Building Representation: The Politics of Development, Diversity, and Institutional Norms*

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October 13, 2025

Abstract

Metropolitan areas in the United States are undergoing rapid diversification, significantly reshaping the demographics of local leadership. This paper examines how shifts in the racial and ethnic composition of city councils influence land use and housing development, particularly in relation to decision-making diversity. Using data on city council elections and the distribution of new housing permits, I identify the causal effect of electing a minority representative on housing supply. The findings reveal that minority representation increases single-family housing construction at the expense of multi-family housing, challenging conventional expectations about ideology and race. Qualitative interviews with city council members suggest that efforts to address minority underrepresentation drive active support for single-family housing, while distrust of developers—rooted in fears of gentrification—fuels skepticism toward multi-family projects. Overall, the study presents a nuanced view of racial representation: while minorities achieve better representational outcomes, these gains can come with costs.

Word count: 8922

*I thank Matthew Blackwell, Justin de Benedictis-Kessner, Taeku Lee, Marcel Roman, James M. Snyder, Jr., Stephanie Ternullo, Elizabeth Thom, Christopher S. Warshaw, Aidan Connaughton, Angelo Dagonel, and the workshop audiences at Harvard University, the Local Political Economy Conference, MPSA, and APSA for their comments and suggestions. The qualitative study was exempted by the IRB at Harvard University (#24-1727).

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1 Introduction

> "[F]or the man who is a party politician in one role may, in another, be a member of a particular interest group, social stratum, neighborhood, race, ethnic group, occupation or profession. In this role he may himself help to generate issues"
>
> Dahl (1961), pg. 93

In the United States, land-use politics is a cornerstone of local policymaking. The power to decide where people, commerce, and industry develop provides elected officials control over municipal growth. These decisions carry substantial economic consequences, influencing both household wealth and city revenues. In short, land-use remains a critical policy domain, shaped by numerous vested interests competing for influence. However, the origins of land-use politics are intrinsically tied to the politics of race. Early attempts to zone cities arose as a strategy to explicitly preserve white enclaves and exclude racial minorities from owning property (Troesken and Walsh, 2019; Sahn, 2021; Reny and Newman, 2018). While racial covenants were eventually prohibited by the courts, local governments maintained policies, such as deterring multi-family buildings, that would reify, and in some cases worsen, existing racial segregation (Marble and Nall, 2021; Hamilton, 1976; Fischel, 2001).

At the same time, cities in the United States are experiencing unprecedented shifts in their demography, with racial minorities now constituting a majority in many American cities. These sweeping changes in population dynamics have significantly impacted local political landscapes, particularly in city councils where increased racial diversity has led to greater racial representation (de Benedictis-Kessner et al., 2023).

In recent years, minority candidates for political office have mainly emerged in Democratic strongholds, often on progressive slates with goals to radically alter the distribution of the local housing supply. As such, pundits in popular media have argued that the election of minorities would mean drastic increases to density, which in turn would increase the af-

fordability of housing.[1] Additionally, scholarship on housing attitudes also finds that public opinion diverges along racial lines, with racial minorities holding more permissive attitudes than their white counterparts (Hankinson, 2018; Douglas et al., 2024; Einstein, Palmer and Glick, 2018; Sahn, 2024). These pieces of evidence suggest that equitable racial representation - or at the very least improvements to existing disparities (Ricca and Trebbi, 2022) - could help to address density and affordability needs of American municipalities. This article examines how the election of racial minorities to city councils may change the housing supply of cities, and what this might mean for the future of a rapidly diversifying population.

However, there are reasons to doubt that this association conclusively proves that electing racial minorities to office would result in more multi-family housing. Recent scholarship highlights that electoral reforms, such as districted city councils, result in increased particularistic demands, which in turn increase accountability to existing residents that find proximate multi-family housing undesirable (Hankinson and Magazinnik, 2023; Mast, 2024; Sahn, 2024). Increasing evidence also exists that minority representatives may simply represent dominant groups within their co-ethnic networks (Strolovitch, 2006). Moreover, the dominant model of local politics in the social sciences emphasizes economic imperatives above all else (e.g., Peterson, 1981; Tiebout, 1956). As such, it could be the case that while city councils continue to diversify, these changes have little effect on the distribution of housing in local settings.

To examine the relationship between elite diversification and the distribution of housing, I leverage a mixed methods approach, combining a range of quantitative data sources and research designs as well as qualitative interviews to assess the impact that racial identity plays in local decisionmaking. Using data on elections in large cities from 2010 to 2021 (de Benedictis-Kessner et al., 2023) and a regression discontinuity design, I identify the causal effect of electing a minority representative on the issuance of new multi-family and single-family housing permits. In accordance with the literature, I find that electing racial

[1]See, for example, King and Mays (2025), Gold (2021), Koseff (2024), and Cristiantiello (2023) for recent examples of this type of coverage in New York City, Los Angeles, and Boston.

minorities to city councils increase the number of all housing permits. Unexpectedly, however, this increase is driven almost entirely by the provision of single-family developments. Insights drawn from 60 semistructured, in-depth interviews with councilpersons, mayors, and their staff provide evidence of several mechanisms that underlie these results. In particular, I find that minority legislators prioritize homeownership as a vehicle to bridge the racial wealth gap and are more wary of developers in fear of gentrifying their districts.

This article makes several contributions to existing literature. Previous work has focused on the effect of electoral configurations on land-use decisions. To this point, it has been difficult to disentangle the effect of racial identity and a districted election system. Here, I find that racial identity, in particular, has strong effects on the supply of housing due to differences in the attitudes and priorities of minority councilpersons. These results further highlight the powers of individual city councilpersons to dictate local policy in ways that do not require a critical mass or majority coalition (de Benedictis-Kessner, Jones and Warshaw, 2025; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2016). Though the focus of the work is on local politics, the results relate to arguments made by legislative scholars about the geographic basis of distributive projects (Shepsle and Weingast, 1987; Weingast, Shepsle and Johnsen, 1981; Weingast, 1979). Finally, the results of this paper contribute to a rich body of scholarship examining the institutional and behavioral consequences of minority candidate emergence and election. By demonstrating that the election of minority officials has significant impacts on local public policy, these findings suggest that minority representation in public office is not only an end in itself but also a means of achieving substantive representation.

2 Related Literature

2.1 Land Use and Race in American Cities

Land use regulations, originating in the early twentieth century, arose as a strategy with the explicit goal of controlling the racial composition of neighborhoods. Atlanta's 1916 Ashley Ordinance, for example, explicitly forbade Black persons from occupying homes in white blocks unless a majority of the community agreed to their arrival (Troesken and Walsh, 2019). From St. Louis to San Diego, restrictive covenants passed by local governments served to preserve white enclaves, at the expense of minority homeownership (Reny and Newman, 2018).[2]

While *Shelley v. Kraemer (1948)* eventually prohibited the enforcement of racial covenants, local governments continued to exert control in ways that preserved racial segregation. Existing homeowners commonly oppose new developments, driven by concerns about construction disruptions, strains on public goods, and potential threats to property values (Hamilton, 1976; Fischel, 2001). Consequently, the most acceptable form of new housing for existing residents is often single-family homes, which restrict the amount of available housing (Marble and Nall, 2021). Discretionary review processes, widespread in the United States, allow these preferences to shape development, often suppressing the overall supply of housing. The resulting political economy is defined by slow, if not entirely stalled, development in American cities. Despite population growth of nearly 100 million since 1980, the average number of new multifamily buildings constructed annually in U.S. cities has remained just three.[3] Existing evidence confirms the primacy of local regulations on limiting development, and its implications for inequalities in housing wealth (Glaeser and Gyourko, 2018; Glaeser, Gyourko and Saks, 2005). When land use policies raise housing costs, they can exacerbate segregation, even in the absence of underlying economic differences between groups (Trounstine, 2020, p.

[2]Racial covenants, as they relate to housing and land use, began with explicit references to maintaining white homogeneity. See Thompson et al.: https://www.npr.org/2021/11/17/1049052531/racial-covenants-housing-discrimination

[3]Author's calculation based on the U.S. Census Building Permit Survey.

46).[4]

The effects of these local land use policies continue to reverberate in the modern era. Persistent gaps in housing wealth, credit approval, and renting continue to plague the American housing market (Pager and Shepherd, 2008; Yinger, 1998; Flage, 2018; King and Mieszkowski, 1973; Ihlanfeldt and Mayock, 2009). These institutional barriers to homeownership and housing construction are compounded by stereotypes of minorities held by key stakeholders, such as developers, realtors, and city appraisers (Korver-Glenn, 2018).

Trends in housing development in American cities show incredibly slow growth, relative to demand for housing units. This, in turn, results in higher housing costs, which continue to exacerbate existing patterns of segregation and racial wealth inequality. In short, the strategy of land use regulations as a tool to explicitly and implicitly preserve the exclusion of minorities from white communities has had far reaching effects on patterns of homeownership and racial composition of metropolitan areas in the United States.

2.2 City Councils, Diversification, and Expectations

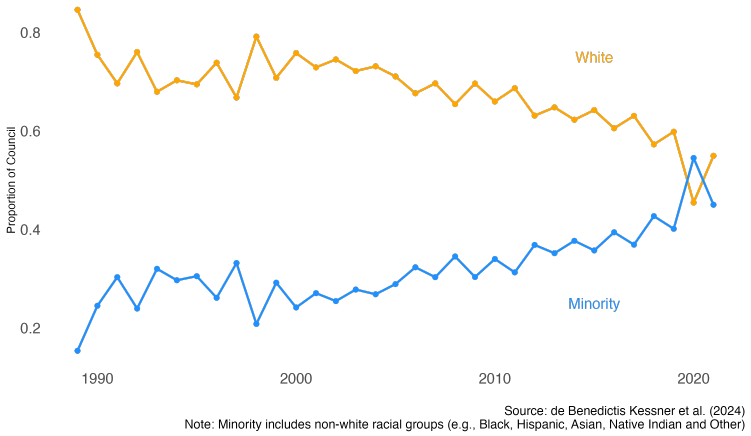

Figure 1: Average City Council Composition by Race over Time

[4]In parallel, research shows that many white residents are willing to pay a premium to live in racially homogenous neighborhoods, further compounding these dynamics (Cutler, Glaeser and Vigdor, 1999; Boustan, 2012).

Local elected bodies, often imbued with the responsibility to dictate land use, have become increasingly diverse in the contemporary era. Figure 1 shows the trends in the average proportion of racial minorities on city councils from 1989 to 2021. Since 1989, the average proportion of racial minorities on city councils rose from approximately 15% to 45% in 2021 (de Benedictis-Kessner et al., 2023). What was a monolithically white deliberative institution has seen unprecedented gains in racial representation in recent years. How then have these paradigmatic shifts in local politics translated to changes in land-use and housing, if at all? Current scholarship provides clear theoretical expectations, but little explicit testing of this relationship.

Growing empirical evidence suggests that racial minorities in local elected office hold distinct policy preferences and approaches to representation than their white counterparts. In particular, the election of racial minorities to city councils results in better accountability to their co-ethnic constituents, improves public services in under-resourced areas, and affects the broader local policymaking agenda (Hankinson and Magazinnik, 2023; Mast, 2024).[5] Improvements in minority representation, however, extend beyond these critical institutions. Beach et al. (2024) find that the election of a racial minority to California city councils results in improved constituent services in majority-minority communities, which, in turn, results in increased housing wealth gains for racial minorities. Moreover, evidence from school boards shows that the very types of policies considered are affected following gains in minority representation (Kogan, Lavertu and Peskowitz, 2021). These effects are not limited to the local politics literature, as these findings accord with complementary results in Congressional and state legislative studies (Broockman, 2013; Butler and Broockman, 2011).

Minority legislators translate these divergent preferences through two pathways, informally increasing the power of that group and formally changing bargaining dynamics (e.g., Baron and Ferejohn, 1989). Since decisionmaking in cities requires consensus building and collaboration (Vey and Storring, 2022), the very presence of distinct policy preferences can

[5]This logic is similar to that of the Congressional distributive politics literature, whereby district representation results in inefficient allocation of public goods (Shepsle and Weingast, 1987).

change bargaining and policy outcomes (Mendelberg, Karpowitz and Oliphant, 2014). Empirical evidence in other legislative settings, such as school boards (Kogan, Lavertu and Peskowitz, 2021), policing commissions (Choi and Hong, 2021), juries (Anwar, Bayer and Hjalmarsson, 2012), and judicial appellate panels (Kastellec, 2013), show that minority presence affects collective decisionmaking, even without a majority minority composition.

That said, there is some reason to doubt that minority representation can alter the landscape of housing development significantly. According to seminal accounts of city politics, local governments are driven primarily by economic competition between each other for land and capital (Peterson, 1981; Tiebout, 1956). As such, city councils are severely constrained in their governing discretion, which limits them to policymaking for economic development (Sharp and Elkins, 1987; Logan and Molotch, 2007). A conservative interpretation of this account is that the identity of local politicians may be relevant to their attitudes, but economic realities prevent them from fully expressing and implementing these preferences.

3 Data and Empirical Strategies

To understand how minority representation affects housing politics, I rely on two research designs. First, I merge data on the composition of city councils and new housing permits data, leveraging a regression discontinuity design to test how closely electing a minority to elected office affects the politics of housing at the city level. Second, to complement this aggregate analysis of housing supply, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 60 city councillors, alderpersons, and assemblypersons to examine how race affects policymaking. Below, I describe the data and designs used in this paper.

