surveys. As with mayors, partisan members of the public reported vastly different levels of support on some policy questions, while smaller gaps in preferences on others.

In general, we find that the public is more polarized on more nationalized issues that divide the national parties. For instance, the policy with the largest amount of polarization among all of our survey questions asked whether local governments should require local businesses to take steps to mitigate climate change. 87% of Democratic respondents reported favoring or strongly favoring this policy, while only 52% of Republican respondents reported supporting the policy – a partisan gap of 35 percentage points.¹³

As with the mayors, we examine these partisan gaps with more rigor in Figure 4, which shows the gaps in policy support between Democratic and Republican respondents (with confidence intervals) along the horizontal axis, with survey questions plotted along the vertical axis, divided up by policy issue area into different panels. Across nearly all local government policy questions on our surveys, Democratic and Republican respondents reported statistically different levels of support (55 questions, or 93%).

The questions on which Democrats' and Republicans' opinions were statistically indistinguishable were few. The first of these was a binary question asking whether or not respondents believed housing programs should prioritize homeownership over renting.¹⁴ The second asked about whether a new housing development needs community-wide voter approval.¹⁵ The third concerned

¹³This difference is statistically significant ($p = 0.04$).

¹⁴The question read “Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: Housing programs should emphasize the goal of homeownership over renting” and there were five response options ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

¹⁵The question read “When a major new housing development is considered by a city government, do you think that it should have to be approved by voters or should the city government be able to approve it without a vote of

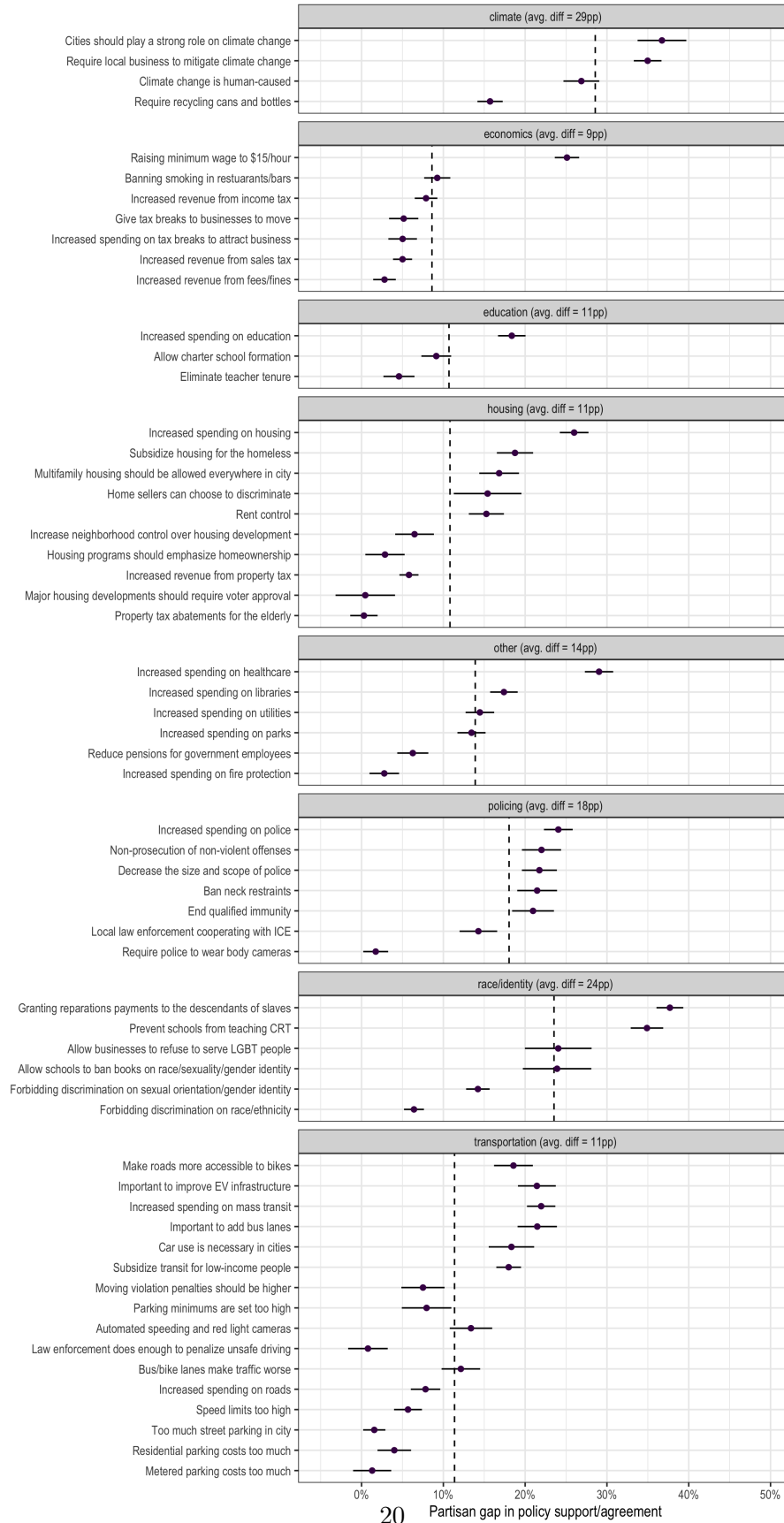


Figure 4: Estimated Mass Public Partisan Differences by Policy Area

a local government policy offering tax abatements to the elderly.¹⁶

The substantive significance of the gaps that were statistically significant varied, however. For instance, partisan polarization in levels of support for policies about local business and economics, shown in the second panel from the top of Figure 4, ranged between five and 10 percentage points. Yet for a number of questions in other policy areas, such as those about local government climate policy, race/identity, or policing, partisan gaps often exceeded 20 percentage points.

