



**CENTER FOR ETHICS IN  
BUSINESS AND GOVERNANCE**  
Saint Anselm College

# **The New Hampshire Statewide Housing Poll and Survey Experiments: Lessons for Advocates**

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A SAINT ANSELM COLLEGE CENTER FOR ETHICS ISSUE BRIEF

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# The New Hampshire Statewide Housing Poll and Survey Experiments: Lessons for Advocates

A Saint Anselm College Center for Ethics Issue Brief

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## Executive Summary

The Saint Anselm College Center for Ethics conducted two surveys of New Hampshire residents in spring 2020: an online survey experiment of adults living in New Hampshire and a randomized telephone poll of N.H. registered voters. The results of the experiments and the poll hold important lessons for advocates trying to solve the affordable housing shortage in our state and throughout New England. The survey experiments showed that there are some NIMBY (“Not in My Back Yard”) attitudes among homeowners toward proposed projects in their neighborhoods, but that there are also certain kinds of messaging that significantly move attitudes in a pro-housing direction. Moreover, respondents worry less about the property tax impact of new development than is commonly supposed. The statewide poll showed overwhelming support for affordable housing and rapid permitting of proposed housing developments, as well as opposition to anti-development messages, but it also showed a disconnect between voters’ support for more homes and their reluctance to consider rolling back local planning and zoning regulations that are responsible for constraining new home-building. This issue brief ties these findings together to argue that housing advocates need to tailor their messages to moral foundations like property rights and fairness, and to link more clearly the strictness of local regulation to the housing crisis. Furthermore, activating renters in local elections and hearings could significantly move local policy in a pro-housing direction.

## Introduction

How do New Hampshire voters want policymakers to address the ongoing housing shortage, and where can advocates do a better job in educating New Hampshire voters about the most effective means for alleviating that shortage? To answer these questions, the Saint Anselm College Center for Ethics commissioned two surveys of New Hampshire residents.

With the first survey, a randomized telephone poll of New Hampshire registered voters, we wished to answer the first question above: what do voters want from housing policy? In the second survey, an online recruitment survey with embedded experiments, we sought to answer the second question: how can advocates persuade voters to support more pro-housing policy solutions?

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks for Max Latona, Ben Frost, and Mike Matheis for helpful comments and suggestions. All remaining errors are the author’s own.

## Background

New Hampshire is suffering from a severe shortage in housing, reflected in low supply and high prices and rents, especially in areas with high demand for homes. While many factors influence the supply and price of housing, the most amenable of these to change is the legal environment, namely the regulations on building new homes, mostly reflected in municipal planning and zoning ordinances and decisions. These regulations add to the cost of homes by delaying approvals, requiring expensive studies, and reducing density, which raises the cost of construction.

Numerous peer-reviewed studies have confirmed these facts, which are already well known in the New Hampshire policy and business communities. The University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Residential Land-Use Regulatory Index, based on a huge nationwide survey of local officials, rated New Hampshire as the fourth most regulated state in the country for home-building.<sup>2</sup> According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, New Hampshire is also the eighth most expensive state in the country, largely due to the cost of housing.<sup>3</sup> New Hampshire's general cost of living is six percent above the national average. Economists have demonstrated a direct, causal connection between residential building regulation and higher home prices and rents in places that have high demand for housing.<sup>4</sup>

The sidebar above gives just a small sampling of the myriad regulatory requirements on landowners that discourage home-building in New Hampshire.<sup>5</sup> Because so little development is allowed "by right," landowners have to pursue variances and conditional use permits to be allowed to build housing. Housing

## Examples of New Hampshire Regulations That Limit Home-Building

- Hanover's zoning map prohibits housing, even by special exception, on nearly half of its land area and requires 10-acre minimum lot sizes on much of the rest.
- Manchester prohibits housing of more than three stories or 45 feet in height.
- Rye requires providing two off-street parking spaces for homeowners that build an accessory dwelling unit (ADU) and bans detached ADUs.
- Portsmouth has historic, downtown, and character districts, each of which overlays and adds to the regulations of the regular zoning districts, specifying detailed aesthetic features of the buildings and properties, such as the pitch of roofs, size of yards, and appearance of facades.

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<sup>2</sup> Gyourko, Joseph, Albert Saiz & Anita Summers (2008), "A New Measure of the Local Regulatory Environment for Housing Markets: The Wharton Residential Land-Use Regulatory Index," *Urban Studies* 45 (3): 693–729.