3.1 Aggregate Outcomes

City Council Data: In this project, I focus on city council elections in the United States from 2010 to 2021. City councils sit centrally in the politics of housing in local government,

often serving as the legislative body with final approval on developments (Anderson, Brees and Reninger, 2008). Existing scholarship further emphasizes their pivotal role by analyzing the distributive and electoral incentives councillors have in allocating projects to their districts (Hankinson and Magazinnik, 2023; Mast, 2024).

The key independent variable of interest is the winning candidate's racial and ethnic identity. Official biographies and election data do not contain the identification of councillors, let alone their challengers, so I rely on data from de Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2023). Their dataset represents the most complete and comprehensive data on American local elections, relying on statewide election websites, unofficial newspaper returns, and crowdsourced information to populate their election results. The resulting dataset includes a near complete universe of medium to large cities, defined as having a population of over 50,000. To identify the race and ethnicity of candidates and elected officials, models are trained on a random forests algorithm, which takes voter file data, name-based Bayesian predictions, and image classifications.

City Housing Permits Data: I then merge these election data to housing development permits data from the Census Bureau's Building Permits Survey (henceforth BPS). The BPS is a survey sent to local building permit officials monthly. In this paper, I use annual place-level summary files, which contain statistics on the number of buildings and units permitted disaggregated by dwelling type: single-family detached homes or multi-family buildings. These data do not allow me to distinguish between market rate and affordable units, but still provide important information about trends in housing politics. These data have also been used by de Benedictis-Kessner, Jones and Warshaw (2025) in their study of partisanship of city councils and mayors as well as Hankinson and Magazinnik (2023) in their paper on spatial representation.

Demographic Data: These main independent and dependent variables are merged to

aggregated place-level data on housing units, resident demographic composition, and population statistics (Manson et al., 2024).[6] Additional data on city budgets and finances are sourced from the Census Bureau's Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances, aggregated by Pierson, Hand and Thompson (2015). Finally, I collect data on housing prices at the city level from Zillow (2025). In particular, I employ their Zillow Home Value Index (ZHVI), which is "a measure of the typical home value and market changes across a given region and housing type. It reflects the typical value for homes in the 35th to 65th percentile range." All monetary values, both in public finances and housing prices, are real values, adjusted by annual Consumer Price Indices (CPI). These data sources, along with lagged variables from the aforementioned data sources, makeup the included covariates in model specifications going forward.

Regression Discontinuity Design: To examine the impact of a minority victory in a local election (at time t) on subsequent housing developments (at time $t + x$), I employ a close election regression discontinuity (RD) design. This design enables the comparison of districts that recently elected a racial minority to those that did not, based on the assumption that these districts share similar characteristics. By focusing on close elections, we can causally identify the effect of a district electing a racial minority to office, which is of theoretical importance. Districts where racial minorities compete against white candidates are the sites, where gains in minority representation are possible. Moreover, scholarship on local government has highlighted the racialized nature of municipal policymaking, making it theoretically advantageous to study these critical cases.

I use the following RD specification:

$$Y_{i,t+x} = \beta_1 \text{Minority Win}_{i,t} + f(V_{i,t}) + \epsilon_{i,t} \tag{1}$$

[6]The United States uses places as a term to refer to a concentration of population, which oftentimes maps onto legally designated municipalities.

where $Y_{i,t+x}$ refers to difference in the log + 1 number of housing permits issued in city i between time t and $t + x$. The main specification used in this paper going forward is the average difference of the logged outcomes + 1 measured two and three years after the election and permits issued in the election year, which accounts for the lag in time that a politician takes office and their ability to affect policy outcomes (de Benedictis-Kessner, Jones and Warshaw, 2025). I also winsorize this outcome variables at the 1% and 99% levels.[7] The treatment effect is estimated on changes in outcomes rather than levels to both increase statistical efficiency (Lee and Lemieux, 2010) and account for existing differences in housing construction across cities. Minority $\text{Win}_{i,t}$ is the indicator for whether a racial minority wins in city i at time t, while $f(V_{i,t})$ is the running variable, which has a sharp discontinuity at 50%.[8] I cluster standard errors by city-year in all specifications, as there are multiple elections in a given year for any particular city council.[9]

The validity of the RD design rests on the assumption that the winner of a close election is the only factor changing discontinuously at the threshold (Hahn, Todd and Van der Klaauw, 2001; Lee and Lemieux, 2010). Appendix A features a comparison of general city statistics between those within the RD bandwidth and those in the full sample of cities. In Appendix C, I conduct a series of tests to validate the main identification assumption of the RD design, including McCrary tests for bunching at the threshold, an analysis of smoothness across key covariates, and placebo tests using lagged values of the running variable (Eggers et al., 2015). The combination of these tests indicate that an RD design is an appropriate choice for this analysis.

Close election RD designs have become increasingly common in the study of the character-

[7]There are two reasons why I winsorize the outcome variable in the main specifications. First, we may worry that extreme values are a result of measurement errors, which can bias the statistical models (Beaumont and Rivest, 2009). As a reminder, the BPS is administered as a survey to municipal governments, so there is some fear that these extreme outcomes are a result of clerical errors. Second, we might also fear that even if these values are genuine, that extreme values may increase the variance of our estimate. Appendix D.4 shows results when using the non-winsorized outcome variables, and the results hold.

[8]As is common in RD designs, $f(V_{i,t})$ is allowed to change at the cutpoint.

[9]One may worry about intra-city dependence affecting standard errors. Appendix D.7 shows results with clusters at the city level, which feature similar results to Table 3.

istics of elected officials, particularly those of local politicians (See for example, de Benedictis-Kessner, Jones and Warshaw, 2025; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2016, 2020; Hopkins and McCabe, 2012; Ferreira and Gyourko, 2014, 2009). We should exercise caution, however, in interpreting β_1 as the causal effect of racial identity on policy outcomes. Given that the racial identity of elected officials can be correlated with other politician characteristics, a more apt interpretation of β_1 is that it is the causal effect of electing a minority politician alongside other factors that are related to being a minority politician (Marshall, 2024). This characterization of the estimand of interest can be compared to that of the effect of extremist candidate nomination in primary election in (Hall, 2015), Muslim candidates to state office in India (Allie, 2023), and the successful election of female candidates (Bucchianeri, 2018).

3.2 Interviews

To supplement the quantitative analyses, I turn now to a qualitative approach to help explain the variation found in the RD design. Qualitative approaches are comparatively advantageous as a mode of social science inquiry (Berg and Ternullo, 2025). First, they offer the ability to innovate theoretically through the potential for unexpected insights into local policymaking (Ternullo, 2024; Burawoy, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012; Fenno, 2003; George and Bennett, 2005; Soss, 1999). In this way, inductive approaches allow for findings that may buck conventional wisdom about municipal governance. Second, qualitative approaches allow for the ability to identify specific differences between cases and develop new theoretical mechanisms that produce the variation of interest from quantitative designs (Tarrow, 2004; Lieberman, 2005).

With the primary goal of understanding differences in white and minority legislators, the sample of cities and legislators were constructed purposively (Small, 2009). In particular, the sampling frame of this study relies on medium to large cities that featured a close election between a white and minority candidate.[10] This sample of cities which feature narrow wins

[10]This strategy of narrowing to medium to large cities is common in the local politics literature. As

and losses allows for precise comparisons, allowing for wide variation in demographics, city finances, and place.

From this list of cities, I reached out to the population of 652 councilpersons, Council Presidents, alderpersons, Presidents of the Board of Alderman, assemblypersons, Mayors Pro Tem, and mayors, through emails available on public listings. I received 104 responses, with 60 ultimately following through with the interview.[11] For 4 offices, I was referred to legislative staff for interviews, instead of speaking to the elected official themselves. The response rate to emails was 15.9%, whereas the completion rate was 8.7%.

This study draws on these completed 60 semi-structured interviews with city legislators and their staff conducted between February and April 2025. Appendix B.3 lists some of the basic questions asked to start interviews, which revolve around demographics and normal means processes in housing development. The open-ended nature of the interviews allowed respondents to expand on the institutional structure of their local legislative bodies as well as the unique political dynamics of each municipality. These answers also allowed for further questions on their attitudes towards land-use and the source of these preferences.

The average interview lasted 32 minutes and 15 seconds on average, and were predominantly conducted over Zoom. A minority of interviews were conducted over the phone due to the preferences of the local policymakers. The audio and/or video of these interviews were recorded, transcribed by Automatic Machine Captions from Panopto, and manually cleaned by the author.[12] These transcripts were coded for demographic characteristics of respondents. In accordance with IRB procedure, all respondents are anonymized, and only identified by general city demographics, their position, and racial identity.

medium to large cities oftentimes have more ability to change, implement, and fund local policies, they represent the most likely place for detecting effects of city council composition. See de Benedictis-Kessner, Jones and Warshaw (2025); de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw (2020) for examples.

[11] 19 respondents said there was no schedule availability or were unavailable, 21 respondents indicated their interest, but dropped off from communications. 4 respondents had to cancel because of author health issues. 3 respondents did not show up to their interviews, and also did not follow-up about their absence.

[12] In particular, transcripts were cleaned by removing filler words and phrases (e.g., uh, um, you know). When presenting quotes, ellipses are included when omitting parts of these statements. They are used for ease of interpretation, and mainly deletes filler information.

Table 1: Racial Breakdown of Respondents

Elected Race	**Council**	**Executive**	**Staff**	**Total**
Asian	7	2	0	9
Black	7	0	0	7
Hispanic	5	0	1	6
Mixed	1	0	0	1
Non-White	20	2	1	23
White	31	3	3	37
Total	**51**	**5**	**4**	**60**

Elected Race	**Democrat**	**Republican**	**NPP**	**Total**
Non-White	16	1	6	23
White	27	6	4	37

Table 1 shows summary statistics for the sample's demographic and political characteristics.[13] Table B.3 of the Appendix matches these individual details to their respective political and demographic traits.[14]

There are two features of the sample that are relevant to the analyses in this paper. First, given the sampling frame focuses on cities with close elections between a white and minority in the last thirty years, the distribution deviates somewhat from the broader landscape of minority representation on city councils. Whereas focusing on cities with large minority populations would elicit a more representative sample, it would be more difficult to disentangle the differences between legislator-related effects and between city variation. Second, while the sampling frame inevitably included mostly Democratic strongholds, the sample includes a substantial number of Republicans and Independents. I discuss the limitations in terms of generalizability below.

[13]For the office, I aggregated together councilpersons, assemblypersons, alderpersons, and Mayors Pro Tem as Council. Executives include mayors, while staff indicates staff from one of those offices. NPP refers to "No Party Preference" or political independents.

[14]IRB protocol involved the anonymization of councilpersons. As such, they are identified by their gender, race, and the general size of the city they represent.

4 Results

4.1 Electing Minorities Leads to Increased Single-Family Housing

Table 3: Minority Election and Housing Permits

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A: Single Family Permits						
NW Win, t	0.249**	0.335*	0.354*	0.231*	0.333**	0.353*
	(0.095)	(0.134)	(0.147)	(0.094)	(0.128)	(0.140)
Panel B: Multi-family Permits						
NW Win, t	-0.126	-0.205	-0.167	-0.256+	-0.316	-0.301
	(0.147)	(0.215)	(0.225)	(0.151)	(0.211)	(0.233)
Panel C: All Permits						
NW Win, t	0.189*	0.261+	0.280*	0.167+	0.252+	0.270*
	(0.090)	(0.135)	(0.141)	(0.090)	(0.130)	(0.135)
Observations	515	515	515	506	506	506
Bandwidth (SF)	0.07	0.11	0.18	0.07	0.11	0.18
Bandwidth (MF)	0.09	0.11	0.2	0.07	0.11	0.18
Bandwidth (All)	0.09	0.12	0.21	0.09	0.11	0.2
Polynomial	0	1	2	0	1	2
Covariate Adjustment				✓	✓	✓

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

The dependent variable is the change in the log number of single/multi family building permits + 1 between the election year and three years after the election year. This table reports the bias-corrected estimates with robust standard errors clustered at the city-election year level (Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2014). Bandwidth is selected using the one common MSE-optimal bandwidth from the 'rdrobust' package (Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2014) for all models. The polynomial row indicates the order of the local polynomial used to construct the point estimator. Models (4), (5) and (6) include city-year level covariates, including, logged median income, logged population, logged median housing price, logged number of housing units, proportion female, proportion white, proportion Black, proportion Hispanic, proportion API, and the number of city council seats. Results are robust to alternative specifications, which can be found in Appendix D.

