



# Public Meetings and the Participatory Politics of Housing

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South Shore Chamber Housing Series

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# Outline

- **Introduction: Big picture**
- **Focus: Our book on public participation and housing development**
- **For discussion: Tradeoffs and potential for reform?**

# Big Picture Overview

- Housing **policy** is about more than housing
  - Climate, social mobility, health
  - Economic - “The cost for the country of too-stringent housing regulations in high-wage, high-productivity cities in forgone gross domestic product is \$1.4 trillion.” (Hsieh and Moretti)
- Housing **politics** extra challenging
  - Identifiable winners and losers
  - Emotional connections to home
- Two separate issues
  - Subsidized housing
  - **Market based housing**

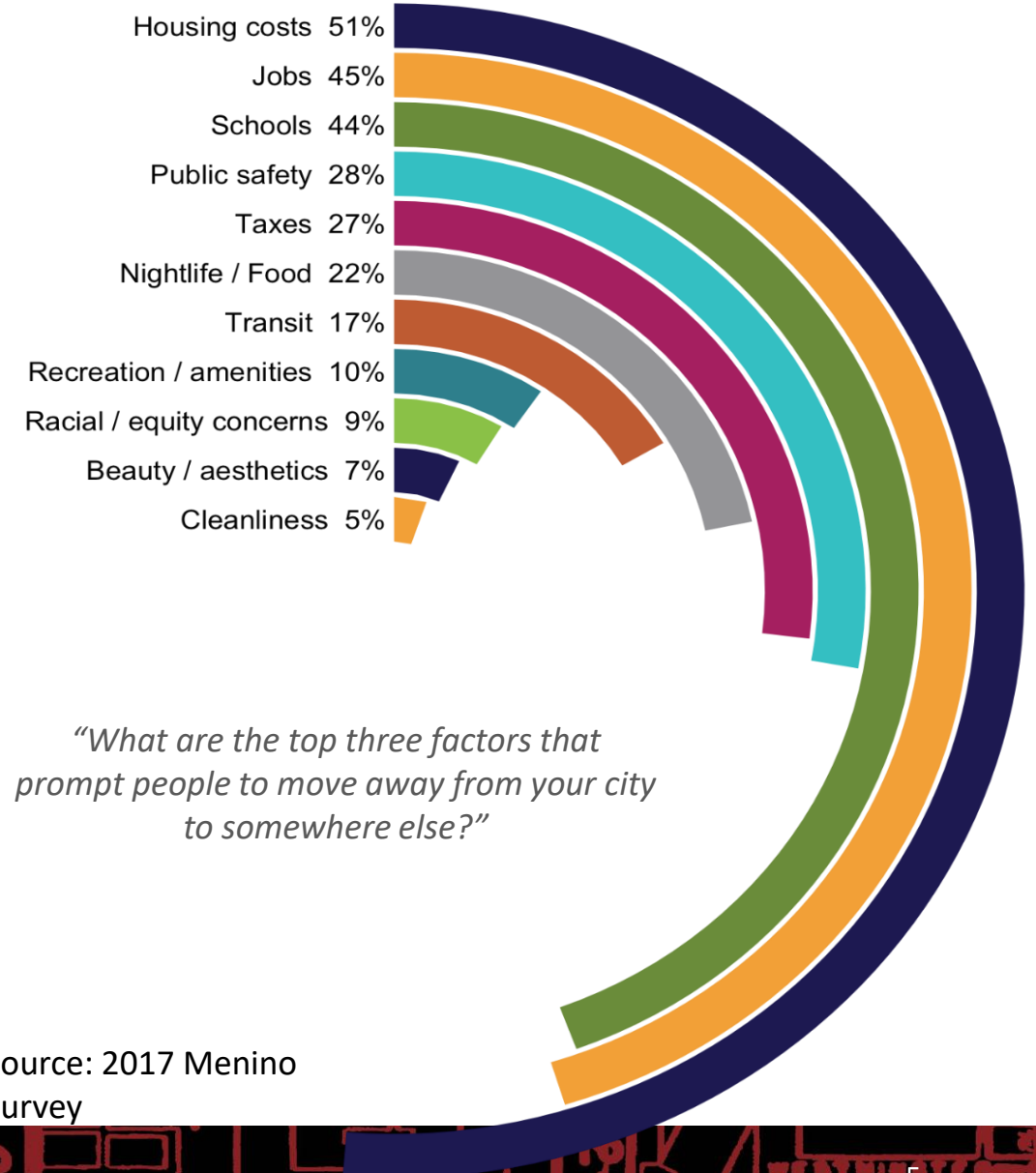
# Housing as a Priority

## Menino Survey of Mayors

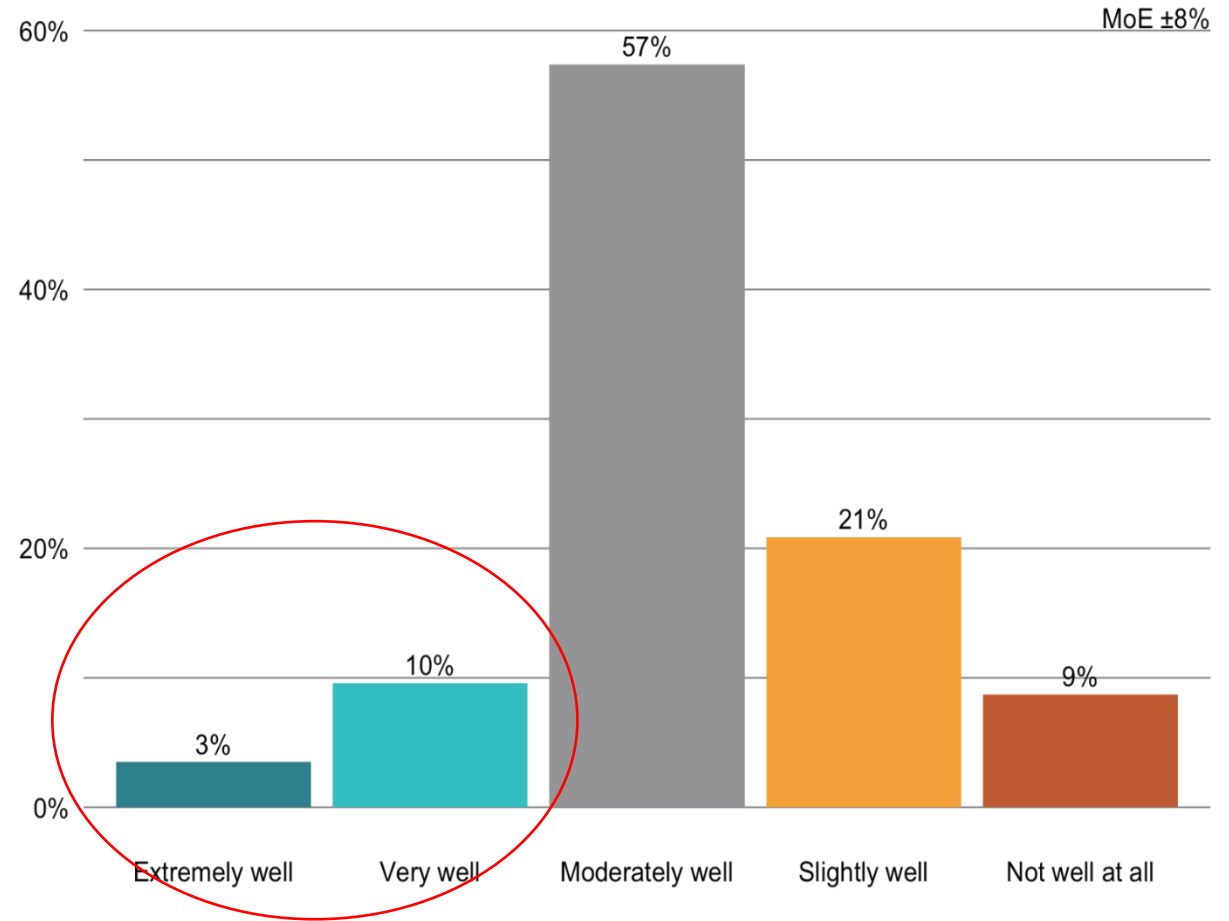
- Only nationally representative, scientifically rigorous survey of American mayors
- Initiated in 2014 at Boston University under the direction of the late Mayor of Boston, Tom Menino
- Principal investigators: Katherine Levine Einstein, David Glick, and Maxwell Palmer collaborating with the team at the IOC – Stacy Fox, Katharine Lusk, Graham Wilson
- Cities over 75K, roughly 100+ interviews per year