<sup>3</sup> Bureau of Economic Analysis, "News Release: Real Personal Income for States and Metropolitan Areas, 2016," May 17, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2t1TRrZ>.

<sup>4</sup> Malpezzi, Stephen (1996), "Housing Prices, Externalities, and Regulation," *Journal of Housing Research* 7 (2): 209–241; Green, Richard K. (1999), "Land Use Regulation and the Price of Housing in a Suburban Wisconsin County," *Journal of Housing Economics* 8: 144–159; Glaeser, Edward L., Joseph Gyourko & Raven Saks (2005), "Why Have Housing Prices Gone Up?" *American Economic Review Papers and Proceedings* 95 (2): 329–333; Glaeser, Gyourko, & Saks (2005), "Why Is Manhattan So Expensive? Regulation and the Rise in Housing Prices," *Journal of Law and Economics* 48 (2): 331–369; Glaeser, Gyourko, & Saks (2006), "Urban Growth and Housing Supply," *Journal of Economic Geography* 6: 71–89; Molloy, Raven (2020), "The Effect of Housing Supply Regulation on Housing Affordability: A Review," *Regional Science and Urban Economics* 80 (1).

<sup>5</sup> This information is taken from Sorens, Jason (2020), "Residential Building Regulation in New Hampshire: Causes and Consequences," forthcoming, Josiah Bartlett Center for Public Policy.

advocates have favored state-level action to streamline municipal approval processes, such as the housing appeals board that was enacted into law in 2018.

Why do many municipalities burden home-building so substantially? There are three main explanations: “fiscal zoning,” “rent-seeking zoning,” and political institutions. The evidence suggests that all three can be in play in New Hampshire, but the last explanation might be the most crucial.

Fiscal zoning is regulation intended to make new residents pay their own way for the cost of additional public services.<sup>6</sup> Municipalities can apply impact fees to new developments to pay for extending utilities or paving roads. In New Hampshire, some towns seem more willing to allow age-restricted housing than general housing, because they believe that senior citizens will cost less because they are unlikely to have children in public school. Still, evidence shows that when families with children move into a town in New Hampshire, the property tax impact is minimal.<sup>7</sup> Housing development raises the value of a property substantially, allowing the property tax rate to drop for remaining properties. Finally, the kind of zoning that most New Hampshire municipalities adopt, relying on large minimum lot sizes, seems geared toward encouraging sprawl and inefficient deployment of public services.<sup>8</sup>

Rent-seeking zoning restricts housing supply under conditions of growing demand in order to cause house prices to rise, resulting in windfall gains for existing homeowners. However, while rent-seeking zoning raises rents and the prices of already built houses, it reduces *average* property values in a jurisdiction, because the losses to landowners who are prevented from developing new housing exceed the gains to people who already own houses.<sup>9</sup>

Political institutions, the rules by which policies are made, explain why policies that hurt more than they help can be enacted. In New Hampshire, local boards are required to hold public hearings for all major planning and zoning decisions. According to new research by three Boston University political scientists, public hearings on new developments tend to be dominated by abutters, who generally oppose all building.<sup>10</sup> Thus, institutions meant to encourage public participation actually undermine the common good by skewing local officials’ perceptions of their constituents’ attitudes toward new housing.

## The Saint Anselm College New Hampshire Housing Poll

The Center for Ethics at Saint Anselm College ran a randomized poll of 478 New Hampshire registered voters in May 2020 to test voters’ attitudes toward affordable housing policies. The poll tested opinions ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” on four statements meant to capture different aspects of the housing problem and possible policy solutions:

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<sup>6</sup> Hamilton, Bruce W. (1975), “Zoning and Property Taxation in a System of Local Governments,” *Urban Studies* 12: 205–211.

<sup>7</sup> England, Richard W. (2019), “Will More Kids in Town Raise the Local Tax Rate?,” A Report to the New Hampshire Association of Realtors, August 15, <https://tinyurl.com/y6ea3636>.

<sup>8</sup> Vann, Ivy (2018), “Local Planning Authority Comes from the States. Are Our Planning Boards Doing Their Jobs?,” *Strong Towns*, <https://bit.ly/2Q35GvV>, November 5.