Does the election of a minority to the city council lead to changes in the supply of new housing permits? Table 3 presents the results of the RD design.[15] In line with theoretical expectations, the close election of a minority to city councils lead to an 21.2% to 32.7%

[15] Appendix C.5. presents the visual results of columns (2) and (5) for Panels (A) and (B).

increase in the number of total housing permits allotted. However, this increase in the amount of housing is unexpectedly driven mainly by the growth in single family housing. The election of a minority to a city council results in a 21.6% to 32.9% increase in the number of single-family housing permits. These results are within the bounds of effects found in other local politics research on city council identity (e.g., de Benedictis-Kessner, Jones and Warshaw, 2025; de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2020).[16] The results are noisier for multi-family permits. Although the estimated coefficients are negative, the standard errors are too large to rule out a null effect. In Appendix D.8, I conduct equivalence tests using bounds set at 0.05, 0.10, and 0.20 standard deviations of the outcome. In each case, the 90% confidence interval extends beyond the equivalence bounds, so the tests are inconclusive. This means I cannot rule out substantively meaningful effects, and therefore I do not have strong evidence for a 'strong null' result. Part of this noise derives from the paltry number of multi-family housing developments in the average American city, which amounts to an annual average of about 3 multi-family housing permits issued annually since 1989. Despite this, I find little evidence of the conventional wisdom that electing minorities to local offices would increase multi-family housing availability and city-wide density.[17]

The results in Table 3 are robust across additional analyses. First, I conduct a battery of tests to establish the validity of the RD design. Appendix C.1 shows the results of McCrary density tests, which test strategic manipulation at the threshold (McCrary, 2008). I find no evidence that candidates are sorting around the threshold, which accords with the motivating logic that close elections are valid for causal inference. Appendix C.2 tests the continuity assumption among key covariates, including logged population, proportion female residents, proportion white residents, proportion Black residents, logged lagged proportion of Democrats on the city council, logged lagged proportion of whites on the city

[16]The effects for Democratic mayors in de Benedictis-Kessner, Jones and Warshaw (2025) is a 70% increase.

[17]One may worry about the large standard error estimates for the models on multi-family housing. First, Figure 2 presents the preferred specification, which suggests that even at the most positive value, there is little to no change in the number of multi-family housing. Second, the results of the difference-in-difference estimation in Appendix D.3. show that this trend in multi-family building permits is broadly robust, that is a negative relationship.

council, logged existing housing units, proportion of renters, logged median income, and logged median housing price. Broadly, there is little evidence that cities just below and above the threshold differ from one another in significant ways, meeting the continuity and smoothness assumptions necessary of RD designs. Appendices C.3 conduct placebo/parallel trends analysis. If changes in the permitting of new housing occur prior to the election of a minority legislator, identification of a causal effect would be violated. There is little evidence of differential pre-trends in the single-family and all building models, which further confirms the causal interpretation of the coefficients in Table 3. There is some caution with the multi-family parallel trends, which mainly derive from the low amounts of multi-family development in general. Finally, I conduct a series of bandwidth tests in Appendices C.4.[18] While there is some variation across varying bandwidth specifications, the point estimates for all three models stay consistent and receive the same qualitative interpretation as the main specifications.

Second, the results in Table 3 are robust to using alternative measures of new housing stocks. Table D.1 shows results using results using multi-family housing units instead of buildings, the share of new multi-family buildings, the share of new multi-family units, and per-capita measures of single-family housing and multi-family housing permits. The coefficients on these measures accord with the qualitative interpretations of the results in Table 3. In particular, the specification using new multi-family building share of all permits remains negative and statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, highlighting the robustness of the result that the election of minority councilpersons results in increased single-family building at the expense of multi-family buildings.[19]

Third, I fit a two-way fixed effect OLS specification to approximate the degree to which the results are generalizable beyond close-elections. It should be noted that one should

[18]The bandwidth estimates are modeled with the specifications from Table 3 column (5). That is, the estimates include controls, a linear polynomial, and standard errors clustered at the city-year level.

[19]Appendix D.2 shows additional analyses on the budgets of cities that elect a minority councilperson. Across the board, there is little to no effect, except a negative estimate on the total expenditure, in accordance with canonical models of diversity and public goods expenditure (Alesina, Baqir and Easterly, 1999).

caution causal interpretation of the difference-in-difference estimates as omitted variables can bias estimates. For example, if minorities are elected to city councils with more anti-development constituencies, the estimates would be downwardly biased. Figures D.2. and D.3 show the results of these analysis, estimating the average effect of changes in ethnic composition of city councils on changes in housing permit approvals. The independent variable, minority proportion of the city council, is scaled for ease of interpretation. One standard deviation increase is equal to approximately a 26.97% increase in minority composition. Two results deserve attention. First, a standard deviation increase in diversity results in a statistically significant negative effect on the permitting of multi-family buildings. Second, while the point estimates on single-family building permits remain positive, the standard error estimates are too noisy to reject the null hypothesis that there is no increase in single-family building permits.

As mentioned, these results require caution in causal interpretation, as the cities where minorities are elected do not have a valid counterfactual in cities where minorities are not elected. However, the trends in development certainly add to the findings of Table 3 that development trends buck conventional wisdom that the election of minorities to city councils result in progressive housing politics that prioritize supply over particularistic concerns.

Fourth, one may wonder if the effect of a minority on the housing mix is an artifact of party affiliation, rather than racial identity. The literature has mixed findings on this question. While some work highlights the lack of distinctive partisan attitudes on the question of housing amongst voters (Marble and Nall, 2021), others find that partisan affiliation matters for the purposes of elite behavior (de Benedictis-Kessner, Jones and Warshaw, 2025). Appendix D.5 shows the results of the analysis of races featuring two-way races amongst members of the same party. The point estimates are nearly indistinguishable from those from Table 3, while still maintaining similar levels of statistical significance. This is in spite of the nearly halved number of observations. Although these results do not necessarily rule out the effects of party on local political dynamics, they certainly do add credence to the

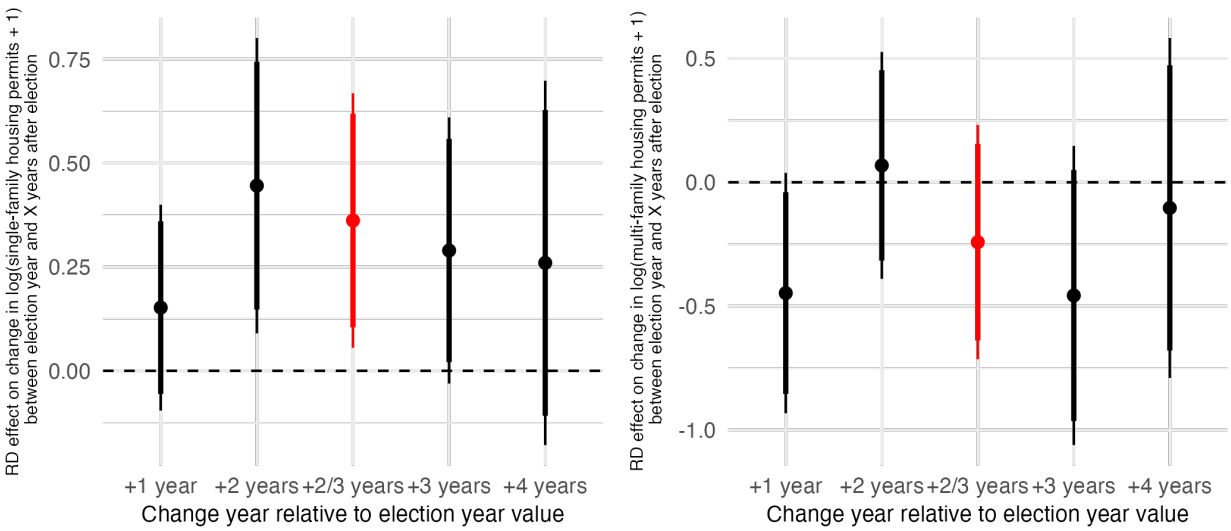

Figure 2: Effect of Minority Election on Permits over Time

*The highlighted red line refers to the preferred specification from Table 2, which uses the average difference of the log + 1 number of housing permits measured two and three years after the election and permits issued in the election year.

importance of race as a key political factor.

Finally, recent advances in the econometric literature highlight the potential biases involved in the use of log differences as an outcome of interest (e.g., Chen and Roth, 2024). The issue stems from the dependency of log differences on the units of outcome, particularly problematic for variables with many zeroes. First, there are minimal numbers of zeros, even within the multi-family permits distribution. Amongst the single-family, multi-family, and all-builds variables, there are 25, 240, and 16 zeroes, respectively. Second, the results of Table 3 are consistent when using alternative functional forms. Appendix D.6 shows the results when employing an inverse hyperbolic sine transformation, in lieu of logged values. The results are not only robust to these transformations, but also slightly stronger in precision than those in Table 3. Taken together, there is little reason to believe that the results are driven by arbitrary functional form decisions.

The main specifications in Table 3 rely on the average change in permits two and three years following the election of a racial minority to city council. Does the effect of minority elections persist beyond this period? Figure 2 highlights the effect of the election of a minority

on the change in single family units permitted from the first year after election to the fourth year. We see large effects in the second and third year, which contribute to the results found in Table 3, but see that the effect wanes by the fourth year. While the coefficient estimate is positive, it is imprecise, making it so that we cannot reject the null hypothesis that there is no effect of minority election in the fourth year. Given that city council terms are generally four years long, these results accord with the periods of time where councilpersons have most ability to affect housing policy. Additionally, while the results from the preferred specification show that multi-family buildings are indistinguishable from zero, there is some evidence that by the third year, multi-family building permits do indeed decline. In general, the results of the temporal analysis add further credence that there is an effect on the distribution of housing permits. While housing permits are seemingly allotted more freely, these gains are almost entirely due to the increase in single-family buildings.

5 Cities, Their Limits, and the Role of Race

Why do cities that elect minorities to office result in increases in single-family development, but not multi-family development? Moreover, why are there significant effects when it comes to the issuance of permits, but not other pivotal outcomes, namely the budget? To answer this question, I turn to the results of semi-structured interviews with 60 city legislators (e.g. councillors, alderpersons, assemblypersons, mayors, managers) and their staff. These conversations with policymakers revealed a few key insights. First, minority legislators hold distinct preferences on housing, prioritizing building wealth through homeownership and protecting vulnerable communities through broad housing protections. Second, they exert broad unilateral control over developments in their districts because of a culture of local deference to each representative. These divergent attitudes translate directly into distinct representational strategies, whereby city councilpersons can gatekeep or streamline housing permits, as well as perform critical outreach to underserved communities, affecting the composition

of housing in their cities for decades to come. Finally, even if councilpersons advocate for multi-family housing, most cities feature an onerous review process, which often results in a council-wide vote. As such, policies for housing density often face a marked disadvantage to the norm of single-family housing.

5.1 Elected Minorities Hold Divergent Attitudes and Priorities

My conversations with elected officials and their staff emphasized pivotal differences in the styles of representation among minority and white councilpersons. The reality of underrepresentation is very tangible, and even minor, incremental changes are noticed by minority legislators. As one Latina councilwoman describes:

> I was the first Latina ever elected to the city council. I was only the eighth woman ever elected to the city council ... So all of those things contribute to different life stories, different points of view philosophy, very different political sensibilities, differences in how we see the world.

These sentiments amongst minority councilpersons often translated to a responsibility to historically underserved communities, namely their co-ethnic residents (Broockman, 2013). For many, this responsibility comes from lived experiences and their careers prior to public service. I asked a Black councilwoman from a large Southern city about how she developed her attitudes on housing to which she responded, "I started doing community advocacy work, which really led me into being a bridge between marginalized communities and organizations that provide social safety nets and services and case management." She goes on to say that their city "is one of the most financially segregated major cities in the country. Having all of our representation come from affluent areas ... meant that only some considerations were being approached with the level of vigor and robust concern that I think is being presented today." This councilperson is not alone in thinking about representation through a lens of previous disparities. The composition of many local public hearings are often

dominated by whiter and older homeowners, who have historically had an outsize influence in land-use determinations (Einstein, Palmer and Glick, 2019). In my interviews, minority legislators across the board incorporated the history of representational disproportionality, whilst also accounting for existing disparities in public participation, to motivate their style of governance.

How does this increased sense of duty to coethnic and historically underserved communities affect policymaking objectives? In short, there was an overwhelming sentiment among minority legislators that homeownership is a vehicle for bridging the gap in housing wealth. This sentiment goes beyond just a policy attitude and directly affects the provision of housing permits in their districts. As one Black councilman notes:

> You know, what homeownership can do for you? You pick up the mountain as experience, but you're making a long term investment in that property that [is generating] equity that you can utilize now or in the future, so there's a value to that. What I've done from a policy standpoint is identify investors who are interested in investing in underserved communities, making sure they were aware of the resources that city tax payers have through the federal government has to help them navigate the process to tap into some of those resources and make some of those investments in development in underserved communities.

The councilmember not only highlights his personal view that homeownership is an important stepping stone towards addressing inequality, but also conveys specific actions, such as serving as a conduit to federal funds, as a way of implementing his vision. Even when minority legislators are cognizant of economic pressures to increase the supply of housing, they may prioritize the goal of homeownership above all else. A Black councilwoman from a large Midwestern city highlights this policy goal further, "being just being very intentional, we do have a numbers problem, but at the same time, we have to be very intentional about making sure that we're stabilizing a neighborhood. And in order to do that, you have to have homeownership."