Do Polarized Local Elites Represent the Public?

These gaps in opinion among partisan groups of mayors and the public indicate some different patterns. At the same time, it is hard to make comparisons between substantive levels of polarization between elites and the mass public across the entire body of our multiple data collection efforts.

In this section, we zero in on how well representation functions at the local level by directly comparing opinions and polarization in those opinions among elites and the mass public. We do so in two ways. First, we focus directly on the most comparable data in our elite and mass public datasets: those identical questions that we asked of both mayors and members of the public. Second, we focus on within-city comparisons using only the cities for which we have responses from both the mayor and residents.

The first of these results – comparisons of opinion gaps on identical policy preference questions – are shown in Figure 5. Figure 5 plots the differences between Republican and Democratic levels of policy support and the associated confidence intervals from a t-test, both for mayors (turquoise points) and members of the public (purple points). We also plot the average polarization among mayors and the public with dashed vertical lines in the same respective colors. On this set of identical policy preference questions, mayors’ average responses were more polarized by party (26 percentage points) than members of the mass public (13 percentage points).

As with our grouped issue-area comparisons of polarization, there are some policy questions

the people?” and there were three response options, “Yes, voter approval required,” “No, city government approves without a vote,” and “Don’t know.”

¹⁶The question was part of a grid asking respondents “Do you favor or oppose the following possible actions by your local government:” and listed “Offering property tax abatements for elderly residents on fixed incomes” as one of the grid items, with five response options ranging from “strongly favor” to “strongly oppose” along with a “don’t know” option.

where it appears mayors are much more polarized than the public and some policies where levels of polarization are similar. For instance, both mayors and the public are highly polarized on the issues depicted towards the bottom of Figure 5 (e.g. climate policy, the car-oriented nature of cities, and electric vehicle infrastructure), but the public is much less polarized than mayors. On other policy questions depicted near the top of the figure, that tend toward local rather than national concerns (e.g. questions about parking in cities), mayors and the public display limited levels of polarization and little differences in their levels of polarization.

Mayors and Their Constituents' Responses

Our final set of analyses focuses on the subset of cities and questions for which we have answers from mayors and their constituents. Analyzing this more limited subset has a few key advantages that supplement the results above. It allows us to compare leaders and the mass public facing the same policy contexts. This is especially important given the variation in on-the-ground conditions and pre-existing policies across cities combined with the fact that some of the survey questions ask for responses relative to current base rates or practices. As importantly, focusing on this subset of the data enable us to more directly consider fundamental questions of representation and their links to underlying issue polarization.

We transition from examining polarization to examining representation by calculating how often a mayor's views align or agree with her constituents and how this varies across issue areas, levels of polarization, and cities. This examination of representation is somewhat limited in its ability to make normative claims. Because we lack an established empirical or theoretical baseline of the "right" level of policy agreement, we cannot make general claims about whether our evidence is consistent with high-quality representation. In addition, we only have measures of opinion for the subset of issues about which we asked questions in our surveys. This set was never intended to capture the full universe of municipal policy preferences or to capture them in the proportions that match some theoretically correct aggregate opinion.

We measure policy preference proximity in two ways (Caughey and Warshaw 2022, 123-124). First, we examine *policy agreement*. This measure is based on the percentage of respondents –