# Reasons People Leave



# Housing Stock Mismatch



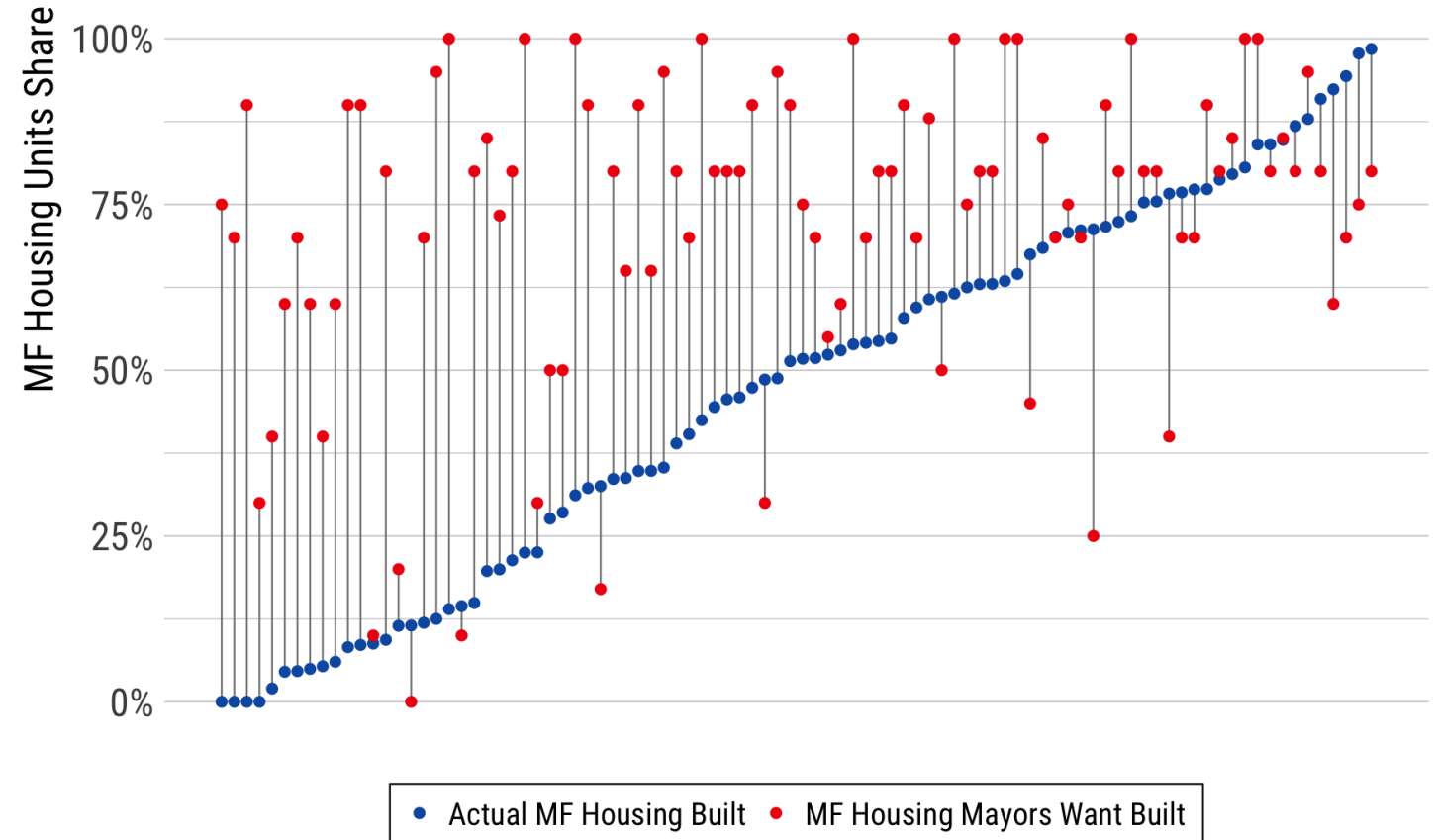
Source: 2017 Menino  
Survey

*"Overall, how well does the current housing stock in your city match the needs  
of your population?"*



# The Multifamily Gap

**The Multifamily Housing Gap**



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# The (Very Local) Participatory Politics of Housing