One approach to implement this goal of single-family development is to serve as a information conduit to prospective developers and homeowners. By hosting informational sessions, these councilpersons ensure that historically marginalized groups have access to critical funding and resources that can facilitate homeownership and neighborhood revitalization. These sessions can also serve as a platform for distributing cost-saving information to residents, such as pre-approved blueprints for single-family home construction and ADU additions. By providing such resources, councilpersons, as one Chicano representative mentions, believe they are significantly reducing the cost and complexity of the development process, by circumventing the need to hire developers for architectural plans. These mechanisms are part of a broad strategy to incentivize single-family home ownership to stabilize neighborhoods as one councilperson notes:

> we would prefer to have single family homes, because, again, when we talk about that level of engagement, when we talk about crime, when you live somewhere and you're invested somewhere you watch out for your neighbors, right? You make sure your lawn is kept and you make sure you're keeping a clean home on the outside, you're picking up, right? You're invested. And so those are the things that have proven to be very beneficial when it comes to stabilizing a neighborhood.

Through these efforts, minority councilpersons believe that they are not only increasing accessibility to housing opportunities, but also fostering economic mobility in historically underserved neighborhoods.

In addition to these views on single-family housing, minority legislators were more likely to hold negative views towards multi-family projects. First, minority councilpersons were disproportionately worried about the effect of new multi-family housing as a vehicle for gentrification. As a Black councilwoman from a large Southern city explains, " Yes. Gentrification is real and it typically happens in black communities ... [developers] use code enforcement as a weapon to increase the number of citations on homes." Many of these leg-

islators derive these fears of rising housing costs for existing residents from their experiences prior to public office. A Black councilwoman from a different large Southern city explains that specific areas were:

> actively being gentrified to the degree that there was going to be some substantial change in the community and that the community wasn't prepared for it. So I started my housing advocacy, recognizing both as a lay person, but also a person who started to do some initial research around gentrification [that it] follows a specific formula.

It is these experiences that result in an attitude of skepticism towards development that may increase housing density in their districts. Secondly, some of these qualms with multi-family developments derive from the mistrust of developers and landlords, who have historically born the cost of urban renewal onto these neighborhoods (Caro, 1974; Einstein, Glick and Palmer, 2023). Broader policy towards housing and city development goes beyond intervention in the permitting process. The scars of urban development in majority-minority neighborhoods extends to policies, such as increased oversight of absenteeism and delinquent landlords. The Black councilwoman from a large midwestern city expresses this very point, "One of the words that I've heard is our area doesn't want to be a dumping ground, so we don't want to be so over inundated with housing that we have nothing else." Others include policy proscriptions to renew dilapidated neighborhoods with green space and better access to city services. The perspectives of minority legislators certainly centers the historical scars of previous development strategies on majority-minority communities.

Minority councilpersons were not the only ones to raise concerns about historical racism. However, even when white legislators brought up the issue, they often failed to frame these disparities in terms of representing underserved constituents. One white assemblyperson acknowledged the legacy of redlining, "I'm saying the process by which all of this happened was inherently racist. And in fact, I can draw the line right back to the restrictive zoning or the restrictive plan. Note that says these properties will only be sold to white Americans."

Despite explicitly referencing the racialized history of housing policy, the assemblyperson later emphasized the decision not to pursue legislative action, instead focusing on the need to build a broad coalition within the legislative assembly to pass other policy priorities on housing. Another white assemblyperson from the same city remarks on this, "certainly it's common for somebody to email and say, hey, I'm stuck in this permitting process and kind of more the constituent relations ... and I try to approach that not like I'm getting involved in these processes because there's also, of course, legal risk." Race as it relates to housing was presented as an abstract policy issue rather than a matter of representing co-ethnic constituents. This framing may reflect the demographics of their district, which is majority white, with no minority group comprising more than 11% of the electorate. Non-minority councilpersons are certainly concerned about racial disparities in housing, but their experiences along with their policy attitudes oftentimes prioritize the economic imperatives of the city over rectifying past inequalities.

5.2 Institutions and Place

How do these differential policy priorities and attitudes towards co-ethnic residents affect policymaking? After all, without the ability to implement these attitudes, differences in policy outcomes by councilperson race would not emerge. I argue there are three features of local politics in the U.S. that make municipal policy divergence possible. First, multi-family housing already faces an uphill battle with multiple layers of review, where as single-family projects can be developed by-right. Second, city councils often feature a culture of district deference, which means representatives often unilaterally dictate what gets built. Finally, minority priorities result in a focus on single-family housing to ameliorate previously institutionalized inequities in the housing process.

The regulatory environment for housing disadvantages multi-family development by requiring additional regulations on building specifications, layers of regulatory reviews, and required public deliberations on their construction. Oftentimes by-design, local regulations

favor the development of single-family housing as it dovetails with homeowner desires to maintain property values (Schuetz, 2022; Marble and Nall, 2021; Grumbach, Mickey and Ziblatt, 2024). As such, for multi-family projects to succeed, developers need to directly work with their representatives to intervene and advocate for their projects. Without the cooperation of the representative of the district where the development is proposed, permit applications can be "dead on arrival." A Black councilwoman from a large midwestern city makes this process clear with their characterization of a veto power. I followed up with this councilwoman, asking if they would unilaterally reject a multi-family housing project for a single-family development. They answer "Yeah. And again, that specifically [is] because of the connection with what the residents want. So my opinion is one way. But again, you know, we base it on like I live in one neighborhood on one block. I know what I want in my neighborhood. I have a lot of multifamily units in the neighborhood that I live in. I don't want anymore. I don't want people coming saying, oh, I want to develop this empty lot." As the councilperson indicates, intervention is certainly within the power of individual district representatives. On the other hand, single-family housing requires relatively less resources and advocacy. Many cities in the U.S. feature by-right policies, which allow for streamlined development of these types of projects and avoid the regulatory hindrances required of multi-family units.

Against this policy background, city government also features a culture of deference to the representative of a given district, which can result in direct, and sometimes unilateral, policy action to stop development. First, city councilpersons have several avenues by which they can unilaterally deny or delay the issuance of permits. As the aforementioned Black councilwoman noted, proposals that do not meet their policy preferences are "dead on arrival," whether by deterring developers to go any further with their plans, negotiating down the number of units, or requesting onerous regulatory requirements indefinitely delaying projects. She describes this process:

> if you have a grave number of individuals that are opposing a particular project,

> then it's almost DOA. Now it's illegal for us to say, no. I can't say no. You can't have that. 'You can't build that there in that neighborhood.' We cannot do that. However, the neighbors have a say so in what comes into their neighborhoods. And so, we're kind of just the catalyst to support bringing people together. We may need a meeting, we may need a community forum, and we create that space for the developer, and the residents to come together, get some questions answered, have some conversations that, you know, get some clarity around the project.

These regulatory strategies are successful, in part because most councils have a norm of deference to developments in each district. As one staff city manager details, "if an issue is within one council members' district, some deference is placed to them and their perspective on it, but everyone is trying to work collaboratively across the dais around the issue, whatever it may be, whether it's a housing project or a commercial project or not, even a land use project, you know, can be whatever it is." The power to screen within-district housing construction represents a broad institutional power, which amounts to unilateral authority to approve housing permits, negotiating down the number of units for any given multi-family housing development, and outright opposing the approval of zoning variances needed to proceed with construction. These organizational norms are not applicable for every project, as another council person details with one commercial project:

> in this instance, we went against what we have typically as a gentlemen's or a gentlelady's agreement, where we defer to the council person whose district is in and firmly follow their lead about what they want to see in a district. We felt that this council member was unjustly stopping this single family development and because of all the input we got from the developer, all the input we got from the public, we went against the norm and we approved that development in this council process district, even with their appeal.

In spite of these occasional exceptions, the delegation of housing decisions to each respective

district representative represents a powerful mechanism, by which councilpersons can affect the spatial distribution of housing (Hankinson and Magazinnik, 2023). Councilpersons also have the authority to streamline projects that do fit into their visions for housing in their district or city at-large. For instance, council offices can serve a "constituent services" role, whereby they can contact executive offices or planning/zoning boards to facilitate permit applications. Moreover, councilpersons can get elected with plans to streamline single-family development more specifically, which in the case of the Latino councilperson, backfired as it resulted in additional unaffordable units in their district.

Moreover, this power also extends to streamlining projects that they want to see in their districts, not just opposing undesirable developments. I summarize the two main ways in which streamlining arose in my conversations with councilpersons. First, council offices can serve as a constituent services conduit for developers. As one councilperson explains, "[w]hat we often can do is we'll get a call and says, well, it feels like my permit processing is stuck. And so we can be a bridge to find out why it's stuck. And to then convey to the developer: Here's what the problem is." In this type of interaction, council offices serve as facilitators of permit applications, putting pressure on planning commissions and executive departments to expedite certain projects. Second, council offices work directly with developers to negotiate discretionary aspects of developments, such as the number of units, connection to city utilities (e.g. electric, sewers, water), and the provision of economic incentives (e.g. tax abatements, grant monies). As one councilperson explains, "[wastewater sewer lines are p]robably the most important piece of infrastructure, with a close second being streets. Anyway, the city may participate in the expense in order to reach help reach the raw land with the developer in order to connect it to internet, electricity, water, wastewater or sewer line."

There is some variance in the ability of councilpersons to unilaterally act to facilitate or block developments in their district. For instance, state-level ethical rules make it more difficult for some members to directly work with developers. In some localities, this dynamic has brought up corruption investigations and the incarceration of elected officials. The

President of the Board of Aldermen from before describes this situation in their city, "[i]t basically led to a corruption scandal, where a number of aldermen took bribes in order to offer tax abatement. They ended up going to federal prison." In spite of this, developers can play pivotal roles in exerting pressure either publicly at meetings or through campaign finance. A councilperson describes the latter phenomenon, "developers tend to be the most tend to be the largest contributors in [city] politics. In [my state], you have max contribution limits of $6,000 per entity. So, the developer, the developer's wife, and the corporation can each give $6,000 to a campaign. In some cases, right, [there is an] LLC out of a PO box in Manhattan. Like plot twist. It's tied to this developer." Even if developers are not universally connected with their district representative, repeat players are recognized and noticed. These close relationships can lead to long partnerships between the developer and the city, as a councilperson details, "And of course, easier and faster means cheaper and more affordable for the people that could possibly move there. So, as people like that, I probably have the closest relationship with. But again, the city council as a whole really is in bed with the large scale projects, suburban experiment developers."

One important point of clarification is that these mechanisms can all work in tandem to incentivize or direct the supply of housing. For example, direct involvement with developers is perhaps most effective in council systems that have the highest level of district-based deference. The key utility in categorizing these informal and formal modes of intervention is to highlight the possible ways councilpersons can affect the housing supply even without broad changes in the composition. Much scholarship has focused on the role that bargaining in legislatures, namely Congress, can be applied to explain mechanisms of policy influence (Baron and Ferejohn, 1989; Beach and Jones, 2017; Beach et al., 2024; Harris, 2023). Although the test of mechanisms in these papers are certainly credible, I argue that there exists pathways to influence that are independent of the composition of the broader legislature. In other words, the social identities of city councilpersons can matter without a critical mass.

6 Conclusion

This article attempts to advance our understanding of how racial identity shapes policy outcomes in the context of local governance. Drawing on a regression discontinuity design, I identify the causal effect of electing a racial minority to city council on the distribution of housing permits. Contrary to popular narratives linking minority representation with increased housing density and affordability, I find that minority-elected officials are more likely to facilitate single-family housing development—driven not by collective shifts in council composition, but by unilateral regulatory action. These findings contribute and add to existing accounts of local housing politics and challenge assumptions about the uniform progressivism of minority officeholders.

Theoretically, I demonstrate that descriptive representation produces meaningful policy effects — but in ways that are conditional on institutional structures and political context. Rather than serving as proxies for redistributive coalitions, minority representatives act within a decentralized policy environment that prioritizes responsiveness to localized interests. Their distinct preferences and political constraints generate policy divergence, even absent large-scale institutional change. In this way, the findings contribute to a growing literature that conceptualizes identity not as deterministic, but as one mediated by political opportunity structures, electoral incentives, and constituent pressures. Empirically, this article contributes novel causal evidence to long-standing debates about the relationship between identity and policy. By leveraging a regression discontinuity design and supplementing with qualitative interviews, the analysis isolates the effects of elite racial identity while capturing the mechanisms through which these effects unfold. This approach strengthens our understanding of when and how racial representation translates into substantive changes to public policy in local settings.

Perhaps most importantly, the findings of this paper emphasize the complexity of racial politics in American cities. As municipalities continue to diversify and as scholars consequently seek to understand downstream consequences, this research highlights the impor-

tance of interrogating assumptions about minority attitudes, policymaker autonomy, and institutional context. Electing racial minorities to public office is not merely paying lip service to changing demographics in the United States; it has implications for public policy, which deserves scholarly attention.