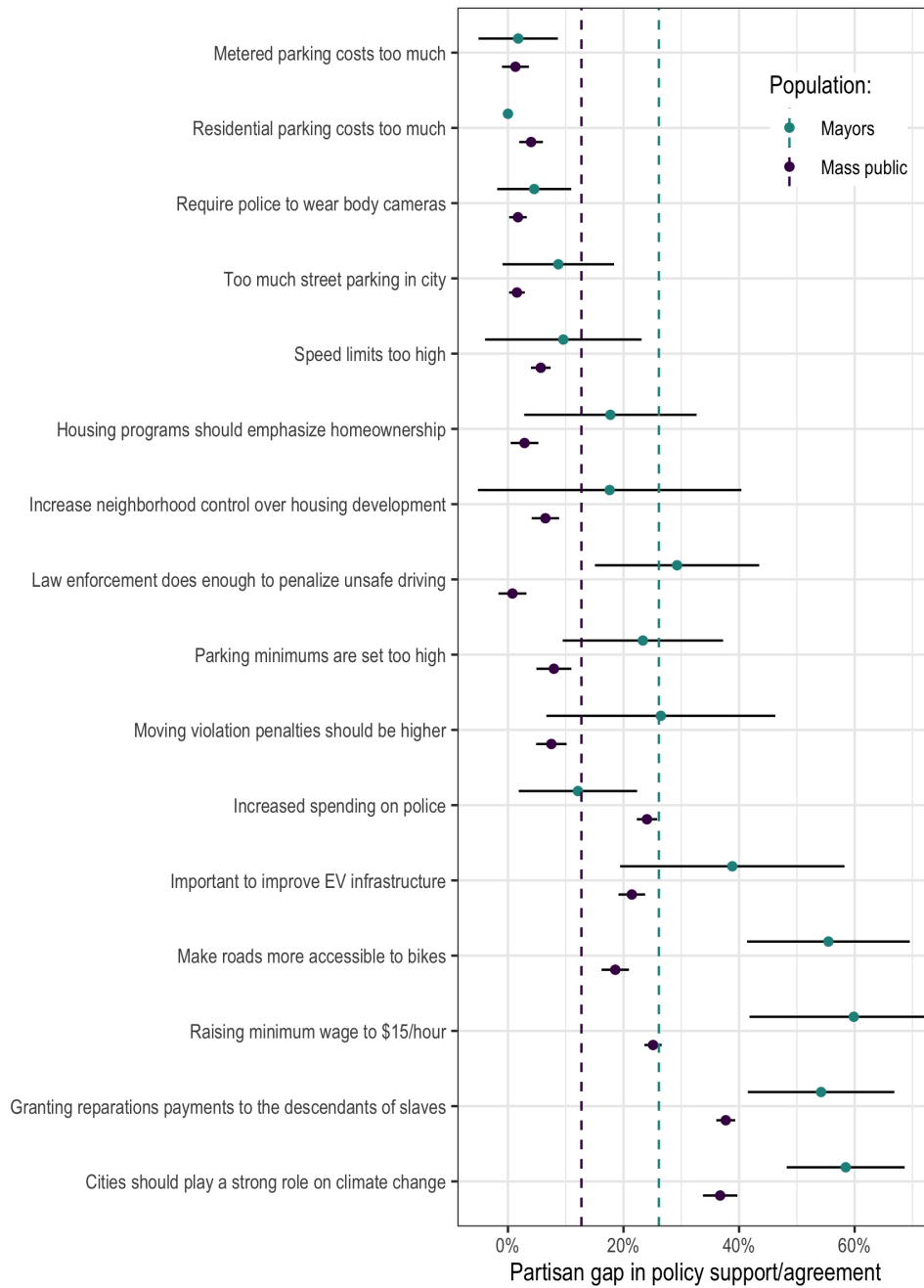


Figure 5: Partisan Differences in Matched Elite and Mass Public Survey Questions

either overall or a partisan subset – in a city whose position that city’s mayor holds. For example, if 60 percent of a city’s Democrats take the “agree” position on a housing question and that city’s Democratic mayor takes the same position, we would say that the Democratic mayor holds a view that is in alignment or agreement with 60 percent of Democrats. If the question is not very polarized and 50 percent of Republicans respondents also hold that position, we would say that the Democratic mayor is in alignment or agreement with 50 percent of Republicans on that question. We then aggregate this measure of policy agreement across questions and cities. Second, we measure *congruence*, which is simply a binary indicator for whether a mayor agrees with the majority of people either overall or in a partisan subset (Lax and Phillips 2012).

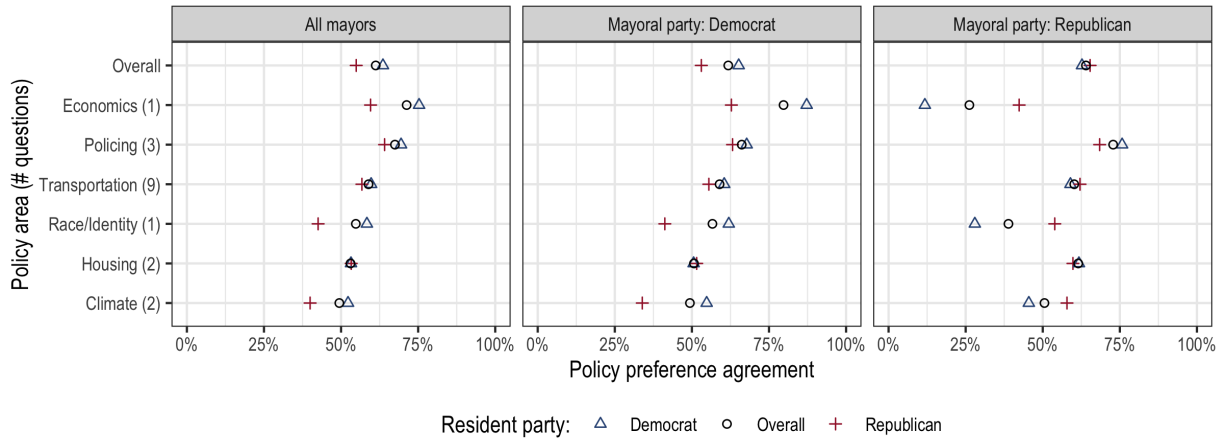
Mechanically, the underlying mass polarization and extremity of mass opinions feeds into these measures of representation. If the public is perfectly polarized and extreme in its opinions (i.e. all Democrats report preferences at one end of the spectrum and all Republican’s report opinions at the opposite end), then a mayor can either be aligned with all of her co-partisans and none of the members of the opposing party, or none of her co-partisans and all of the members of the opposing party.

Figure 6 shows the aggregate partisan representation overall (the top points in each panel) and by issue area for all mayors (left panel), Democratic mayors (middle panel) and Republican mayors (right panel), for all residents (black open circles) and broken down by residents’ partisanship (blue triangles for Democrats and red crosses for Republicans). It includes all questions and observations from cities in which we have data from both mayors and their constituents.¹⁷ The top panel focuses on policy agreement, while the bottom panel focuses on policy congruence.