<sup>9</sup> Fischel, William A. (2001), *The Homevoter Hypothesis: How Home Values Influence Local Government Taxation, School Finance, and Land-Use Policies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

<sup>10</sup> Einstein, Katherine Levine, David M. Glick & Maxwell Palmer (2019), *Neighborhood Defenders: Participatory Politics and America’s Housing Crisis* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

- 1) "My community needs more affordable housing to be built;"
- 2) "New Hampshire towns and cities should relax their planning and zoning regulations in order to allow more housing to be built;"
- 3) "New Hampshire communities should do more to prevent development and keep the state the way it is;"
- 4) "The New Hampshire legislature should set a hard limit on how long planning and zoning boards can take to review permits to build housing."

The first question is intended to tap directly into NIMBY sentiments against affordable housing in respondents' own communities. Surprisingly, however, 63 percent of respondents agreed, 23 percent strongly, and only 21 percent disagreed, five percent strongly. At a margin of error of just five percent, this difference is strongly statistically significant. Democrats were significantly more likely than Republicans and partisan neutrals to favor affordable housing in their own communities (Figure 1).

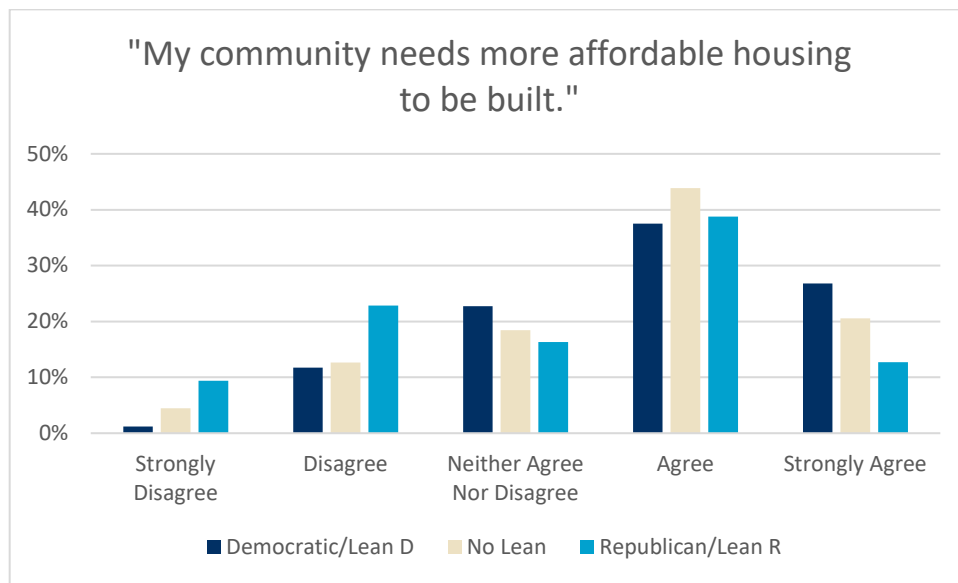


Figure 1: Attitudes Toward Affordable Housing by Party ID

The second question asked about the policy choice that most economists say is responsible for the crisis of affordability in New Hampshire: overly costly and restrictive planning and zoning decisions by municipal boards. There was a 13-percentage-point split on whether to loosen regulations, with 29 percent agreeing and 42 percent disagreeing, while 23 percent neither agreed nor disagreed and six percent didn't know. More rural respondents were more likely to favor loosening zoning, but these locations are less strictly zoned to begin with. Breakout by party ID is shown in Figure 2.

