Check for updates

Article

Urban Studies

Urban Studies
1–18
© Urban Studies Journal Limited 2024
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/00420980241267246
journals.sagepub.com/home/usj
Sage

Politics in affordable housing provision: How partisan control of local councils influences planning choices

Yonah Slifkin Freemark
Urban Institute, USA

Abstract

Investment in publicly subsidised social housing units – designed to ensure long-term access to dwellings for households with low and moderate incomes – is a strategy that cities around the world leverage to increase housing affordability. But the availability of such affordable units varies tremendously between cities, even within the same country. To what degree is this variation the product of local politics expressed through voter or policymaker preferences? To answer this question, I examine the inclusion of social housing in major development projects planned in hundreds of municipalities across the Paris, France, metropolitan region. Through a series of multiple regression analyses, I demonstrate that in cities with left-wing councils, shares of social housing units in new projects are an average of 7–11 percentage points higher than in cities with right-wing or centrist councils, after controlling for the ideologies of local residents, preexisting levels of social housing and community demographics. Though voters' political preferences are closely associated with city-level social housing shares, elected officials' partisan affiliations explain variations in the provision of social housing in newly approved projects. I reaffirm these findings by using a series of regression discontinuity tests to examine differences between communities with close elections. These results show how the partisan affiliations of local leaders affect urban planning choices in their communities.

Keywords

agglomeration/urbanisation, housing, local government, planning, politics

Corresponding author:
Yonah Slifkin Freemark, Urban Institute, Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center, 500 L'Enfant Plaza SW, Washington, DC 20024, USA.
Email: yfreemark@urban.org

摘要

投资公共补贴的社会住房旨在确保中低收入家庭能够长期获得住房，这是世界各地城市用来提高住房可负担性的一项策略。但即使在同一个国家，不同城市之间此类保障性住房的供应情况也存在很大差异。这种差异在多大程度上是通过选民或政策制定者的偏好所表达的地方政治的产物？为了回答这个问题，本文考察了法国巴黎大都会地区数百个基层市政区在规划的大型开发项目中纳入社会住房的情况。通过一系列多元回归分析，本文发现，在剔除了当地居民的意识形态、现有的社会住房水平和社区人口统计数据等受控因素的影响之后，在左翼议会管理的城市中，新项目中社会住房的比例平均比右翼或中间派议会管理的城市高出 7–11 个百分点。尽管选民的政治偏好与城市级社会住房份额密切相关，但民选官员的党派倾向可以解释新批准项目中社会住房供应的差异。本文使用一系列断点回归测试考查了选举势均力敌的社区之间的差异，从而再次证实了这些发现。这些结果显示了地方领导人的党派关系如何影响其社区的城市规划选择。

关键词

集聚/城市化、住房、地方政府、规划、政治

Received December 2023; accepted June 2024

Introduction

Access to housing has become a key concern of policymakers due to increasingly expensive dwelling costs that inhibit residents from affording comfortable, adequate homes (Wetzstein, 2017). Cities have leveraged a variety of tools to address this issue. Some focus on subsidising residents directly and some emphasise reforms of land-use regulations to encourage private investors to build (Aurand, 2010; Hansson, 2019). Others, particularly in Europe and with the help of national government funds, have invested in publicly supported social housing units designed to ensure long-term affordability for households with low and moderate incomes (Scanlon et al., 2014). Yet the availability of affordable units varies tremendously between cities, even within the same country (Freemark and Steil, 2022). Why do some cities invest more in social housing than others?

The scholarship on urban politics has for years emphasised structuralist explanations for how cities act, pointing to underlying economic or demographic conditions to explain differences in outcomes. Some argue that local governance is depoliticised; cities' primary goal, according to this approach, is pursuing economic growth, often through neoliberal strategies, rather than redistribution. This implies that residents' ideological perspectives, elections and the partisan affiliations of elected leaders produce little policy difference, given local characteristics. Social housing investments attract residents with lower incomes and thus likely result in less growth and tax revenue – meaning that we might expect that cities would hesitate to build more such units than required by national policy, such as a law in France that mandates a minimum level of social housing in most cities.