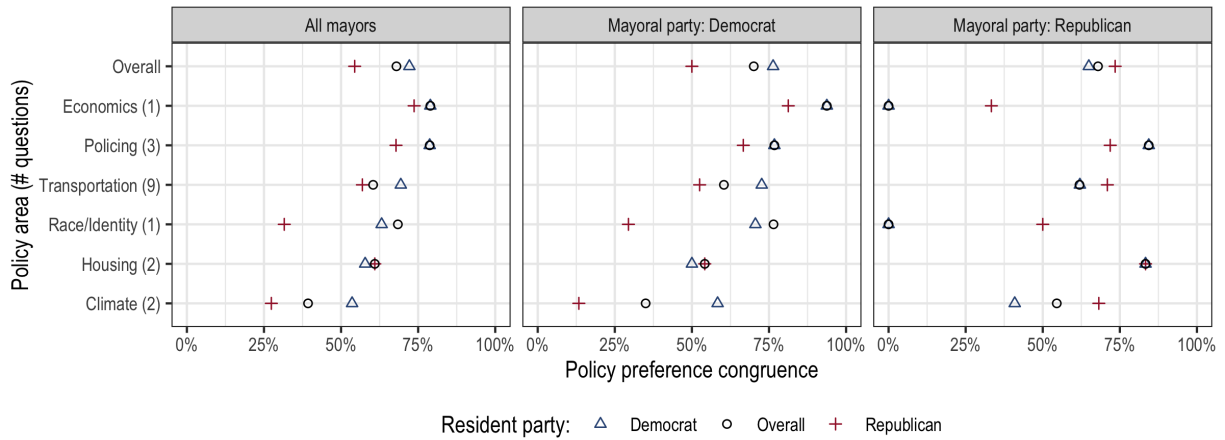
Averaging across parties and questions, we find that mayors agree with about 61% of their constituents.¹⁸ Moreover, they are congruent with majorities of their constituents about 68% of

¹⁷For presentational purposes, we do not separately display data from the two cities in our merged data which had mayors who did not identify with either of the two major political parties.

¹⁸We calculate this quantity (agreement) by first calculating the percent of the population within each city that a mayor agrees with for each question within each city, then average that question-level agreement within each issue area within each city to get the average city-issue-level agreement, and average that city-issue-level agreement across issues within each city to get the average city-level agreement, and finally average that city-level agreement across cities to get total agreement. If we average policy agreement across individual questions (agnostic of issue area) within city rather than across questions within issue area and then across issue areas, we find that mayors agree with 63% of their publics on average.



(a) Policy Agreement in Matched Elite and Mass Public Survey Questions



(b) Policy Congruence with Majorities in Matched Elite and Mass Public Survey Questions

Figure 6: Policy Proximity (agreement and congruence) in Matched Elite and Mass Public Survey Questions

the time.¹⁹ There have not been many prior studies on proximity between elected officials and the mass public on individual issues at other levels of government in the United States. One recent study, however, finds that state legislators are congruent with the majority of the public's views (as expressed on ballot initiatives) about 66% of the time (Matsusaka 2026). In addition, the level of policy agreement and congruence we find between mayors and the public is similar to, though perhaps slightly lower than, the level of agreement between the mass public and policy outputs observed in state governments (Caughey and Warshaw 2022; Lax and Phillips 2012). These comparisons suggest that representation in city governments is working roughly as well as representation at the state and federal levels.

We also find that heterogeneity in the degree with which mayors' views are more likely to reflect the opinions of their party rather than the opposing party varies across issues, largely in line with the level of polarization in opinions. On economic, climate, and race/identity issues, for instance, Democratic mayors are much closer to the views of Democrats in the public than Republicans (and conversely for Republican mayors). For policing and transportation, however, the level of policy proximity with their constituents is relatively similar across mayors of different parties.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis of the partisan divide in opinions about local policies reveals striking variation in the extent to which Democrats and Republicans differ in their policy views at both the elite and mass public levels. At the elite level (among mayors), there is stark division between parties in policy preferences on climate and race/identity. In some arenas, including some aspects of housing and transportation policy, there is a more moderate degree of division between Democratic and Republican mayors' views. And in yet other areas, such as policing, the divide between parties is minimal, with members of each political party fairly similar in their policy views. While the overall

¹⁹We calculate congruence by first calculating the percent of the population within their city that a mayor agrees with (agreement) for each question within each city, then calculate congruence as the number of those questions for which agreement is greater than 50% to get question-level congruence within each city. We then average that question-level congruence within each issue area within each city to get the average city-issue-level congruence, and average that city-issue-level congruence across issues within each city to get the average city-level congruence, and finally average that city-level congruence across cities to get total congruence.

partisan divide is likely not as pervasive as it is among national political leaders, there do appear to be Democratic and Republican ways to approach many areas of urban policy.

Partisans in the mass public were also divided on many local issue areas including climate policy, race/identity, and policing. On others, polarization in the mass public was far less substantial. Across most policy areas, the partisan divisions among the public were smaller than they were among mayors. This pattern holds when we narrow the focus to the subset of questions where we ask mayors and the public the same questions about the same policies: mayors are more polarized across party lines than members of the public.

We also assess policy representation, the degree to which mayors represent the views of their constituents and hold the majoritarian position, by using the subset of the data in which we can compare mayors and public respondents in the same cities. Overall, we find that mayors' views agree with about 61% of the public in their cities. They are congruent with the majority of the public about 68% of the time. These figures are similar to the levels of policy proximity at other levels of government. We also find that mayors tend to be more congruent with the views of their own partisans on more polarized issues. But there is little difference in representation across parties on less polarized issues.

Our findings have several implications for both scholarly and public debates about the role of partisanship and representation, especially in local politics. First, the degree of polarization that we observe among mayors means that Democratic and Republican cities will likely approach some of the most pressing policy challenges of today, like climate change, in different ways. While our paper does not attempt to measure the policy consequences of these partisan views, previous scholarship has shown that mayoral partisanship is causally linked with policy outcomes in at least some domains. There is some variation in mayoral power depending upon city institutional structure, and institutions themselves shape how elite partisan identities translate into policy outcomes (Bucchianeri 2020). Nonetheless, in many cities, mayors influence a number of important city functions. They control which staff get hired, which policies are prioritized in city long-range planning, and how priorities are communicated to constituents (Anzia 2021*a*). Local leaders are, of course, limited by the many fiscal and regulatory constraints that buffet cities (Peterson 1981). Nonethe-

less, a growing body of work shows that local elections—and the leaders they select—matter to policy outcomes. Our research provides guidance on which policy areas we might expect mayoral partisanship to be most consequential.