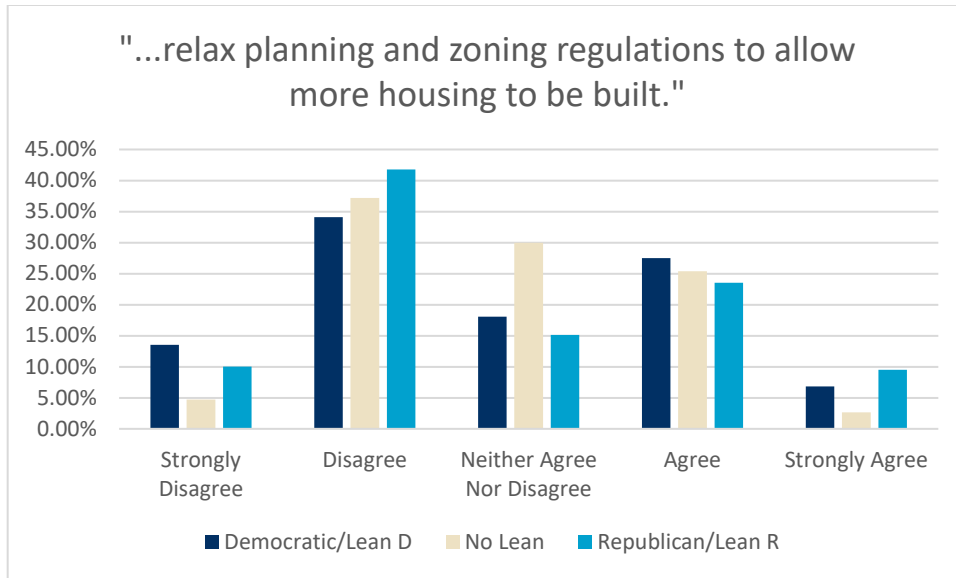


Figure 2: Attitudes Toward Relaxing Zoning by Party ID

The third question flipped the orientation of agreement and disagreement with a statement intended to capture the most attractive reason for limiting new housing: maintaining the state’s character. But only 31 percent agreed with the statement, while 46 percent disagreed. Figure 3 shows few differences between partisans on this question.

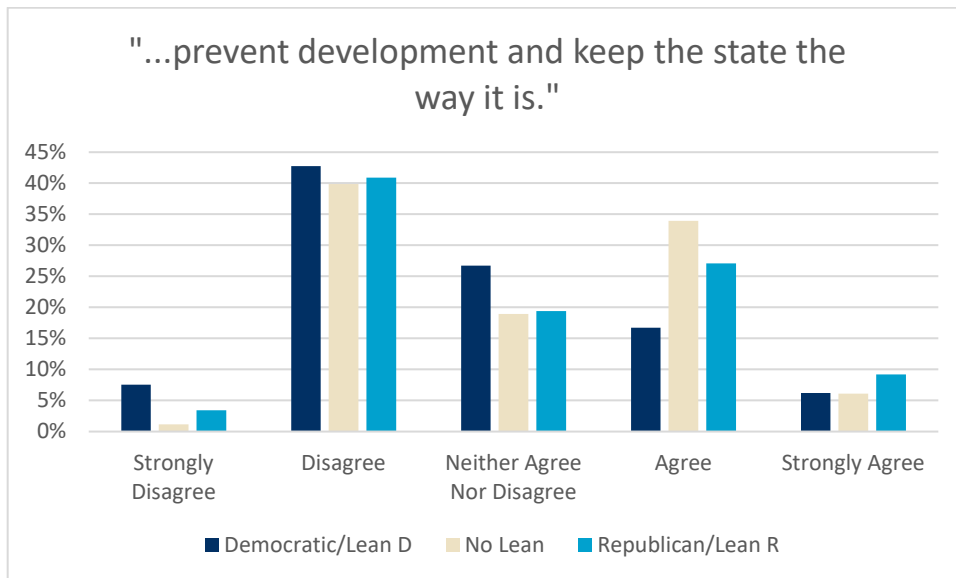


Figure 3: Attitudes Toward Preventing Development by Party ID

The last question is the only about state-level policy, in fact, a statutory change that is under active consideration in the legislature and is supported by the governor. Here, 58 percent agreed with the change, while only 18 percent opposed it, and Republicans were a little more likely to be in favor (Figure 4).