Nonetheless, left-wing political candidates often campaign in favour of social housing, typically doing so in opposition to the policy goals of centrist and right-wing candidates. This suggests that affordable housing provision could vary based on the ideological views of residents and/or elected leaders. To what degree is this variation the product of local politics expressed through voter or policymaker preferences? I explore this question in the context of cities in the Paris, France, metropolitan region. French cities feature partisan local elections; nonetheless, differences in social housing provision between

cities whose councils have differing partisan control has not previously been quantified.

In this article, I first show that resident political ideologies, measured in terms of vote shares for left-wing candidates in national presential elections, are strongly associated with social housing availability citywide. Next, I examine how much social housing has been included in major new development projects in localities across the region over the past two decades. Through a series of multiple regression analyses, I demonstrate that, on average, cities with councils controlled by left-wing parties have 7–11 percentage point higher project social-housing shares, compared to those with councils controlled by centrist or right-wing parties. I reaffirm this finding after controlling for resident demographics and preexisting citywide levels of social housing. The link between *resident* ideologies and project social-housing shares disappears, however, after controlling for other characteristics. Finally, I use a series of regression discontinuity tests to examine differences in project social-housing shares for jurisdictions with closely contested elections. These results indicate that cities where left-wing parties took control of councils after tight elections planned projects with 13–29 percentage-point higher social-housing shares than those cities where centrist or right-wing parties barely won.

These findings collectively offer us insight into the importance of the partisan affiliations of municipal leaders in making choices about the future of their communities. Which party controls a local council is, of course, the result of elections that reflect resident ideological preferences. But in office, elected officials' choices appear to be more informed by the ideological approach represented by their partisan affiliations than by resident political views. The party affiliations of local elected leaders are thus relevant to the important urban planning issue of how much publicly subsidised affordable housing is added in new projects.

Literature review

According to a widespread view – repeated by politicians and exemplified by former New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia's aphorism that 'there is no Democratic or Republican way to pick up garbage' (Schleicher, 2007: 421) – local governments are largely managerial in nature. Mayors and city councillors are rewarded by the voting public for 'good governance'. Some, such as Ferreira and Gyourko (2009), argue that partisan differences produce no variation in outcomes. This perspective suggests that local policy is apolitical, with outcomes resulting not from ideological or partisan divergence between residents or those in office but rather from structural explanations like the economy and demographics (Phelps and Wood, 2011).

Many scholars in the United States argue that cities have no choice but to focus on economic development, since residents and private investors have close to free movement and thus cities have a disincentive to use policy levers, such as affordable housing investment, to support redistribution (Peterson, 1981). Molotch (1976) argues that cities thus pursue developmentalist regimes; localities focus their budgets on incentives for economic activity (Judd and Swanstrom, 2011). Fischel (2001), meanwhile, suggests that cities are ultimately directed by politically powerful 'homevoters' who desire low taxes and home-value stability.

Similar arguments play out in Europe, where scholars again emphasise depoliticisation and describe the role of broadly held neoliberal ideologies in shaping policy (Brenner, 2004). Examining local policy in France, Enright (2016) argues that it is leveraged primarily to support capital accumulation. This approach plays out specifically in

the context of major urban development projects – the focus of this article – which are, claim Pinson (2009) and Swyngedouw et al. (2002), motivated by the goal of increasing economic activity. The implication of this argument is that localities have limited ability to pursue (and/or their leaders have limited interest in pursuing) redistributive aims through policy that serves people with lower incomes – such as investing in affordable housing.

Even so, in France, at least, housing policy is openly discussed in local political campaigns. In the 2020 Paris municipal elections, for example, the three major candidates from the left, centre and right parties developed platforms explicitly related to housing policy (Prudent, 2020). The socialist mayor Anne Hidalgo – like many other members of her party throughout the country – campaigned on increasing the share of the city's housing stock that would be social housing, even as the others representing centrist and right-wing parties did not. But the assumption that local planning is driven by economics implies that candidates' policy approaches – which may reflect resident political ideologies – are relatively meaningless in terms of outcomes.

Yet, even if the predominant view has been that local policymaking is founded on economic and social considerations, there is growing evidence that political ideologies have a role in influencing outcomes. Consider first that local policies reflect *resident* political perspectives (Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2014). (Einstein et al., 2019 point out they often better represent the views of wealthier inhabitants.) Einstein and Kogan (2016) and Palus (2010) find that, over time, resident populations that become more Democratic in US cities induce their respective municipalities to spend more. The chain of causality suggested here is that left-leaning voters believe in the benefit of increased public investment and vote for Democrats, and those elected Democrats make policy choices that reflect that preference.

