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# Do Americans Support More Housing?

Michael Lewyn



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## **Zoning and Land Use Planning**

### **Do Americans Support More Housing?**

*Michael Lewyn\**

As American zoning has become more restrictive,<sup>1</sup> housing construction has plummeted. During the 1970s, 17 million housing units were completed,<sup>2</sup> or roughly one unit for every 12 U.S. residents.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, during the 2010s, only 10.8 million units were completed,<sup>4</sup> or one for every 28 residents.<sup>5</sup> Construction of single-family structures decreased by about 14 percent between 1973 and 2022,<sup>6</sup> and construction of structures with five or more units decreased by 54 percent.<sup>7</sup>

And as supply has dwindled, housing costs have increased: between 1960 and 2014, median rents increased by 64 percent in real terms nationwide, while real household

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<sup>1</sup>See Been, *City NIMBYs*, J. Land Use & Envtl. L. 217, 222 (2018); Peter Ganong and Daniel Shoag, *Why Has Regional Income Convergence in the U.S. Declined?* 15, at [https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/shoag/files/why\\_has\\_regional\\_income\\_convergence\\_in\\_the\\_us\\_declined\\_01.pdf](https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/shoag/files/why_has_regional_income_convergence_in_the_us_declined_01.pdf) (growth in land use litigation evidence of increased regulation); Katherine Levine Einstein et. al., *Neighborhood Defenders* 12 (2020).

<sup>2</sup>See United States Census Bureau, *New Residential Construction*, at [https://www.census.gov/construction/nrc/historical\\_data/index.html](https://www.census.gov/construction/nrc/historical_data/index.html) ("Housing Units Completed" table) ("New Residential").

<sup>3</sup>In 1970, the U.S. had 203.3 million residents. See Sarah Janssen, ed., *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2023* at 609.

<sup>4</sup>See *New Residential*, *supra* note 2.

<sup>5</sup>See Janssen, *supra* note 3, at 609 (U.S. had 308.7 residents in 2010).

<sup>6</sup>See *New Residential*, *supra* note 2 (1.197 million completions in 1973, 1.022 million in 2022).

<sup>7</sup>*Id.* (779,800 completions in 1973, 359,100 in 2022). 1970s construction of such units averaged about 509,000 per year- higher than in any year since 1986. *Id.*

incomes increased by only 18 percent.<sup>8</sup> Over the last five years, rents have risen by 18 percent.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it appears that the law of supply and demand applies to housing: that is, reduced supply has led to higher costs.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>See Andrew Woo, *How Have Rents Changed Since 1960?*, Apartment List (June 14, 2016), <https://www.apartmentlist.com/rentonomics/rent-growth-since-1960> [<https://perma.cc/FBY9-PGGX>]. Purchase prices for houses have also increased rapidly. Between 1990 and 2022, the nominal cost of the median house increased from \$92,000 to \$423,300—almost a fourfold increase. See Janssen, *supra* note 3, at 77. By contrast, median household incomes are roughly two and a half times their 1990 level. See United States Census Bureau, *Historical Income Tables-Households*, at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-income-households.html> (Table H-6) (during this period, median household incomes increased from \$29,943 to just over \$70,000).

<sup>9</sup>See Katherine Schaeffer, *Key Facts About Housing Affordability in the U.S.* at <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/03/23/key-facts-about-housing-affordability-in-the-u-s/>.

<sup>10</sup>A significant amount of scholarship supports this view. See, e.g., Brian Asquith et. al., *Supply Shock Versus Demand Shock: The Local Effects of New Housing in Low-Income Areas 2*, at [https://direct.mit.edu/rest/article/doi/10.1162/rest\\_a.01055/100977/Local-Effects-of-Large-New-Apartment-Buildings-in](https://direct.mit.edu/rest/article/doi/10.1162/rest_a.01055/100977/Local-Effects-of-Large-New-Apartment-Buildings-in) (even in low-income areas, new housing reduces rents in the blocks closest to such housing); Cristina Bratu et. al., *City-wide effects of new housing supply: Evidence from Moving Chains*, at <https://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/181666> (finding similar pattern in European city); Bethel Cole-Smith and Daniel Muhammad, *The Effect of an Increasing Housing Supply on Housing Prices The Case of the District of Columbia 2000-2018 2*, at <https://cfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ocfo/publication/attachments/Housing%20Supply%20Bethel%20Cole%20Smit%20April%202020.pdf> (if housing supply had not increased in Washington, D.C. during 2010s, rents would have been 5.84 percent higher than they were); Xioadi Li, *Do New Housing Units In Your Backyard Raise Your Rents? 2*, at [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/7fc2bf\\_ee1737c3c9d4468881bf1434814a6f8f.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/7fc2bf_ee1737c3c9d4468881bf1434814a6f8f.pdf) (in New York City, for every 10 percent increase in the housing stock, rents fell by 1 percent compared to areas without new housing); Kate Pennington, *Does Building New Supply Cause Displacement? The Supply and Demand Effects of Construction in San Francisco*, 5 at <https://www.gwern.net/docs/economics/2020-pennington.pdf> (monthly rents fall by 1.2–2.3 percent in San Francisco within 500 meters of a new project). Cf. Shane Phillips et. al., *Research Roundup: The Effect of Market-Rate Development on Neighborhood Rents*, at <https://www.lewis.ucla.edu/research/market-rate-development-impacts/> (summarizing relevant research in more detail, including studies that are less conclusive than those cited above); Michael Lewyn, *Downtown Condos for the Rich: Not All Bad*, 51 New Mexico L. Rev. 400, 415–22 (2020) (responding to claims that new construction would not lower housing costs).