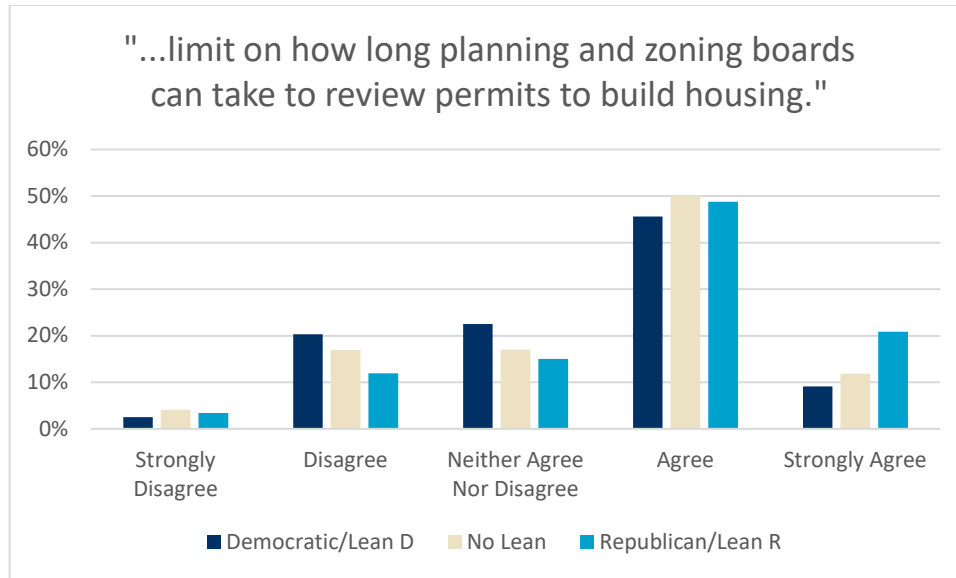


Figure 4: Attitudes Toward Limiting Permit Review Time, by Party ID

We aggregated responses to all four questions to create an aggregate index of pro-housing sentiment for each respondent.<sup>11</sup> Then we used multiple regression to see how county of residence, party registration, homeownership, sex, and a college degree correlate with pro-housing sentiment, controlling for everything else.

County of residence was not usually statistically significant, except that residents of Cheshire County were much more pro-housing, even controlling for party registration. Republicans were less pro-housing than Democrats, but this differed across questions, as seen above. Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to favor affordable housing in their own communities, but Republicans are more likely than Democrats to favor a hard limit on how long local boards may take to review permits. Interestingly, neither homeownership, sex, nor college education statistically predicted pro-housing views, except that homeowners were less likely to say that their communities needed more affordable housing. (Still, more than 60% of homeowners did agree with the statement.)

Overall, the results suggest that New Hampshire voters support more affordable housing, even in their own communities, and want to limit the legal games that some municipalities might play to discourage development. They are also skeptical of “keep[ing] the state the way it is” as a reason to stop housing. At the same time, housing advocates need to do a better job of explaining how planning and zoning ordinances and decisions are responsible for the statewide housing shortage. Many voters do not seem to realize that tight zoning regulations and affordable housing are inconsistent goals in New Hampshire.

## Framing Affordable Housing: Results of Two Survey Experiments

Is it possible to change people’s minds about affordable housing? To answer this question, the Center for Ethics sponsored two experiments as part of a single online survey of New Hampshire residents. Saint Anselm College economist Mike Matheis and Center Director Jason Sorens wrote up the results in

<sup>11</sup> We used a technique called principal component analysis that lets the data determine how much weight each component should have in an index.

a working paper available on the Center website called, “Framing Affordable Housing: Experimental Evidence from New Hampshire.”

## Which Developments Do New Hampshire Residents Want in Their Own Neighborhood?

The first experiment asked respondents to choose between two hypothetical housing developments which one they would prefer to see in their own neighborhood. All projects were described as containing workforce units, but they were randomly assigned one of four possible types (apartments, condominiums, mixed-use [which was defined], single-family), one of three possible sizes (10, 50, or 200 residences), either a tear-down or new-build status, one of three infrastructure conditions (developer-provided, city-provided, and none new), seniors-only or non-age-restricted status, either modern or traditional architecture, either including or not including low-income units, and either including or not including luxury units. Four of these choice tasks were presented to each respondent, and the respondents were also able to rate on a 0 to 10 scale each of the developments. Figure 5 shows an example of what this task looked like on the computer screen.

When we analyzed the results statistically, we found that respondents were six percentage points more likely to select a development that contained single-family houses, four percentage points less likely to select a development with 200 units (compared to ten), three percentage points less likely to choose a tear-down, four percentage points more likely to choose a development with developer-provided infrastructure (compared to no new infrastructure), nine percentage points more likely to choose a non-age-restricted development, and five percentage points less likely to choose a development that did **not** have low-income units.<sup>12</sup>

Some of these results are surprising, particularly on tear-downs (infill development), age restriction, and low-income units. But these surprises are mostly explained by differences in opinion between homeowners and non-homeowners. When we look specifically at homeowners, they are more likely to prefer developments with single-family houses (by seven percentage points), either 10 or 50 residences rather than 200 (by nine percentage points), and no age restriction (by five percentage points). Non-homeowners, by contrast, prefer developments that are new builds (by four percentage points), that come with **either** city-provided or developer-provided infrastructure (by six percentage points), that are not age-restricted (by 13 percentage points), that include low-income units (by eight percentage points), and that include luxury units (by four percentage points).<sup>13</sup>

