"City Limits" of Representation: How Perceptions of Public Opinion and Fiscal Constraints Shape Local Policymakers' Housing Attitudes *

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Abstract

Cities in the United States face a housing affordability crisis, yet local policymakers have been slow to pass both supply-side and demand-side reforms. To what extent is this inaction driven by challenges to representation? Are the housing policy preferences of elected officials reflective of the preferences of their constituents? In an elite survey of local elected officials, we compare support for a pro-housing zoning reform, affordable housing tax incentives, and rent control against constituent preferences for the same policies. While elite support is responsive to public opinion, there is substantial bias which leads to mixed congruence and particularly poor representation on rent control. For one, elites significantly underestimate public support for all three housing reforms. Additionally, we examine if local legislators' are *internally responsive*, that is, responsive to their perceptions of public opinion. Internal responsiveness is also substantially biased, moderated in large part by the expected fiscal impact of each policy. Together, our findings suggest a biased dual responsiveness, wherein politicians are constrained by both fiscal incentives and public opinion but are also hampered by uneven participation in local politics.

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Many U.S. cities and towns face a housing affordability crisis. The cause of this crisis has been linked to regulations implemented by local politicians that restrict the supply of new housing, such as single-family zoning (Been, Ellen and O'Regan 2019; Glaeser, Gyourko and Saks 2005; Glaeser and Gyourko 2018). Many Americans have expressed growing discontent with housing affordability and want government to do something about it (Elmendorf, Nall and Oklobdzija 2025; Mendelberg, Novoa and Pietrzak 2025). Consequently, many housing *policies* which address affordability are very popular, including government-subsidized affordable housing, rent control, and even pro-supply zoning reforms (Elmendorf, Nall and Oklobdzija 2024; Horowitz and Kansal 2023).

Nevertheless, the implementation of many of these policies is rare.[1] What explains this disconnect between public preferences and policy outcomes? While many accounts center anti-housing public opinion, much of this opposition concerns individual development proposals near residents' homes (e.g., Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019; Hankinson 2018). In contrast, programmatic policy reforms tend to be more popular, as noted above, especially for affordable housing and demand-side policies. Thus, public opinion alone is insufficient in explaining citywide policy outcomes. An alternative explanation is a failure of representation stemming from the beliefs and decision-making processes of local elected officials.

Housing and land-use policy provides an ideal case to study local representation. First, these policies are a core power of local government,[2] and have profound consequences on affordability (Freemark 2023), homelessness (Colburn and Aldern 2022), segregation (Rothwell and Massey 2009), and access to local public goods (Trounstine 2016). Second, it is a policy domain where existing theories of local responsiveness yield conflicting predictions. On one hand, pluralist accounts of representation predict local officials are very responsive to voter preferences on this highly salient issue (Dahl 1961). Not only are residents highly active in voicing their intense preferences directly to local officials in face-to-face public hearings (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019; Sahn 2025), but voter attitudes often cut across partisan affiliations (Marble and Nall 2021), potentially allowing

[1] For example, from 2006 to 2018, local residential land use restrictions remained similarly strict and even tightened in large coastal markets (Gyourko, Hartley and Krimmel 2021). As of 2019, only 182 municipalities have some form of rent control (Rajasekaran, Treskon and Greene 2019), although part of this limited implementation is due to state preemption of local rent control. Finally, as of 2019, just 14% of localities had affordable housing requirements (International City/County Management Association 2019), and only 33% of localities reported providing any financial support or incentives for affordable housing as of 2010 (International City/County Management Association 2010).

[2] "Urban politics is above all the politics of land use" (Peterson 1981, p. 25).

for representation unencumbered by partisan polarization. On the other hand, local legislators are theorized to be limited in their ability to be responsive to public opinion due to federalism-related fiscal constraints (Peterson 1981; Tiebout 1956) or elite economic interests which cause officials' to prioritize growth over democratic responsiveness (Stone 1989; Logan and Molotch 1987).

In this study, we adjudicate between these competing theories and examine if local elected officials' housing and land-use policy positions are congruent with and/or responsive to public opinion. We argue that local representation is characterized by ***biased dual responsiveness***. Local elected officials are primarily responsive to two factors: (1) perceived public opinion and (2) fiscal considerations. First, local officials are responsive to public opinion, but as they perceive it. Local politics provides a limited information environment (Einstein, Glick and LeBlanc 2017), which may *bias* perceptions. We argue that various local organized interests, but especially older home owning residents who dominate local participation (Einstein et al. 2025; Sahn 2025), can skew local officials' perceptions of public opinion. Second, federalism-related constraints lead local officials to be highly sensitive to fiscal considerations (Peterson 1981). Consequently, local officials lead public opinion when they anticipate fiscal gains and lag it when they expect losses. For local policy congruence to occur, these two beliefs must be aligned. Our account synthesizes competing explanations of local representation and outlines the conditions for when we should expect congruence and when we should not.

Moreover, we expand on existing accounts of representation (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963), by articulating a framework to assess both ***external responsiveness***—the relationship between an officials' position and our estimate of their constituents' actual public opinion—and ***internal responsiveness***—the relationship between an officials' position and their perception of public opinion. Separating these two is critical because a gap between public opinion and policy outcomes can arise for two distinct reasons. The first is a problem of information: politician's information environment determines their perceptions of public opinion. The second is a problem of incentives and constraints: politicians may deliberately choose to depart from public opinion due to competing considerations. We argue both matter, extending existing works which examine these in isolation (e.g., Broockman and Skovron 2018; Caughey and Warshaw 2022; Einstein and Kogan 2016; Lax and Phillips 2012; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014).

To test the quality of local representation, we fielded an original online survey of just under

950 local elected officials, primarily Councilmembers or other local legislators (e.g. Commissioners, Trustees). We asked them how they would publicly cast a vote on three housing policies that address housing affordability: two supply-side policies (*zoning reform* to encourage more multifamily housing, and *affordable housing tax incentives*) and one demand-side policy (*rent control*). We also asked officials' about their perception of public support for each policy in their districts. We compare these responses to estimates of district-level public opinion, which we estimate using multilevel regression and poststratification (MRP) using responses from the 2024 Cooperative Election Study (CES) for the supply-side policies and a collection of surveys for rent-control. Thus, our evaluation of representation is based on a delegate model, whether legislators match constituents' stated preferences (Pitkin 1967).[3]

First, we measure policy congruence—the degree to which politicians' support for policies aligns with their constituents' support (Canes-Wrone 2015). For zoning reform, we find local officials are slightly *more* supportive than their constituents. For affordable housing tax incentives, local officials exhibit high levels of congruence, expressing support for the policy at a rate similar to the public. For rent control, support among elected officials substantially lags the high support found among constituents, leading to very low levels of policy congruence. These results suggest a mixed picture of representation in local housing policy.

To what extent do these results reflect officials' responsiveness to differences in public opinion? Next, we measure *external responsiveness*—the degree to which politician support changes with public opinion (Achen 1978; Matsusaka 2026). We find a strong and positive relationship for all three policies, evidence of responsiveness. However, we also find evidence of *biased* responsiveness, particularly for affordable housing tax incentives and rent control, where super-majorities of support are required for politicians' indifference.

One source of bias is misperceived of public opinion. We find politicians systematically underestimate public support for all three policy reforms by wide margins: ranging from a minimum of 13 points for zoning reform to a maximum of 39 points for rent control. We theorize that this misperception is largely due to unrepresentative contact (e.g., Broockman and Skovron 2018; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes 2019; Pereira 2021) stemming from highly active local

[3]Some legislators may instead respond to "latent opinion," anticipating how the public would react were the issue highly debated (Key 1961). For these legislators, our measure of misperception may capture anticipation rather than error.

residents. Consistent with this, we show that politicians' perceptions of public opinion is systematically closer to the opinions of older, homeowning voters: the attributes which predict participation in local politics, including meeting attendance (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019; Fischel 2001).

Another source of bias is the quality of *internal responsiveness*—the extent to which elected officials vote in line with their *perception* of public opinion. This removes the influence of misperceptions. As with external responsiveness, we find a strong and positive relationship for all three policies. Again, we find evidence of bias, but in the *opposite* direction: while legislators match (perceived) public opinion on rent control, they substantially *lead* (perceived) public opinion on zoning reform and affordable housing tax incentives. That is, local officials say they are willing to deliberately buck their perception of public opinion on these issues.

What explains biased internal responsiveness? We find that the expected fiscal impact of each policy substantially moderates internal responsiveness. Local officials who perceive fiscally positive impacts exhibit particularly biased internal responsiveness, and are willing to lead public opinion. The opposite is true for officials who perceive fiscal losses. Conversely, we find relatively small effects of self-reported influence of different interest groups (including business interests and unions) and local officials' descriptive characteristics, although these channels likely exert influence in other ways (e.g. through misperceptions).

Together, these results help explain the patterns in local representation we observe. Overwhelmingly budget positive fiscal expectations of zoning reform combined with only modest misperception of lower public opinion lead to unbiased external responsiveness and high congruence. But, this congruence is in part coincidental. Likewise, positive or neutral fiscal expectations for affordable housing tax incentives help offset a larger misperception of public opinion. Conversely, massively underestimated support for rent control combined with neutral to negative fiscal expectations leads officials to substantially lag the public in responsiveness, leading to low policy congruence.

This study provides three contributions to our understanding of representation and local politics. First, we show that congruence and external responsiveness, the typical measures of representation, occasionally mask what is otherwise *coincidental representation*. To address this, we develop a framework to measure and understand internal responsiveness. Second, we show how internal responsiveness can be biased by structural factors or incentives, such as fiscal considerations. This is especially true for local politics, which uniquely differs from national politics in that local officials

face hard fiscal constraints. Third, we adjudicate between various theories of local representation. We demonstrate how both perceived public opinion and fiscal considerations strongly drive local decision making. In doing so, we advance a synthesis of prior theories we refer to as ***biased dual responsiveness***. The confluence of perceived public opinion and the expected fiscal impact of policy determines the quality of local representation.

Local Representation and *Biased Dual Responsiveness*

A question at the core of democratic theory is whether elected officials represent the policy preferences of their constituents. A growing empirical literature finds that, on average, public policy responds to mass preferences of Americans at the state and local level (Caughey and Warshaw 2022; Einstein and Kogan 2016; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). However, responsiveness is often *biased*, with policies requiring super-majorities in public opinion for about even-chances of passage, which may lead to policy incongruence (Lax and Phillips 2012).

However, these models of representation typically examine how on policy reflects credible estimates public opinion. While this empirical literature generally finds alignment between mass preferences and enacted policies, it does not directly capture the intermediary role of elected officials in understanding and responding to public opinion. Whereas representation based on policy often lags public opinion due to the challenges of policymaking (Caughey and Warshaw 2022), representation based on elected officials' policy support should be more immediate. Moreover, there is a strong reason to believe elite models of responsiveness differ at the sub-national level. While politicians at higher levels of government have many signals of public opinion, including public opinion polling, state and local elected officials representing smaller geographies lack these tools and instead rely on information that may be more biased, such as neighborhood meetings or constituent contact (Dynes, Karpowitz and Monson 2021; Einstein, Glick and LeBlanc 2017).

To unpack this electoral connection, we examine public opinion and legislator attitudes in the context of housing policy. Cities and states exert substantial autonomy in their control over housing policy, from land-use regulations to subsidization. Furthermore, these policies have been identified as key contributors to the housing affordability crisis (Glaeser, Gyourko and Saks 2005; Glaeser and Gyourko 2018). Efforts to reform these policies often face strong political opposition, and

preferences over housing policy often cut across traditional party cleavages (Marble and Nall 2021). Thus, we are assessing a highly salient policy area where voters are likely to have intense preferences and opportunities to mobilize as groups (Dahl 1961), making this a strong test for the quality of local representation.

The first component of this connection is mass preferences towards housing policy. Surveys find that most voters support broader reforms to regulate the housing market and expand the supply of affordable housing (Elmendorf, Nall and Oklobdzija 2024; Mendelberg, Novoa and Pietrzak 2025). However, this support does not always extend to policies that would increase the supply of market-rate housing (Elmendorf, Nall and Oklobdzija 2024; cf. Horowitz and Kansal 2023), where support is often conditioned on the degree to which it increases density (Pietrzak and Mendelberg 2025). Likewise, voters often oppose changes in their immediate community, reflecting NIMBY ("not in my backyard") politics (Larsen and Nyholt 2024; Trounstine 2023). These NIMBY attitudes are often held by those most active in local politics, leading them to have a potentially out-sized influence on local policymaking (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019).

Despite their pride in knowing their constituents (Mayhew 1974), political elites have been found to often misperceive public opinion among their constituents. For example, Broockman and Skovron (2018) find that American state legislators overestimate the conservatism of their districts, possibly due to the higher levels of political contact from conservative constituents during the early 2010's. Thus, perceptions of opinion can be biased based on uneven levels of political participation. At the local level, such biases are found in higher turnout among white voters (Hajnal and Trounstine 2005), homeowners (Hall and Yoder 2022), and older residents (Einstein et al. 2025).

On housing policy, these factors overlap in the intense political mobilization of "neighborhood defenders," a group typically composed of older homeowners who oppose reforms which would change the feel of their communities via more housing development (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019). These neighborhood defenders not only vote at higher rates but also participate in non-voting settings, such as public hearings (Sahn 2025; Yoder 2020). Officials not only cite meeting comments as their primary source of information about public opinion Einstein, Glick and LeBlanc (2017), but are also responsive to meeting comments even after being informed of mass public opinion in their district (Dynes, Karpowitz and Monson 2021).

Public opinion is just one factor in electoral decision making. Elected officials also have to weigh

the considerations of interest groups, from the business community to non-profits and labor unions (Anzia 2022). These include institutions and champions of citywide growth interests (Logan and Molotch 1987), like large employers and hospitals who may see new workforce housing as critical for their long-term success. General fiscal constraints also weigh heavily. Policies leading to net costs over added tax revenue risk long-term debt, risking the exit of capital and residents (Tiebout 1956). These concerns are believed to weigh heavily on the minds of elected officials, limiting their responsiveness to public opinion and prioritizing citywide growth and fiscal objectives (Peterson 1981).

The nexus of these forces in local representation can be seen in research related to this study. Rivard and Lucas (2024) conducted similar research on a nationally representative survey of Canadians and 700 local elected officials. They found the policy preferences of elected officials to be largely aligned with the public. However, rather than finding greater congruence with homeowners or the highly educated, Rivard and Lucas (2024) find that politicians agree with more ideologically proximate constituents. These results paint a positive picture of representation, implying that the true obstacle to housing reform are the conflicts that occur due to hyper-local opposition and mobilization, not broader representation misalignment.

However, Rivard and Lucas (2024) leave open many questions. Is this representation due politicians accurately perceiving and acting in alignment with the preferences of their voters, or is it "coincidental" resulting from a confluence of factors unrelated to public opinion (Enns 2015)? Given that housing policy often crosses partisan cleavages in the United States, will the same moderating effect of ideology drive responsiveness in the U.S. context? Moreover, do stronger federalism-related fiscal constraints in the U.S. magnify the influence of budgetary concerns in local elected officials calculus? We address these open questions by testing various mechanisms underlying whether and why local elected officials are responsive to public opinion.

Design

To test for the quality of local representation, we conduct a survey of local officials where we ask multiple questions about three housing policies: zoning reform to build more multifamily housing, tax incentives for affordable housing, and rent control. Table 1 shows these policies and their

wordings.[4]

Table 1: Housing Policies

Policy	**Question Wording**
Zoning Reform	Relax zoning laws to allow for construction of more apartments and condos.
Affordable Housing Incentives	Expand local tax incentives to encourage developers to build homes for people who make less than half of the average income in your area.
Rent Control	Implement rent controls that significantly limit landlords from raising rents.

In the survey, we ask local officials to imagine that the three policies are proposed in their relevant legislative chambers, and ask how they would vote **publicly** on the record. We emphasize the publicity of the vote and also remind officials to evaluate policies based on "the political landscape and the needs of **your district**" to elicit strategic, political preferences rather than the politicians' personally held preferences over policies. Additionally, we ask this question first to elicit the most organic responses and avoid priming the effects of public opinion or other interests we ask about later. After asking about these vote stances, we then ask about the importance of five other interests: the general public, public meeting attendees, the municipal budget, business interests, and non-profits/unions. Elected officials were asked to rank these from most important to least when it comes to making decisions about housing policy. Officials were also provided an opportunity for open-ended comment. Following this, we asked officials what percent of the people living in your district would support the same three policies as before, using a sliding scale.[5] Then, we asked respondents to estimate the budgetary impact of each policy: net positive (increase revenues over

[4]Our survey asked the same questions about affordable housing as the 2024 CES, but switched "federal tax incentives" with "local tax incentives." We believe that respondents read this question as willingness to pay more in taxes overall to support affordable housing, whether it's local, state, or federal taxes. To verify this, we conducted an experiment on whether this word change affected public support for the policy, and found no differences in support. We wanted to provide elected officials with the level of taxes they have direct control over. It is not obvious the bias that would occur if the public had a polarizing attitudes about federal taxes versus local taxes for supporting affordable housing. The question on zoning reform is also slightly modified. The original wording is "Relax local zoning laws in your state to allow for construction of more apartments and condos." We drop "in your state" in the survey of local officials to focus attention on local reforms.

[5]The sliding scale ranged from 0 to 100. The default was "N/A" to avoid anchoring around a certain value, and officials had to move the scale to proceed in the survey.

costs), negative, or neutral. Finally, we asked respondents about their perceived salience of housing issues.

To measure congruence, responsiveness, and perceptions of public opinion, we compare responses for each of the policies to estimates of district level public opinion using MRP. To test for the moderating effects of competing influences on congruence and perceptions, we run subgroup analyses with the same comparisons based on responses given by a politician's rank ordering and budget expectations. We assess factors which predict incongruence using both objective data and other answers from the politician survey.