One argument for the status quo is that zoning simply reflects public opinion: that is, that Americans simply do not want new housing for anyone but themselves.<sup>11</sup> But is this actually what Americans believe? In this article, I seek to use data from recent opinion polls to answer that question.

### I. Americans Support New Housing

Poll data shows that when asked about the desirability of housing, Americans in fact support more housing. For example, a 2022 Yougov poll asked a sample of American adults “Do you support or oppose building more single-family houses in this country?”<sup>12</sup> 90 percent of respondents said yes.<sup>13</sup> When asked about single-family housing in their “local area”, 81 percent said yes.<sup>14</sup> When asked about apartment buildings, 76 percent favored more apartments nationally, and 65 percent favored more apartments in their local area.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, a 2023 National Association of Realtors (NAR) survey asked Americans in the fifty largest metropolitan areas: “In your opinion, how good or bad an idea is it to build more of the following types of housing in your community?”<sup>16</sup> 50 percent of respondents responded that more rental apartments would be a “good idea” while only 26 percent responded that more apartments would be a “bad idea.”<sup>17</sup> Other forms of housing were even more popular: respondents believed that new attached housing such as

<sup>11</sup>In a recent article for this journal, I argued that zoning might not reflect the desires of municipal residents because people who attend hearings are unrepresentative of the public. See Michael Lewyn, *Does Democracy Justify Zoning?*, 51 Real Est. L.J. 95, 98–101 (2022). But in that article, I did not address poll data showing what the public actually believes.

<sup>12</sup>Yougov, *Attitudes on Development and Zoning- Yougov Poll, June 9–13, 2022*, at <https://today.yougov.com/topics/economy/articles-reports/2022/07/14/development-and-zoning-yougov-poll-june-2022> (go to “Toplines” link; question 43) (“Yougov June 2022”).

<sup>13</sup>*Id.*

<sup>14</sup>*Id.* (question 44).

<sup>15</sup>*Id.* (questions 45 and 46).

<sup>16</sup>National Association of Realtors, *NAR Community and Transportation Preference Surveys* at <https://www.nar.realtor/reports/nar-community-and-transportation-preference-surveys> (question at page 10 of “Topline Results” link; methodology on main page).

<sup>17</sup>*Id.*

townhomes were a good idea by a 54 percent to 19 percent margin, new single-family homes on small lots were a good idea by a 66 percent to 12 percent margin, and new single-family homes on large lots were a good idea by a 51 percent to 21 percent margin.<sup>18</sup>

A study by Zillow.com asked persons living in twenty-nine large metropolitan areas about a variety of types of housing, and also found that the majority of respondents favored new multifamily housing in the abstract.<sup>19</sup> 70 percent agreed that allowing "small and medium apartments in residential neighborhoods would have a positive impact on availability of more affordable housing options"<sup>20</sup> Even when asked about housing in their own neighborhoods, majorities favored some types of housing: 57 percent of respondents "agreed that they would support a multifamily residence like an apartment building being built in their neighborhood,"<sup>21</sup> while only 36 percent disagreed.<sup>22</sup>

## II. More Ambiguous Data

Even though Americans generally favor new housing, this support can easily be altered by how a question is worded.