What do these results tell us? First, homeowners tend to have some traditional NIMBY sentiments. They don't want apartments, condos, or mixed-use developments, and they want smaller developments. Second, non-homeowners can also be NIMBYs, but in a different way. They don't like tear-downs, perhaps because they are worried about gentrification, and they want new infrastructure. But in other ways, non-homeowners are more YIMBY in their views. They want mixed-income developments, and they strongly dislike age restrictions. The fact that both homeowners and non-homeowners dislike age restriction suggest that New Hampshire municipalities are often getting the politics of planning and zoning wrong. They assume voters worry about “kids in schools” and thus prefer seniors-only housing,

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<sup>12</sup> These figures are based on the unweighted results in Table 3 of the paper, which for technical reasons we explain in the paper are probably more reliable than the weighted results, which are, however, similar.

<sup>13</sup> These results come from the unweighted column in Table 5 of the paper.



but the opposite is true. It is possible that city managers and planning board members worry a lot more about the supposed fiscal impacts of new development than regular voters do.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> We are indebted to comments from Salim Furth and Michael Hankinson on this point.

We will now show you four different scenarios of new housing development, each offering two alternative projects with different features. Vote for the project you would prefer to see in your own neighborhood below the table explaining each project's features.

Note: the term *mixed-use* refers to a development with commercial uses on the ground floor and apartments above the ground floor.

Scenario 1 out of 4

	Project 1	Project 2
Type of project	Apartments	Mixed-use
Size of project	Ten residences	50 residences
Type of property	Tear down and rebuild	Tear down and rebuild
Infrastructure	No new infrastructure built	Developer-provided infrastructure
Age restriction?	No age restriction	Seniors only
Architectural style	Traditional	Modern
Low-income units?	Includes some low-income units	Includes some low-income units
Luxury units?	Does not include luxury units	Does not include luxury units
Workforce units?	Includes some workforce units	Includes some workforce units

I prefer Project 1
  I prefer Project 2

On a scale of 0-10, where 10 is best, how would you rate these projects? Vote by dragging the sliders.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Project 1's value

Project 2's value



Figure 5: Sample Conjoint Task

## Can New Hampshire Be Persuaded to Support More Development?

The second experiment asked respondents to read one of four randomly displayed paragraphs about planning and zoning regulations. We label each of these messaging treatments *Economic Expertise*, *Property Rights*, *Fairness*, and *Control*. We devised the first three vignettes ourselves, and the *Control* vignette was lifted verbatim from the Town of Londonderry Master Plan.

We then asked respondents four questions about housing policy and measured whether exposure to one of the first three treatments increased support for pro-housing policies relative to those respondents who saw the *Control* vignette.

The vignettes that the respondents saw were as follows.

### *Economic Expertise*

Economists say New Hampshire's planning and zoning regulations are too strict, keeping out productive workers by limiting housing. Both Harvard and University of Pennsylvania economists have separately discovered that New Hampshire is one of the five most regulated states for building housing. A recent National Bureau of Economic Research paper found that eliminating planning and zoning regulations in the Boston metropolitan area, which includes part of New Hampshire, would boost the income of the average resident by 13%. A study by University of Chicago and Berkeley economists found that relaxing zoning regulations around the U.S. to an average level would boost the economy by nearly 10%.

### *Property Rights*

Planning and zoning regulations prevent property owners from doing what they wish with the land they own. If landowners want to build housing, they have to face virtually endless red tape from local bureaucrats and delays that can make the process unaffordable. Some local regulations even make building on your own land completely illegal! We could abolish land-use regulations and still keep building codes that protect safety and health. Nothing prevents neighbors from signing contracts to limit what they can do with their land if they want to, but government should stay out.

### *Fairness*

New Hampshire's planning and zoning regulations are unfair to working families struggling to make ends meet. By limiting the new housing that can be built, these restrictions drive up rents and house prices, making housing completely unaffordable for more and more Granite Staters. Everyone knows that some towns in New Hampshire are much more expensive to buy in than others, and they tend to be the places with better schools. So poor families in New Hampshire get stuck in poverty, because they cannot afford to live where they can get a better education for their kids.