Elected Officials Survey Data

To identify local elected officials, we use data from KnowWho, which collects information on elected officials nationwide at multiple levels of government. As many local governments make housing and land-use decisions at the legislative level, we subset to officials which are identified as members of a municipal legislative branch. Consequently, the majority of our local elected officials are Councilmembers or Councilmembers serving as Mayor (90%), although errors in KnowWho records means we received some responses from current local executives (9%) or former legislators (¡1%). After cleaning and manually adding email addresses for missing records in larger cities, we subset our sample to those with an email address. Our total sampling frame was just over 17,000 municipal officials.[6]

We recruited local officials via email to take our survey hosted online via Qualtrics between November 20, 2025 and January 15, 2026 (n = 788, 5.8% response rate), then again between May 12, 2026 and June 15, 2026 (n = 160, 4.8% response rate).[7] Our respondents represent a diversity of municipalities across the United States. Figure A-1 shows the geographic coverage of our respondents, while Table A-2 documents the characteristics of our respondents compared the sampling frame. Based on voter file data, our sample is more Democratic leaning, whiter, more likely to have a college degree, and older than the entire KnowWho sampling frame, with deviations

[6]For councilmembers in larger cities (over 50,000 residents) with missing email addresses, we collected these by hand using municipal websites and social media, adding 1,200 additional emails. We removed entries where the title field provided indicated a non-legislative position (e.g. "Police Commissioner"), although we did not remove Mayors, as council-manager forms of government typically designate a member of City Council as Mayor, who retains legislative, rather than executive, duties.

[7]After asking the respondent to identify their title (e.g. current legislator, former legislator, staffer), we instructed staffers to hand over the survey to the current legislator and dropped those who did not.

of around .15 to .18 a standard deviation on these dimensions. However, our sample of legislators is representative of the municipal councils they sit on.[8] Even unweighted, our sample is more representative of the left-leaning municipalities where the housing crisis is more acute (Kahn 2011; Ternullo 2026), making them a particularly policy relevant sample. Reweighting respondents to match the full sampling frame changes our estimates of policy support, congruence, and agreement by at most 2.3 percentage points (Appendix A-2, Table D-7, Figure D-4).

Public Opinion Data and MRP Estimation

To estimate sub-national public opinion about housing policies, we rely on the technique called multilevel modeling with post-stratification (MRP). We rely on MRP as it substantially outperforms alternative methods (such as disaggregation), allowing us to estimate public opinion at small geographies (Ornstein 2023; Park, Gelman and Bafumi 2004). As we are interested in local representatives, we model these at the smallest geography possible given the constraints of both census and survey data, the ZIP code. Unlike disaggregation, MRP partially pools information across geographies, meaning that we can credibly estimate public opinion in ZIP codes where we have very few respondents. In addition to MRP, we also present an alternative "grand mean" approach (Broockman and Skovron 2018), which averages public support for policies among respondents that live in ZIP codes where a representative responded to our elite survey.

For two of our housing policies, zoning reform and affordable housing incentives, we draw on the 2024 Cooperative Election Study (CES). The large sample size ($n = 60{,}000$) of the CES allows us to generate estimates at the small geography of the ZIP code level. For rent control, we assemble six surveys that asked relatively similar questions about rent control and the respondent's ZIP code ($n = 10{,}200$), following prior scholarship (Lax and Phillips 2009).[9]

Following the method outlined in Kastellec, Lax and Phillips (2010), we fit an individual-level logistic regression model of opinion for each housing policy, as a function of a respondent's age, race, gender, poverty status, and location (at the ZIP code, county, state, and census region levels).[10] In

[8] This is reflected in the fact that our respondents represent municipalities that are whiter, more highly educated, and slightly wealthier than the average Census place (Table A-4).

[9] We also present models which add either a fixed or random effect for the source of the survey to account for wording and sampling differences and results are substantively very similar.

[10] For rent control, one survey was missing gender identity information. Our model and post-stratification frame excludes gender for this policy.

addition to these individual-level variables, we add several ecological variables into the model. At the ZIP code level, we add the homeowership rate, population density, transit modeshare, and the college attainment rate. At the county level, we add vote choice in the 2024 Presidential election. These variables were chosen based on factors known to matter in the housing literature. Appendix B details the MRP methodology in greater detail.

In total, we estimate public opinion for over 31,000 ZIP codes. These ZIP codes represent over 330 million Americans, or 98 percent of the population total (as of 2023). Table B-5 displays summary statistics at the ZIP code level. When weighting these figures by the total population in each ZIP code, average support for zoning reform is 51% and support for affordable housing incentives is 75%, very close to the CES weighted average support of 49% and 72%, respectively. Support for rent control—which does not have a national benchmark—is 76%, very similar to affordable housing incentives. We validate our MRP strategy in a variety of ways, including comparing estimates of public support to real ballot initiative vote shares (See Appendix B.1).

To incorporate the role of unequal participation, we also estimate the average misperception via the grand mean approach for neighborhood defender types. Using CES data, define a proxy for this group as homeowners, age 45 and above, who voted in 2016, 2020, and 2024. While this group does not precisely identify the neighborhood defenders Einstein, Glick and Palmer (2019) write about, they are the most identifiable version from CES data and likely to both hold similar opinions and participate in similar ways. We anticipate both that the support for housing policies will be lower among this group and that the gap between local elected officials' perceptions of public opinion will be smaller for this group compared to its complement. All analyses were pre-registered on OSF unless otherwise noted (Section C).

Linking Elected Officials to MRP Estimates

Using these ZIP code level estimates, we then estimate public opinion for each politician's district. For local councilmembers, first we identify if the member is at-large (representing their entire municipality) or ward based. For at-large members ($n = 538$), we estimate municipal-level public opinion by joining the councilmembers to their census place (typically incorporated municipalities). Then, we crosswalk ZIP codes to Census places using a crosswalk from the Missouri Census Data Center, which calculates the population overlap each ZIP code contained in or intersecting a Census

place based on 2020 Census data at the block level. We use these population overlap estimates to construct population weights, and sum the ZIP code level public opinion estimates multiplied by their population weights to the Census place level.

For councilmembers representing a ward ($n = 410$), we attempt to collect information about the geography of their ward. Data collection is ongoing, but so far we have collected and geocoded the shapefiles of 372 (91%) local elected officials with ward-based districts. For these, we apply a similar methodology as above. First, we identify the Census blocks contained (centroid) within a ward geometry. Then, we aggregate Census block populations contained within the ward by ZIP code, allowing us to construct population weights for each segment of a ZIP code intersecting the ward, and sum the ZIP code level public opinion estimates multiplied by their population weights to the ward level. For the remaining wards we cannot obtain a shapefile for, we rely on PDF or image files of wards uploaded to municipal websites or requested from city clerks. We are in the process of georeferencing these maps of the ward boundaries, then drawing vector polygons via QGIS to obtain usable shapefiles.

Results

Policy Congruence and External Responsiveness

We use multiple approaches to assess congruence. First, we compare the average councilmember's stated vote against public support at the district level estimated via MRP (Table 2, Columns 1 and 2). Levels of support among elected officials are similar to public support for affordable housing tax incentives and about 10 points higher for the pro-housing zoning reform. For rent control, on the other hand, councilmembers' stated vote is about 30 points below average public support in their districts.

Next, we compute rates of policy congruence and policy agreement (e.g., Caughey and Warshaw 2022). Congruence represents the share of policymakers voting "yes" if a majority of the public supports the policy and "no" otherwise. Agreement represents the share of the public in a policymaker's district that supports their representative's stated preference. We find relatively high degrees of congruence for zoning reform and affordable housing incentives, but very low congruence for rent control, representing mixed evidence for our pre-registered H1—that councilmember

support for housing reforms would lag public opinion and lead to incongruence. Agreement follows a similar pattern, indicating that most voters support the stated preference of their local official for zoning reform and affordable housing incentives, but not rent control. As a benchmark, (Rivard and Lucas 2024) find a similar level of alignment between Canadian local legislators and their constituents on zoning reform, but higher levels of congruence for affordable housing development.

In an exploratory analysis, we examine these relationships by legislators' self-reported partisanship (Table D-6). Support for each policy among Democratic legislators is around 30 points higher compared to Republicans, indicating high levels of elite polarization. However, support remains relatively even among their constituents, varying by an average of less than 5 points. While both Democratic and Republican legislators offer similar congruence for zoning reform, Democrats provide higher congruence for affordable housing and rent control given both policies are extremely population among most constituencies.

Table 2: Policy Support and Congruence

Policy	**Policymaker Support (%)**	**Public Support (%)**	**Congruence (%)**	**Agreement (%)**
Zoning Reform	62.6%	52.2%	64.4%	52.7%
Affordable Housing	75.7%	76.3%	75.7%	64.6%
Rent Control	35.8%	76.4%	35.8%	43.6%

In addition to congruence and agreement, we also examine external responsiveness directly and plot the predicted probability of a councilmember stating that they would vote "yes" for each policy as function of public opinion in their district using a logit model. Policies show evidence of responsiveness if their slopes are steep and positively sloped. Figure 1 plots these relationships. All policies show strong evidence of responsiveness, with strong positive relationships that are statistically significant at the 95% level. This strong responsiveness helps counter concerns about picking at random in elite surveys, which would drive a midpoint bias (Zelizer 2024).

The plots in Figure 1 also display dashed lines from the x- and y-axes where policy support and the probability of a councilmember stating they would vote "yes" reach 50%. The relationship of the responsiveness curves to these dashed lines reveals if responsiveness is biased. Perfect ma-

joritarian responsiveness would produce curves that are very steep and cross the 50-50 crosshairs. Meanwhile, biased responsiveness will be less steep and/or the entire curve will be shifted either to the left or right, leading or lagging public opinion. In Figure 1, zoning reform shows little bias in responsiveness. However, rent control and to lesser extent affordable housing incentives show a notable bias, requiring above majority public support to push the probability of a councilmember voting "yes" above 50%.

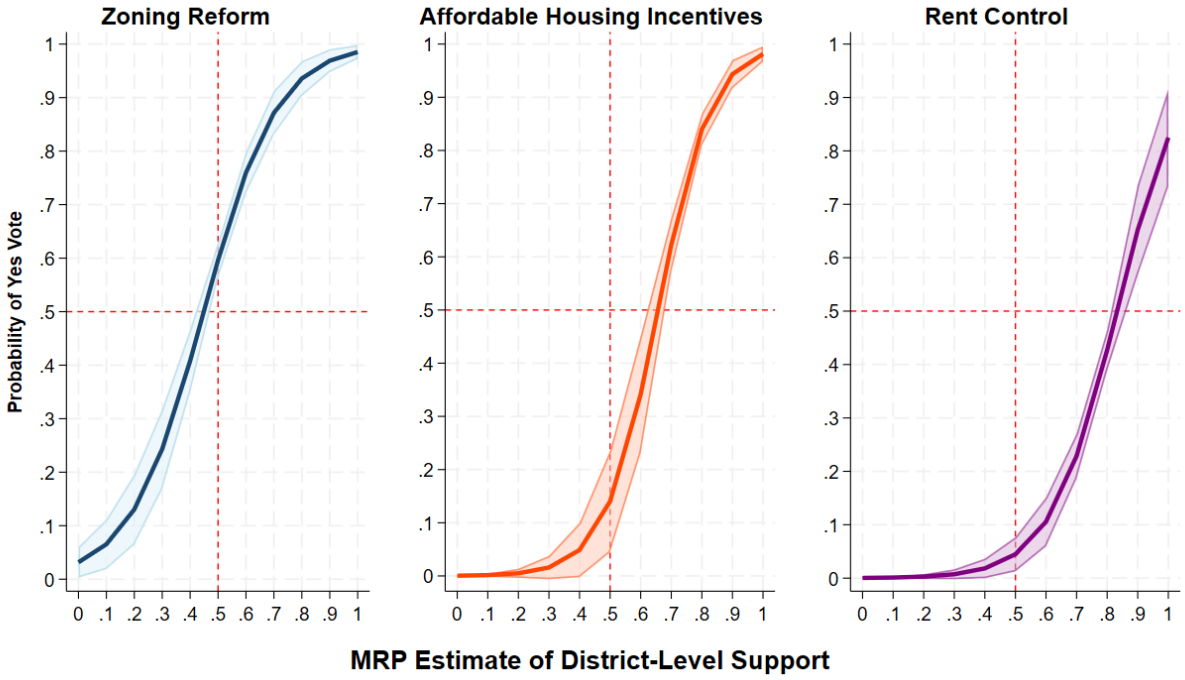


Figure 1: Predicted probability of councilmember voting for a policy from a logistic regression curve given district-level public opinion. 95% confidence intervals shaded. Dotted lines show the 50% marks in opinion support and policy probability.

The Electoral Connection and Perceptions of Public Opinion

Why do councilmembers' preferences sometimes deviate from public opinion in their district? One theory is that elected officials are responsive to public opinion, but have an inaccurate perception of such opinion. To test this theory, we asked each councilmember about their perception of public opinion in their district. Councilmembers underestimate public support for zoning reform by 9 points, tax incentives for affordable housing by 26 percentage points, and rent control by 39 points (Figure E-11). Results are similar using the MRP approach (13 points for zoning reform, 29 points

for tax incentives, and 39 points for rent control), although these do not incorporate estimates of uncertainty.[11] As a benchmark, our average misperception of 31 points is greater than that found among a sample of primarily local Dutch and Danish legislators (Otjes and Rasmussen 2026) and roughly twice the size of that found in (Broockman and Skovron 2018)'s study of American state legislators.

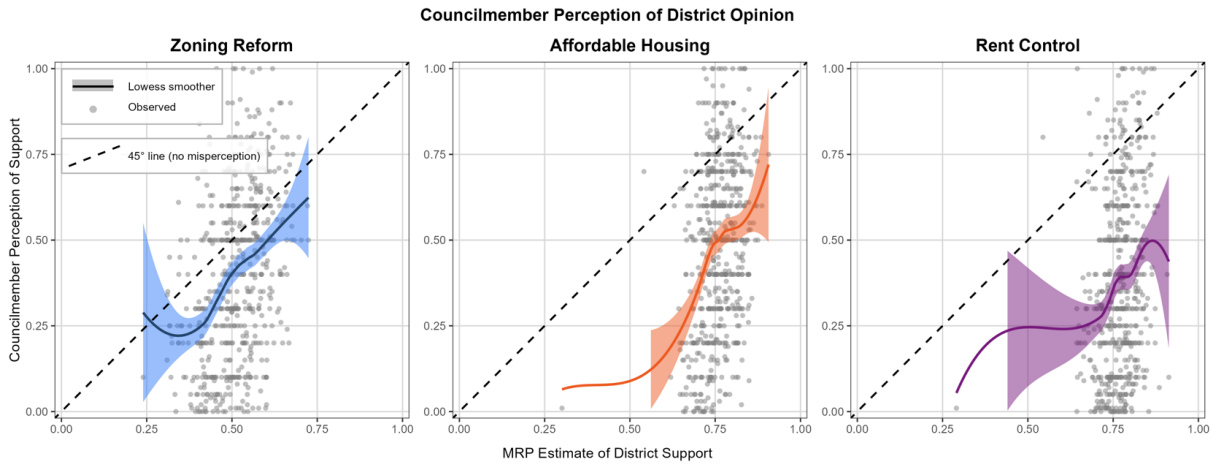


Figure 2: Councilmember perception of policy support compared to public opinion as estimated using MRP.

Figure 2 plots councilmembers' perceptions of public opinion against MRP estimates of public opinion. The relationship between the two is visualized with a LOESS curve and a unit slope line represents a perfect relationship. For all three policies, the LOESS curve runs below the unit slope indicating that councilmembers' perceptions of public support for these policies are consistently below the actual public support of their constituencies. Still, the MRP approach allows us to see that both LOESS curves have positive slopes. Councilmembers' perceptions of public opinion increase as local public support increases, indicating perception is correlated to public opinion at least in a cross-sectional snapshot. That legislators' estimates are substantially below 50% and increase linearly with actual public support suggest that these misperceptions are not the result of midpoint hedging or random guessing (Lucas, Sheffer and Breunig 2026; Zelizer 2024). These findings support our pre-registered hypothesis that politicians will consistently underestimate public support for housing reforms. Moreover, they suggest that policy congruence and agreement

[11] We recommend caution in interpreting the rent control estimates via the grand mean approach due to the smaller sample size of the combined surveys, and the fact that this approach does not account for biased sampling with weights. CES questions incorporate CES weights.

for affordable housing is more coincidental—unmoored from public opinion—than intentional.

Another notable attribute of Figure 2 is the relative lack of variation in average public support for the affordable housing policy and rent control. Within our sample, independent surveys, and the CES as a whole (for affordable housing incentives), large majorities of residents consistently show support for these pro-renter policies. At the same time, the broad coverage of the y-axis indicates that councilmembers' perceptions of public opinion are widely varying. Many councilmembers incorrectly expect there to be very little support for these pro-renter policies in their district. In contrast, there is more variation in estimated public opinion for zoning reform.

Next, we test for the sources of misperception. One potential source may be uneven local participation, driven by those most likely to attend meetings about housing and participate in local politics. These meeting attendees—typically older, homeowning voters—may be particularly influential in impacting perceptions. Indeed, when we asked our local officials to select the top 2 ways they learn about their constituents' opinions about housing, neighborhood meetings was the most commonly selected source of information (Panel A of Figure 3). This is followed by constituent contact, which is also likely to be dominated by neighborhood defender types.

To assess this source of bias, Panel B of Figure 3 presents the gap in local officials' perceptions of constituent opinion against two subgroups of their constituents: (a) older, politically active homeowners (blue diamonds), and (b) all other residents (grey circles).[12] Using the grand mean approach, we subset to older politically active homeowners as these attributes predict higher rates of voting in local elections and a greater likelihood of attending local meetings about housing (Einstein, Palmer and Glick 2019; Einstein et al. 2025; Sahn 2025). We treat these estimates as a directional proxy for local voters and neighborhood defender preferences about housing.

If local officials' perceptions are in part biased by unrepresentative constituent contact and the opinions voiced at local meetings, then local officials' perceptions should be directionally closer to those of older politically active homeowners. Indeed, that is what we find. For each policy, local legislators' perception of public opinion is closer to that of our directional proxy for local voters and neighborhood defenders. In fact, relative to our proxy, there is no measurable misperception for zoning reform: precisely the policy that discussed at most local meetings about housing, and

[12]For zoning reform and affordable housing, we consider voters to be politically active if they voted in the last three presidential cycles. Only the most recent cycle, 2024, is validated by the CES. For rent control, we rely on self-reported participation in the last presidential election.

the policy that drives many neighborhood defenders to participate in local politics (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019; Hall and Yoder 2022). In contrast, we may not expect neighborhood defenders to have reason to voice their opinions on affordable housing tax incentives and rent control.

Of course, councilors are often demographically similar to neighborhood defenders. Of respondents matched to the voterfile, 98% voted in 2024, they have mean age of 59, and 97% are estimated to be homeowners. Thus, they are likely to hold similar beliefs as neighborhood defenders and may project these beliefs onto their constituents—an egocentric bias found in other cases of elite misperceptions (e.g., Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger and Stokes 2019; Sevenans et al. 2023). Still, in combination with evidence that both neighborhood meetings and constituent contact are disproportionately cited by officials as the main way they learn about their constituents' housing preferences, we view this as suggestive evidence that these modes of information may bias officials' perceptions. Furthermore, if egocentric projection were truly the source of misperception bias, then it would be surprising that so many legislators would be willing to defy their own personal support for zoning reform and affordable housing tax incentives by supporting them at such high rates.