### A. Yes, But Not Near Me

The Zillow survey also shows that people are less willing to support new housing in their own neighborhood than in their country or city generally. The survey asked respondents whether they would support various types of housing in their own neighborhoods—59 percent stated that they would favor duplexes, 52 percent stated that they would favor small apartment buildings with fewer than ten units, 45 percent stated that they would favor apartment buildings with ten to fifty units, and 38 percent stated that they would favor buildings with over 50 units.<sup>23</sup> Because the poll did not state

<sup>18</sup>*Id.*

<sup>19</sup>See Manny Garcia, *Across 29 Metro Areas, Residents Largely Support Allowing Missing Middle Homes In Residential Neighborhoods*, at <https://www.zillow.com/research/missing-middle-affordability-32711/>.

<sup>20</sup>*Id.*

<sup>21</sup>*Id.*

<sup>22</sup>*Id.*

<sup>23</sup>*Id.*

how many respondents were undecided,<sup>24</sup> it is impossible to know whether a plurality of people opposed larger buildings. However, all of these percentages are lower than the percentage of respondents who admit that new buildings contribute to affordability;<sup>25</sup> thus, it seems clear that some respondents were more likely to favor new housing as long as it was in someone else's neighborhood.

Even the least popular forms of housing became popular when tied to various conditions. Zillow reports that 76 percent of respondents would favor even a large apartment building if it was "within a 15-minute walk of frequent transit, recreation or with an affordability requirement for low and middle income families."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, a Manhattan Institute poll asked residents of 20 metropolitan areas whether they would support "Allow[ing] new housing to be built near transit stops."<sup>27</sup> 66 percent of respondents favored this option.<sup>28</sup>

On balance, the Zillow poll suggests that Americans generally support new housing but might be less willing to support housing that is closer to their own homes, especially if such housing is larger or is not near transit and recreation.

### **B. Regulation or Deregulation?**

Similarly, another 2022 Yougov poll asked whether they favored "[r]emoving regulations and codes that prevent developers from constructing more housing . . . in your local community."<sup>29</sup> 37 percent of respondents favored this reform, and 41 percent did not.<sup>30</sup> The same poll asked if residents of a community "should have veto power over new develop-

<sup>24</sup>*Id.*

<sup>25</sup>*Id.* (70 percent agreed that allowing "small and medium apartments in residential neighborhoods would have a positive impact on availability of more affordable housing options").

<sup>26</sup>*Id.*

<sup>27</sup>Michael Hendrix, *Metropolitan Majority: The Survey*, at <https://manhattan.institute/article/metropolitan-majority-the-survey>.

<sup>28</sup>*Id.*

<sup>29</sup>Yougov, Housing Policy Yougov Poll: July 19–22, 2022, at <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/07/27/housing-policy-yougov-poll-july-19-22-2022> (click on "Toplines" link) ("Yougov July 2022").

<sup>30</sup>*Id.*

ments in the community”: 60 percent said yes.<sup>31</sup> These results may be related to public hostility towards developers: a 2023 Yougov survey shows that only 39 percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of this group.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, 75 percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of homeowners.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, a slight change in phrasing leads to more pro-housing responses. The 2023 Yougov survey asked whether “[p]eople should be free to buy land and develop real estate where they please” or “The government should limit where people are allowed to build things.”<sup>34</sup> 58 percent favored allowing people to “develop real estate where they please.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, a question that asks about “government” and “people,” as opposed to developers, yields more pro-housing results. Similarly, the Manhattan Institute survey asked whether they would support “[e]xpediting and streamlining the approvals process so it is easier to begin building new housing.”<sup>36</sup> 68 percent of respondents favored this option, perhaps because “streamlining” sounds more moderate than “removing regulations”<sup>37</sup> or allowing people to “develop real estate where they please.”<sup>38</sup>

### C. Trade-off Questions

A survey of California residents asked respondents whether state government “should ease current land use and environmental restrictions to increase the supply of housing [or] maintain current land use and environmental restric-

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> See Yougov, *YouGov Survey: Housing 2* at [https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/lq4i20xul1/Housing\\_poll\\_results.pdf](https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/lq4i20xul1/Housing_poll_results.pdf) (“Yougov 2023”). See also Clayton Nall et. al., *Folk Economics and the Persistence of Political Opposition to New Housing* 9, at [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4266459](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4266459) (discussing widespread public hostility to developers).

<sup>33</sup> See Yougov 2023, *supra* note 32, at 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 50.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*

<sup>36</sup> See Hendrix, *supra* note 27.

<sup>37</sup> See *supra* notes 29–30 and accompanying text.