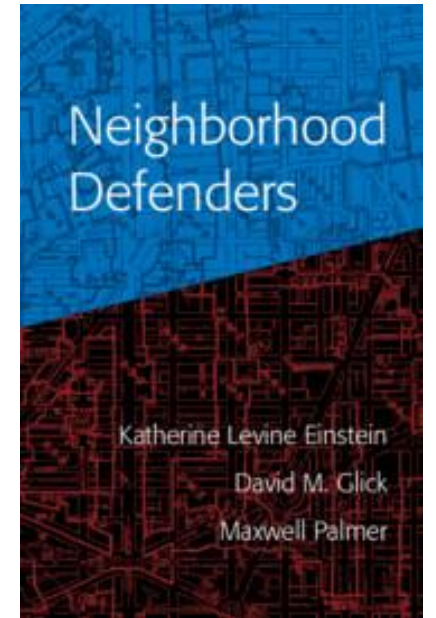
“What the hell, Ron? You're building your stupid building on the block next to Pawnee Commons? The park that I built from scratch out of a pit? This building is gonna ruin the views, you jerk.....”



“The world needs apartment buildings.  
The park you built is nice and people want to live next to it....”



“...You spend the **next two years** cutting down trees and fighting zoning laws that I helped pass...”



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# The (Very Local) Participatory Politics of Housing

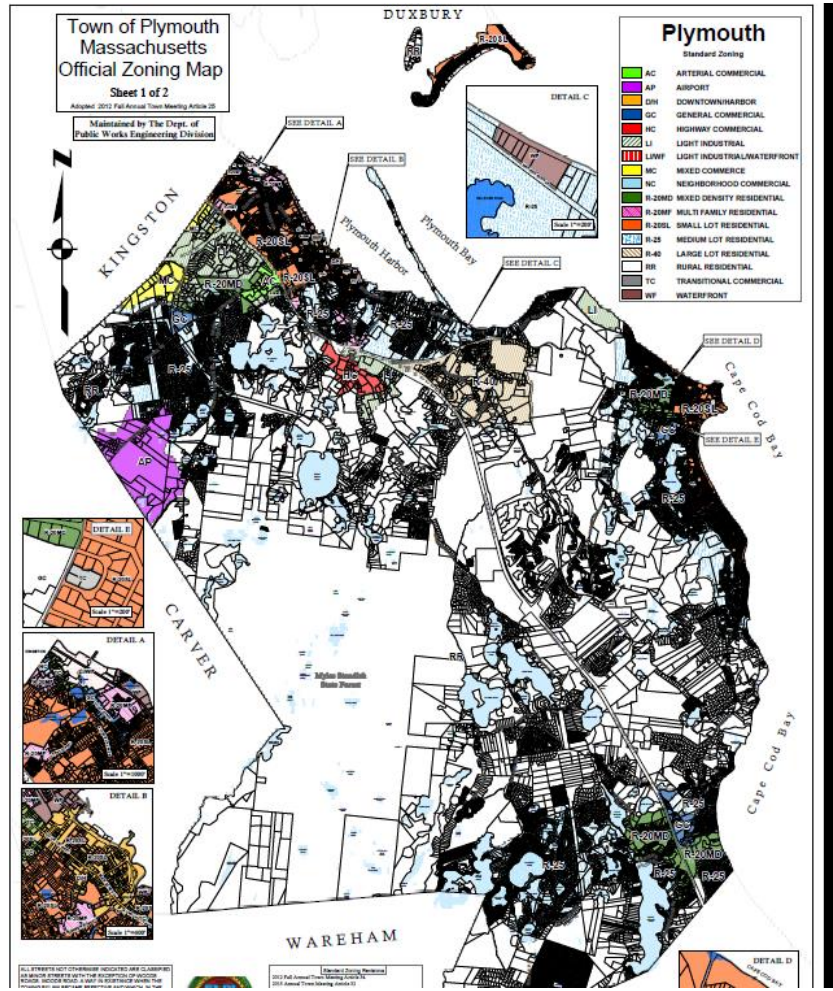


How do local participatory processes affect what gets built, and where?

**Punchline:** Empower unrepresentative group to stall, stop, and shrink proposals



# The (Very Local) Participatory Politics of Housing



## Land Use Regulations



“NIMBY” Attitudes

# Our Basic Argument

- Land Use Regulations **AND** NIMBY attitudes...  
But Also...
- **Well Intentioned Participatory Institutions**
  - Planning Boards and Zoning Boards of Appeal
  - Many proposals, especially for anything other than a single family, end up in these processes.
- Local opponents will naturally be more motivated
- Design almost guarantees government hears skewed perspectives
- More regulations → more opportunities

# Our Basic Argument Slightly Differently

## Why Public Meetings Matter

- Those who object can only do so much without institutions that give them influence

At the same time

- Restrictive regulations frequently do not have bite without individuals invoking them



# Why Meetings Matter: Porter Square, Cambridge



- “I feel that having four units in that building with one parking space each is insufficient...”
- “We’re in Zone B, my understanding is that there’s a 2500...minimum square foot requirement per dwelling. And I think this development is very non-compliant and that’s my objection.”