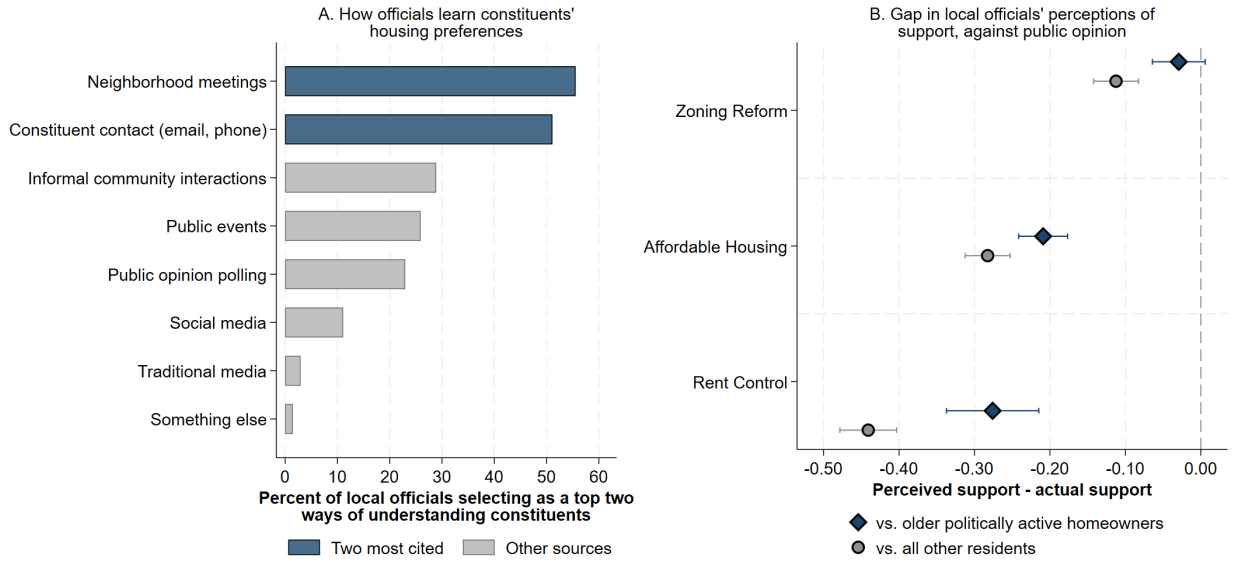


Figure 3: Unrepresentative contact and the perception gap

Note: Panel A includes wave 2 respondents only ($N = 160$). Respondents were asked to select two, so totals sum to more than 100%. Panel B employs the grand mean approach, subtracting local officials' perceived support of from that of two subgroups. 95% confidence intervals modeled using ZIP code level clustered bootstrap (1,000 repetitions), accounting for covariance between the two means. Zoning reform and affordable housing confidence intervals also account for the CES weight, while rent control estimates do not.

Internal Responsiveness

These misperceptions are troubling for the quality of local democracy. But despite poor external responsiveness, if legislators are responsive to their perceptions of public opinion, then there is the potential to improve local accountability by correcting misperceptions. To assess internal responsiveness, we repeat the analysis from Figure 1 using perceptions of public opinion, rather than actual public opinion at the district level modeled using MRP.

Similar to Figure 1, Figure 4 presents a clear, positive relationship between perceived public opinion and vote choice. However, there is a large leftward bias in responsiveness by elected officials to their perceptions of public opinion for zoning reform and affordable housing incentives. Many politicians appear to be willing to lead what they perceive as tepid public opinion on these housing policies. That these respondents admit they will support policies they believe to be unpopular helps counter concerns about social desirability bias. In contrast, rent control displays near perfect internal responsiveness. Although we find that elected officials substantially underestimate public support for rent control, those that believe it to be popular are willing to support it.

As a mechanism check, we assess whether larger misperceptions in public opinion predict larger gaps in policy congruence (Figure D-5). Across all 3 policies, policy agreement is lowest when misperceptions are the largest. This test further supports the importance of public opinion in shaping local elite policy support, even under substantial bias in perceptions.

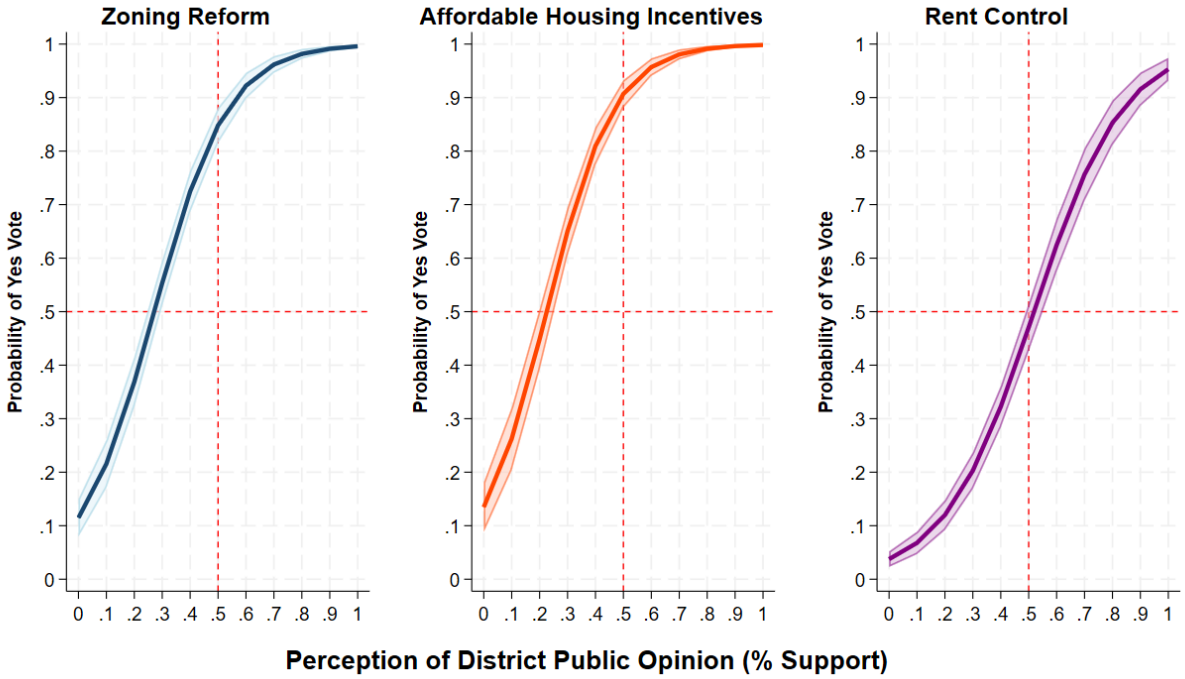


Figure 4: Predicted probability of councilmember voting for a policy from a logistic regression curve given perceptions of district-level public opinion. 95% confidence intervals shaded. Dotted lines show the 50% marks in opinion support and policy probability.

Influences Beyond Public Opinion

Thus far, we have established that there is a mixed level of external responsiveness in local housing policy. Politicians dramatically underestimate public opinion, meaning they are sometimes willing to support policies that they believe are out of step with their constituents (as evidenced by both zoning reform and affordable housing tax incentives). Even accounting for these politicians' perceptions of public opinion, we see their support leading the public for zoning reform and affordable housing incentives. That is, politicians display biased internal responsiveness. What are the drivers of this willingness to buck public opinion?

We also asked local officials to state their expectations of how the policy would affect the budget, from budget negative (greater service costs than added tax revenue), to neutral, to budget positive (vice versa). Table 3 shows the average expected fiscal impact of each policy. These diverging expectations help to explain why politicians appear to be sometimes congruent with public opinion despite inaccurately perceiving it. Zoning reform is overwhelmingly seen as budget positive or neutral, counteracting the low perception of public support. While affordable housing incentives

are more likely to be seen as harming the municipal budget, a majority of legislators still view these as either budget neutral or positive, similarly counteracting perceived tepid public opinion. Finally, rent control is seen as largely budget neutral or negative, with few perceiving a positive fiscal impact of the policy. This may help explain why, unlike zoning reform and affordable housing incentives, few local politicians appear willing to buck their perception of district public opinion.

Table 3: Expected Fiscal Impacts of Housing Policies

Policy	**Budget Negative (%)**	**Budget Neutral (%)**	**Budget Positive (%)**
Zoning Reform	17.1%	25.7%	57.1%
Affordable Housing	39.0%	31.7%	29.4%
Rent Control	38.2%	55.0%	6.9%

Next, we assess if ranking public opinion as less influential is associated with greater deviation from public opinion? We do not find meaningful variation in responsiveness based on the ranking of meeting attendees, nor business leaders, nor the budget (Section F). As an exploratory analysis, we observe large variation based on the expected fiscal impacts of each policy. Figure 5 displays policy responsiveness between the elected officials' stated vote and their perception of public opinion in their district.[13] Take a neutral budget effect as a baseline. Politicians who expect reforms will lead to negative budgetary impacts (red lines) show a substantial rightward shift in internal responsiveness, lagging public opinion. Those who expect positive budget impacts (green lines) show a leftward shift that is often neither statistically nor substantively significant. That is, politicians who are pessimistic about the budget effects of these policies are more willing to deviate from typical legislator behavior, though this does bring them closer to perfect internal responsiveness for zoning reform and affordable housing incentives.

As a final exploratory analysis, we assess if municipal fiscal health moderates responsiveness. For example, a city in good fiscal health may be able to afford budget negative policies demanded by voters, whereas a city in poor fiscal health may pursue budget positive policies their voters oppose.

[13] As we found no effects by the relative importance of the budget compared to public opinion, we do not plot this variation and note this test departs from our pre-registered analysis plan by not including that interaction.

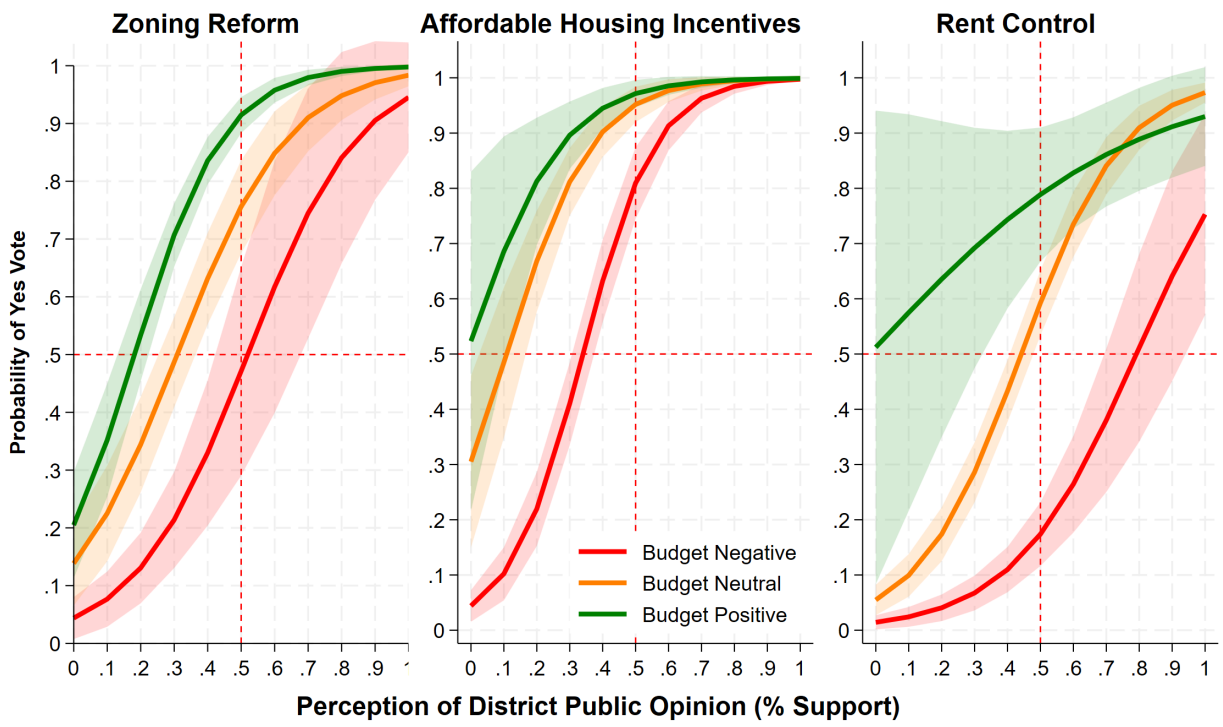


Figure 5: Councilmember probability of supporting zoning reform compared to their perception of public opinion. Data subsetted based on perceived effects of policy on the budget.

To proxy for a city's fiscal health, we use a municipality's debt burden, the size of a city's combined stock and service debt over total revenue measured by the Census of Governments (Gorina, Maher and Joffe 2018). We then split the sample by the median municipal debt burden. Our expectation is that worse fiscal health will hamper responsiveness by incentivizing legislators to pursue budget positive policies and avoid budget negative policies. Positive fiscal health will allow legislators to remain more responsive regardless of their expectations of budget effects.

We find mixed evidence of the moderating effect of fiscal health (Figure D-6). When legislators view a policy as budget neutral or positive, we see no differences in internal responsiveness. Instead, only when policies are viewed as budget negative do we see different behaviors related to fiscal health. Cities with worse fiscal health show less internal responsiveness for budget negative policies. We do not see differential internal responsiveness for affordable housing incentives by city health. This is surprising, given the policy has the most clear, immediate financial costs for the local government.

Discussion

To help build a body of evidence, it is important to contextualize our findings against similar studies. Of the nine policy areas that Rivard and Lucas (2024) examine, two are similar to our policies of interest though not perfectly matched. Like our measure of support for tax incentives for affordable housing, Rivard and Lucas (2024) ask about support for: "New construction of affordable housing units by governments." Similar to our measure of zoning reform, they ask about support for: "Repealing single-family zoning bylaws to allow for mixed housing construction everywhere." For both zoning and affordable housing, Rivard and Lucas (2024) find positive correlations between politician support and public support. However, for both policies, politician support leads public support. These findings are largely similar to our own, providing external validity in the similar but separate context of Canadian municipalities.

In contrast, Rivard and Lucas (2024) find no evidence that politician support is more closely aligned with homeowners versus renters, leading them to discount the influence of homeowners in shaping citywide housing policy. We offer an alternative interpretation. We also find that politicians' policy support is not more closely aligned with our subset of neighborhood defender types—older homeowners who vote regularly. While the mobilization of opponents may still hamper individual siting decisions, we do not find evidence of it as applied to these municipality-wide housing policies. However, we demonstrate that politicians' *perceptions of public opinion* are more aligned with this group. Thus, neighborhood defenders likely do play an out-sized role in shaping housing politics, at least by the mechanism of altering how politicians view public opinion. That this effect does not always manifest as shaping politicians' preferred policies underscores that other factors beyond public opinion meaningfully shape citywide housing policy.

To that point, our findings signal the importance of pushing beyond public attitudes in understanding housing reform politics. Instead, we highlight the importance of fiscal constraints and perceptions of budgetary impacts (Peterson 1981). Nevertheless, while we show that public opinion and budget are the top considerations for most respondents, the budget neutral responsiveness curves in Figure 5 rarely cross .50 probability at 50% perceived public support. Even after accounting for expectations of fiscal impacts, there are other unobserved variables biasing the relationship between perceived public opinion and elite policy support.

For example, interest groups likely also play an important role in legislator policy support (Anzia 2022). While we did not find evidence that the ranking of interest groups affects responsiveness to public opinion, this could be due to noise generated through rankings as opposed to ratings or a lack of tailoring to the specific interest groups active in each legislator's district. For example, large local employers from hospitals to even Disney World have lobbied against NIMBY interests to expand "attainable housing" for their workers (Lake 2024), making them a meaningful local player in housing politics. Additionally, interest group influence may operate indirectly—such as by influencing perceptions of public opinion or municipal budget impacts—rather than directly altering legislators' statements of policy support. Still, our results suggest that interest groups, while an important consideration, may be secondary in shaping responsiveness compared to the municipal finance.

An additional factor likely affecting the relationship between perceived public opinion and policy support is subjective evaluations of the policy. Politician ideology likely impacts housing policy support, all else equal. Republicans express lower support for all three housing policies compared to Democrats, leading them to be less in line with their constituents on the popular policies of affordable housing tax incentives and rent control (Table D-6). And like the public writ large, officials vary in how effective they believe each of these policies is likely to be in improving local housing conditions (Been, Ellen and O'Regan 2019; Been, Ellen and O'Regan 2025; Einstein, Palmer and Glick 2026; Elmendorf, Nall and Oklobdzija 2025). Future research should more closely examine how elite beliefs regarding the housing supply moderate representation.

Finally, uncertainty likely affects the role of public opinion and fiscal constraints. For some policies, an official may be willing to buck public opinion because they believe voters are unlikely to hold them accountable due low turnout and low voter information (de Benedictis-Kessner 2026). Likewise, a politician may believe a policy has directional budgetary impacts, but expects those impacts to be minor. This may explain why rent control has perfect internal responsiveness while having slightly negative budgetary impacts. The policy does not directly cost the government anything in the short-term, thus allowing elected officials to support it in unison with their (perception of) voters.

Normatively, our findings present a mixed image of housing policy and local democracy. Zoning reform and affordable housing incentives see a relatively high-level of policy congruence and external

responsiveness, but it occurs due to coincidental representation. Therefore, the degree to which this representation will hold over time is uncertain. From the perspective of the housing affordability crisis and voter demands for policy reform, it is reassuring that neighborhood defenders are not absolute dictators of elected officials' stated vote choice. Instead, elected officials are willing to defy perceived public opinion to pursue policies expanding the supply of market-rate and affordable housing, particularly when they believe these policies have potential to fill the municipal coffers.

Furthermore, these substantial misperceptions among policymakers raise the opportunity for pro-housing information campaigns. For rent control, politicians are on average perfectly internally responsive but also wildly underestimate public support. Our findings suggest that conveying accurate measures of public opinion may improve external responsiveness. But for zoning reform and affordable housing incentives, it is unclear whether efforts to better inform officials' of public opinion would increase politicians' support for reform or encounter ceiling effects given the existing high level of elite support.