### *Control*

Form-based zoning is a new approach in New Hampshire. In contrast with conventional zoning that emphasizes the separation of uses, a form-based code instead uses character — the look and feel of a place — as the primary organizing principle. Form-based codes take the approach that most uses, which fall into the broad categories of retail, residential, office, civic uses, even light industrial activities, are compatible, having traditionally co-existed happily in traditional communities for centuries. Given appropriate standards, all of these uses can be located close

to each other, except for in unique cases where smells or extreme noise are an issue, in which case the conventional approach of separating uses is appropriate.

Respondents answered four housing policy questions similar to those used in the statewide poll of registered voters.

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements.

1. New Hampshire should reduce planning and zoning regulations in order to allow more housing to be built.
2. I would be willing to support more affordable housing in my own community.
3. New Hampshire should do more to prevent development and keep the state the way it is.
4. The state of New Hampshire should set a hard limit on how long local planning and zoning boards can hold up a permit to build housing.

Among respondents who were registered voters and who received the *Control* vignette, we found similar views to registered voters in the statewide poll on each of these questions. We also found that opinions across questions correlated in the expected way: if you expressed higher levels of agreement with one, two, and four, you were more likely to express lower levels of agreement with three. We then aggregated responses on the four questions into an overall index of pro-housing attitudes.

We found that respondents in general expressed more pro-housing views after seeing the *Property Rights* and *Fairness* prompts, relative to those who saw the *Control* prompt. *Economic Expertise* had no effect. Figure 5 plots the effect sizes of each intervention with a 95% confidence interval. Since the index of pro-housing views ranges from -4.4 to 2.9 with a standard deviation of 1.4, an effect size of nearly 0.5 is large.