# Why Meetings Matter

- Board, initially unbothered, hears from some neighbors with strenuous concerns
  - Only developer on other side
  - This was not a massive apartment tower
- Ordered further study
  - Cut from four to three units
  - Doubled parking per unit
- The process
  - Sometimes improves or avoids bad projects
  - However, repeated over and over again, constrains housing supply and access to housing



# Why Public Meetings Matter: 100 Case Sample

- Planning boards for special permit.
  - Waiver requests typically focused on road design and setbacks
  - Comments: Environment, flooding, aesthetics, neighborhood character, traffic
- Zoning Boards of Appeal for variances.
  - Variances: Setbacks, lot size, and dimensions
  - Comments: Parking (68%), aesthetics, neighborhood character

# Why Public Meetings Matter: Participation

- Who does government hear from in the housing production process?
- Are meeting participants demographically representative of their communities?
- Do meeting participants share the views of the broader community?

# Testing for Participatory Inequalities in Massachusetts

- Meeting minutes from 97 cities and towns over a three year period
  - Not Boston – most observations from small cities and towns
- All proposals for more than one housing unit
  - Most are modest, many are subdivisions in suburban areas
- Who participated and what they said
- Matched to other databases
- 3500 commenters and 4300 comments

# Unrepresentative of the Broader Community

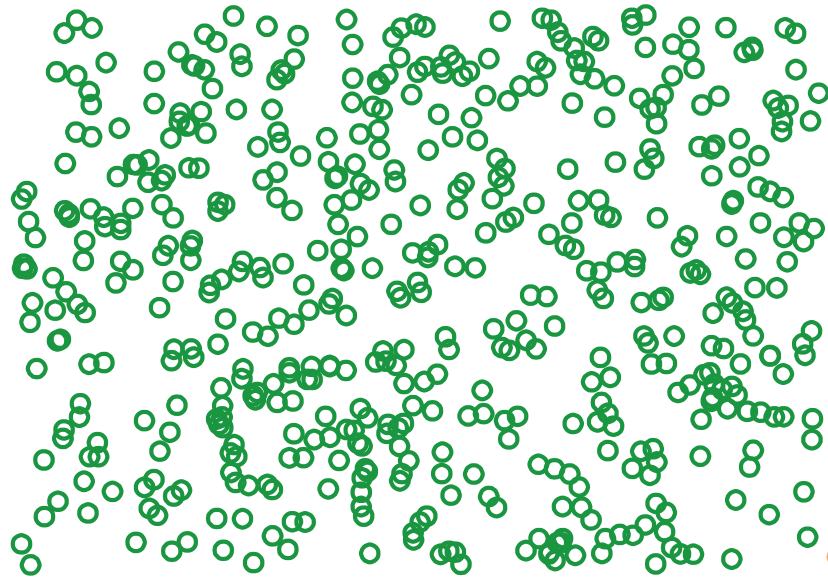
## Differences Between Commenters & Voters

	Commenters	Voters	Diff.
Women	43.3%	51.3%	-8.0%
Whites	95.0%	86.7%	+8.2%
Age > 50	75.0%	52.6%	+22.4%
Homeowners	73.4%	45.6%	+27.8%

- Party
  - No difference in participation
- Home value among owners
  - No difference in participation
- Geography
  - 82% live in same neighborhood (tract)
  - 41% on same block

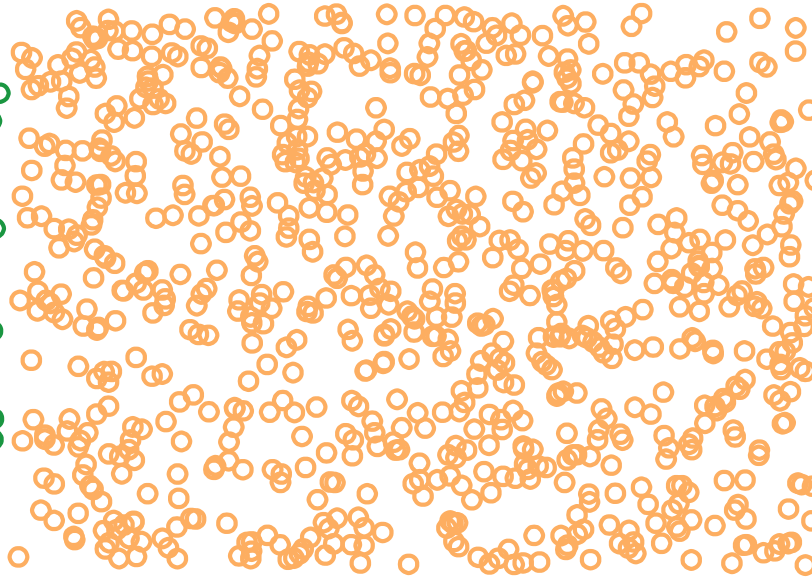
# Commenters are overwhelmingly opposed to the construction of new housing.