Conclusion

In this study, we assess the relationship between public opinion, elected officials' perceptions of opinion, and the stated preferences of elected officials when it comes to high-profile housing policies. We find that while legislators are responsive to public opinion, they vary substantially in their alignment with voters. What alignment does exist for zoning reform and affordable housing tax incentives is largely coincidental, the result of biased internal responsiveness and a willingness of politicians to deviate from (their perception of) public opinion.

One of the sources of this deviation is officials' underestimation of constituents' support for all three housing policies. These misperceptions may be due to uneven participation, as officials' perceptions are more aligned to the opinions of neighborhood defenders than for non-defenders. Still, even elected officials' responsiveness to their perception of public opinion is often imperfect, with officials leading perceived public opinion on the policies of zoning reform and affordable housing.

We demonstrate how influences beyond public opinion play a role, with positive anticipated fiscal impacts likely leading to greater than expected support for zoning reform and affordable housing tax incentives. Nevertheless, even after accounting for misperceptions and fiscal impacts,

unobserved variables continue to bias the relationship between public opinion and legislator policy support.

Together, these findings support what we call biased dual responsiveness. Legislators are responsive both public opinion (Dahl 1961) and expected budgetary outcomes (Peterson 1981). Furthermore, highly active subsets of the public will bias—though not dictate—legislators' perceptions of what the public wants (Einstein, Glick and Palmer 2019; Fischel 2001). In contrast, we find limited direct evidence that interest groups or a "growth machine" weaken responsiveness to public opinion (Logan and Molotch 1987). Of course, local coalitions may have goals peripheral to housing and growth (Stone 1989), making our study only a slice of legislator incentives and behavior. Still, our findings unite theories of representation in subnational government with fiscal federalism, centering the beliefs and behaviors of legislators in local policymaking and the political origins of the housing affordability crisis.

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A Descriptive Statistics

To assess representativeness, we compare our legislator respondents to those who were emailed from the KnowWho sampling frame but did not answer the survey. To build a common set of demographic data, we merge the KnowWho sampling frame to the Statara voter file and export summary statistics. This appendix describes how the two files were linked.

Sources

We define our sampling frame as the 17,049 local officials we emailed. Their identifying information comes from KnowWho's 2025 county and municipal officials extract, which includes legal first name, middle name, a separate nickname field, surname, suffix, municipality, state, five-digit county FIPS code, and office ZIP code.

The voter file is Statara's national file (June 2026 extract), access via Harvard University's Center for American Political Studies (CAPS). Each record carries up to two addresses: a consumer address, present for everyone, and a registration address, present only for records the vendor has tied to a voter registration. Records lacking a registration address do not contain vote history.

All linkage was performed inside a Level 3 secure computing cluster at Harvard University. No individual-level data left the cluster and the individual-linked files were deleted following the evaluation of representativeness. The exported results are counts and means. Any statistic based on fewer than ten people was suppressed.

Preparing the fields

For both datasets, accented characters were converted to ASCII (so *Peña* and *Pena* agree), invalid bytes were dropped, text was lower-cased, and all non-letters were removed. ZIP codes were zero-padded to five digits. Municipality names were standardised. For example, *St.*, *Mt.* and *Ft.* were expanded, and leading or trailing type words (*City of*, *Township*, *Borough*) were stripped. Blank or missing values were never counted as agreement with anything, including another blank.

Blocking

Comparing every official with every voter record would have been computationally challenging. Therefore, match candidates were drawn from blocks defined by state, normalised surname, and first initial. Each official generated multiple keys, allowing for the detection of imperfect matches. Keys were structured as follows:

- Every token of the first name, plus the nickname where KnowWho records one, such that *Bill* reaches *William* and *J. Robert* reaches *Robert*;
- The full surname, plus the first and last components of a multi-part surname, excluding particles (*de*, *van*, *del*) and fragments shorter than three letters, so that compound and hyphenated surnames are reachable from either half.

What counts as agreement

A candidate agrees at *level 1* if the first name matches exactly and the surname matches in full. It agrees at *level 2* if the match runs through a nickname, through a prefix relationship (*Rob* and *Robert*), or through an exact first name on only part of a compound surname. Agreement on the first initial alone is rejected.

Either consumer or registration address may lead to geographic agreement, since these need not be the same. This agreement is graded: (1) the same five-digit ZIP; (2) the same municipality name, provided the record is not positively located in a different county; (3) the same county; (4) the same three-digit ZIP; (5) the same state only. County agreement is a direct join based on five-digit national FIPS codes. However, Connecticut is an exception, as their officials are coded to the 2022 planning regions rather than the legacy counties. Thus, CT officials are excluded from the county match.

Assigning a tier

Each surviving official–record pair is assigned to the strictest tier it satisfies:

Table A-1: Linkage tiers

Tier	Rule	Treated as a link
1	Exact name, same ZIP5	Yes
2	Exact name, same municipality (no county conflict)	Yes
3	Weaker name match, same ZIP5 or municipality	Yes
4	Exact name, same county or same ZIP3[a]	Yes
5	Exact name, same state only[a]	No
9	Unresolved tie between different people	No

[a] Tier 5 is retained only so that it can be counted; it is never treated as a link. Analyses use tiers 1–4.

Resolving each official to a single record

Occasionally, an elected official reaches more than one voter record. We keep the record that agrees most strongly. First tiebreaker is the tier. A tier-1 candidate is preferred to a tier-2 candidate before anything else is weighed, and so on down. Because a tier already encodes how well the name and the geography agree, candidates that survive at the same tier are separated by a further sequence of tests, applied in this order: the closer geography, where the tier leaves a choice (in tier 3 a shared ZIP5 outranks a shared municipality, in tier 4 a shared county outranks a shared three-digit ZIP). Next, whether middle initial and generational suffix agree; whether the record's council district matches the district the official represents; whether the record carries registration data at all, since holding municipal office requires being registered; whether the county agrees; and finally whether ZIP and municipality both agree rather than only one.

Records still tied after all of that are tested for being the same person twice over rather than two people. They qualify if they share a vendor person identifier or if every tied record reports an age, those ages fall within a year of each other, and the gender is the same. Ties that survive this test are treated as non-matches at every tier. Most ties were between records of visibly different ages, that is, between different people.

Gender and party are deliberately excluded from every step above. They are the fields used to validate the linkage, and using them to build it would guarantee the validation passed.

Coverage

13,615 of the 17,049 officials in the frame (80%) were linked to a voter record at tiers 1–4, including 745 of the 948 survey respondents (79%). 11,543 at the strict tiers and 2,072 at tiers 3–4. Of the remainder, 1,919 had no same-name candidate anywhere in the file, 1,144 reached candidates that

could not be resolved to a single person, and 371 agreed on name and state alone, which we do not treat as a link.

Checking the linkage

The survey collected gender, race and party identification from respondents directly, and none of those fields was used to build the link, so they serve as an external check. Agreement is high: 97% on gender, 94% on race, and 95% on Democratic versus Republican identification against the vendor's combined party measure, rising to 96% against actual party registration in the states that record it.

Some disagreement is expected even from a correct link, because race is the vendor's imputation rather than an administrative record. And agreement is not uniform across tiers: it is 96% at tiers 1–2 and 98% at tier 3, but 82% at tier 4 (which rests on county or three-digit-ZIP agreement alone, without any match on ZIP code or municipality).

A.1 Representativeness

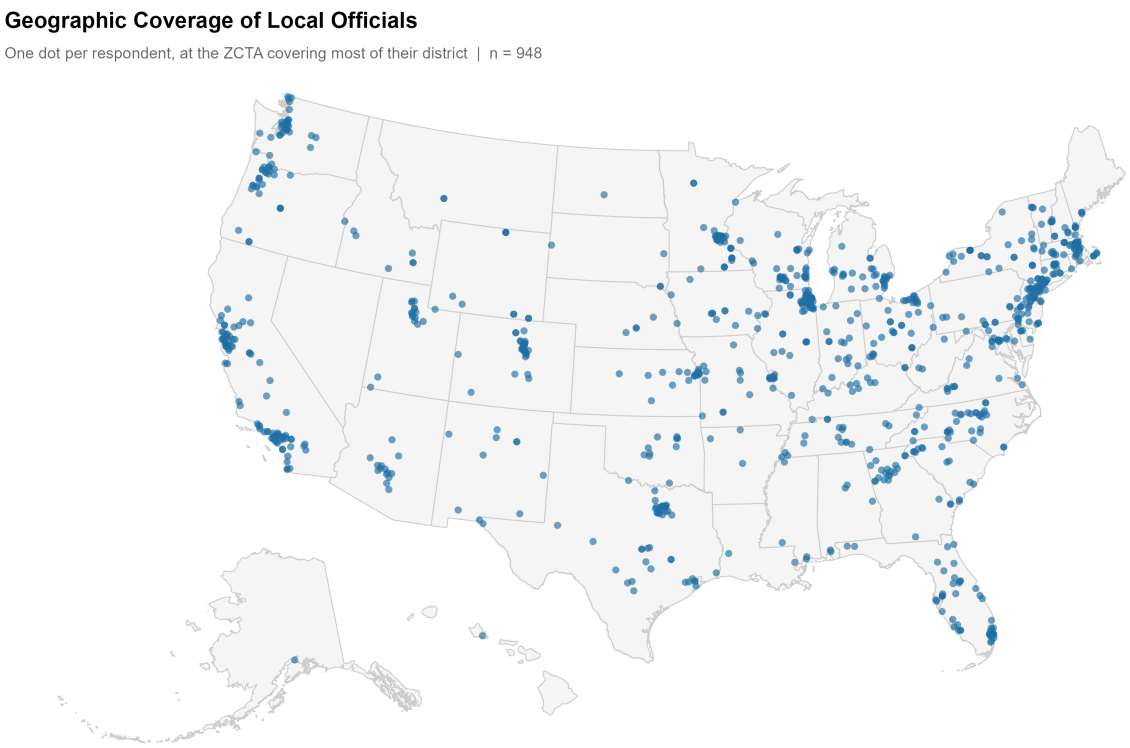


Figure A-1: Map of respondents from the local elected officials survey.

Table A-2: Survey respondents compared with the sampling frame and with their own councils

	A. Full sampling frame				B. Own full council			
	Resp.	Frame	Diff.	Std. diff.	Resp.	Council	Diff.	Std. diff.
Party (registration where recorded, vendor model otherwise)								
Democrat (%)	59.3	50.4	8.9	0.18	59.4	57.4	1.9	0.04
Republican (%)	30.7	40.1	−9.4	−0.19	30.6	33.1	−2.5	−0.05
Party registration only (states that register by party)								
Democrat (%)	59.6	50.9	8.7	0.17	60.3	55.7	4.6	0.09
Republican (%)	27.8	36.5	−8.8	−0.18	27.7	30.6	−2.9	−0.07
Unaffiliated or other (%)	12.7	12.6	0.1	0.00	12.0	13.7	−1.6	−0.05
Gender and race								
Female (%)	37.0	37.1	−0.0	−0.00	37.1	38.3	−1.2	−0.03
White (%)	83.8	77.5	6.3	0.15	83.7	80.4	3.3	0.08
Black (%)	7.5	11.2	−3.7	−0.12	7.5	9.0	−1.5	−0.05
Hispanic (%)	5.3	8.4	−3.1	−0.11	5.4	7.3	−2.0	−0.07
Asian (%)	3.3	2.4	0.9	0.06	3.3	3.0	0.3	0.02
Housing								
Homeowner (% of known)	97.2	97.4	−0.2	−0.02	97.1	97.5	−0.4	−0.02
Single-family dwelling (% of known)	92.6	93.1	−0.5	−0.02	92.4	91.9	0.4	0.01
Education								
College degree (% of coded levels)	79.1	70.7	8.4	0.18	79.3	75.7	3.6	0.08
Age and registration								
Age (mean)	58.7	56.4	2.3	0.18	58.6	56.8	1.9	0.14
Age under 45 (%)	17.3	20.9	−3.6	−0.09	17.5	20.8	−3.4	−0.08
Age 65+ (%)	37.8	29.8	8.0	0.17	37.6	31.6	6.0	0.13
Years registered (mean)	26.2	26.1	0.1	0.01	26.2	25.4	0.8	0.07
Turnout in 2024 (registered records)								
Voted, 2024 general (%)	98.2	98.1	0.1	0.01	98.2	98.2	−0.1	−0.01
Voted, 2024 primary (%)	83.2	78.8	4.4	0.11	83.6	80.2	3.4	0.08

Notes: A. Full frame = all 13,615 officials linked to a voter record, including the 745 respondents. B. 604 municipalities with at least one linked respondent and one linked non-respondent (733 respondents among 3,458 council members); full council = all linked members, respondents included, weighted so each council counts in proportion to its respondents. Resp. = respondents; Frame = the full sampling frame; Council = their own full council. Diff. = respondents minus the reference group, in percentage points for percentages. Std. diff. = Diff. / SD of the trait in the reference group. Party uses actual registration where the state records it and the vendor's model elsewhere; the registration-only block is limited to states that register by party. Row Ns vary with missing data.

Table A-3: Survey self-reports compared with the voter-file record

Comparison	N	Agreement (%)
gender: survey vs voter file	725	97.2
race: survey vs voter file	672	93.5
party D/R: survey vs COMBINED	482	95.0
party D/R: survey vs MODELED	475	94.7
party D/R: survey vs REGISTRATION (party-reg states)	308	96.1

Notes: Matched respondents only. Agreement is the share of people whose survey answer matches the voter-file value. Race and party are limited to the categories both sources code.

Table A-4: Representativeness of Council Member Sample

Districts vs the US population | ACS 2024 5-year

	Officials districts	US population (ACS 2024 5-year)
Population density (per sq mi)	2,876	3,976
% Non-Hispanic White	62.2%	56.9%
% Hispanic / Latino	16.7%	20.1%
% College educated (BA+, 25+)	41.6%	35.3%
Median household income	$92,492	$87,089
% Below federal poverty line	11.9%	12.8%
% Homeowners	63.6%	65.6%
% Commuting by transit	2.5%	3.2%

Source: ACS 2024 5-year (tidycensus), ZCTA level. Districts weighted by the share of the official's constituency in each ZCTA.

B MRP Estimation

Following the method outlined in Kastellec, Lax and Phillips (2010), we estimate the following individual-level logistic regression model of opinion about housing policy (from 0 to 1, where 1 is support). An individual's response y_i is a function of their demographics (indexed a, r, g, p for categorical variables by age, race, gender, and poverty status, respectively) and location (indexed z, c, s, R for ZIP code, county, state, and region, respectively):

$$y_i \sim \text{Bernoulli}(\pi_i) \tag{1}$$

$$\text{logit}(\pi_i) = \beta_0 + \alpha^{\text{age}}_{a[i]} + \alpha^{\text{race}}_{r[i]} + \alpha^{\text{gender}}_{g[i]} + \alpha^{\text{poverty}}_{p[i]} + u_{z[i]} + v_{c[i]} + w_{s[i]} + r_{R[i]} + X_{z[i]}\beta + X_{c[i]}\gamma \tag{2}$$

The individual-level random effects are modeled as:

$$\alpha^{\text{age}}_a \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{age}}) \tag{3}$$

$$\alpha^{\text{race}}_r \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{race}}) \tag{4}$$

$$\alpha^{\text{gender}}_g \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{gender}}) \tag{5}$$

$$\alpha^{\text{poverty}}_p \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{poverty}}) \tag{6}$$

The ZIP code, county, state (including Washington, DC), and region effects are modeled as:

$$u_z \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{ZIP}}) \tag{7}$$

$$v_c \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{county}}) \tag{8}$$

$$w_s \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{state}}) \tag{9}$$

$$r_R \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{region}}) \tag{10}$$

Where both ZIP and county predictions include a series of ecological fixed effects (detailed below). We fit the model in `R` using the `lmer` function from the `lme4` package (Bates et al. 2015).

After fitting this model, we compute the weighted average of predicted probabilities using post-stratification weights at the ZIP code level:

$$\hat{\theta}_z = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{J_z} N_{jz} \hat{\pi}_{jz}}{\sum_{j=1}^{J_z} N_{jz}} \tag{11}$$

where N_{jz} is the census population count for demographic cell j in ZIP code z, and $\hat{\pi}_{jz}$ is the predicted probability of support for that demographic cell.

For ZIP codes and counties where we do not observe CES respondents, we set the ZIP code random effect to zero. We drop ZIP codes where the census does not estimate cross-tabulated demographics (typically very small population ZIP codes) and those where we do not have the full set of fixed-effect variables.

To construct our post-stratification weights, we use cross-tabulated data at the ZIP code level from the 2019-2023 American Community Survey (ACS). We use tables B17001A-G, which provide the fully crossed counts of people in each ZIP code by age, race, gender, and poverty status. We chose poverty status as it is the closest proxy for household income available at a granular level of cross-tabulation, and income has been shown to matter for preferences about housing development (Mendelberg, Novoa and Pietrzak 2025). In pre-testing our weighting scheme, we also found that poverty better predicts support for housing policies than another commonly used variable in post-stratification weights: educational attainment. In the CES, we construct variables that closely match census categories. We collapse age into less than 35, 35 to 54, 55 to 64, and 65 and older. We collapse race into White alone, Black alone, Asian alone, and other/mixed race. For CES respondents who self-identify as Hispanic or Middle Eastern, we reassign them to one of the categories based on their responses to the "multiracial" question. For poverty status, we approximate household size using three questions "marital status," "children under age 18 in household," and "number of children." For married and domestic/civil partnership respondents, we assign these as 2-person households at baseline. For all other marital statuses, we assign these as 1-person households at baseline.

To these baselines, we add the number of children to the household size for respondents who select that they have at least one child under age 18 in their household. Then, we use the Census Bureau 2024 Poverty Thresholds by Size of Family and Number of Children and assign them to above or below the poverty line based on the "family income" question, rounded up. While imperfect due to imprecise income bins and an indirect measure of household size, our method identifies 13.6% of respondents to be below the poverty line, very similar to the actual rate of 10.6% in 2024 (11.1% in 2023). All variables used for post-stratification weights are entered into the MRP model as individual-level predictors.

In addition to these individual-level variables, we add several ecological variables into the model. These variables were chosen based on factors known to matter in the housing literature. At the ZIP

code level, we add: the homeownership rate, as homeowners and renters have diverging financial incentives and preferences (Fischel 2001; Hankinson 2018); population density per square mile, as a proxy for building density, as people have contextual development preferences and suburbanites tend to be more resistive to new housing (Pietrzak and Mendelberg 2025; Ternullo 2024); the transit, cycling, or walking mode-share to work, as traffic and parking concerns shape housing preferences (Grabar 2024; Trounstine 2023); and the college attainment rate, measured as the percent of residents who have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, which matters for residential sorting into cities (Behrens, Duranton and Robert-Nicoud 2014). All four variables come from the 2019-2023 ACS. Due to extreme values, we rescale population density by subtracting the mean and diving over the standard deviation (based on CES averages).