Our findings also highlight the value of comparing different levels of government. Federal policy is highly divided by partisanship (Lee 2015). Recent research on state government shows that state policies are both increasingly variable and coupled with partisanship (Caughey, Warshaw and Xu 2017; Grumbach 2018). Our initial analysis of local elite survey data suggests that, while some of these partisan dynamics permeate the local level, their effects may be more varied and at times more muted.

One important limitation of this body of research is that, because cities in the United States and elsewhere tend to be more liberal than rural areas (Borwein et al. 2025; Rodden 2018), it is not possible to observe how mayors, or other city leaders with consequential powers, from the most right-leaning parts of the country think or behave; there are simply no cities over 75,000 that are as conservative as the most right-leaning national congressional districts. In many respects, this makes the size of the partisan divide we observe on some questions all the more striking. We find real differences between Democratic mayors and the subset of Republicans who win elections in dense, or at least somewhat dense, places.

Nevertheless, this compositional difference between cities and national political districts makes it challenging to directly compare the policy preferences of national and local politicians. Moreover, we do not have equivalent survey questions of state or national legislators, again limiting our ability to make direct comparisons across different types of public officials.

Still, cities over 75,000 are home to 33 percent of the population of the United States. The politics of these communities—and the extent to which partisanship shapes those politics—affects the day-to-day lives of millions of Americans. Prior research has yielded surprisingly little insight into the extent to which partisanship permeates decision-making – both at the elite and mass levels – in these communities. By providing a partisan mapping of local officials’ and the local public’s preferences, this study represents an important step in documenting how a nationalized political environment filters down to the local level.

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Supplementary Appendix for
“Partisan Polarization in Local Politics”

A Survey administration and question wording

Throughout our survey work with both mayors and members of the public, we sought to preserve the dignity of the human subjects who participated in our research and we adhered to general disciplinary and institutional guidelines for ethical treatment of research subjects. We obtained informed and voluntary agreement to participate from all survey participants via an online or verbal consent form. No participants for our surveys were directly paid by the researchers, and we did not target our surveys towards any group of vulnerable subjects. We took care to ensure our survey participant pools were diverse along demographic and geographic lines, as discussed in the main body of the manuscript, in order to match the demographics of our target universe of participants. As such, we do not consider our research as differentially benefiting or harming particular groups.

A.1 Survey of mayors

1. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: Cities should try to reduce income inequality, even if doing so comes at the expense of businesses and/or wealthy residents. [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2014)
2. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: It is good for a neighborhood when it experiences rising property values, even if it means that some current residents might have to move out. [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2014)
3. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: Cities should play a strong role in reducing the effects of climate change, even if it means sacrificing revenues and/or expending financial resources. [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2014)
4. Please indicate your support for implementing or maintaining the following policing policies in your community. [Strongly opposed; Opposed; Supportive; Strongly supportive] (2015)

- Body cameras
 - Civilian review board for all serious complaints about police officers
 - Evaluating police department efficacy based on arrest and crime statistics
 - Independent investigations for all police-related shootings
 - Publicizing information about stops, arrests, and reported crime aggregated by demographics
5. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: Cities should require developers to include more affordable housing in new projects even if doing so deters some new development. [Strongly disagree; Disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Agree; Strongly agree] (2015)
6. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: Cities should make their roads more accessible to bicycles even if it means sacrificing driving lanes and/or parking. [Strongly disagree; Disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Agree; Strongly agree] (2015)
7. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: Cities should play a strong role in reducing the effects of climate change, even if it means sacrificing revenues and/or expending financial resources. [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2017)
8. In recent years, many mayors have pledged to fight climate change at the municipal level. A serious and sustained effort to make a meaningful impact in my city would require... [Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree] (2017)
- Raising or reallocating significant financial resources
 - Inconveniencing some cars and drivers
 - Increasing residential density and upzoning existing neighborhoods
 - Updating municipal facilities and other capital

- Updating building codes
 - Replacing municipal vehicles with electrics/hybrids
 - Instituting new costly regulations on the private sector
 - Making binding commitments to climate pacts or networks
9. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: city government should stay out of shaping individuals' decisions around the following issues: [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2018)
- Consumption of unhealthy foods
 - Personal finances
 - Gun ownership
 - Recycling and composting
 - Energy sourcing
10. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: Cities should have strong living wage ordinances, even if it means that some businesses may locate elsewhere or hire fewer people. [Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree] (2018)
11. The city should encourage increasing housing density in popular, established neighborhoods. [Agree; Neither; Disagree] (2018)
12. It would be better if housing prices in my city declined. [Agree; Neither; Disagree] (2018)
13. Immigrants should receive local government services, regardless of legal status. [Agree; Neither; Disagree] (2018)
14. Sharing economy services like Uber and Air BnB need greater regulation. [Agree; Neither; Disagree] (2018)

15. Marijuana should be legalized, regulated, and legally sold in your city. [Agree; Neither; Disagree] (2018)
16. Do you think penalties for moving traffic violations in your city should be stronger? [Yes; No; Not sure] (2019)
17. Do you think speed limits in your city are generally set at the right level, are too high, or are too low? [Right level; Too high; Too low; Not sure] (2019)
18. Do you think the following in your city cost too much, too little, or are priced at the right level? [Right level; Too much; Too little; Not sure] (2019)
 - Residential street parking
 - Metered street parking
19. In general, do you think there is too much street parking available in your city, too little, or is it at the right level? [Right level; Too much; Too little; Not sure] (2019)
20. Some cities require new residential developments to provide minimum levels of parking. If your city has a parking minimum, do you think it is set too high, too low, or is it at the right level? [Right level; Too high; Too low; Not sure; Not applicable] (2019)
21. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement. It is important to improve my city's electric vehicle infrastructure, even if it means less parking for non-electric vehicles. [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2019)
22. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: Law enforcement in my city is doing enough to penalize unsafe driving. [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2019)
23. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: Cities should make their roads more accessible to bicycles even if it means sacrificing driving lanes and/or parking. [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2019)

24. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: Cities should play a strong role in reducing the effects of climate change, even if it means sacrificing revenues and/or expending financial resources. [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2019)
25. Policymakers have debated a variety of social policy programs to support those suffering the economic consequences of COVID-19. How strongly would you support the implementation of the following policies at the state or federal levels? [Strongly support; Support; Neutral; Oppose; Strongly oppose] (2020)
- Residential eviction moratoriums
 - Commercial eviction moratoriums
 - Permanent relaxing of occupational licensing regulations
 - Income tax cuts
 - Sales tax holidays
 - Universal basic income
 - \$15 minimum wage
 - Universal paid sick leave
 - Medicare for All
26. COVID-19 has led to debates about how to administer elections. Do you support or oppose voting by mail? This means that instead of going to the polls in-person on Election Day, voters would fill out their ballot at home and then mail it in. [Support; Oppose] (2020)
27. In my city, the police department's share of last year's budget was: [Far too big; Too big; About right; Too small; Far too small; Na] (2020)
28. How supportive are you of implementing the following programs to reduce the racial wealth gap in your city? [Strongly supportive; Supportive; Neutral; Opposed; Strongly opposed] (2021)

- Targeted programs to increase Black and Latino homeownership
 - Targeted programs to increase Black and Latino small business ownership
 - Targeted programs to improve access to capital for Black and Latino small business owners
29. Evanston, IL recently piloted a reparations program for Black city residents providing \$25,000 in homeownership assistance per individual/family. How supportive would you be of a similar program in your city? [Strongly supportive; Supportive; Neutral; Opposed; Strongly opposed] (2021)
30. Stockton, CA recently piloted a Universal Basic Income program providing a group of low-income residents \$500 per month for two years. How supportive would you be of a similar program in your city? [Strongly supportive; Supportive; Neutral; Opposed; Strongly opposed] (2021)
31. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: The COVID-19 pandemic reveals the need for significant changes in how my city supports small businesses going forward. (If you agree, please briefly tell us what changes you would like to see). [Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree] (2021)
32. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement. [Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree] (2021)
- The city should encourage increasing housing density in popular, established neighborhoods.
 - It would be better if housing prices in my city declined.
 - In general, real estate developers are a negative influence on my city.
 - Housing programs should emphasize the goal of homeownership over renting.
 - It is important to provide strong protections for tenants facing eviction even if it is costly for landlords.

33. For each of the following potential local actions to reduce emissions, which is closest to your position? [Do not support; Somewhat support; Strongly support] (2022)

- Restrictions on gas stoves in private homes
- Restrictions on gas or oil heat in new private construction
- Requirements that new construction be solar-ready
- Using local government money to subsidize private home energy upgrades
- Restrictions on gas powered lawn tools
- Community choice aggregation
- Replacing municipal vehicles with more fuel efficient versions before their natural lifecycle ends
- Actions to make driving more expensive (e.g., congestion fees; parking prices)

34. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: Cities should play a strong role in reducing the effects of climate change, even if it means sacrificing revenues and/or expending financial resources. [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2022)

35. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement: Local government should fight poverty by directly transferring money into the pockets of people in need even if it means less money is available to address poverty in other ways. [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2022)

36. Publicly subsidized housing in many cities is oversubscribed. Regardless of your city's current preference system, who should be prioritized for publicly subsidized housing? [Should receive high priority; Should receive some priority; Should not receive priority; Na, public housing should not have a priority system.] (2022)

- Seniors
- Current City Residents

- Homeless People
- Families with children
- Formerly incarcerated people
- People with a history of eviction
- Victims of domestic violence
- Veterans
- Refugees

37. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with each statement. [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree; This would not be legal in my city] (2022)

- Some resources in my city should be reserved for minority-owned small businesses.
- Some resources in my city should be reserved to support homeownership programs for Black residents.
- Undocumented immigrants should have access to local public benefits programs.

38. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with each statement. [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2022)

- Civilians should be unable to acquire assault rifles under any circumstances.

39. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statements. Part of a city's strategy to maintain public order should include: [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree; This is not legal in my city.] (2023)

- Periodically clearing homeless encampments
- Emphasizing and prioritizing fines, fees, and citations for disruptive behavior in public spaces, such as urinating in public parks or drug use on mass transportation
- Emphasizing and prioritizing fines, fees, and citations for unsafe driving.

- Embedding mental health professionals in police responses
 - Using curfews and restricting use of public spaces, such as parks, after sundown
40. Oregon and Montana recently passed state legislation that required cities over a certain size (10,000 in Oregon and 5,000 in Montana) to eliminate single-family zoning and allow the development of duplexes by right. How supportive would you be of a similar policy in your state? [Strongly supportive; Supportive; Neutral; Opposed; Strongly opposed] (2023)
41. California and Oregon have recently passed state laws allowing property owners to construct Accessory Dwelling Units without going through a lengthy permitting process. How supportive would you be of a similar policy in your state? [Strongly supportive; Supportive; Neutral; Opposed; Strongly opposed] (2023)
42. Some cities require new residential developments to provide minimum levels of off-street parking. Do you believe your city's parking requirements are too high, too low, or at the right level? [Right level; Too high; Too low; Not sure; My city does not control parking requirements in new development] (2023)
43. Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statements: [Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree] (2023)
- Residents of a neighborhood should have more say over what housing gets built there than residents who live elsewhere in the city.
 - Residents of a neighborhood should have more say over what energy infrastructure (such as transmission lines or solar panels) gets built there than residents who live elsewhere in the city.
 - Law enforcement in my city is doing enough to penalize unsafe driving.
 - Housing programs should emphasize the goal of homeownership over renting.
 - It would be better if housing prices in my city declined.