<sup>38</sup> See *supra* notes 34–35 and accompanying text.



tions even if it increases the cost of new housing.”<sup>39</sup> 55 percent of Californians favored easing restrictions, and 44 percent favored the status quo.<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, a 2022 Echelon Insights poll asked a sample of registered voters a question related to housing supply, which asked respondents to choose between two alternatives. One question asked respondents to choose between “building more housing in high-demand areas by reducing regulatory and zoning requirements, including affordable housing close to public transit [and giving] current residents more of a say over new housing development in their communities to ensure property values don’t go down and existing neighborhood character is preserved.”<sup>41</sup> 50 percent picked the “current residents” alternative, and only 35 percent picked the “building more housing” alternative.<sup>42</sup> However, the “pro-housing alternative” here seems quite ambiguous: a respondent might interpret it to mean “building more housing, including affordable housing” or “building more housing but reducing requirements for affordable housing.” In addition, I am not sure that less knowledgeable respondents would consider “giving current residents a say” as opposed to “building more housing.”<sup>43</sup>

Although questions involving trade-offs seem to be rare, it does appear that voters are less consistently pro-housing when exposed to such questions than they are when asked about the desirability of housing generally.

<sup>39</sup> PPIC Statewide Survey, *Californians and The Environment- July 2023* at 72, at <https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/crosstabs-all-adults-0723.pdf> (“PPIC”).

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

<sup>41</sup> Echelon Insights, *Neoliberalism*, at <https://echeloninsights.com/wp-content/uploads/March-2022-Omnibus-Neoliberal-2.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

<sup>43</sup> The same survey asked voters to choose between retaining “the current environmental review process in order to preserve the natural beauty of the environment and protect the rights of current property owners” and relaxing the “environmental review process that makes it too hard to build projects that would reduce carbon emissions, like wind farms, high-density housing, and new public transportation.” *Id.* Because housing was coupled with other issues, I would not classify this as a “housing question” and have not discussed it above.



#### D. Density-phobia

A 2022 Yougov poll asked about a variety of zoning policy options, including “Changing zoning practices to allow for more high-density development.”<sup>44</sup> Respondents opposed this option by a 48 percent to 30 percent margin,<sup>45</sup> though it is unclear what they thought “high-density development” means.

#### E. Who Supports Housing? Who Doesn’t?

Which groups favored more housing, and which didn’t? Here too, how a question was phrased mattered significantly. Polls that were phrased as a “regulation vs. freedom” question tended to show that Republicans were more pro-housing than Democrats. For example, 64 percent of Republicans agreed that people “should be free to develop real estate where they please”<sup>46</sup> while a majority of Democrats rejected this view.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, 64 percent of California Republicans favored easing land use/environmental regulations to increase housing supply, as opposed to 48 percent of Democrats.<sup>48</sup>

Polls that reference density without referencing government, environmental regulation, or freedom tend to show a different pattern: for example, when Yougov respondents were asked about changing zoning to allow more high-density development, 39 percent of Democrats and only 24

<sup>44</sup>See Yougov July 2022, *supra* note 29.

<sup>45</sup>*Id.*

<sup>46</sup>See Yougov 2023, *supra* note 32, at 50.

<sup>47</sup>*Id.* On the other hand, when asked about “Removing regulations and codes that prevent developers from building more housing,” partisan distinctions were modest. Republicans favored this idea by only a 43-40 margin, while Democrats opposed it by only a 45-38 margin. See Yougov, *Housing Policy: Yougov Poll: July 19-22, 2022*, at 3, at <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/07/27/housing-policy-yougov-poll-july-19-22-2022> (“Yougov July Tables”). Evidently, references to “developers” are less polarizing than references to “government.” Similarly, racial and economic differences as to this question were minor. Blacks were only 4 percentage points more likely than whites to pick the “pro-housing” answer. *Id.*

<sup>48</sup>See PPIC, *supra* note 39, at 72.

percent of Republicans favored this proposal.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, only 26 percent of Republican respondents to the Echelon Insights poll favored reducing requirements to allow more dense housing, as opposed to 47 percent of Democrats.<sup>50</sup> When asked about the desirability of apartments in their local area, 50 percent of Republicans supported the idea, as opposed to 74 percent of Democrats.<sup>51</sup>

Members of ethnic minority groups were generally more pro-housing than whites. In response to a 2022 Yougov question about the desirability of apartments, 79 percent of Blacks and Hispanics favored apartments even in their local area, as opposed to 60 percent of whites.<sup>52</sup> Other groups that were especially pro-apartment included persons earning under \$50,000 (70 percent) and persons under 29 (89 percent).<sup>53</sup> The Zillow survey showed similar results. 46 percent of Black respondents and 49 percent of Hispanics were willing to support a large apartment building near them, as opposed to 33 percent of whites.<sup>54</sup> Persons under 30 (52 percent) and earning under \$50,000 (40 percent) were also more likely to hold this view.<sup>55</sup>

Because Blacks tend to be Democrats,<sup>56</sup> one might expect them to favor the “pro-regulation” answer when housing issues were placed in a “regulation vs. deregulation” format.<sup>57</sup> But when asked whether people should be free to develop

<sup>49</sup> See Yougov July Tables, *supra* note 47 at 5.