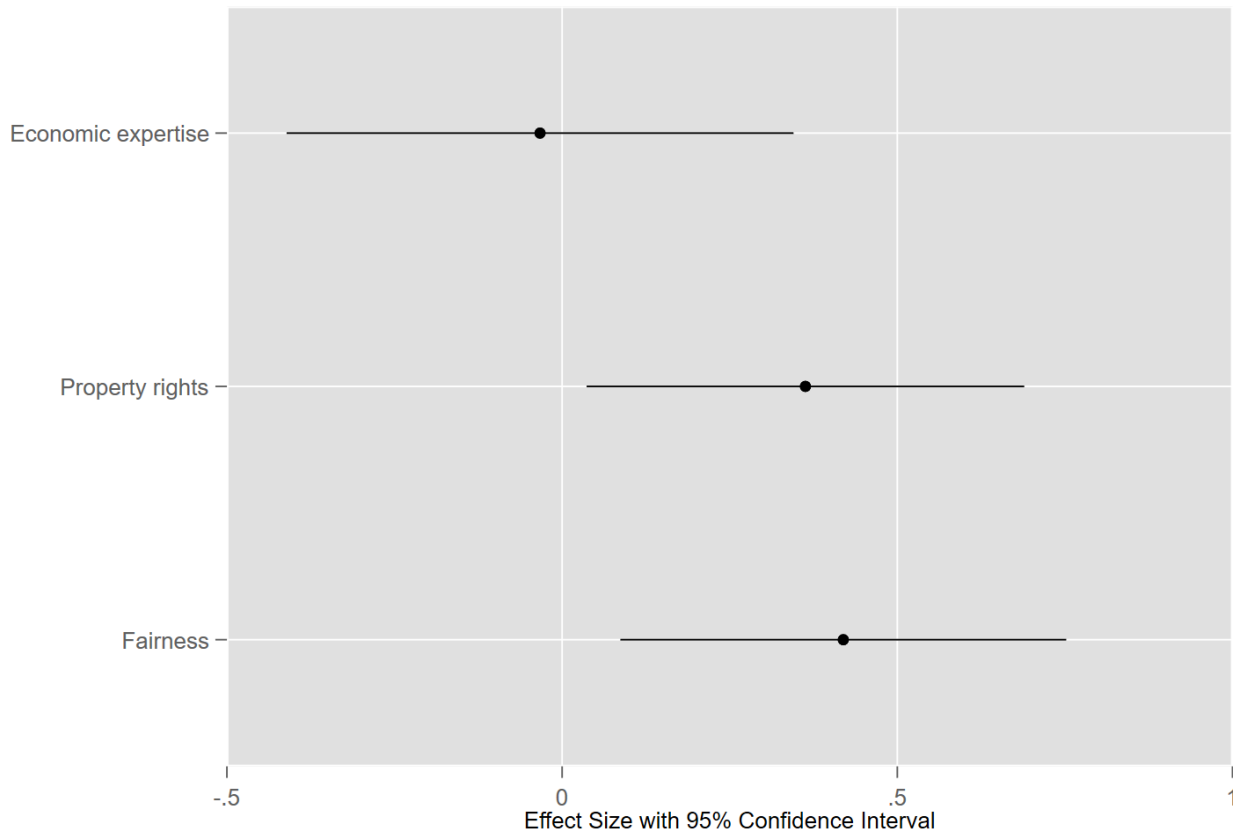


Figure 5: Estimated Effects of Housing Policy Vignettes

Then we drilled down on partisan and ideological groups and found that Democrats and liberals were especially responsive to the *Fairness* prompt, but Democrats (though not liberals) were also responsive to some extent to the *Property Rights* prompt, and liberals to *Economic Expertise*. Conservatives and libertarians were also responsive to *Fairness*, but, surprisingly, not to *Economic Expertise* or *Property Rights*. Moderates and independents responded very positively to the *Property Rights* argument. Those who were politically disengaged, measured by lack of voter registration and lack of knowledge as to ideological and partisan self-placement, were unresponsive to all treatments.

We also looked at how the treatments affected responses on individual questions, not just the index of pro-housing attitudes. Here, the most interesting result is that conservatives and libertarians now also responded to *Property Rights* just as strongly as moderates on the question of reducing local land-use regulations, but not on the other questions. Seeing the *Property Rights* message on average moved a moderate, conservative, or libertarian about half a point on the Likert scale, for instance, half of the distance between Agree and Strongly Agree or between Neither Agree nor Disagree and Agree. It is not possible for a single respondent to move half a point on the scale, but an average effect of half a point could reflect, for example, that half the respondents moved a full point and half did not move at all.

The biggest surprise is that New Hampshire residents do not generally respond to the economic benefits of building more housing. There are several possible reasons for this lack of an effect. One is that the inclusion of numbers in *Economic Expertise* triggered hostility to math. Another is that priming with economic arguments got respondents to think more about their own self-interest, activating

counterproductive NIMBYism. Finally, it is possible that the economic argument was simply not stated strongly or persuasively enough to move people's views compared to *Control*.

## Conclusion: Lessons for Advocates

Most New Hampshire voters want more housing to be built and want housing to be more affordable. Democrats are unified in favoring more affordable housing and opposing new restrictions on development to maintain the state's character. Republicans are more divided, but they do overwhelmingly favor limiting the "red tape" that can hamper development. Most voters across parties, areas of the state, and levels of education do not yet connect planning and zoning ordinances and decisions to the affordability crisis in the state, which is an opportunity and a challenge for housing advocates.

The experimental evidence shows that New Hampshire residents can be persuaded to support more housing with arguments about private property rights and fairness to striving families. Different audiences respond differently to these messages. Democrats and liberals respond particularly strongly to the fairness message, while moderates and independents respond particularly strongly to the property rights message. Conservatives, libertarians, and Republicans can be persuaded to support loosening local land-use regulation with a property rights message, but they tend to resist persuasion on questions like supporting more affordable housing. It therefore appears that negative connotations or perhaps misperceptions about what "affordable housing" means prevail among many on the right. This is a risk of messaging about "affordable housing" that includes advocacy of taxpayer subsidies.

While neighbors often oppose new housing developments proposed near them, there are a few factors that can make them more agreeable to new housing. For homeowners, smaller, single-family developments are more acceptable. The problem is that these types of developments have less benefit for solving the housing affordability crisis.

Non-homeowners represent a potential pool of support for YIMBY policies at the local level. They tend to prefer mixed-income developments and strongly oppose age restrictions. However, renters also oppose tear-downs that are typically required for dense, infill development in urban areas. For many projects, activating renters to come to hearings and express their views is a way to boost public expressions of support for housing, but for other projects, that may not be the case.

The Center for Ethics at Saint Anselm College will continue to do research on the views of New Hampshire voters on housing issues and on the rhetorical tools advocates can use to make this issue more salient in our communities. Voters can be persuaded to favor making building homes easier, which is good news for those who wish to solve the affordable housing crisis in our state. All that's needed is the resources to bring the appropriate messages to voters and mobilize turnout at local elections.