A.2 Mass public surveys

1. Do you think that local government spending in these areas should be increased, decreased, or kept the same? [Response options: Increased; Kept the same; Decreased; Don't know]
 - (a) ... Education
 - (b) ... Mass transit, such as buses and trains
 - (c) ... Roads
 - (d) ... Housing
 - (e) ... Tax breaks to attract businesses
 - (f) ... Healthcare
 - (g) ... Parks and recreation
 - (h) ... Police
 - (i) ... Fire protection
 - (j) ... Libraries
 - (k) ... Utilities, such as water, sewers, and trash collection

2. Do you think the amount of money that the local government raises in these areas should be increased, decreased, or kept the same? [Response options: Increased; Kept the same; Decreased; Don't know]
 - (a) ... Property taxes
 - (b) ... Income taxes
 - (c) ... Sales taxes
 - (d) ... Fees and fines (such as parking or traffic tickets)

3. Do you favor or oppose the following possible actions by your local government: [Response options: Strongly favor; Favor; Oppose; Strongly oppose; Don't know]
 - (a) ... Declaring that local law enforcement will cooperate with federal immigration authorities
 - (b) ... Requiring police to wear body cameras
 - (c) ... Ending qualified immunity, the rule that protects law enforcement officers from

liability for their actions unless they clearly violate the law

- (d) ... Banning neck restraints by police officers
 - (e) ... Decreasing the size of the police force and the scope of their work [Nov. 2021-2023 only]
 - (f) ... Not prosecuting nonviolent offenses such as shoplifting, disorderly conduct, or driving without a license [Nov. 2021-2023 only]
4. Do you favor or oppose the following possible actions by your local government: [Response options: Strongly favor; Favor; Oppose; Strongly oppose; Don't know]
- (a) ... Limiting how much landlords can raise their tenants' rent each year
 - (b) ... Offering subsidized housing to the homeless
5. Which of the following statements about multifamily housing, such as apartment buildings, comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?
- Multifamily housing should be allowed everywhere in my city to revitalize neighborhoods and local economies
 - Multifamily housing should be allowed only in dense areas of my city to preserve the character of less populated neighborhoods
6. Do you favor or oppose the following possible actions by your local government: [Response options: Strongly favor; Favor; Oppose; Strongly oppose; Don't know]
- (a) ... Requiring local businesses to take steps to mitigate climate change
 - (b) ... Forbidding discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity
 - (c) ... Forbidding discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity
 - (d) ... Subsidizing public transportation for low-income people
 - (e) ... Banning smoking in bars and restaurants
 - (f) ... Requiring residents to recycle aluminum cans and glass bottles
 - (g) ... Reducing pensions for government employees
 - (h) ... Giving tax breaks to businesses that move to your town
 - (i) ... Preventing local schools from teaching about critical race theory [Nov 2021-2023 only]

Apr-Nov 2022 survey:

1. "Cities should play a strong role in reducing the effects of climate change, even if it means sacrificing revenues and/or expending financial resources." [Response options: Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree]
2. Which of the following statements about multifamily housing, such as apartment buildings, comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right?
 - Multifamily housing should be allowed everywhere in my city to revitalize neighborhoods and local economies
 - Multifamily housing should be allowed only in dense areas of my city to preserve the character of less populated neighborhoods
3. Do you favor or oppose the following possible actions by your local government: [Response options: Strongly favor; Favor; Oppose; Strongly oppose; Don't know]
 - (a) ... Limiting how much landlords can raise their tenants' rent each year
 - (b) ... Offering subsidized housing to the homeless
 - (c) ... Offering property tax abatements for elderly residents on fixed incomes
 - (d) ... Increasing neighborhood control over housing development
4. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: Housing programs should emphasize the goal of homeownership over renting. [Response options: Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree]
5. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: "My city is too oriented towards cars." [Response options: Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree]
6. How safe is travel in your city for the following groups?
 - (a) Mass transit riders
 - (b) Drivers
 - (c) Low income residents
 - (d) Children

- (e) Elderly people
 - (f) Pedestrians
 - (g) Persons with disabilities
 - (h) Cyclists
7. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Painted bicycle lanes are a safe alternative when physically separate bicycle lanes are too expensive.” [Response options: Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree]
 8. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: “It is important to improve my city’s electric vehicle infrastructure, even if it means less parking for non-electric vehicles.” [Response options: Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree]
 9. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Cities should make their roads more accessible to bicycles even if it means sacrificing driving lanes and/or parking.” [Response options: Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree]
 10. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: “It is important to improve my city’s bus system reliability with bus priority lanes, even if it means sacrificing driving lanes and/or parking.” [Response options: Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree]
 11. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Replacing car lanes with dedicated bike or bus lanes makes traffic worse.” [Response options: Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree]
 12. Some cities require new residential developments to provide minimum levels of parking. If your city has a parking minimum, do you think it is set too high, too low, or is it at the right level? [Response options: Too high; Right level; Too low; My city does not have a parking minimum; I don’t know]
 13. Do you think the following in [city] cost too much, too little, or are priced at the right level?