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Online Appendix

Building Representation: The Politics of Development, Diversity, and Institutional Norms

Contents

A Quantitative Data Summary

A.1 Summary Statistics of Data

	RD Min	RD Max	RD Mean	RD Median	Full Mean	Full Median
Population	75067	8736047	414584	188498	280286	126782
Female	42	54	51	51	51	51
White	14	95	61	62	64	66
Black	0	82	17	12	15	9
Hispanic	1	96	29	27	25	18
Native American	0	8	1	0	1	0
Asian/PI	1	72	17	13	16	11
Other Race	1	20	5	4	4	4
CC Percent White	0	100	54	50	60	62
CC Percent Minority	0	100	46	50	40	38
College Educated	5	52	21	19	22	20
Rented	18	69	43	43	42	42
Median Home Price	21122	1266426	261621	199025	246585	179923
New SF Buildings	0	7236	592	236	354	124
New MF Buildings	0	869	49	13	32	8

Table A.1: Summary Statistics of RD and Full Samples

Table A.1 details the summary statistics of the RD sample compared to the full sample from de Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2023). The statistics are generated at the city-year level, and the RD sample is limited to cities with a close election between a minority and white candidate for city council.[20] There are a couple of differences between the RD sample and full sample that are worth noting. First, the cities in the RD analysis have, on average, larger populations and higher priced homes. For the most part this is due to the larger cities, such as Los Angeles, making up a larger proportion of the RD sample than the full sample. Second, the development trends are distinct, namely that there is more single family and multi family buildings in cities in the RD sample.

[20]These include elections where minority candidates received vote shares between 39% and 61% as per the bandwidth estimates from Table 3.

A.2 Distribution of Units across US

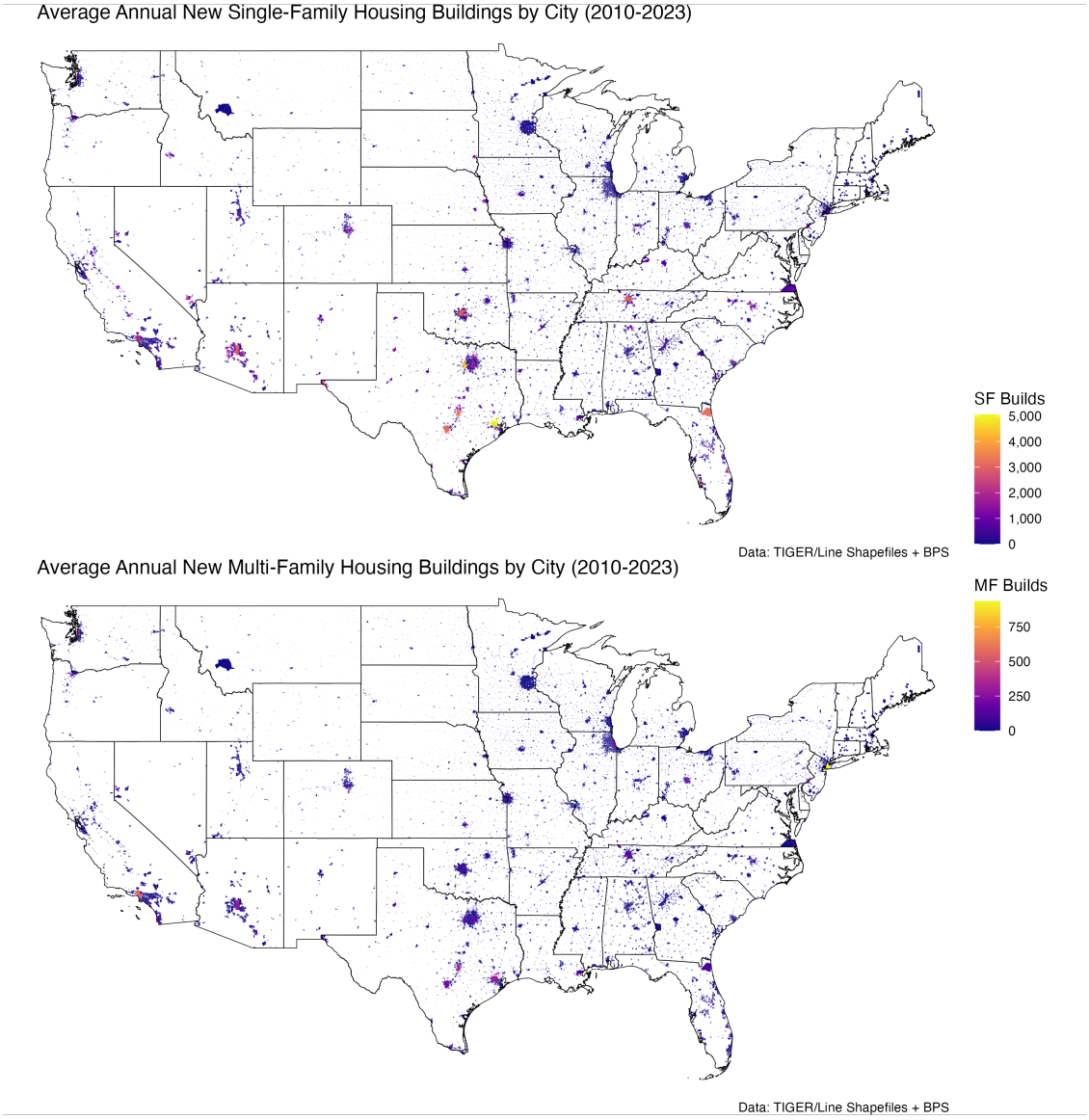


Figure A.1: Single-family and multi-family housing units by city, 2010-2023

Figure A.1 displays the average annual number of housing building permits issued between 2010 and 2023 across Census-designated places in the continental United States.[21] During

[21] Visualizations of Hawaii and Alaska are omitted for convenience. Housing permit data for these states are available in the replication files.

this period, the majority of housing permits issued in nearly every American city were for single-family units.

A.3 National Coverage of Data

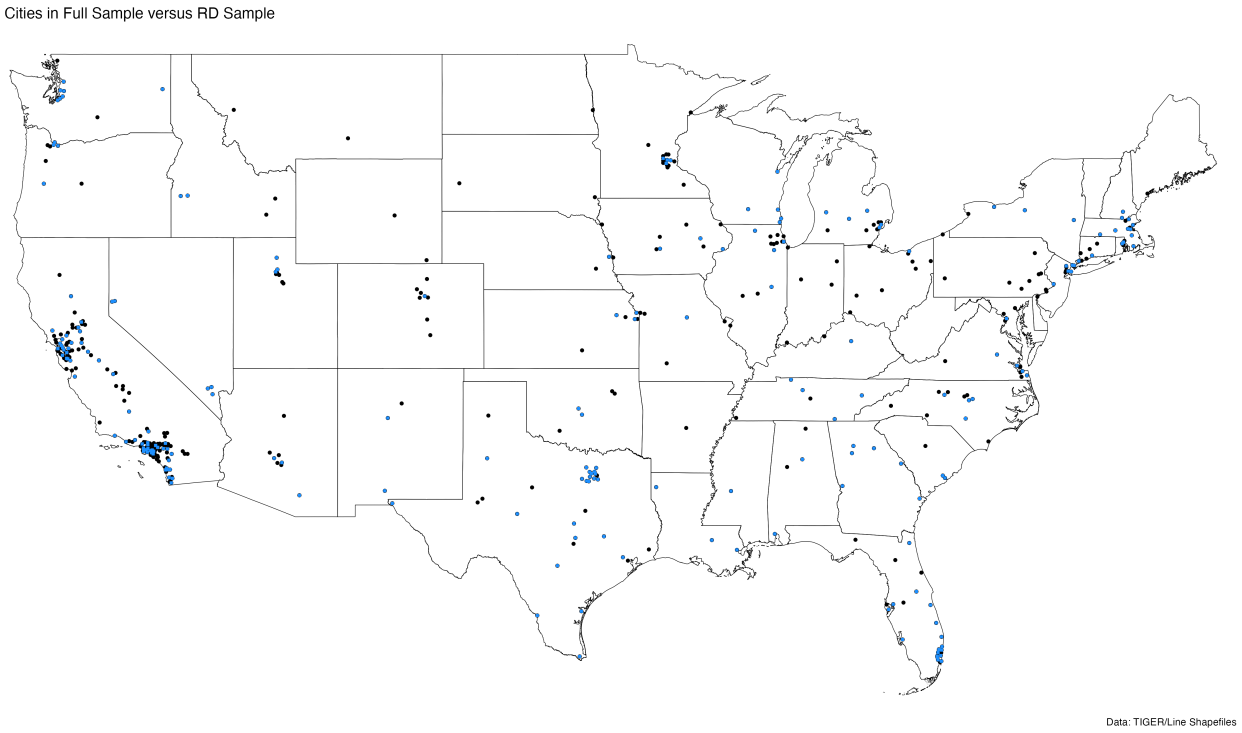


Figure A.2: Coverage of RD versus Full Data

Figure A.2 shows the full sample of cities in de Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2023) (henceforth referred to as the full sample) compared to the RD sample in Table 3. The black dots reference all cities in the full sample, while the Dodger blue squares reference cities that feature an election between a white and minority, where the minority candidate receives between 39% and 61% of the vote (i.e. the RD sample specification in Model 5 of Table 3). The figure shows that the RD sample does not deviate significantly at least regionally from that of the full sample.

B Qualitative Data Summary

B.1 Description of Respondents

Interview Date	Gender	Race	Party	City Size
02/04/2025 10:00	Male	White	Republican	Small City
02/04/2025 18:00	Male	Asian	Democrat	Medium City
02/05/2025 16:30	Male	White	Democrat	Small City
02/06/2025 11:00	Male	Black	NPP	Small City
02/06/2025 12:00	Female	Latino	NPP	Medium City
02/07/2025 12:30	Male	White	Republican	Large City
02/07/2025 13:00	Female	White	NPP	Small City
02/07/2025 17:00	Male	White	Democrat	Large City
02/08/2025 10:00	Male	Asian	NPP	Medium City
02/10/2025 10:00	Female	White	Democrat	Large City
02/10/2025 13:00	Male	White	Democrat	Large City
02/10/2025 16:45	Male	Asian	NPP	Medium City
02/11/2025 12:00	Female	White	NPP	Small City
02/12/2025 12:00	Female	White	Republican	Large City
02/12/2025 12:30	Male	Asian	Democrat	Medium City
02/12/2025 13:00	Male	Latino	Republican	Small City
02/12/2025 17:00	Female	White	Democrat	Large City
02/13/2025 13:00	Female	White	Democrat	Large City
02/13/2025 17:00	Male	Latino	Democrat	Medium City
02/14/2025 12:00	Male	White	Democrat	Large City
02/14/2025 13:00	Male	White	NPP	Medium City

Continued on next page

Interview Date	Gender	Race	Party	City Size
02/14/2025 15:00	Male	Black	Democrat	Small City
02/15/2025 12:00	Female	White	Democrat	Large City
02/17/2025 12:30	Male	White	NPP	Medium City
02/17/2025 17:00	Male	White	Democrat	Large City
02/18/2025 10:00	Male	White	Democrat	Medium City
02/18/2025 12:30	Female	White	Republican	Small City
02/18/2025 14:00	Female	Latino	Democrat	Large City
02/18/2025 16:00	Female	Black	Democrat	Small City
02/19/2025 10:00	Male	White	Republican	Large City
02/19/2025 11:00	Female	White	Democrat	Medium City
02/19/2025 13:00	Male	White	Democrat	Large City
02/19/2025 17:00	Male	Asian	Democrat	Medium City
02/19/2025 18:30	Female	Asian	Democrat	Medium City
02/20/2025 12:00	Female	Black	Democrat	Small City
02/20/2025 15:00	Female	White	Democrat	Large City
02/20/2025 16:00	Male	White	Democrat	Large City
02/20/2025 16:30	Male	White	Democrat	Medium City
02/21/2025 09:00	Male	White	Democrat	Large City
02/21/2025 14:30	Male	White	Democrat	Small City
02/21/2025 16:00	Male	Mixed	Democrat	Small City
02/22/2025 10:00	Female	White	Democrat	Small City
02/24/2025 10:30	Female	Black	Democrat	Large City
02/24/2025 16:00	Female	Black	Democrat	Small City
02/24/2025 17:30	Male	White	Democrat	Medium City

Continued on next page

Interview Date	Gender	Race	Party	City Size
02/25/2025 09:30	Male	White	Republican	Large City
02/25/2025 10:00	Male	White	Democrat	Medium City
02/25/2025 12:00	Male	White	Democrat	Medium City
02/27/2025 12:00	Male	Asian	NPP	Medium City
02/27/2025 12:30	Male	Black	Democrat	Large City
02/27/2025 14:30	Female	White	Democrat	Large City
02/27/2025 17:00	Female	White	Democrat	Large City
02/28/2025 12:00	Male	White	Democrat	Medium City
02/28/2025 14:00	Male	White	Democrat	Medium City
02/28/2025 16:30	Male	Asian	NPP	Medium City
03/05/2025 14:30	Male	Latino	Democrat	Large City
03/07/2025 13:30	Male	White	Democrat	Large City
03/20/2025 15:00	Female	Asian	Democrat	Large City
03/28/2025 9:00	Female	Latino	Democrat	Medium City
03/30/2025 12:00	Male	White	Democrat	Medium City

Table B.1 contains information about the interviews conducted for the qualitative section of this study. It includes information about the date of interview as well as the respondent's gender, race, party, and city size. City size is factorized as the following. Cities with populations less than 50,000 are labelled as a Small City, cities with populations between 50,000 and 75,000 are labelled as a Medium City, and cities with populations larger than 75,000 are labelled as Large City.

B.2 Email Invitation

Hello Councilmember _____,

I am an academic researcher at Harvard, and our research team is studying how city governments make decisions about land use, development, zoning, and housing policy.

I am writing to ask that you participate in an interview in your role as an official of _____. It's important for the success of this research that we get several responses, and we are especially hoping to count on your insights as representation from _____.