14%



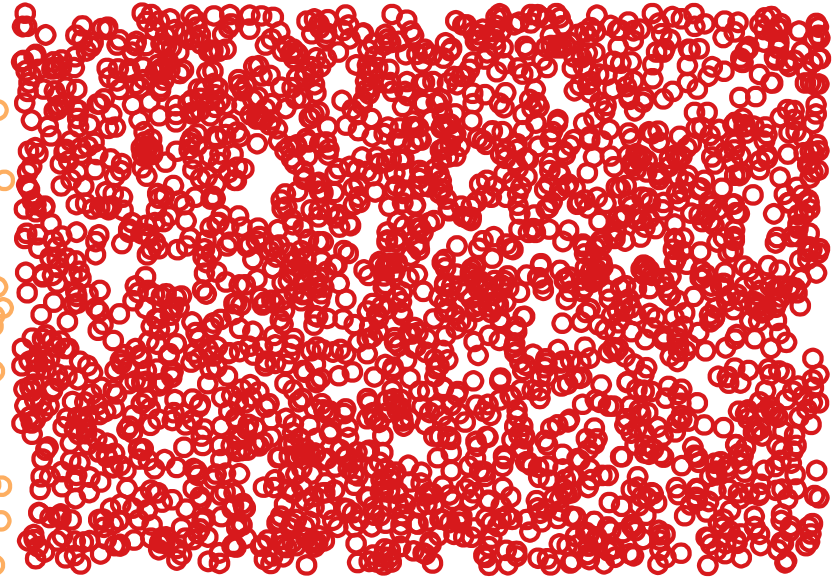
Support

23%



Neutral

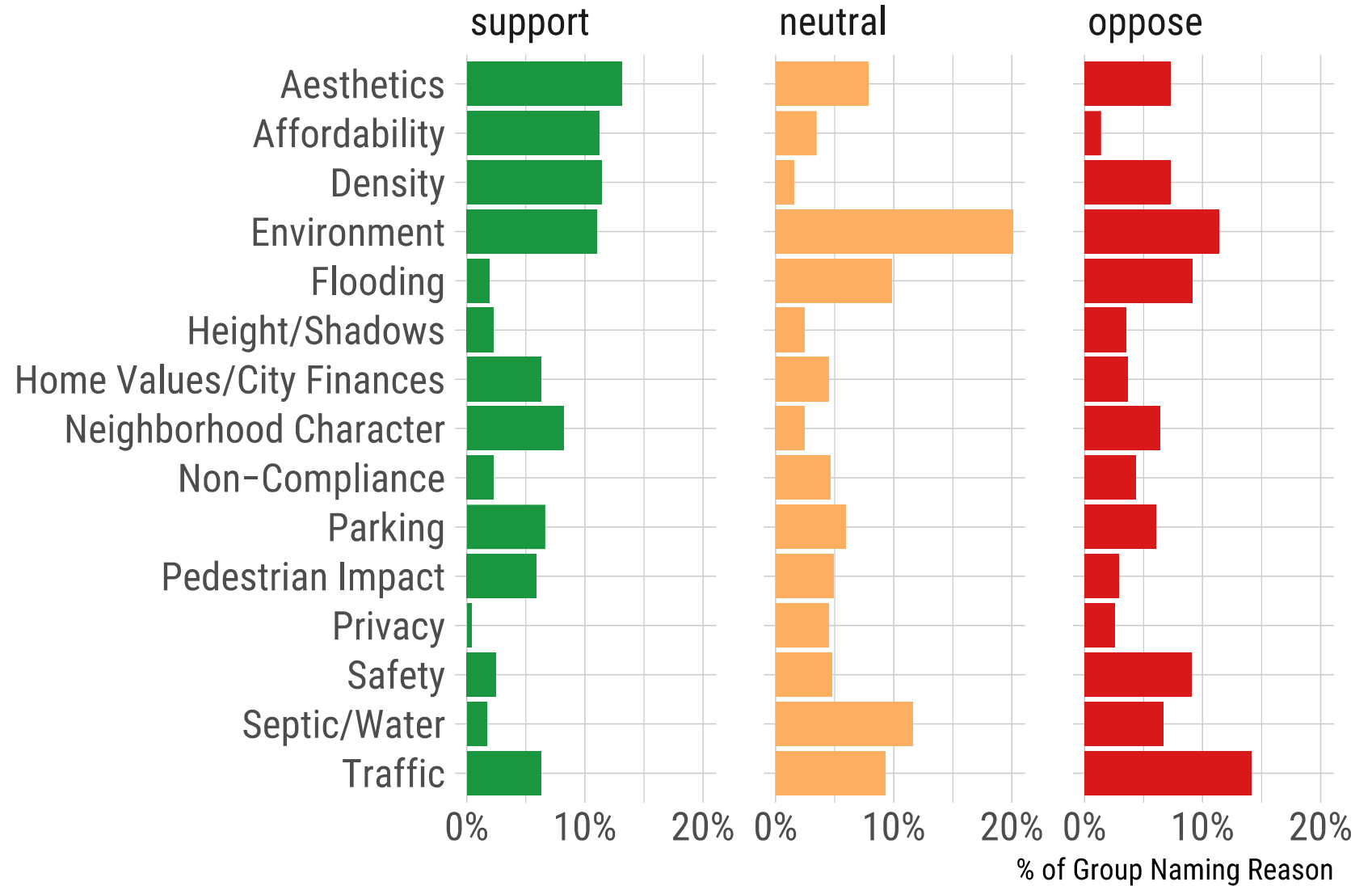
63%



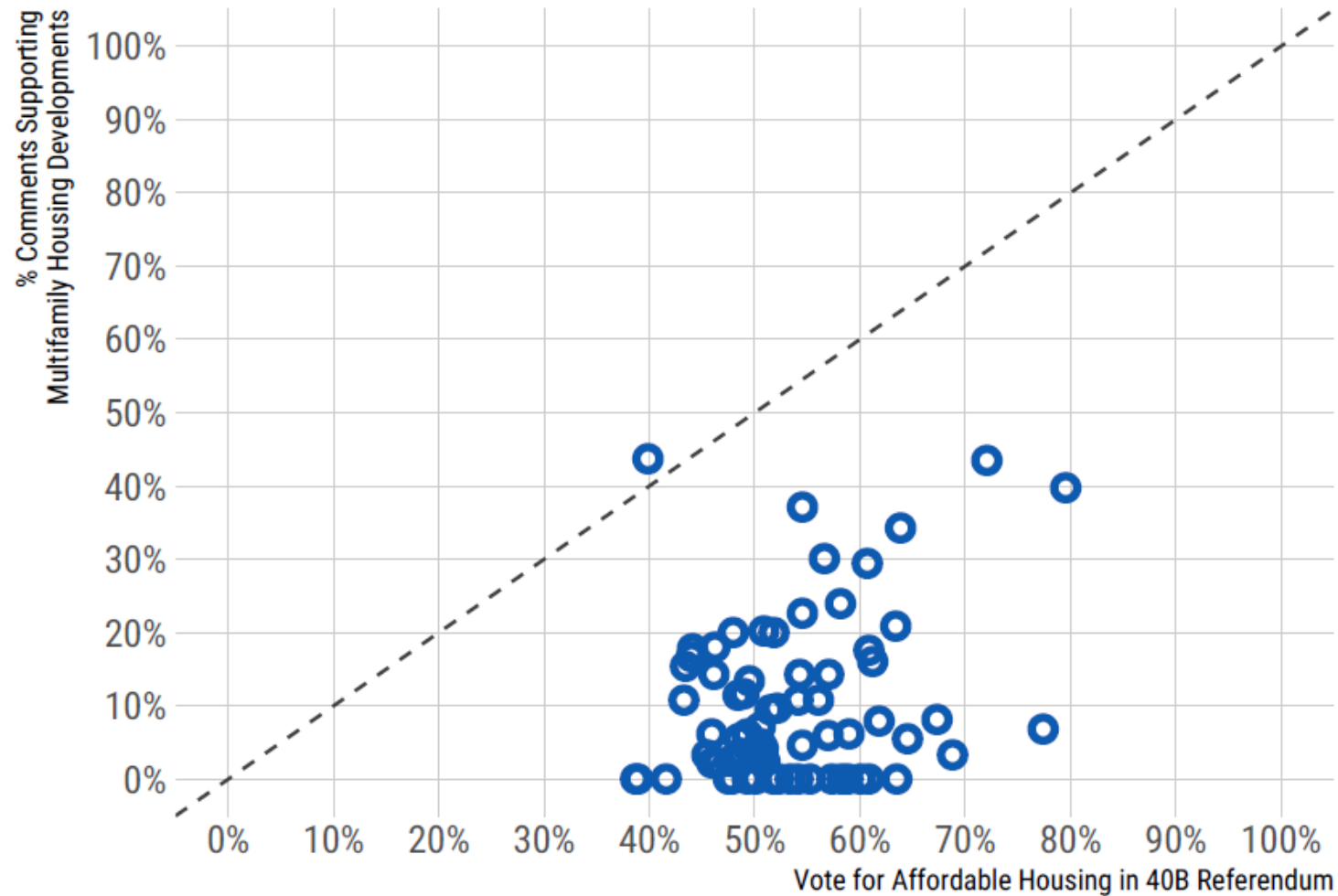
Oppose



# Top 10 Reasons by Positions Taken



# Comparison to Support for 40B





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# Summing Up

- Concerns about neighborhood change, environmental impacts, increases in traffic are basic human reactions pertinent to government decision making