[Response options: Too little; Right level; Too much]

- (a) Metered street parking
- (b) Residential street parking

14. In general, do you think there is too much street parking available in your city, too little, or is it at the right level? [Response options: Too little; Right level; Too much]
15. Do you think speed limits in your city are generally set at the right level, are too high, or are too low? [Response options: Too high; Right level; Too low]
16. Do you think speed violations and red light violations should be enforced with automated cameras? [Response options: Yes; No; Not sure]
17. Do you think penalties for moving traffic violations in your city, such as speeding or running red lights, should be stronger? [Response options: Yes; No; Not sure]
18. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Law enforcement in my city is doing enough to penalize unsafe driving.” [Response options: Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree]
19. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statement: “My city’s streets are equally safe across different income and racial groups.” [Response options: Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree]
20. Some people feel that use of cars is problematic and should be decreased in favor of other modes of transportation in cities. Suppose these people are on one end of the scale, at point 1. Others think that car use is necessary in cities and should be available to anyone. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between. Where would you place YOURSELF on this scale? [Response options: Car use is problematic (1); 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; Car use is necessary (7)]
21. Do you favor or oppose the following possible actions by your local government: [Response options: Strongly favor; Favor; Oppose; Strongly oppose; Don’t know]
 - (a) ... Declaring that local law enforcement will cooperate with federal immigration authorities
 - (b) ... Requiring police to wear body cameras

- (c) ... Ending qualified immunity, the rule that protects law enforcement officers from liability for their actions unless they clearly violate the law
- (d) ... Banning neck restraints by police officers
- (e) ... Decreasing the size of the police force and the scope of their work
- (f) ... Not prosecuting nonviolent offenses such as shoplifting, disorderly conduct, or driving without a license

B Average opinions on individual issue questions

Figure A2 shows the reported levels of support across all policy questions among both Democratic survey respondents (designated by blue points) and Republican respondents (designated by red points), with each issue area in a separate panel. For a number of policy questions, partisans reported vastly different levels of support.



Figure A1: Partisan polarization across all policy preference questions among mayors, by issue

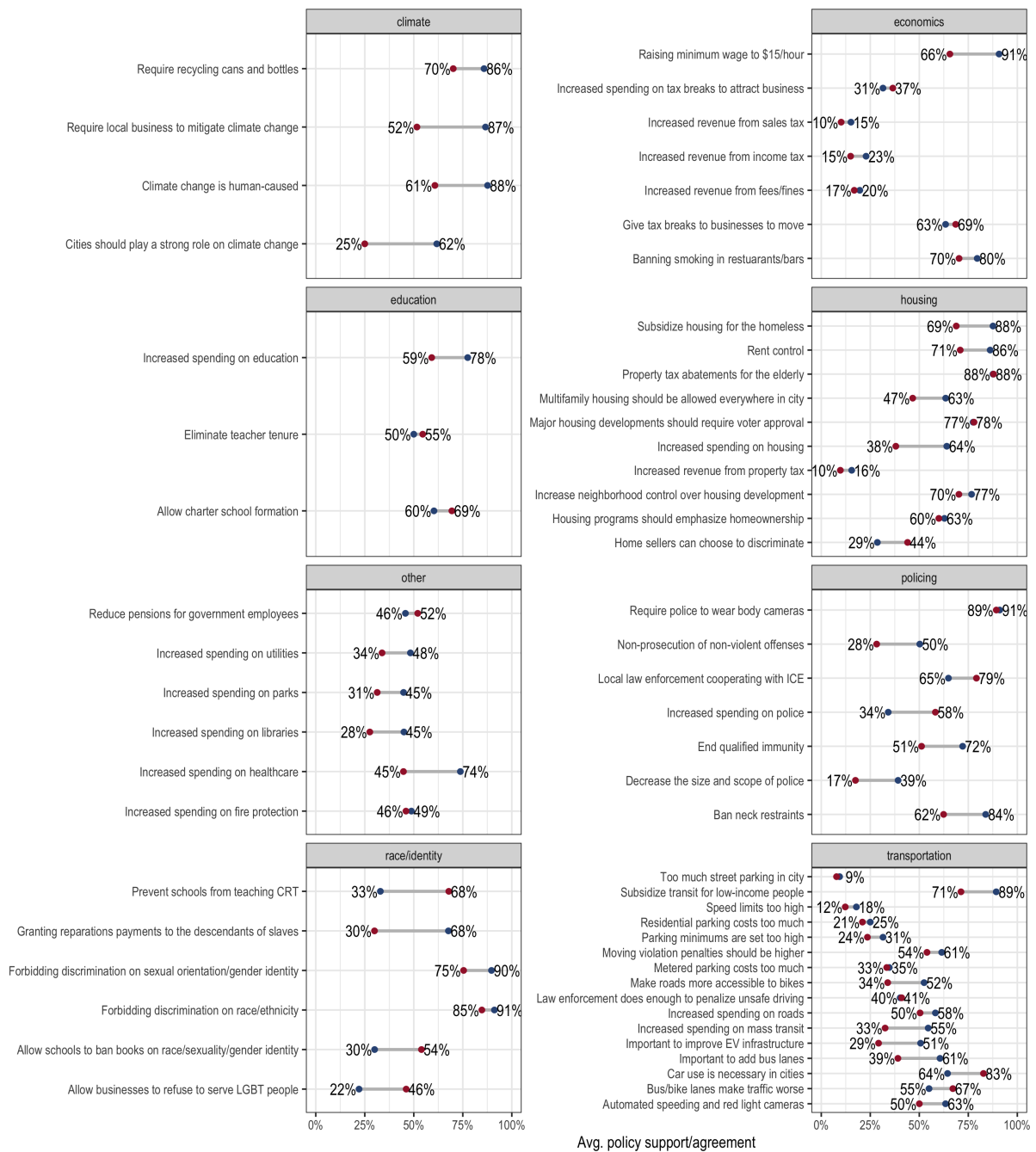


Figure A2: Partisan polarization across all policy preference questions among the mass public