Participation is completely voluntary. If your quotes are used in any publications, we will ensure that you and your city are not identified by name. Your identity will remain confidential. This is an opportunity to speak out about how you view your job and the crucial role you play in making decisions about local land use.

If you are interested, please let us know your availability over the next few weeks. The interview will be conducted over Zoom. We expect interviews to take approximately 30 minutes.

If you have any questions about the interview or this project, please do not hesitate to reach us at jeremiahcha@g.harvard.edu.

B.3 Sample Questionnaire

The following script is the sample script submitted for IRB review. For all conversations, I began with the starting material and received either verbal or electronic consent from all respondents. In addition, I followed this protocol with the collection of background information.

The substantive questions served as a structure for interviews with councilpersons. However, the interviews were semi-structured, so often contained follow-up questions following legislator responses. These ranged from clarification questions to separate questions about ways legislators intervened in certain regulatory matters.

> Good morning/afternoon. I appreciate you taking time out of your day to speak with me. My name is Jeremiah Cha and I am a PhD candidate and researcher at Harvard University. The conversation we will be having today revolves around local political processes, as the relate to housing and zoning policies. Your insights in this interview will be invaluable to illuminating how local government functions, which is the central focus of this study. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions, and I invite you to incorporate relevant experiences you might think help to elucidate your points.
>
> For today's interview, I will be recording our session for the purpose of referencing back in the research process. Quotes from our conversation may also be used in publications, but your personally identifiable information will not be attached to them. Participants will be identified, at most, by their general occupation and race. I will also be taking notes in my notebook.
>
> Before we go any further, I want to remind you that you can stop or pause the interview at any time. Moreover, you can request the recording to stop or pause as well at any time. If there are any questions, feel free to ask them as we progress.

Background Information:

1. What is your name?
2. What is your race?
3. What is your gender?
4. What year were you born?
5. Are you affiliated with a political party? If so, which one?
6. What is your current occupation?
7. Before your current position, what industry or occupation were you in?

Substantive questions:

Let's begin with some broad questions about your local government.

1. Could you walk me through the process to get new housing construction approved or policies passed in [INSERT CITY HERE]? If necessary, you can detail the different processes for single-family and multi-family housing projects.
2. Could you give an example of a recent housing project or policy that succeeded?
3. Could you give me an example of a recent housing project or policy that failed?
4. Where in the process do you see housing policies and construction fail most often?
5. Why do these fail in [INSERT CITY HERE]?
6. Would you characterize the process as onerous in [INSERT CITY HERE]? Why [or why not]?
7. What is the role of the state government on housing policy in [INSERT CITY HERE]?
8. Finally, what is your personal role in housing policy in local government?

Let's move on to some questions more specific to [INSERT CITY HERE].

1. Do you believe that there is a housing crisis in [INSERT CITY HERE]? If so, what does that entail? Why [or why not]?
   - 1a. **[IF NO]** Perhaps, we should talk a little bit more granularly about policies. Rents have risen X% since 2000, while the unhoused population has grown by X% in the same timeframe. What are some policy solutions to these issues?
   - 1b. **[IF YES]** What are some policy solutions to the housing crisis here in [INSERT CITY HERE]?

2. How would you compare the state of housing policy in [INSERT CITY HERE] to comparable cities in the nation?
3. Nationally, the U.S. is undergoing a housing crisis. How would you characterize the role that [INSERT CITY HERE] plays in helping to remedy this state of affairs?
4. Which constituencies are most active on the issue of housing?
5. Obviously housing construction is intertwined with developers in the area. What is their role in housing policy in [INSERT CITY HERE]?

Let's speak a little bit about your views on housing.

6. I want to learn a bit about how you formulated your policy views on housing – could you walk me through perhaps personal experiences with housing or critical moments in your life that informs your housing policies?
7. Let's go back to when you were first elected/appointed/confirmed. On the policy of housing, what were your plans and aspirations? Have you succeeded?
8. What are your views on multi-family developments versus single-family ones?
9. In your perfect hypothetical city, what tenets would drive your housing policy?

C Regression Discontinuity Validity Tests

C.1 McCrary Test

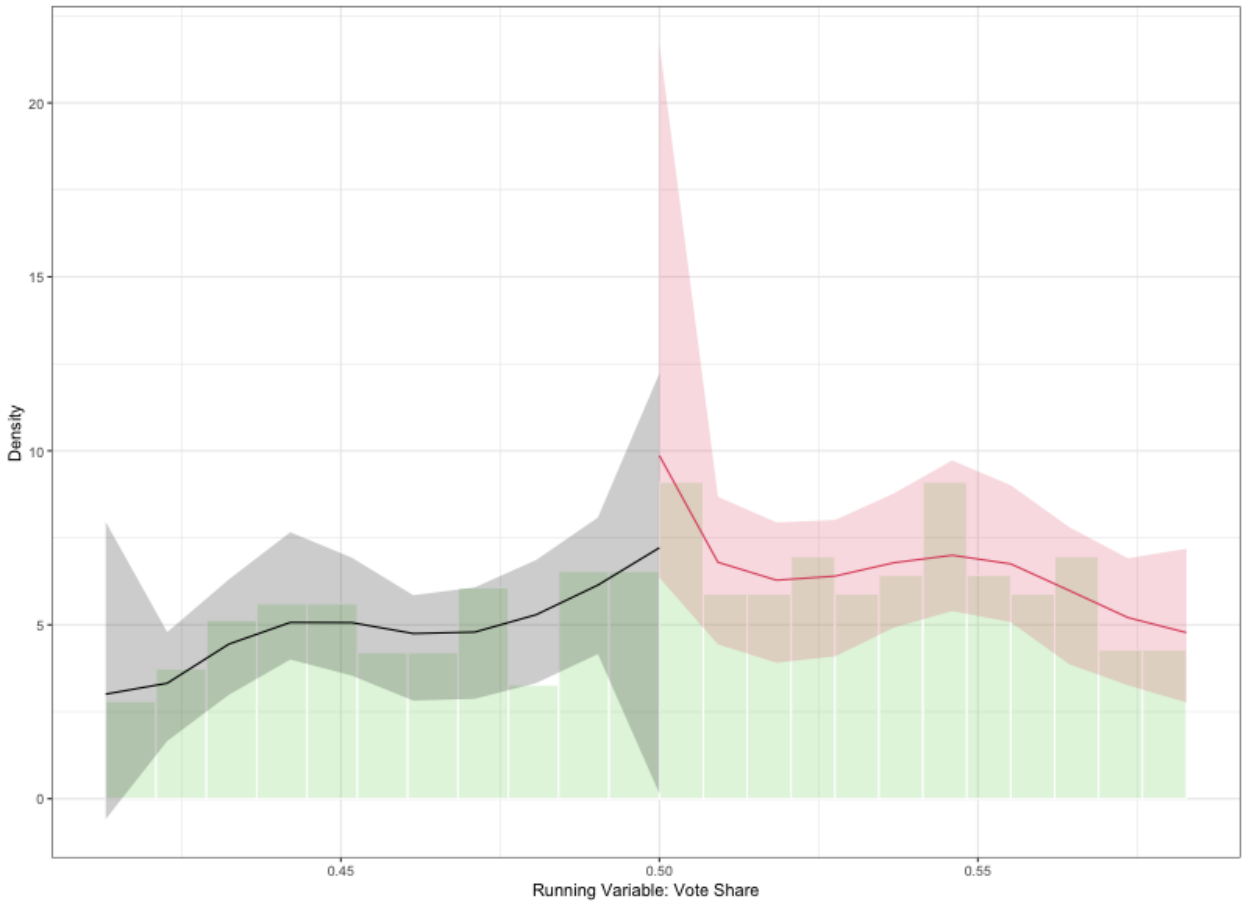


Figure C.1: Density in Running Variable (McCrary Test for Discontinuity)