To match this data to the CES, we use the ZIP to ZCTA crosswalk from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). At the county level, we add the 2024 Democratic presidential vote share. While partisanship matters less in shaping housing preferences than other policy domains (Marble and Nall 2021), recent evidence suggests party identification may moderate the effects of other variables, like income, in predicting support for housing policies (Wetherill 2025). County election returns come from Michael Minn, collected from Secretaries of State websites. For CES respondents where election data did not match based on the CES provided FIPS code, we matched their ZIP code to their county FIPS code using the HUD-USPS ZIP Code Crosswalk files.

In total, we estimate public opinion for over 31,000 ZIP codes. These ZIP codes represent over 330 million Americans, or 98 percent of the population total (as of 2023). Median ZIP code support for zoning reform and affordable housing tax credits is 50% and 72%, respectively (Table B-5). When weighting these figures by the total population in each ZIP code, support for zoning reform is 51% and support for affordable housing tax credits is 75%, very close to the CES weighted average support of 49% and 72%, respectively. For rent control, median ZIP code support is 74%, with weighted mean support of 76%.

Table B-5: MRP Predicted Support for Housing Policies

Policy	**Min**	**Q1**	**Median**	**Q3**	**Max**	**Mean**	**SD**
Zoning Reform	0.23	0.43	0.50	0.54	0.86	0.51	0.09
Affordable Housing Incentives	0.54	0.68	0.71	0.76	0.97	0.75	0.06
Rent Control	0.36	0.71	0.74	0.78	0.96	0.76	0.06

B.1 MRP Validation

As additional validation, we compare predicted support for two policies—affordable housing tax credits and rent control—against real-world ballot initiatives, drawing on replication data from Mendelberg, Novoa and Pietrzak (2025). Their dataset includes 113 ballot initiatives at the municipal level on both issues between 2008 and 2025. We compare our estimated support for the two policies at the Census place level (aggregated up from the ZIP code level) against ballot vote shares. Our matched dataset includes 81 affordable housing supply measures and 19 rent control measures.

Figure B-2 shows the association between MRP estimates and ballot vote shares. The relationships are statistically significant and have slopes close to 1, which we would expect if the MRP estimates perfectly tracked real-world public opinion. However, we do see that our MRP estimates have a positive intercept shift against ballot vote shares. We note, however, that the intercept vote shares of these ballots are impacted by many factors including ballot wording, election timing (e.g. on-cycle, off-cycle, primary elections) which may impact turnout, temporal trends in public opinion, the imposition of taxes (true of about half of affordable housing ballot initiatives in the sample), and the ballots being bundled with other non-housing initiatives.

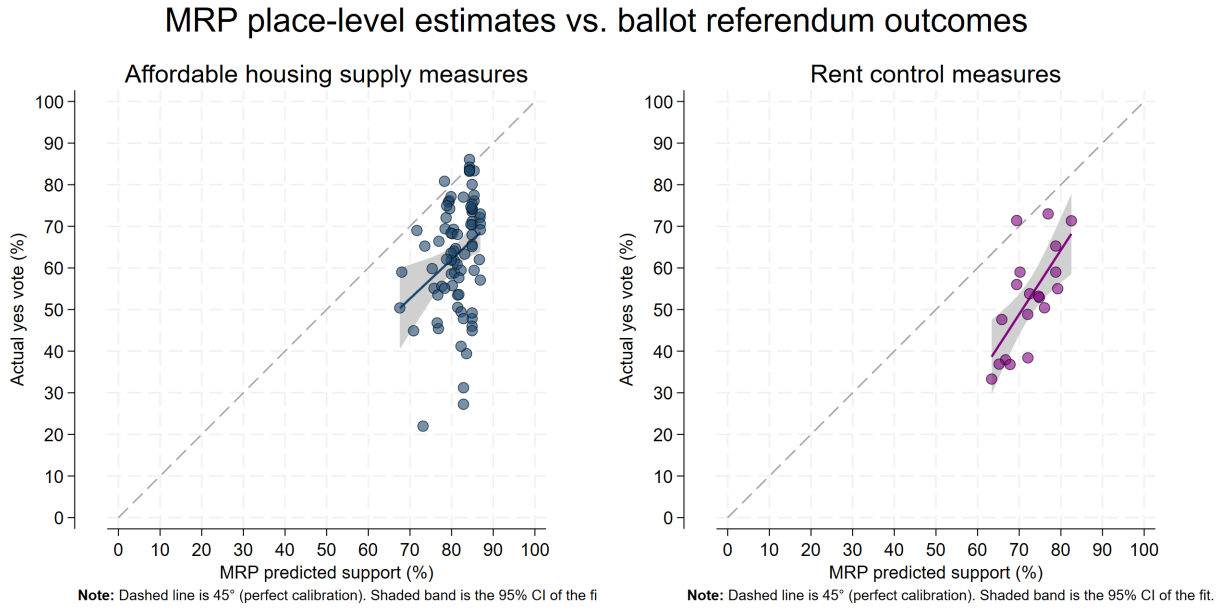


Figure B-2: Comparison of place-level MRP estimates of public support for housing policies and ballot measure support.

C Pre-Registered Hypotheses and Tests

The following section outlines an abbreviated form of all pre-registered hypotheses and their outcomes. The full pre-registration (which details the specific analysis plan to test each hypothesis) can be viewed online on OSF:
`https://osf.io/a35rb/overview?view_only=160a99b14b104137b9c54bf7116067a6`.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Politician support will be consistently lower than public opinion for our three housing policies (relaxing zoning laws, tax incentives for affordable housing, and rent control), evidence of policy incongruence.*

H1 Test: As shown in Table 2, this hypothesis is **not supported**. Politician support is only lower than public opinion for rent control and is higher than public opinion for zoning reform.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Politicians will consistently underestimate public support for our three housing polices, and larger misperceptions in public opinion predict larger gaps in policy incongruence.*

H2 Test: As shown in Figure 2 (which shows that politician perceptions are consistently below MRP estimates of their district), this hypothesis is **supported**. Politicians consistently underestimate support for all three housing policies. This hypothesis is also supported when estimating misperceptions using a grand mean approach (See Figure E-11).

Additionally, Figure D-5 shows that larger misperceptions predict larger gaps in policy incongruence, operationalized as agreement rates. These relationships are roughly parabolic, with the maxima of agreement rates occurring at low rates of misperceptions. However, these are not exactly centered around zero, suggesting factors other than perceived public opinion also matter.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Politicians' perceptions of public opinion will be closer to the opinions of neighborhood defenders, who support all three policies at lower rates, compared to other residents.*

H3 Test: As shown in Figure 3, this hypothesis is **supported**. Our pre-analysis plan specifies "neighborhood defenders" as "*homeowners, age 45 and above, who voted in 2016, 2020, and 2024.*" This subgroup is less supportive of all three housing policies than the general public and those not in this group, and politicians' perceptions are systematically closer to this subgroup.

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Politicians' perceptions will be more accurate in districts where housing policy is more salient (measured both objectively and subjectively).*

H4 Tests: As shown in Figure E-7, this hypothesis is **partially supported**. Figure E-7 shows that higher self-reported salience of housing predicts lower misperceptions in support. However, the various objective measures of housing cost salience (housing cost burden and market tightness) have smaller and mixed effects. As an observational measure, only increasing district renter share consistently predicts lower misperceptions.

Hypothesis 5 (H5). *The gap between politician support for the policy less district public opinion will be predicted by:*

- *H5a: a negative gap for all three policies (politician support is lower than the public) will be predicted by ranking meeting attendees higher.*
- *H5b: a positive gap for the two supply side reforms will be predicted by politicians ranking business leaders as more important (and vice versa for rent control).*
- *H5c: because fiscal considerations may constrain the choices of elected officials, politicians ranking fiscal balance as highly influential and ranking a policy as a fiscal net negative will show greater incongruence with their constituents in the form of a negative gap.*

H5 Tests:

- H5a: As shown in Figure F-14 and Table F-10, this hypothesis is **not supported**. Ranking meeting attendees as a more important influence does not consistently predict lower rates of agreement.
- H5b: As shown in Figure F-14 and Table F-10, this hypothesis is **not supported**. Ranking business leaders as a more important influence, if anything, is associated with lower rates of agreement.
- H5c: As shown in Figure F-16, this hypothesis is **not supported**. Ranking fiscal balance as a more important influence does not affect the relationship between congruence and expected policy effects.

Exploratory Hypotheses. *In addition to our formal hypotheses, there are number of research questions we plan to address using exploratory analyses.*[14] *We do not have theory-driven predictions for these tests. As a result, we will report the analyses but interpret them with more reservation. The exploratory analyses will investigate misperception among the following subgroups:*

[14] *Note: Results for these analyses will be reported in future drafts.*

- *Partisanship of elected officials*
- *District-level variables*
  - *Competitive districts*
  - *Local v. state office*
  - *At-large v. district for local officials*
  - *Nonpartisan elections*
  - *Form of government (e.g., council-manager)*
  - *Professionalized legislatures (for state elected officials)*

Exploratory Tests:

- Partisanship: As shown in Table D-6, Republican legislators express lower support for all 3 housing policies. Because constituencies do not polarize to a similar extent and voter support for affordable housing tax incentives and rent control is very high, Republican legislators are far less congruent on these two policies compared to Democratic legislators.
- Competitive districts:: *pending.*
- Local v. state office: For practical reasons, we are conducting our analysis of state legislators in a separate manuscript. We will note differential patterns between these offices in that latter manuscript.
- At-large v. district for local officials: As shown in Figure D-3, ward legislators show slightly higher levels of agreement with constituents for affordable housing tax incentives and rent control compared to at-large legislators.
- Nonpartisan elections : *pending.*
- Form of government (e.g., council-manager): : *pending.*
- Professionalized legislatures (for state elected officials): We will report these results in the state legislator manuscript.

D Congruence

The following section presents alternative analyses related to the main congruence and agreement results.

D.1 Congruence by Local Officials Characteristics

Table D-6 replicates Table 2 by the self-reported party of each local official. Measures of congruence and agreement differ little by party for zoning reform. However, Republicans and Independents show lower levels of congruence and agreement for affordable housing tax incentives and rent control relative to Democrats. Because their voters do not polarize as much, Republican and Independent legislators exhibit worse congruence with their constituents on these two policies, compared to Democratic legislators.

Table D-6: Policy Support and Congruence, by Legislator Partisanship

Policy / Legislator party	**N**	**Policymaker Support (%)**	**Public Support (%)**	**Congruence (%)**	**Agreement (%)**
Zoning Reform					
Democrat	453	75.5%	53.9%	66.0%	53.0%
Independent	250	57.2%	51.9%	61.6%	52.2%
Republican	200	41.5%	48.3%	63.5%	52.5%
Other	40	57.5%	53.6%	67.5%	53.2%
Affordable Housing					
Democrat	453	89.2%	78.0%	89.2%	72.1%
Independent	250	67.2%	75.6%	67.2%	59.9%
Republican	200	56.0%	73.0%	56.0%	53.1%
Other	40	80.0%	77.5%	80.0%	68.0%
Rent Control					
Democrat	453	49.0%	77.5%	49.0%	50.4%
Independent	250	28.0%	75.5%	28.0%	39.9%
Republican	200	11.5%	75.2%	11.5%	30.5%
Other	40	55.0%	77.5%	55.0%	56.3%

Figure D-3 plots the agreement rates by various characteristics of local officials in our sample. Agreement varies very little across all characteristics for zoning reform. Conversely, ward-based, Black, Latino, female, and urban local officials all display higher rates of agreement for affordable housing tax incentives and rent control.

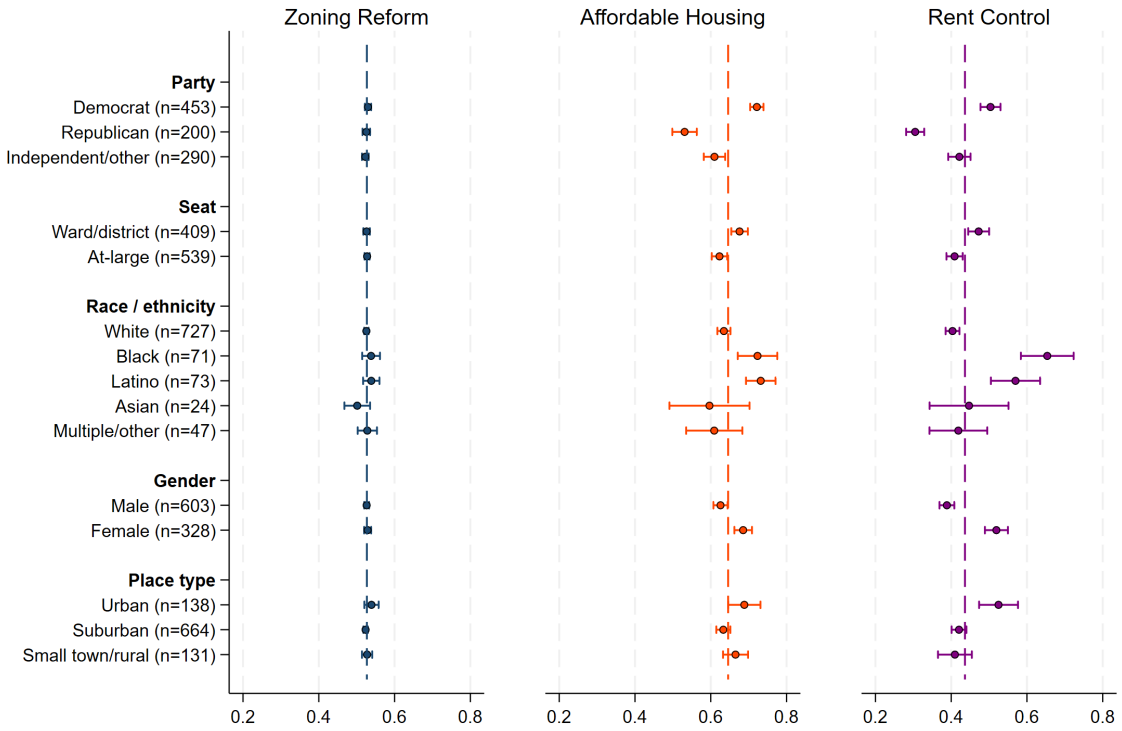


Figure D-3: Agreement with local officials' votes by officials' self-reported party identification, district type, race, gender, and density of the district they represent. Dashed lines lines represent each policy's sample mean agreement rate.

D.2 Alternative Modeling and Weighting

To assess the extent to which non-response affects our substantive conclusions, we weight the 745 respondents linked to the voter file in two stages. First, we rake the linked members of the sampling frame to the complete frame based on census region, contact tier, and KnowWho-recorded gender, as these are the characteristics available for every official. Second, we rake respondents to the full frame on region and tier and to the weighted linked frame on voter-file party, race, gender, age, and education. Table D-7 reports levels of policymaker support, congruence, and agreement using all respondents, matched respondents (unweighted), and matched respondents (weighted). No estimate moves by more than 2.3 percentage points.

Table D-7: Policy Support and Congruence, Weighted to the Sampling Frame

Policy / Sample	**N**	**Policy-maker Support (%)**	**Public Support (%)**	**Congru-ence (%)**	**Agreement (%)**
Zoning Reform					
All respondents, unweighted (main text)	948	62.6%	52.2%	64.2%	52.7%
Matched respondents, unweighted	745	63.0%	52.6%	64.2%	52.6%
Matched respondents, weighted	745 (622)	60.3%	52.1%	63.2%	52.5%
Affordable Housing					
All respondents, unweighted (main text)	948	75.7%	76.3%	75.7%	64.6%
Matched respondents, unweighted	745	76.0%	76.4%	76.0%	64.7%
Matched respondents, weighted	745 (622)	74.2%	76.1%	74.2%	63.7%
Rent Control					
All respondents, unweighted (main text)	948	35.8%	76.5%	35.8%	43.6%
Matched respondents, unweighted	745	36.4%	76.6%	36.4%	43.9%
Matched respondents, weighted	745 (622)	36.7%	76.8%	36.7%	44.2%

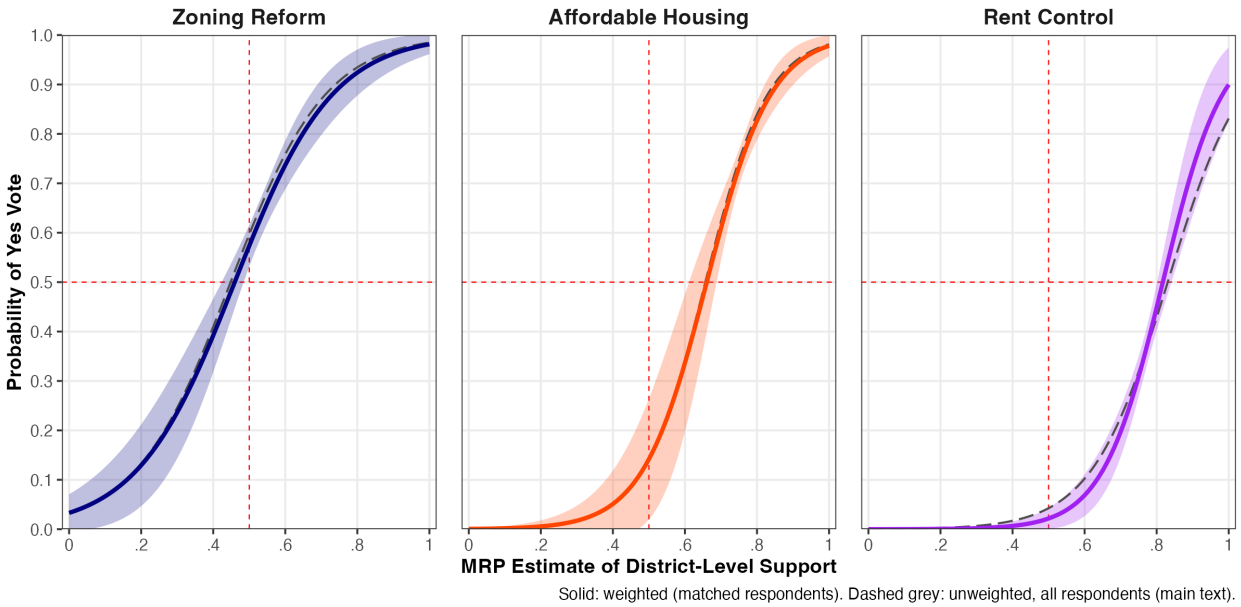


Figure D-4: Predicted probability of councilmember voting for a policy given district-level public opinion, with respondents matched to the voter file and weighted to the sampling frame (solid line; 95% confidence intervals shaded). The dashed grey line is the unweighted curve from Figure 1. Dotted lines show the 50% marks in opinion support and policy probability.