<sup>50</sup> See Echelon Insights, *supra* note 41.

<sup>51</sup> See Yougov, *Attitudes on Development and Zoning- Yougov Poll, June 9-13, 2022*, at 46 at <https://today.yougov.com/topics/economy/articles-reports/2022/07/14/development-and-zoning-yougov-poll-june-2022> (go to “Tables” link) (“2022 Yougov June Tables”).

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*

<sup>53</sup> *Id.*

<sup>54</sup> See Garcia, *supra* note 19.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.*

<sup>56</sup> See Cheryl Laird and Ismail White, *Why So Many Black Voters Aren’t Democrats, Even When They Aren’t Liberal*, *Fivethirtyeight*, Feb. 26, 2020, at <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-so-many-black-voters-are-democrats-even-when-they-arent-liberal/>.

<sup>57</sup> See *supra* notes 46–48 and accompanying text (Republicans more pro-housing when responding to questions focusing on government regulation).

real estate as they pleased, 60 percent of Blacks and only 48 percent of whites responded positively.<sup>58</sup> People earning under \$50,000 (56 percent) and under 29 (61 percent) also took a pro-deregulation position.<sup>59</sup> And in response to the Echelon Insights question asking respondents to choose between more housing and community control over development, Blacks opposed the pro-housing answer by only a 43%-36% margin, while whites opposed it by a 55%-31% margin.<sup>60</sup> The poll question focused on density showed smaller racial gaps: when asked whether zoning should be changed to allow more high-density development, Blacks were only 6 points more likely than whites to give an affirmative answer (33 percent as opposed to 27 percent).<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, the responses discussed above show a fairly consistent pattern: housing is much more popular among the black, young and poor than among the unblack, unyoung and unpoor.

### III. A Note on Public Ignorance

Generally, the public is not particularly attentive to housing issues. For example, when asked if housing supply has kept up with population, only 44 percent of respondents correctly answered that it had not.<sup>62</sup> For example, one Yougov study shows that only 27 percent of respondents are familiar with the term "NIMBY" (an acronym for "Not In My Backyard" commonly used to describe opponents of new housing) and only 20 percent are familiar with the term "YIMBY" (an acronym for "Yes In My Backyard," commonly used to describe supporters of new housing).<sup>63</sup> And a recent survey by three academics from various disciplines found that 30-40

<sup>58</sup> See 2022 Yougov June Tables, *supra* note 51 at 95. However, Hispanics responded identically to whites, perhaps because only 75 Hispanics were polled. *Id.*

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*

<sup>60</sup> See Echelon Insights, *supra* note 41.

<sup>61</sup> See Yougov July Tables, *supra* note 47, at 5. Lower-income voters supported this proposition at levels identical to that of the general public, and 36 percent of respondents under 30 did so.

<sup>62</sup> See Yougov 2023, *supra* note 32, at 6; *supra* notes — and accompanying text (discussing slowdown in American housing supply).

<sup>63</sup> See Yougov 2023, *supra* note 32 at 6; Infranca, *The New State Zoning: Land Use Preemption Amid a Housing Crisis*, 60 B.C. L. Rev. 823, 827 (2019) (explaining concepts in more detail).

percent of Americans believe, contrary to the evidence of the past several decades, that new housing supply causes housing prices to rise.<sup>64</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that public opinion on new housing is easily influenced by question wording—and perhaps it should be surprising that the public supports new housing as much as it does.

#### IV. Summary

It seems clear that when asked about the desirability of new housing, the majority of Americans believe that their nation as a whole (and even their own community) needs new housing—both single-family housing and multi-family housing. However, poll data is less clear about whether Americans are willing to tolerate such housing in their own neighborhood. Moreover, poll questions that reference density or that reference arguments for the status quo tend to show less support for new housing. Generally, members of minority groups, lower-income Americans, and the young are somewhat more pro-housing than the unyoung, unblack, and unpoor majority.

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<sup>64</sup>See Nall et. al., *supra* note 32, at 6–7 (as many as 30–40 percent of respondents endorse this view). On the other hand, the 2023 Yougov study asked if the “amount of available housing” contributes to the cost of housing; only 20 percent of respondents picked “not much” or “not at all.” See 2023 Yougov, *supra* note 32, at 32.