- However, due to institutions, government may only hear these perspectives
- *Processes designed to protect vulnerable people from powerful developers have created new inequalities in which local officials disproportionately hear from an unrepresentative set of residents*

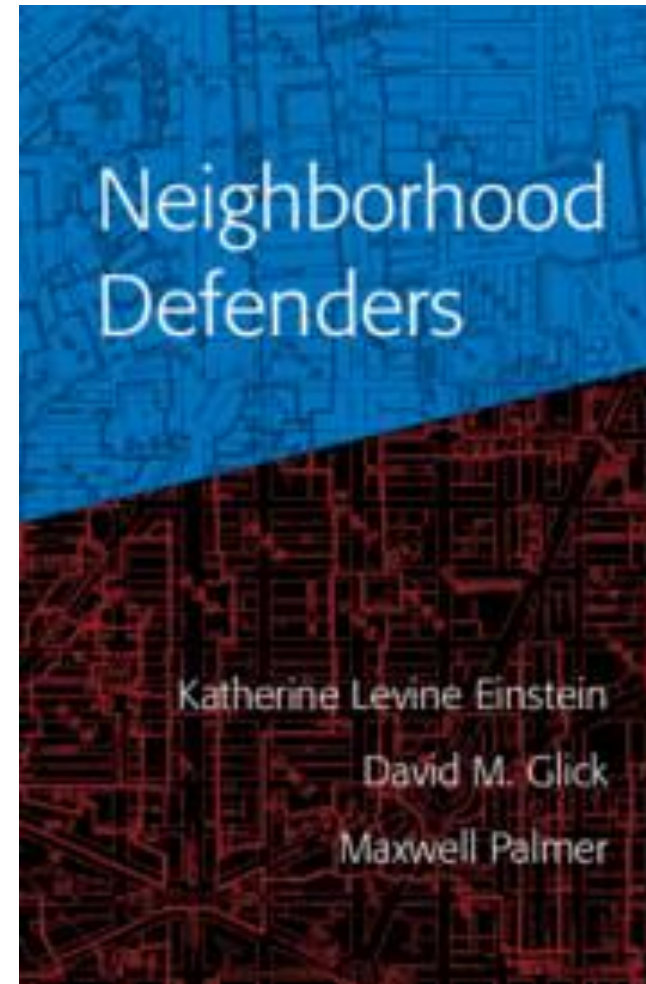
# For Discussion

- What's the right balance?
  - We generally laud public participation
  - How much should we prioritize the views of those most affected by change?
  - How to balance competing voices and priorities

# For Discussion: Reforms?

- Change composition of participants?
  - We're a bit skeptical
    - Even making a dent in voting participation is hard
    - Unclear who the “next” people to show up are if we make it easier
  - Early evidence: Very tentative from early shift online post Covid
    - Same inequalities online meetings
- Concentrated costs and diffuse benefits hard to overcome

# Thank You!



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