D.3 Relationship to Misperceptions

Do larger misperceptions in public opinion predict larger gaps in policy incongruence? To answer this, we operationalize district-level representation as policy "agreement" (Caughey and Warshaw 2022), the share of the public in a district that support their local officials' stated policy position. Figure D-5 uses nonparametric kernel regressions to compare policy agreement against councilmember misperception (the gap between perceived and actual district-level public opinion). Regression lines for zoning reform and affordable housing incentives are curved with maxima near 0 on the x-axis, indicating that councilmembers' policy positions are most aligned with public opinion when the councilmembers have the most accurate perceptions of public opinion. Critically, these curves are nonparametric, so the presence of a maxima is not model-dependent.

For all policies, agreement is lowest when misperceptions are the largest. Both affordable housing and zoning reform feature maxima near where councilmembers have the most accurate perceptions of public opinion. For rent control, this is not as clearly the case, and we cannot say for sure that policy agreement is greatest when misperceptions are at their minimum. We note, however that there are very few observations with a positive gap in perception for both affordable housing tax incentives and rent control. Given this, the continued positive slope suggests that legislators have more accurate perceptions of public opinion have increased agreement, a finding consistent with H2.

Notably, the curves also have different magnitudes primarily due the distribution of public opinion. The more severe curves for affordable housing tax incentives and rent control reflect the concentration of true public opinion estimates between 60% and 80% support. Given public support is so high, the average level of agreement is able to extend as high as .75 for councilmembers in favor of affordable housing tax incentives and rent control. In contrast, public support for zoning reform is concentrated between 40% and 60%, meaning the average share of the public agreeing

with any given policy is largely limited to this narrow range.

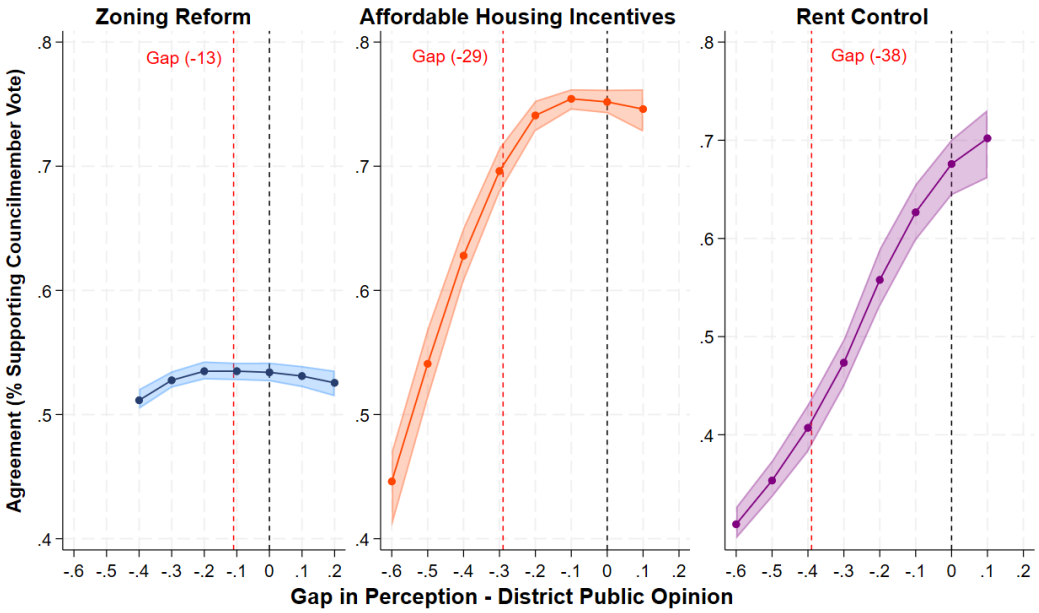


Figure D-5: Agreement between councilmember position and public support compared to councilmember misperception of public support. Red dotted line indicates the average gap between perception and public opinion for that policy.

D.4 State Preemption

One concern about our main findings related to congruence and agreement is that local officials are responding based on constraints imposed by state laws. This is especially relevant for rent control, as rent control is explicitly preempted in 31 states. Table D-8 shows the subgroup results for congruence and agreement by if a local official represents a municipality in a state which preempts rent control. Congruence and agreement are only slightly lower in states which preempt rent control, but these differences are not statistically significant.

D.5 Fiscal Health

If cities are truly fiscally constrained, then the level of fiscal health should moderate legislators' ability to respond to public opinion. Fiscally healthy cities should allow for greater responsiveness, whereas officials is fiscally unhealthy cities should be compelled to pursue budget positive policies and avoid budget negative policies, regardless of public opinion.

To assess this, we measure each municipality's debt burden using the Census of Governments. First, we scale outstanding debt and annual debt service to each cities total revenue. We then rank this ratio nationally so that higher values indicate healthier finances. We split respondents at the median of this score and estimate internal responsiveness curves for officials in the healthier and unhealthy halves, within each category of the official's expected budgetary impact (Figure D-6).

Results are mixed. Legislators who view a policy as budget negative do show polarization by expected effects. Among these legislators, those in fiscally less healthy cities substantially lag public opinion compared to their counterparts in fiscally healthy cities. But the pattern does not hold for

Table D-8: Rent control support and congruence by state preemption

	N	Officials' support (%)	Public support (%)	Congruence (%)	Agreement (%)
Panel A: Preemption states					
Preempted	595	35.8	77.1	35.8	43.4
Not preempted	353	35.7	75.4	35.7	44.0
Difference		0.1	1.7***	0.1	−0.6
		(3.4)	(0.5)	(3.4)	(1.8)
Panel B: Preemption + Dillon Rule states					
Preempted	639	35.4	77.0	35.4	43.2
Not preempted	309	36.6	75.3	36.6	44.6
Difference		−1.2	1.6***	−1.2	−1.4
		(3.6)	(0.5)	(3.6)	(1.9)
All members	948	35.8	76.5	35.8	43.6

Note: Panel A codes states that explicitly preempt rent control; Panel B also counts Dillon Rule states (AK, NV, PA, VT, VA, WV), which do not explicitly preempt rent control, but require permission from the state. Difference = preempted − not preempted, in percentage points, from OLS with standard errors clustered by place in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

affordable housing tax incentives, thus we consider this suggestive evidence of moderation by city fiscal health.

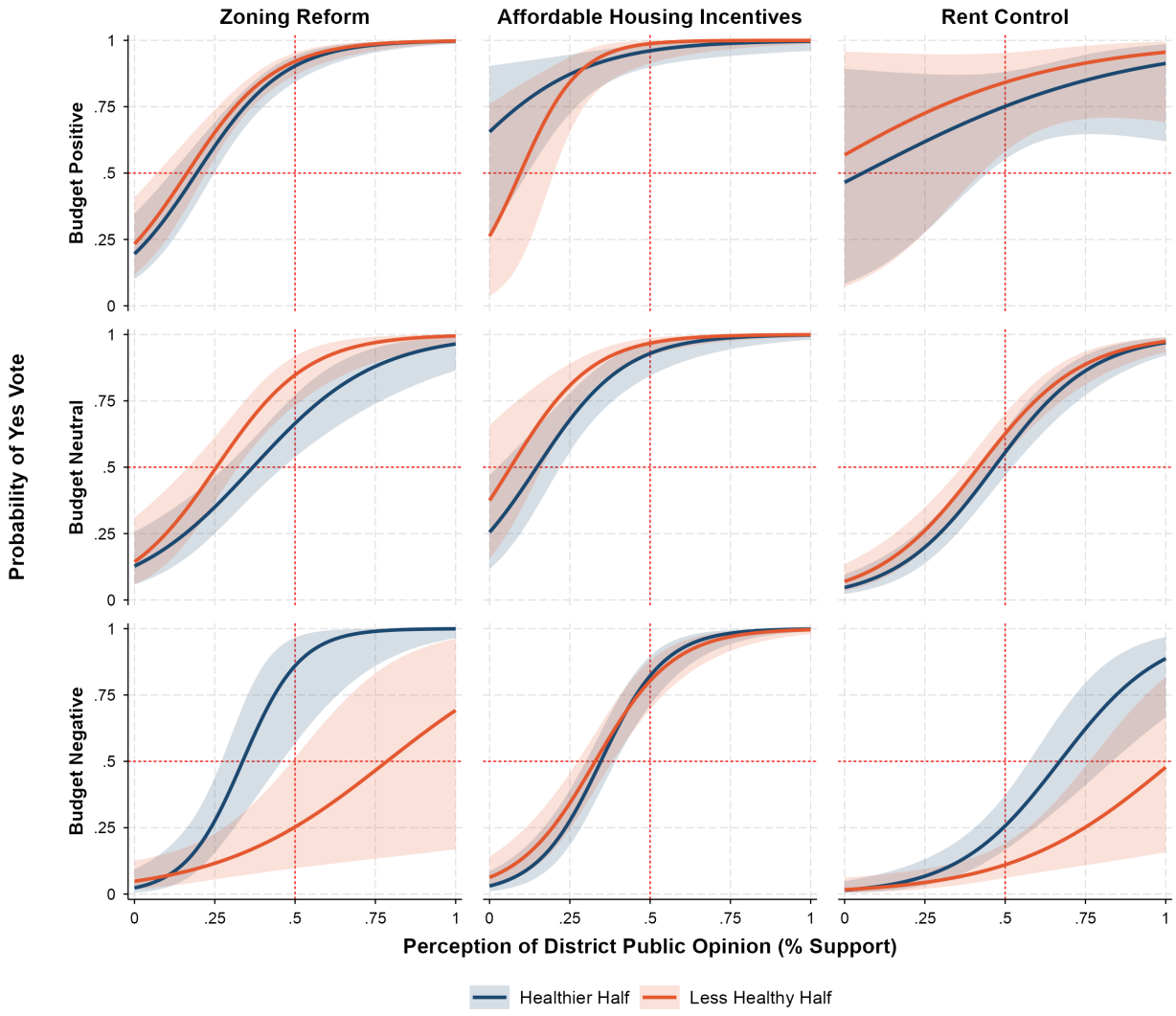


Figure D-6: Predicted probability of a legislator supporting each policy given their perception of district support, by municipal fiscal health and the expected budgetary impact of the policy. Fiscal health is a debt-burden score from the Census of Governments. Cities are split at the sample median. Curves are logistic regressions estimated separately for each group. 95% confidence intervals are clustered by municipality.

E Misperceptions

The following section explores possible explanations of local officials' misperceptions of public opinion, including: housing issue salience (Section E.1); interest group influence (Section E.2); and party identification, seat type, district characteristics, and local official descriptive characteristics (Section E.3). Finally, Section E.4 displays alternative modeling specifications for misperceptions.

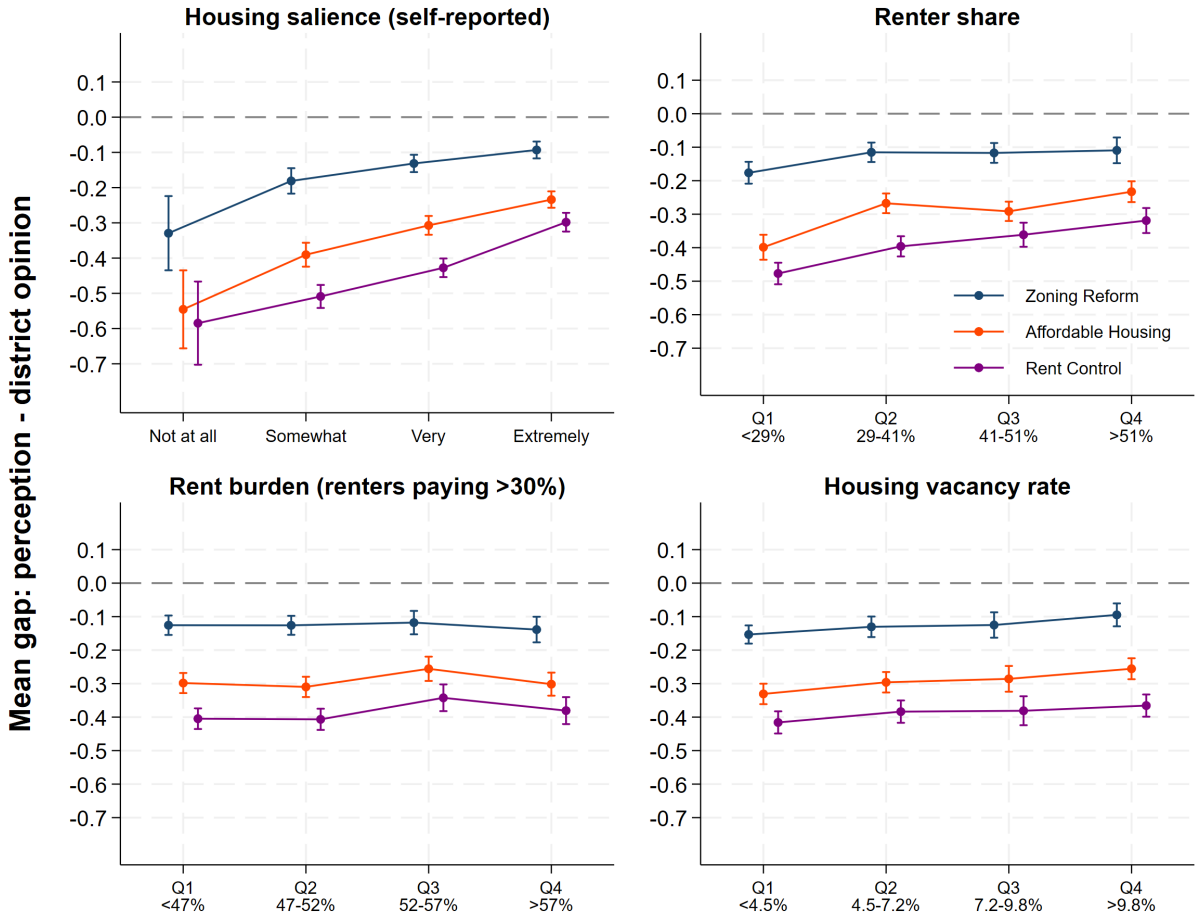
E.1 Housing Issue Salience on Misperceptions

One potential source of misperceptions is linked to the salience of local housing costs. In our pre-registration, we anticipated lower misperceptions in places where the affordability crisis is more

acute. Specifically, we expected that low issue salience may mean that the only people participating via public meetings and contact are anti-housing, "neighborhood defender" types of residents. In contrast, high housing policy salience may lead to more participation across demographic groups, providing a more representative sense of public support for these housing policies. To test this possibility, we measure housing issue salience using both self-reported and a variety of objective measures of local housing affordability.

Figure E-7 plots the point estimate of local official misperception of district public opinion for four measures. The top left-hand panel shows the self-reported measure. Specifically, we asked "Next, we have a question about what voters care about in your district. While this issue matters more in some areas than others, how important do you believe rising home prices and rents are to voters in your district?" The response options ranged from not at all to extremely important. As the figure shows, higher self-reported housing issue salience predicts smaller misperceptions. Of course, local officials who are interested in housing policy may also believe that it is a high priority issue, and these officials may also may invest greater time information gathering their constituents' attitudes on these topics.

Consequently, we also evaluate various objective measures, on the assumption that these measures should correlate with higher housing affordability issue salience. However, objective measures of housing affordability show mixed results. The share of renters who pay more than 30% of their incomes on rent (the definition of rent burdened) and the housing vacancy rate (a proxy for housing demand) do not consistently predict lower misperceptions. Only a higher share of renters in the local officials' district predicts lower misperceptions.



Note: Quartiles use national cutoffs from all U.S. Census places, weighted by population (ACS 2020-2024). Points are mean gaps within each group; 95% CIs clustered by place.

Figure E-7: Local officials' misperception of public opinion by multiple measures of housing affordability issue salience. For objective measures, points are mean perception gaps within quartiles of each measure. Bars are 95% confidence intervals treating, clustered at the census place level. Dashed line at zero represents fully accurate perceptions of public opinion.

E.2 Interest Group Influence on Misperceptions

Another possible source of misperceptions is the influence of local interest groups. As reported later in Section F, we asked politicians to rank the importance of five influences in their policy making. We use these rankings to see if they are associated with variation in perception of public opinion. Figure E-8 plots the descriptive results (the rankings are treated as categorical variables), while Table E-9 columns "Full" shows regression results (the rankings are treated as continuous variables). Both show that for all policies, interest rankings do not consistently predict different perceptions, with the exception of nonprofits/unions. Ranking nonprofits/unions as more important consistently predicts lower misperceptions for all three policies.