C.2 Smoothness Test

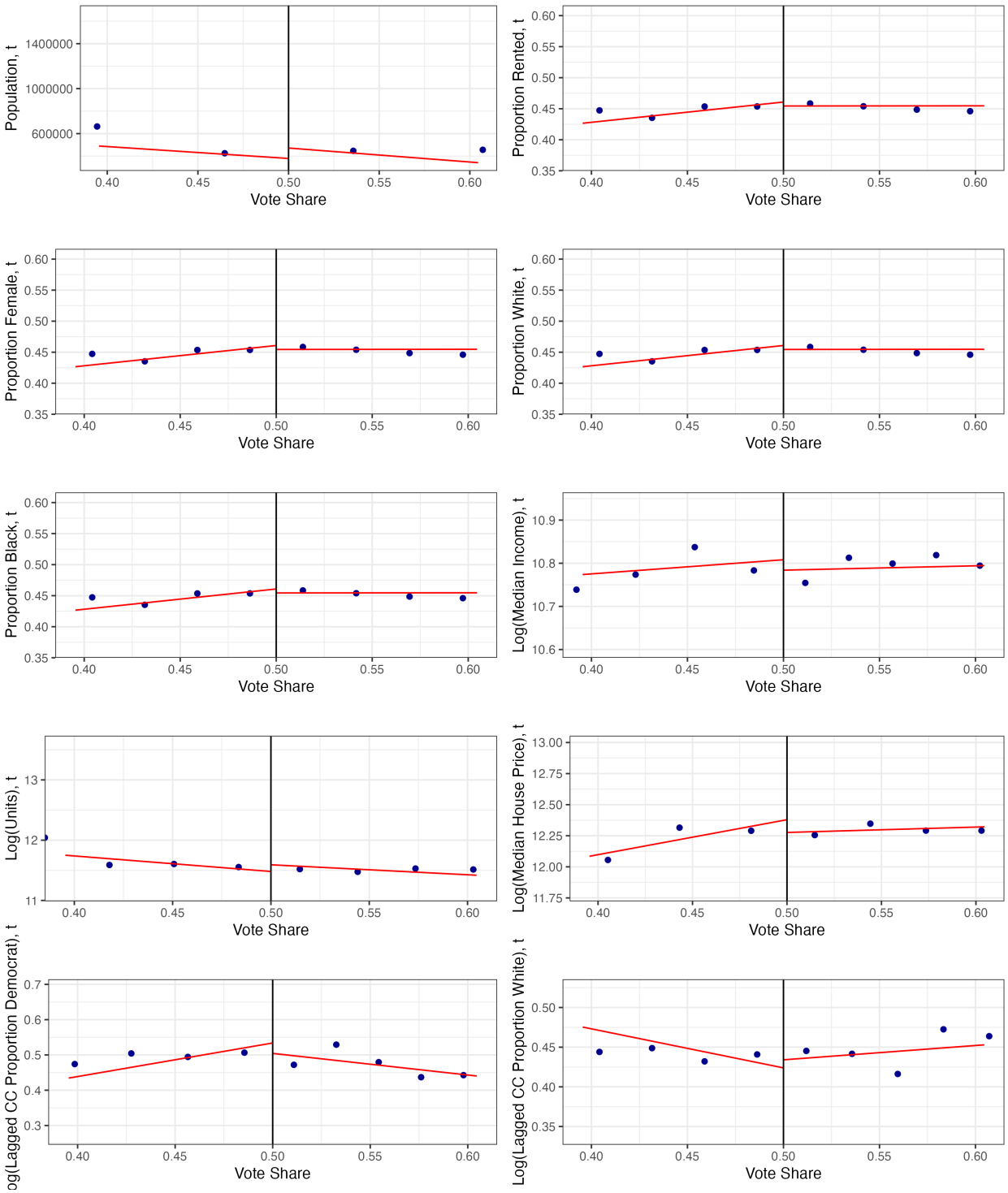


Figure C.2: Smoothness across RD cut-point for pre-treatment covariates

C.3 Placebo Tests

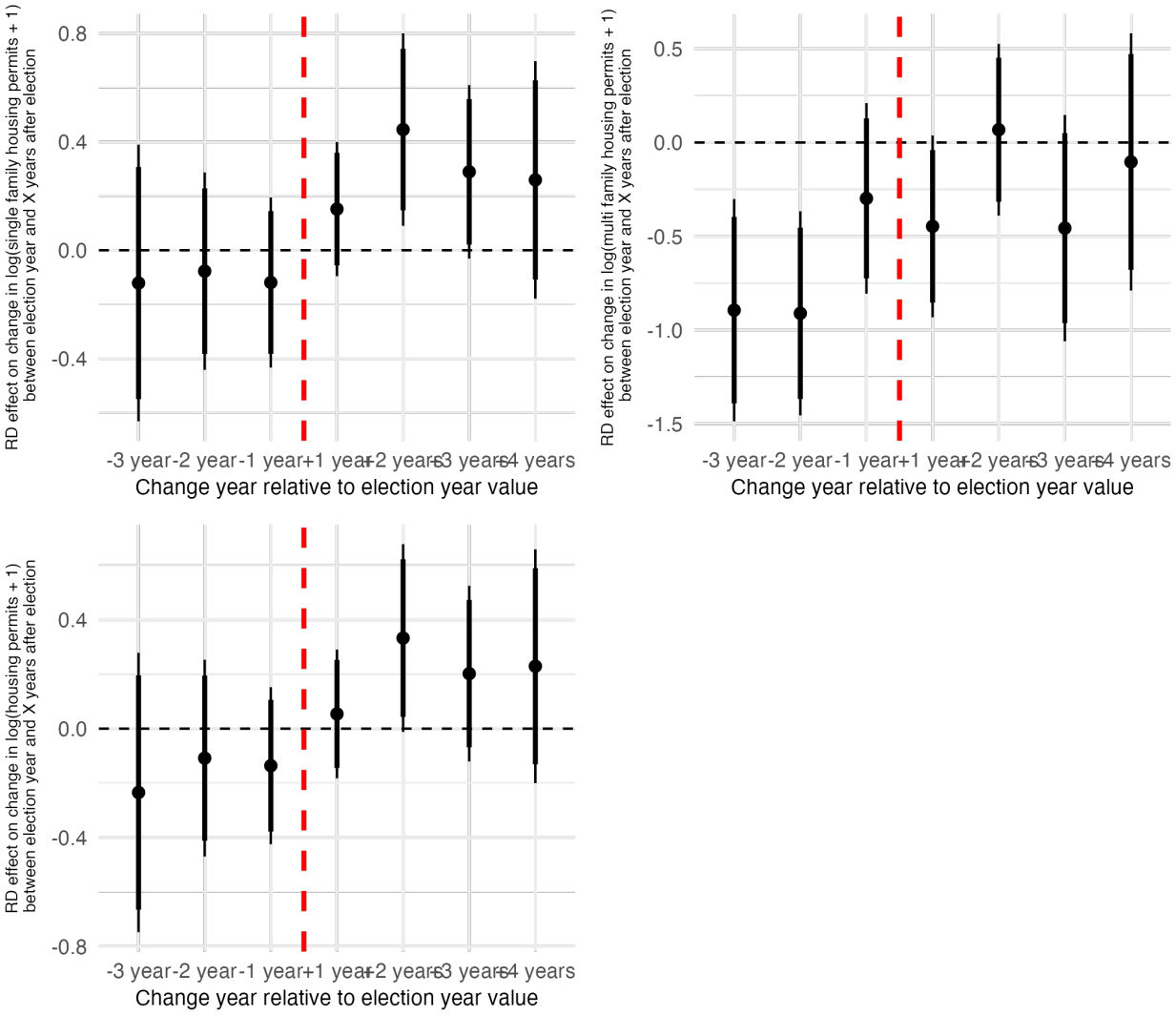


Figure C.3: Placebo effect of minority election on pre-treatment # of single-family buildings permitted

C.4 Alternative Bandwidth

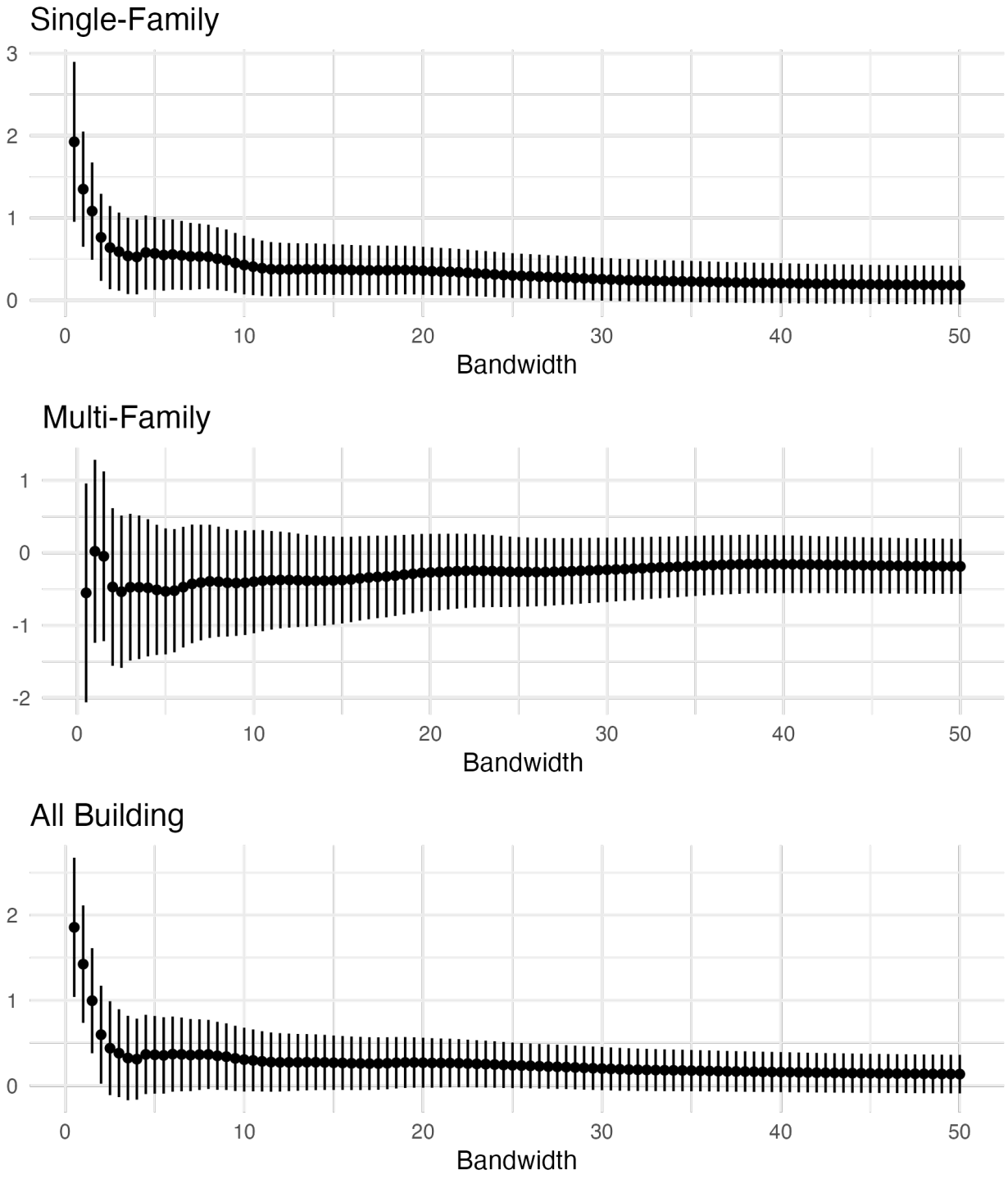
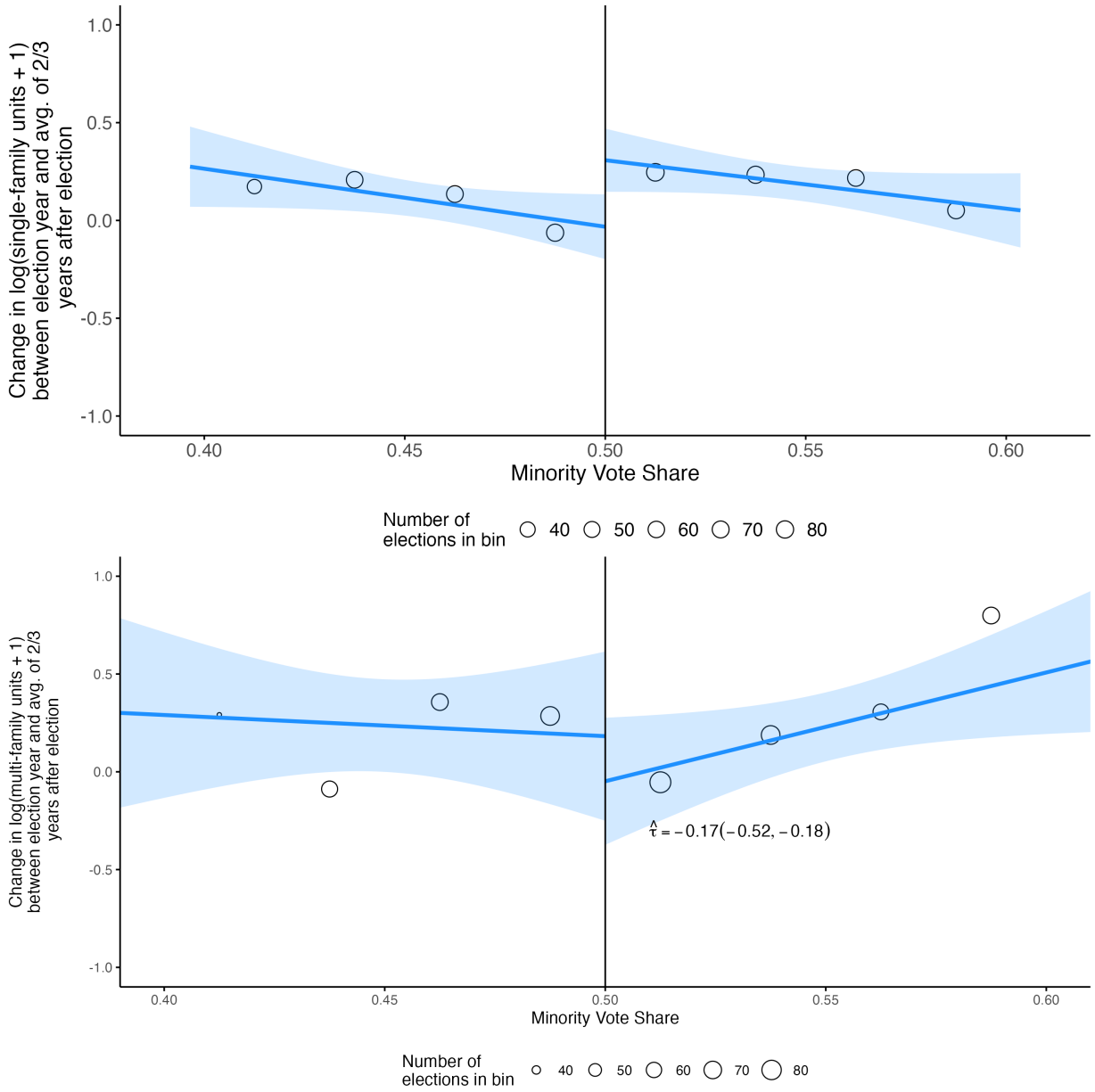


Figure C.4: Effect of minority win on permitted buildings with alternative bandwidths

C.5 Visualization of RD results



D Alternative Specifications and Robustness

D.1 Alternative Housing Outcomes

Table D.1: Minority Election and Alternative Housing Outcomes

	SFH	MFU	MFB Share	MFU Share	SFHpc	MFBpc
NW Win, t	0.362*	−0.813	−0.049	−0.131	0.033	−0.533
	(0.156)	(0.448)	(0.031)	(0.072)	(0.209)	(0.346)
Eff. Observations	111	139	123	129	45	58
Bandwidth	10.5	13.1	11.7	12.2	10.5	14.7
Polynomial	1	1	1	1	1	1
Covariate Adjustment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

* p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

The dependent variable is the change in the log number of single-family units + 1 for Model (1), log number of multi-family units + 1 for Model (2), proportion of permits that are for multi-family buildings for Model (3), proportion of permits that are for multi-family units for Model (4), log number of single-family permits per capita for Model (5), and log number of multi-family permits per capita for Model (6) between the election year and two and three years after the election year. This table reports the bias-corrected estimates with robust standard errors clustered at the city-election year level (Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2014). Bandwidth is selected using the one common MSE-optimal bandwidth from the 'rdrobust' package (Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2014) for all models. The polynomial row indicates the order of the local polynomial used to construct the point estimator. All models include city-level controls, including city-year level covariates, including, logged median income, logged population, logged median housing price, logged number of housing units, proportion female, proportion white, proportion Black, proportion Hispanic, proportion API, and the number of city council seats.

D.2 Effect on Housing Budgets

The results from Table 3 show that the election of minorities affects the approval of housing permits, namely those for single-family homes. Does the effect extend to other housing outcomes, such as investment into community housing programs? Figure 2 shows the RD estimates of electing a minority on the change in city budgetary outcomes. In short, there is little evidence that the election of minorities increase expenditures on housing and community development. In fact, while the effect is noisy, the point estimate is negative, as is the effect on total expenditures broadly. While we should caution interpreting these as significant effects, they are in line with the results found in Beach and Jones (2017), which highlight decreases in broad public goods provisions following the election of a minority to California city councils. Other outcomes, such as total revenue, property tax revenue, and intergovernmental transfer revenue, are null and centered around zero. All in all, however, the effect that minorities have on budgetary outcomes is limited with the largest point estimate effect being 5%.

