

Supply Skeptics or Abundance Acolytes? Mayoral Views on the Housing Crisis

Across the United States, housing affordability has reached crisis levels. In many cities, home prices and rents have far outpaced wages, while housing supply has failed to keep up with demand. In the Greater Boston area alone, 36 municipalities now have a median home price above \$1 million. Yet other cities offer a counterpoint: Minneapolis and Austin, for example, have permitted substantially more housing construction in recent years, and rents have fallen relative to inflation. But if building more housing stabilizes prices, why don't more cities do it?

That question took center stage at a recent presentation in the American Politics Speaker Series, hosted jointly by the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation and the Center for American Political Studies. On November 21, 2025, Katherine Levine Einstein, associate professor of political science at Boston University, presented research examining mayors' views on the roots of America's housing crisis, and what solutions they believe will be most effective.

Einstein, who conducted the research alongside Boston University's David Glick and Maxwell Palmer, framed housing scarcity as not just an economic problem but a political one. While economists broadly agree that expanding housing supply is central to lowering costs, local land-use decisions are heavily shaped by "homevoters": homeowners who participate in local politics primarily to protect property values and neighborhood character. Resistance to change, both in the built environment and in demographic composition, also constrains development.

Compounding these dynamics is widespread skepticism that new housing construction will actually lower prices. Einstein described this supply skepticism as a product of "folk economics": the intuitive, nontechnical ways people understand markets, which are reinforced by narratives that blame developers, landlords, and investors for rising costs. As a result, while many people grasp basic supply-and-demand principles, those instincts often break down in housing markets, where price effects are difficult to observe and counterfactuals are hard to imagine.

Although supply skepticism has been broadly documented among the general public, far less is known about its prevalence among public officials. Given that control over land use is arguably the greatest power local government wields, the authors turned their focus to mayors as key decision-makers. They asked two questions: Which mayors are pro-supply? And how do those views predict attitudes on policy reform and housing construction? To answer them, the team analyzed data from the Menino Survey of Mayors, a long-running survey of U.S. mayors in cities with populations over 75,000. Drawing on a decade of data

from 2014 to 2023, the study measures mayoral attitudes on a variety of issues, including housing, through questions about their views on the causes of rising housing costs, market-rate construction, and regulations.

Their findings point to three broad categories of mayoral beliefs. First are “pro-supply” mayors — a large and growing group, especially among Democratic mayors — who believe that increasing housing supply can reduce costs. These mayors are substantially more likely to support deregulatory reforms, including easing zoning and permitting restrictions and expanding multifamily housing, and they tend to favor higher levels of future housing construction. A second group, which the Einstein called the “income” mayors, emphasizes wages failing to keep pace with rising prices and supports policies such as inclusionary zoning. Finally, a third group embraces “folk economics” or “excuses” explanations, attributing the housing crisis to landlords, corporations, and real estate developers.

To compare these perspectives, survey responses were rescaled to capture each mayor’s underlying beliefs: whether increasing supply reduces prices, whether raising incomes would meaningfully address the crisis, or whether external actors are primarily responsible. The researchers then assessed how those beliefs predicted policy preferences and anticipated housing production.

The authors also found that these views are not fixed. Several mayors reported shifting their perspectives after encountering empirical research linking housing production to affordability and homelessness reduction. Because local governments hold substantial power over land use, changes in mayoral beliefs can translate directly into policy outcomes. So, as more mayors move toward a pro-supply mindset, the prospects for policy change, and for cities to make progress of housing affordability, may begin to improve.