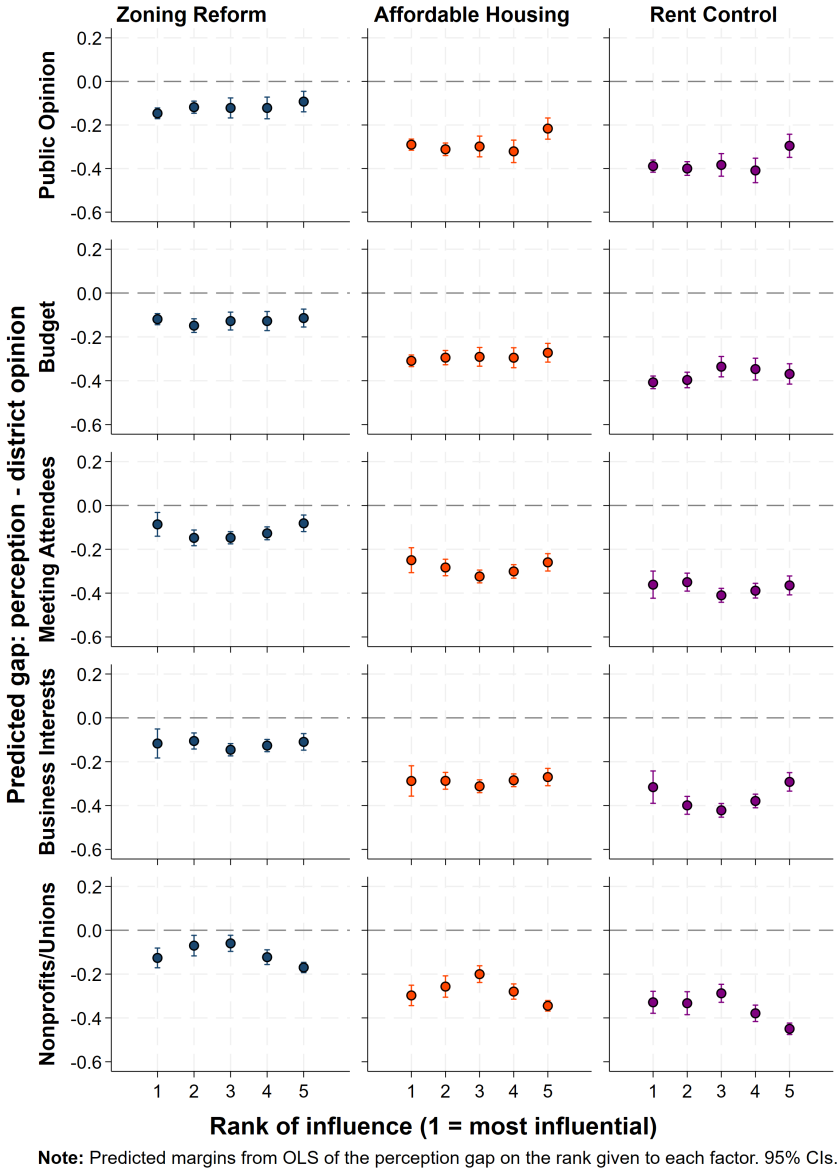


Figure E-8: Local officials' misperception of public opinion by influence ranking. Dashed line at zero represents fully accurate perceptions of public opinion.

However, as later shown in Figure F-12, public opinion and budget are most commonly ranked as the most or second most important influence. As these two influences dominate, we also show these relationships removing these top two influences, to explore if the relative ranking of the remaining three influences is associated with different perceptions of public opinion. Figure E-9 plots the results of these relative rankings, and Table E-9 columns "Relative" show the regression results. Under these relative rankings, ranking nonprofits/unions as more important consistently predicts lower misperceptions, especially for rent control. Conversely, ranking business interests as more important predicts larger mipserceptions for affordable housing and rent control, but not for zoning reform. Finally, ranking meeting attendees as more important predicts larger misperceptions for zoning reform, but not for affordable housing and rent control.

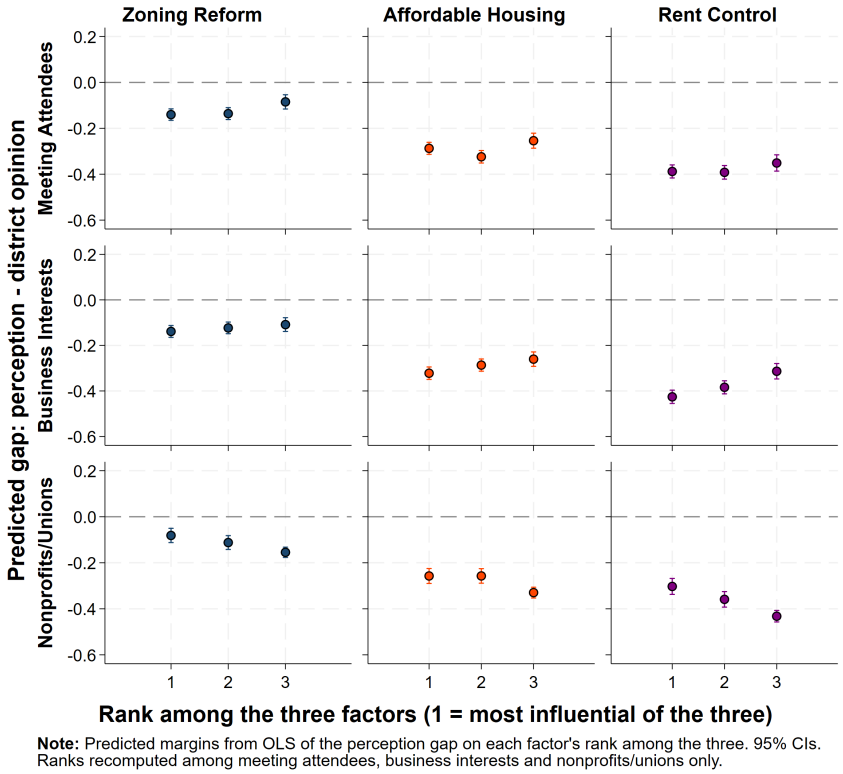


Figure E-9: Local officials' misperception of public opinion by influence ranking, less public opinion and municipal budget as possible influences. The remaining three influences are the ranks relative to eachother. Dashed line at zero represents fully accurate perceptions of public opinion.

Table E-9: Misperceptions by influence ranking

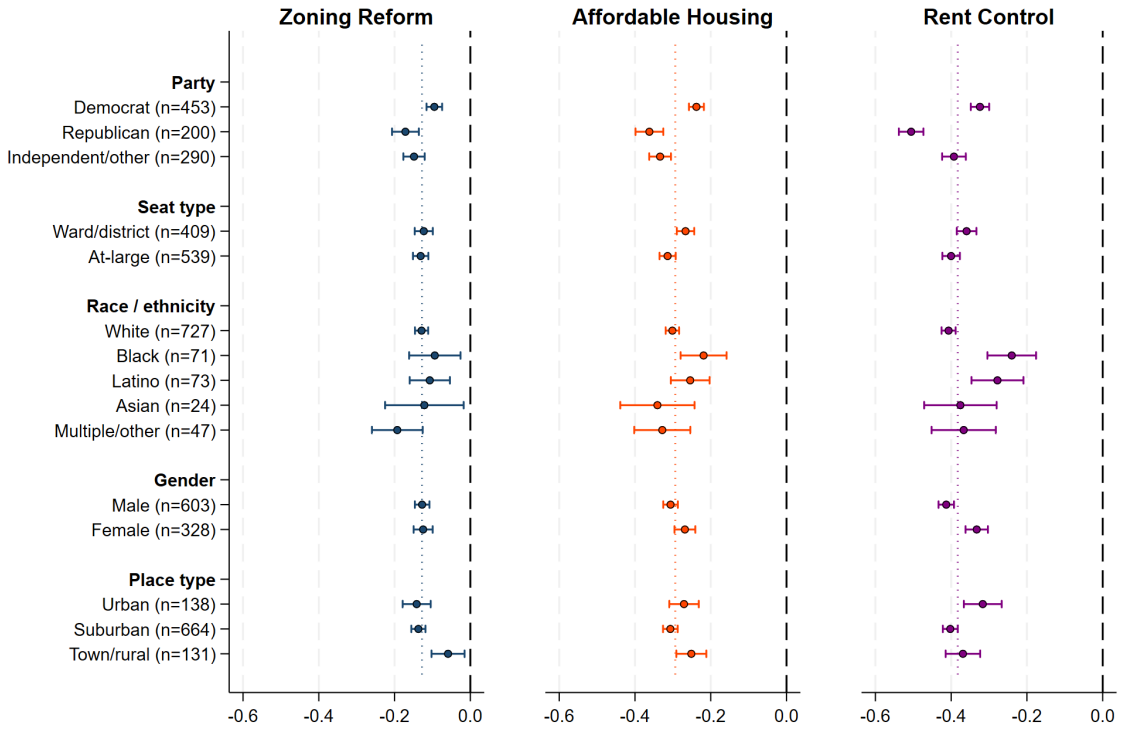
	Zoning reform		Affordable housing		Rent control	
	Full	Relative	Full	Relative	Full	Relative
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A: Public opinion						
Importance	−0.011*		−0.010		−0.014**	
	(0.006)		(0.006)		(0.006)	
Constant	−0.096***		−0.266***		−0.344***	
	(0.019)		(0.019)		(0.020)	
N	859		859		859	
R^2	0.004		0.003		0.005	
Panel B: Budget impact						
Importance	−0.001		−0.008		−0.014**	
	(0.005)		(0.006)		(0.006)	
Constant	−0.125***		−0.277***		−0.345***	
	(0.016)		(0.016)		(0.018)	
N	862		862		862	
R^2	0.000		0.002		0.006	
Panel C: Meeting attendees						
Importance	−0.009	−0.026***	0.000	−0.012	0.004	−0.017
	(0.006)	(0.010)	(0.007)	(0.010)	(0.008)	(0.012)
Constant	−0.111***	−0.095***	−0.293***	−0.278***	−0.389***	−0.361***
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.015)
N	855	812	855	812	855	812
R^2	0.002	0.008	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.003
Panel D: Business interests						
Importance	0.000	−0.015	−0.006	−0.031***	−0.020**	−0.055***
	(0.007)	(0.010)	(0.007)	(0.010)	(0.008)	(0.012)
Constant	−0.125***	−0.108***	−0.281***	−0.258***	−0.344***	−0.320***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.017)	(0.016)
N	855	812	855	812	855	812
R^2	0.000	0.003	0.001	0.011	0.008	0.028
Panel E: Nonprofits/unions						
Importance	0.021***	0.037***	0.022***	0.039***	0.038***	0.065***
	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.010)	(0.006)	(0.011)
Constant	−0.154***	−0.153***	−0.322***	−0.323***	−0.431***	−0.430***
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
N	854	812	854	812	854	812
R^2	0.017	0.018	0.017	0.019	0.041	0.044
Outcome mean	−0.128		−0.294		−0.383	
N (all respondents)	904		904		904	

Note: Outcome: perceived − MRP district support (negative = underestimate). Each cell block is a separate OLS regression of the outcome on the factor's importance (reverse coded). Full: importance = 5 − rank among all five factors (0 = ranked last, 4 = ranked first). Relative: importance = 3 − rank among meeting attendees, business interests and nonprofits/unions only (0 = least influential of the three, 2 = most), and public opinion and the budget are not part of this ranking. A positive coefficient means ranking the factor as more influential is associated with smaller misperceptions. The constant term is the predicted misperception when the influence is ranked last. Outcome mean is the unconditional mean across all respondents. Standard errors clustered by place in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

E.3 Other Possible Sources of Misperceptions

Finally, we examine if various other factors are associated with greater or lower levels of misperceptions. These include: local officials' self-reported party identification and descriptive characteristics, if their district is at-large or ward-based, and how urban their district is.

Figure E-10 plots the results. Republican party identification is associated with larger misperceptions for all three housing policies than the sample average, and the opposite is true for Democrats. This may be due to co-partisan constituent contact or information seeking. At-large members have slightly smaller misperceptions than ward/district members for affordable housing tax incentives and rent control, but these effects are small. The same is true for gender, where female officials had slightly smaller misperceptions compared to male respondents. Some of the larger effects are by the race of local officials: Black and Latino local officials had lower levels of misperceptions for affordable housing tax incentives and rent control relative to White officials. Finally, officials representing urban districts had slightly smaller misperceptions about rent control, as do officials representing non-metro towns or rural areas about zoning reform. However, across all subgroups, local officials systematically underestimate public support for all three policies.



Perception gap: member's perceived support - MRP district support
Note: Means with 95% CIs clustered by place. Dashed lines at zero policy perception gap. Dotted lines at the policy's sample mean perception gap. Urban places are defined as in an MSA with at least 5,000 people/sq mi; suburban places are in an MSA below that; town/rural are outside an MSA.

Figure E-10: Local officials' misperception of public opinion by self-reported party identification, district type, race, gender, and density of the district they represent. Dashed lines at zero represents fully accurate perceptions of public opinion. Dotted lines represent each policy's sample mean misperception.

E.4 Alternative Misperception Modeling

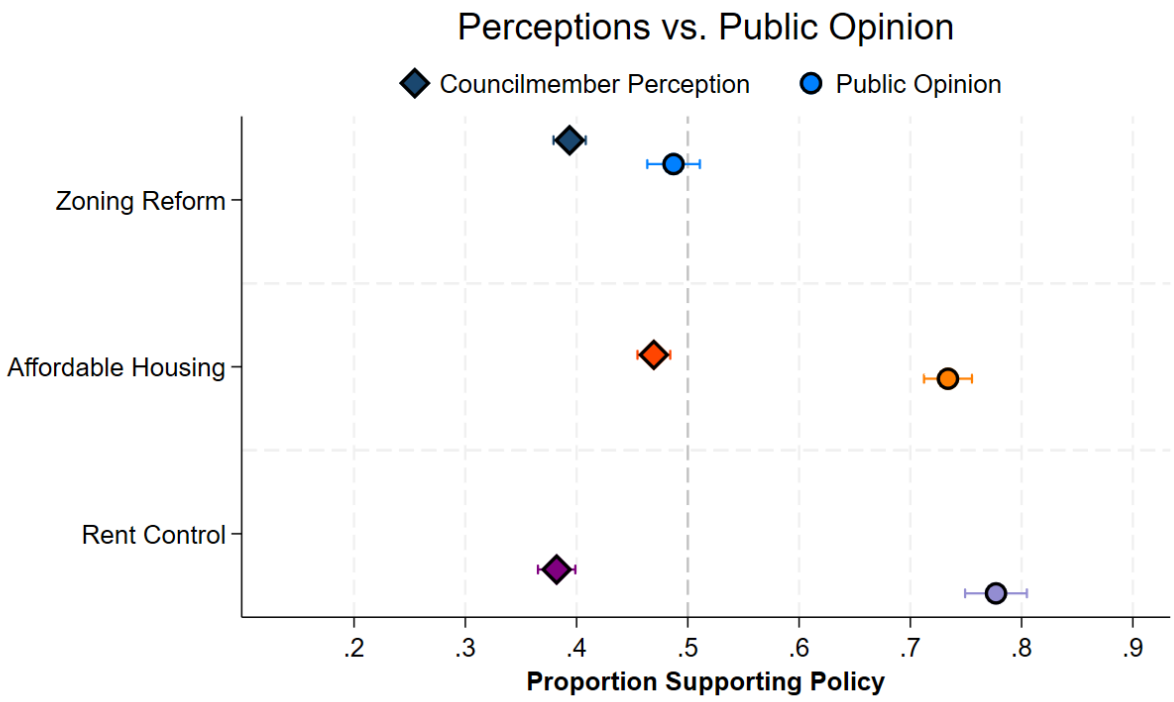


Figure E-11: Councilmember perception of policy support compared to public opinion as estimated using the grand mean approach.

F Interest Groups

To probe the influence of factors beyond public opinion on local officials' housing policy decision-making processes, we asked local officials to rank the importance of five factors. Specifically, we presented the following prompt: "Casting a vote as an elected official can be difficult and requires making tradeoffs between competing demands. When thinking about housing policy in your municipality, how important are the following influences? Please rank them from 1 (most influential) to 5 (least influential). Use each rank only once." The five factors were: the opinions of residents, the opinions of public meeting attendees, opinion of business leaders, opinion of non-profits/labor unions, and the expected impact on the municipal budget.

Figure F-12 shows the results. Public opinion and budget are nearly tied for being the top consideration and the majority of respondents place both of them in their "top 2" rankings; other factors were rated as less influential (Figure F-12).

However, as rankings may suffer from social desirability bias, we measure the influence of these five factors using an alternative conjoint experiment. Each respondent completed one conjoint task. We asked local officials' if they would vote to advance or deny "a proposal for a large, market-rate housing development" in their district. We showed two profiles and instructed respondents to imagine only one could advance to full city council vote. We asked respondents to imagine that "a staff member has compiled a report about the positions of key stakeholders." we fully randomized the following positions: a "representative public opinion poll of people living in your

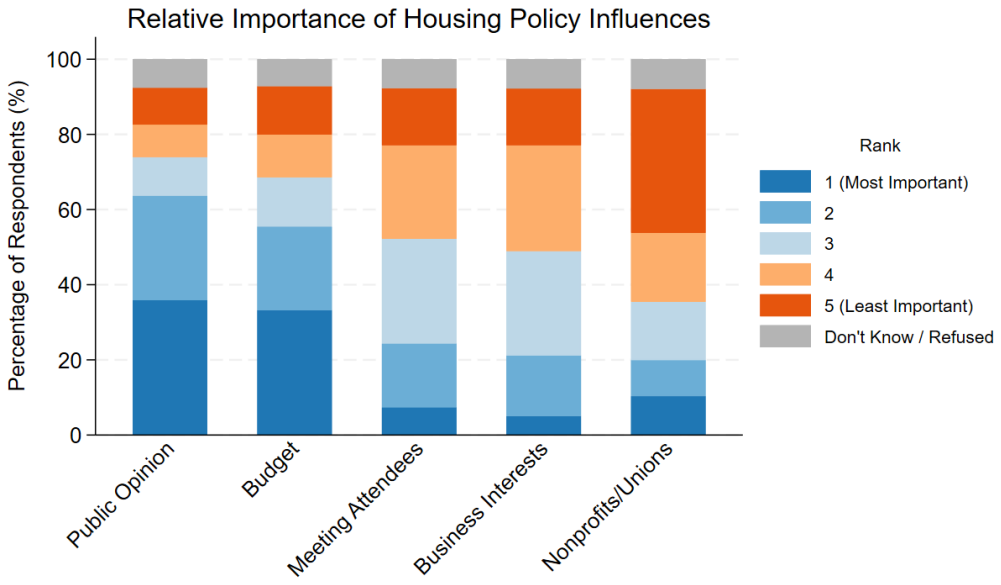


Figure F-12: Local officials' ranking of factors' influence on their housing policy decisions.

district" (25% support/75% support), "a collection of the comments of people who showed up to a meeting about the proposed development" (25% support/75% support), "a fiscal impact statement by the municipal finance department" (budget negative/budget positive), a statement by the local chamber of commerce (oppose/support), and a statement by a collection of community non-profits (oppose/support). Figure F-13 shows the results. We find that public opinion and fiscal impacts produce the largest effects. These results mirror the rank ordering: large effects of public opinion and impacts on the budget that are effectively tied in magnitude, followed by more modest effects by other interest groups. This should assuage some concern that the rank order is purely the result of social desirability bias.