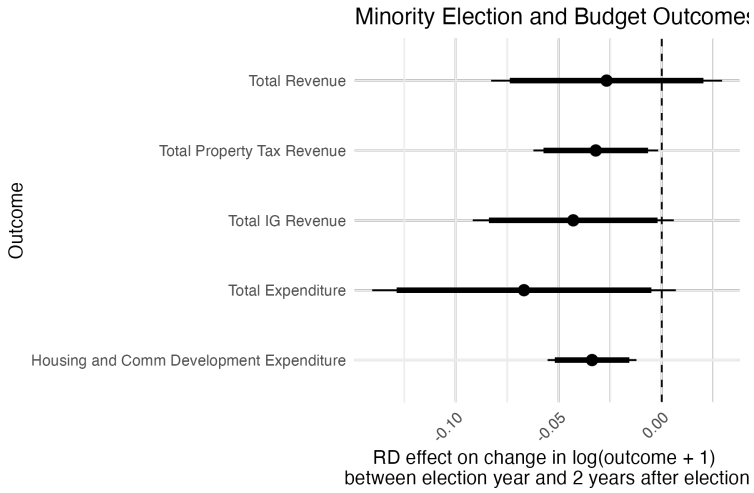


Figure D.1: Effect of Minority Election on Budgetary Outcomes

D.3 2FE Specifications

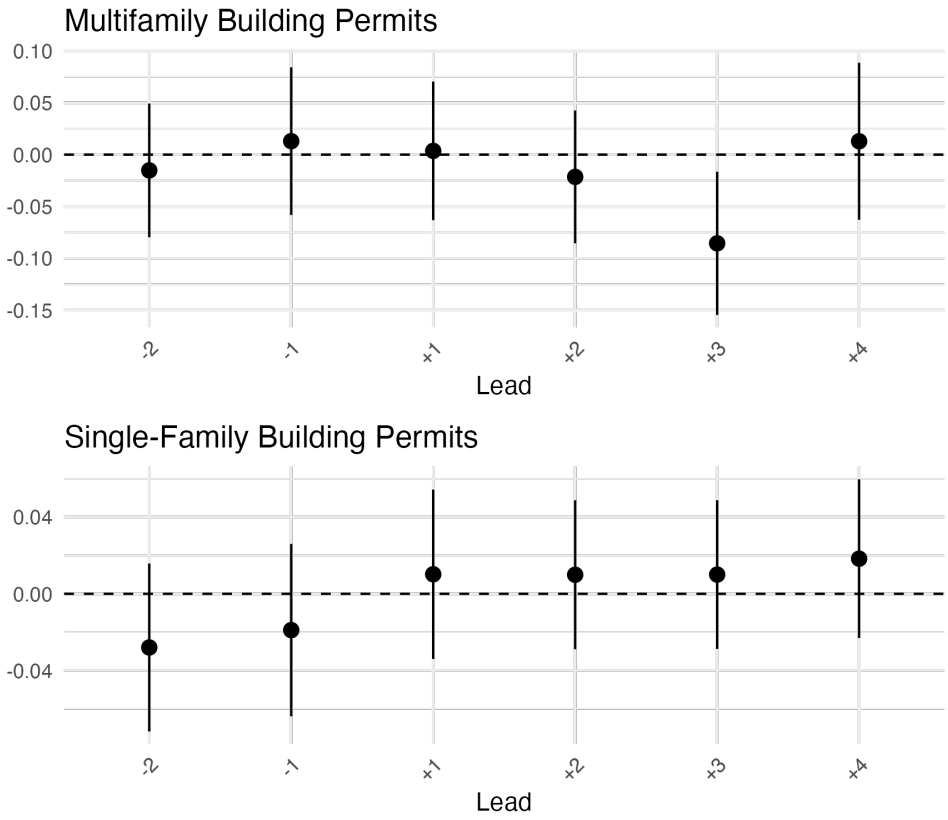


Figure D.2: Effect of minority composition on building permits

Note: The dependent variable is the log number of housing permits issued in X years after an election year + 1. 95% confidence intervals were constructed with robust standard errors clustered at the city-year level. Each model includes the following covariates: proportion white residents, proportion Black residents, proportion Hispanic residents, proportion college educated, proportion of renters, log number of existing housing units, log median income, and log housing prices.

D.4 Non-Winsorized Results

Table D.2: Minority Election and Housing Permits

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A: Single Family Permits						
NW Win, t	0.287**	0.377**	0.404*	0.277**	0.381**	0.408**
	(0.105)	(0.144)	(0.158)	(0.102)	(0.137)	(0.149)
Panel B: Multi-family Permits						
NW Win, t	-0.115	-0.195	-0.158	-0.244	-0.305	-0.286
	(0.148)	(0.220)	(0.229)	(0.152)	(0.217)	(0.238)
Panel C: All Permits						
NW Win, t	0.205*	0.294*	0.306*	0.189*	0.291*	0.302*
	(0.095)	(0.145)	(0.151)	(0.096)	(0.139)	(0.145)
Observations	515	515	515	506	506	506
Bandwidth (SF)	0.07	0.1	0.18	0.06	0.1	0.17
Bandwidth (MF)	0.1	0.11	0.21	0.08	0.11	0.18
Bandwidth (All)	0.09	0.11	0.2	0.08	0.11	0.19
Polynomial	0	1	2	0	1	2
Covariate Adjustment				✓	✓	✓

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

The dependent variable is the change in the log number of single/multi family building permits + 1 between the election year and three years after the election year. This table reports the bias-corrected estimates with robust standard errors clustered at the city-election year level (Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2014). Bandwidth is selected using the one common MSE-optimal bandwidth from the 'rdrobust' package (Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2014) for all models. The polynomial row indicates the order of the local polynomial used to construct the point estimator. Models (4), (5) and (6) include city-year level covariates, including, logged median income, logged population, logged median housing price, logged number of housing units, proportion female, proportion white, proportion Black, proportion Hispanic, proportion API, and the number of city council seats. Results are robust to alternative specifications, which can be found in Appendix D.

D.5 Within Party Specification

Table D.3: Within-Party Minority Election and Housing Permits

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A: Single Family Permits						
NW Win, t	0.325*	0.407*	0.434*	0.329*	0.362*	0.397*
	(0.143)	(0.168)	(0.177)	(0.135)	(0.156)	(0.169)
Panel B: Multi-family Permits						
NW Win, t	-0.114	-0.143	-0.407	-0.166	-0.242	-0.292
	(0.197)	(0.265)	(0.359)	(0.185)	(0.241)	(0.310)
Panel C: All Permits						
NW Win, t	0.239+	0.300+	0.299	0.226+	0.268+	0.300+
	(0.138)	(0.166)	(0.194)	(0.128)	(0.155)	(0.167)
Observations	266	266	266	260	260	260
Bandwidth (SF)	0.06	0.11	0.2	0.05	0.1	0.16
Bandwidth (MF)	0.1	0.16	0.16	0.09	0.15	0.2
Bandwidth (All)	0.06	0.13	0.18	0.06	0.11	0.19
Polynomial	0	1	2	0	1	2
Covariate Adjustment				✓	✓	✓

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

The dependent variable is the change in the log number of single/multi family building permits + 1 between the election year and three years after the election year. This table reports the bias-corrected estimates with robust standard errors clustered at the city-election year level (Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2014). Bandwidth is selected using the one common MSE-optimal bandwidth from the 'rdrobust' package (Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2014) for all models. The polynomial row indicates the order of the local polynomial used to construct the point estimator. Models (4), (5) and (6) include city-year level covariates, including, logged median income, logged population, logged median housing price, logged number of housing units, proportion female, proportion white, proportion Black, proportion Hispanic, proportion API, and the number of city council seats. Results are robust to alternative specifications, which can be found in Appendix D.

D.6 Inverse Hyperbolic Sine Specification

Table D.4: Inverse Hyperbolic Sine Minority Election and Housing Permits

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A: Single Family Permits						
NW Win, t	0.308**	0.405**	0.431*	0.302**	0.412**	0.438**
	(0.113)	(0.154)	(0.168)	(0.111)	(0.147)	(0.160)
Panel B: Multi-family Permits						
NW Win, t	-0.164	-0.255	-0.215	-0.316+	-0.379	-0.362
	(0.179)	(0.255)	(0.269)	(0.181)	(0.251)	(0.278)
Panel C: All Permits						
NW Win, t	0.216*	0.313*	0.323*	0.204*	0.314*	0.322*
	(0.103)	(0.156)	(0.162)	(0.104)	(0.150)	(0.156)
Observations	515	515	515	506	506	506
Bandwidth (SF)	0.06	0.1	0.18	0.06	0.1	0.17
Bandwidth (MF)	0.09	0.12	0.2	0.07	0.11	0.18
Bandwidth (All)	0.09	0.11	0.2	0.08	0.11	0.19
Polynomial	0	1	2	0	1	2
Covariate Adjustment				✓	✓	✓

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

The dependent variable is the change in the inverse hyperbolic sine of single/multi family building permits between the election year and three years after the election year. This table reports the bias-corrected estimates with robust standard errors clustered at the city-election year level (Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2014). Bandwidth is selected using the one common MSE-optimal bandwidth from the 'rdrobust' package (Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2014) for all models. The polynomial row indicates the order of the local polynomial used to construct the point estimator. Models (4), (5) and (6) include city-year level covariates, including, logged median income, logged population, logged median housing price, logged number of housing units, proportion female, proportion white, proportion Black, proportion Hispanic, proportion API, and the number of city council seats. Results are robust to alternative specifications, which can be found in Appendix D.

D.7 City Level Clustered SE

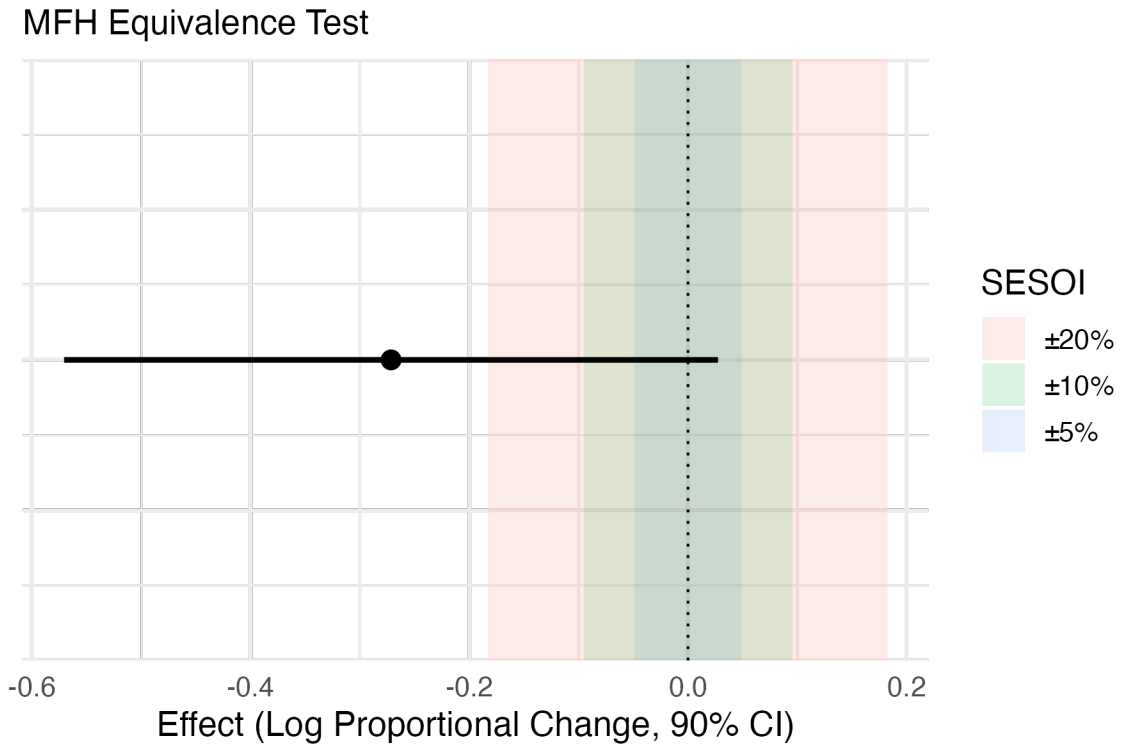
Table D.5: Minority Election and Housing Permits

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A: Single Family Permits						
NW Win, t	0.290**	0.375**	0.404**	0.287**	0.377**	0.407**
	(0.099)	(0.139)	(0.152)	(0.094)	(0.129)	(0.142)
Panel B: Multi-family Permits						
NW Win, t	-0.113	-0.193	-0.159	-0.244	-0.307	-0.285
	(0.154)	(0.220)	(0.228)	(0.156)	(0.215)	(0.234)
Panel C: All Permits						
NW Win, t	0.205*	0.293*	0.306*	0.192*	0.290*	0.302*
	(0.092)	(0.142)	(0.148)	(0.089)	(0.132)	(0.138)
Observations	515	515	515	506	506	506
Bandwidth (SF)	0.06	0.1	0.18	0.06	0.09	0.17
Bandwidth (MF)	0.1	0.12	0.21	0.08	0.11	0.18
Bandwidth (All)	0.09	0.11	0.2	0.08	0.1	0.19
Polynomial	0	1	2	0	1	2
Covariate Adjustment				✓	✓	✓

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

The dependent variable is the change in the log number of single/multi family building permits + 1 between the election year and three years after the election year. This table reports the bias-corrected estimates with robust standard errors clustered at the city-election year level (Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2014). Bandwidth is selected using the one common MSE-optimal bandwidth from the 'rdrobust' package (Calonico, Cattaneo and Titiunik, 2014) for all models. The polynomial row indicates the order of the local polynomial used to construct the point estimator. Models (4), (5) and (6) include city-year level covariates, including, logged median income, logged population, logged median housing price, logged number of housing units, proportion female, proportion white, proportion Black, proportion Hispanic, proportion API, and the number of city council seats. Results are robust to alternative specifications, which can be found in Appendix D.

D.8 MFH Equivalence Tests



The point estimate and confidence interval are from Table 3 Model 5 of the MFH panel. All equivalence tests fail, meaning it is unlikely that the effect found is a strong null effect.