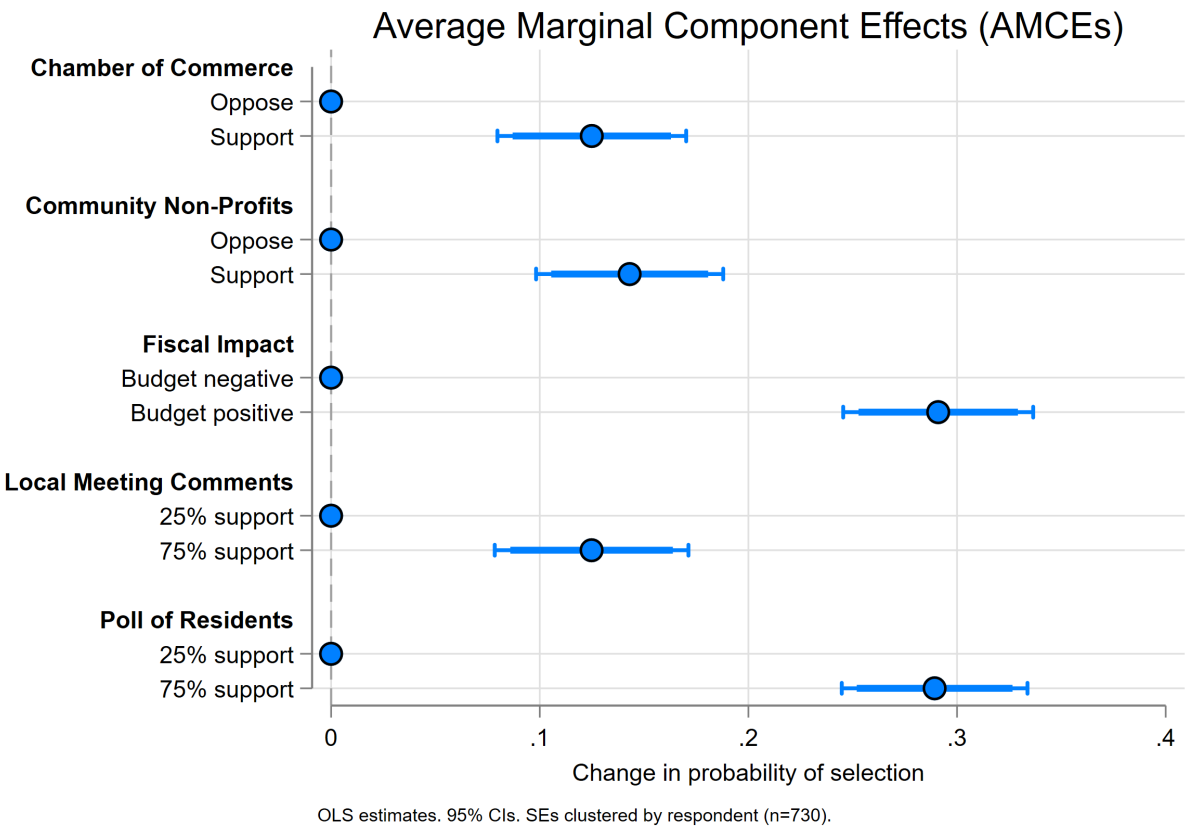
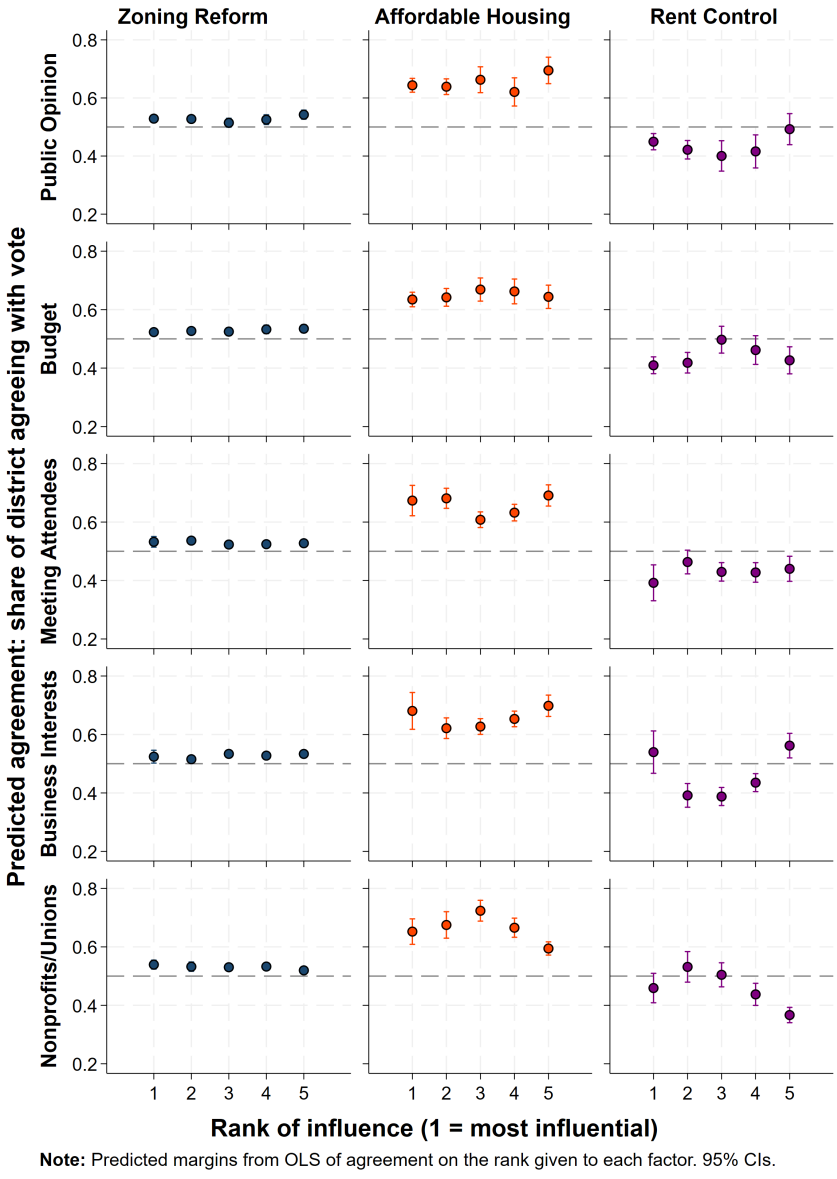


Figure F-13: Average Marginal Component Effects from conjoint experiment

F.1 Interest Group Influence on Agreement

Next, we explore if these rankings are associated with different levels of policy agreement. Figure F-14 plots the descriptive results (the rankings are treated as categorical variables), while Table F-10 columns "Full" shows regression results (the rankings are treated as continuous variables). These results mirror the same substantive conclusions of the association of rankings on misperceptions. Higher rankings of public opinion, budget, and meeting attendees do not consistently predict higher or lower levels of policy agreement. However, ranking nonprofits/unions as a more important influence consistently predicts higher agreement, and the opposite is true for higher rankings of business interests. These effects are larger when only subset to the relative ranking (columns "Relative"), which exclude public opinion and budget impacts.



Note: Predicted margins from OLS of agreement on the rank given to each factor. 95% CIs.

Figure F-14: Agreement with local officials' stated votes for each policy by influence ranking. Dashed line at 0.5 represents half of the officials' constituents agreeing with the vote.

Table F-10: Agreement by influence ranking

	Zoning reform		Affordable housing		Rent control	
	Full	Relative	Full	Relative	Full	Relative
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A: Public opinion						
Importance	−0.001		−0.007		−0.003	
	(0.002)		(0.006)		(0.007)	
Constant	0.532***		0.668***		0.445***	
	(0.006)		(0.017)		(0.022)	
N	876		876		876	
R^2	0.000		0.002		0.000	
Panel B: Budget impact						
Importance	−0.003		−0.005		−0.011*	
	(0.002)		(0.005)		(0.006)	
Constant	0.534***		0.659***		0.460***	
	(0.006)		(0.015)		(0.019)	
N	880		880		880	
R^2	0.003		0.001		0.003	
Panel C: Meeting attendees						
Importance	0.002	−0.002	0.000	−0.015	−0.001	−0.017
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.007)	(0.012)
Constant	0.523***	0.531***	0.647***	0.663***	0.436***	0.454***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.016)
N	875	829	875	829	875	829
R^2	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.003	0.000	0.003
Panel D: Business interests						
Importance	−0.003	−0.009***	−0.015**	−0.035***	−0.029***	−0.062***
	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.011)
Constant	0.534***	0.539***	0.674***	0.685***	0.488***	0.503***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.016)
N	874	829	874	829	874	829
R^2	0.003	0.009	0.006	0.015	0.015	0.034
Panel E: Nonprofits/unions						
Importance	0.005**	0.010***	0.022***	0.045***	0.036***	0.071***
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.011)
Constant	0.522***	0.520***	0.616***	0.612***	0.385***	0.381***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)
N	873	829	873	829	873	829
R^2	0.007	0.013	0.019	0.027	0.037	0.050
Outcome mean	0.527		0.646		0.436	
N (all respondents)	948		948		948	

Note: Outcome: share of the district agreeing with the member's vote (MRP support if the member votes yes, 1 − support if no). Each cell block is a separate OLS regression of the outcome on the factor's importance (reverse coded). Full: importance = 5 − rank among all five factors (0 = ranked last, 4 = ranked first). Relative: importance = 3 − rank among meeting attendees, business interests and nonprofits/unions only (0 = least influential of the three, 2 = most), and public opinion and the budget are not part of this ranking. A positive coefficient means ranking the factor as more influential is associated with higher agreement. The constant term is the predicted agreement when the influence is ranked last. Outcome mean is the unconditional mean across all respondents. Standard errors clustered by place in parentheses.* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Given the moderating effect of budget expectations on responsiveness, we also replicate the association between budget influence ranking on agreement by expected budget effects (positive/neutral or negative). Figure F-15 plots the results. While officials who anticipate the policy's impact to be budget positive/neutral show generally higher agreement than those who anticipate the impact to be negative, there is no systematic moderating effect. That is, ranking budget to be more important and anticipating a negative effect does not correspond to significantly lower agreement than ranking it as less important and anticipating a negative effect.

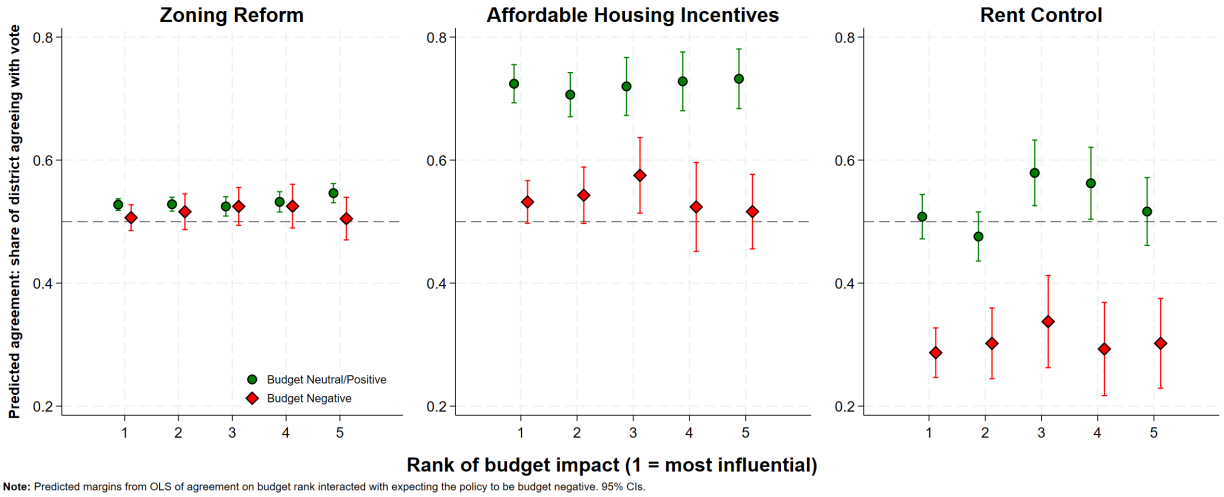


Figure F-15: Agreement with local officials' stated votes for each policy by budget influence ranking and expected budget impact. Dashed line at 0.5 represents half of the officials' constituents agreeing with the vote.

F.2 Interest Group Influence on Internal Responsiveness

Finally, as agreement rates can be influenced by misperceptions of public opinion, we also explore the moderating effect of the rankings of different interests on *internal responsiveness*. For ease of interpretation and to maximize statistical power, we show the internal responsiveness curves separately for if each influence was ranked first or second most important or if it was ranked third through fifth most important. However, results are substantively similar if we plot all five rankings separately (available upon request). Figure F-16 plots the results. As shown, the relative ranking of various influences have no consistent effects on internal responsiveness. This is unlike agreement and misperception, where the relative ranking of meeting attendees, business interests, and nonprofits/unions occasionally show impacts. This suggests that to the extent that different interest groups influence external responsiveness to public opinion, they may do so through their ability to shape perceptions of public opinion rather than a local officials' internal responsiveness.

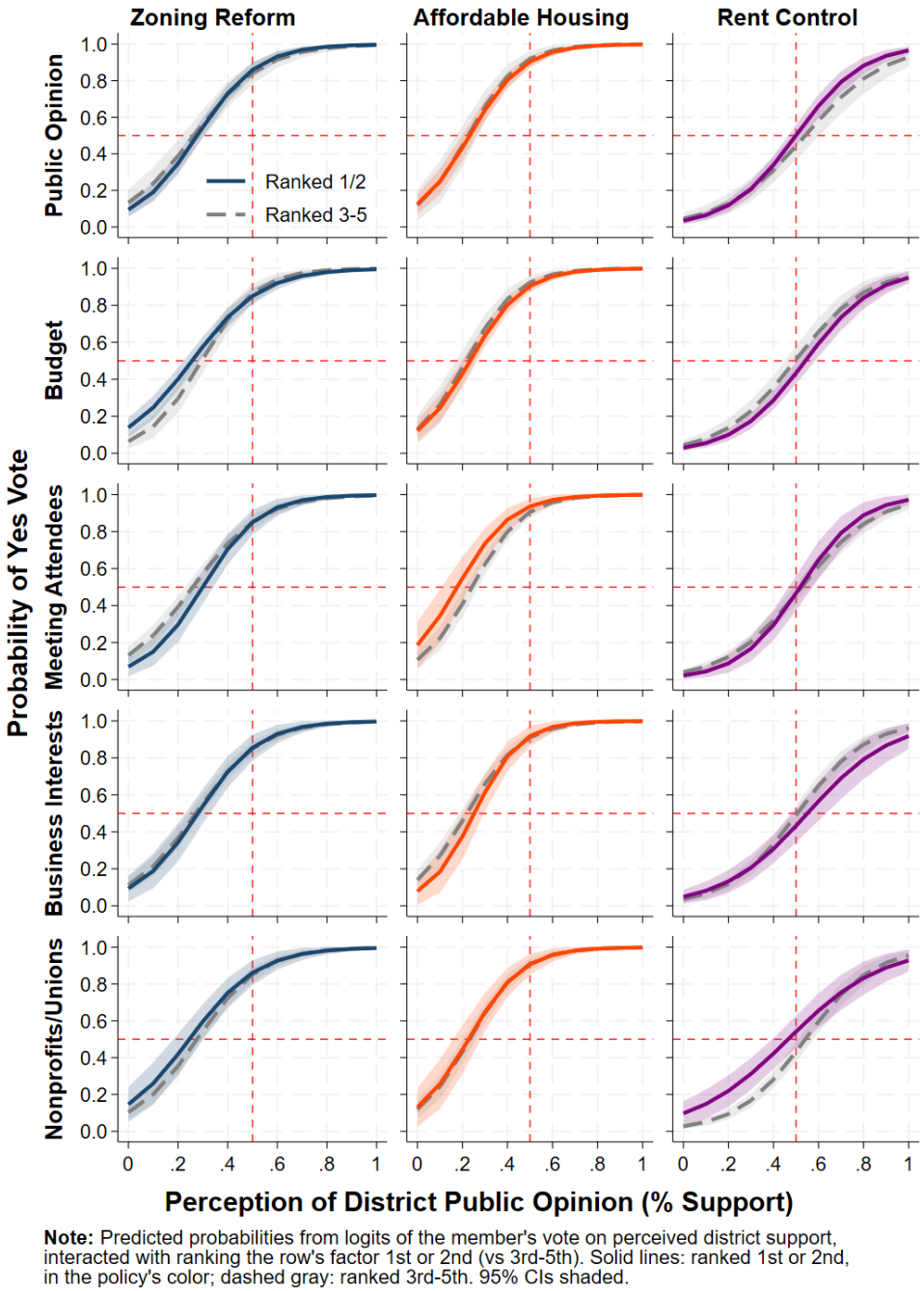


Figure F-16: Predicted probability of local official voting for a policy from a logistic regression curve given perceptions of district-level public opinion, by top 2 or bottom 3 influence ranking. Curves represent the predicted probabilities from a triple-interaction logistic regression. 95% confidence intervals shaded. Dotted lines show the 50% marks in opinion support and policy probability.

G Survey Question Wording

CES

1. Relax local zoning laws in your state to allow for construction of more apartments and condos.
2. Expand federal tax incentives to encourage developers to build homes for people who make less than half of the average income in your area.

Local Officials Survey

1. Lately, there's been growing discussion about housing affordability — rising home prices and rent. While this issue matters more in some areas than others, how important do you believe housing affordability is to voters in your district? [Extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not at all important]
   [LATER IN THE SURVEY]
2. If the following policy were proposed in your (municipality/State legislature), how would you vote? Yes/No [Forced choice. Rotate order of policies but have them remained fixed across questions within respondent.]
   - Relax local zoning laws to allow for construction of more apartments and condos.
   - Expand (local/State) tax incentives to encourage developers to build homes for people who make less than half of the average income in your area.
   - Implement rent controls that severely limit landlords from raising rents.
3. Next, we'd like to know generally how you make decisions about housing policy. How important are the following influences as you prepare to cast your vote? Please drag and drop the following items from 1 (most influential) to 5 (least influential). [Rotate influences].
   - Opinion of residents
   - Opinion of public meeting attendees
   - Expected impact on (municipal/state) budget
   - Opinion of business leaders
   - Opinion of non-profits/labor unions
4. We would also like to know about people in your (municipality/district). In your opinion, what percent of the people living in your (municipality/district) would support the following policy proposals? [Slider from 0 to 100% - default at N/A].
   - Relax local zoning laws to allow for construction of more apartments and condos.
   - Expand local tax incentives to encourage developers to build homes for people who make less than half of the average income in your area.
   - Implement rent controls that severely limit landlords from raising rents.
5. All things considered, what would be the effect of each policy on your city/state's budget. Net positive (increase revenue over costs) Net neutral Net negative (increase costs over revenue)
   - Relax local zoning laws to allow for construction of more apartments and condos.
   - Expand (local/State) tax incentives to encourage developers to build homes for people who make less than half of the average income in your area.
   - Implement rent controls that severely limit landlords from raising rents.