Contrasts in local policymaking are not simply a reflection of resident ideology, however; they may also be a manifestation of the partisan affiliations of local officials and the points of view that inform those partisan links. Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw (2016, 2020) show that Democratic mayors and counties with Democratic legislative majorities spend more than their Republican counterparts, especially on redistributive functions, including housing; this is true even in the context of economic constraints (Hajnal and Trounstine, 2010). Through a survey of mayors, Einstein and Glick (2018) show that when asked to consider trade-offs between alternative policies, Democrats are far more likely to agree about the need to reduce income inequality, even at the expense of business groups. Bucchianeri et al. (2021) argue that local officials' actions are informed by the intersection of party affiliation and views about the private market's role in providing public services. Here, the chain of causality suggested is that mayors associate their partisanship with policies on the left–right ideological spectrum, and the fact that they then promote those policies is related to their partisanship; of course, given that these officials were elected, those preferences seem likely to correspond to those of voters.

Differences between Democrats and Republicans play out even though many of the US local governments studied are technically non-partisan in that the ballots on which candidates are listed make no mention of party affiliation (Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw, 2020). The official non-partisanship of such leaders suggests, in turn, that local leaders are not following policy approaches directly determined by party policy, but rather that partisan affiliation itself reflects ideological divergence. In France, on which I focus

this article, this partisan–ideological connection is more apparent at the local level since most city councillors are elected on party lists.

If scholars of political science have begun to make the connection between local leaders' partisanship and outcomes related to budgetary redistribution, less progress has been made in understanding the link between partisanship and local *urban planning* issues. One potential explanation for that discrepancy is an adherence among local planners to the 'rational' planning model that assumes scientific methods can be used to solve city problems, and the assumption that similar methods can be used in cities of various political stripes.

As such, some researchers suggest that there have been relatively consistent local planning strategies by US political leaders of both Democratic and Republican affiliations (Lang et al., 2008). These planning strategies, argue Guttenberg (2009) and King and Fischer (2016), are prioritising growth. Others recognise the political nature of choices related to planning but explain varying outcomes not as a reflection of ideological difference but rather as mechanisms to reward partisan loyalty; Gay (2017), for example, finds that state-level housing assistance is steered to communities with higher support levels for the party in power. Some politicians, too, may support certain types of housing over others for electoral reasons. Adler and Ansell (2020) find that homeownership plays a role in increasing support for right-wing political positions in the context of low housing prices; homeowners benefiting from higher home values, meanwhile, may become less supportive of redistribution (Ansell, 2014). In theory, social housing investment could have the opposite effects. Local leaders may also be aligning themselves with national party goals in making local policy (Clegg, 2021).

New research, however, has taken steps in demonstrating how ideological views – both of residents and of political officials – might inform specific planning actions. Benedictis-Kessner et al. (2024) show that electing a Democratic mayor in the United States results in increased apartment construction. Freemark et al. (2020) survey US planning staff, finding that residents' political ideologies are associated with officials' views about policies related to land-use planning.

Outside the United States, to be clear, researchers have more explicitly made the link between housing and politics. In France, Le Galès (1995) describes the importance of socialist mayors in developing a *politique de la ville* (urban policy) designed to encourage improvements for working-class neighbourhoods, particularly the social housing complexes known as *grands ensembles*. But, according to some, those efforts have been set aside in favour of increasing economic development, then subsumed as part of the effort to prevent ghettoisation, not to increase access to housing (Blanc, 2007). In the United Kingdom, Clegg and Farstad (2021) find that local governments under the control of left-wing parties were more likely to require affordable housing in new private projects, but that this partisan differentiation declined after the emergence of the financial crisis, with local housing affordability becoming the major differentiator instead. In these scholars' eyes, the partisan impact on local social housing decisions is potentially marginal.

This context opens new avenues for research. Do resident preferences, combined with differentiation in local partisan control, produce variation in actual development of affordable housing?

Methods

French *communes* (local governments; I refer to them hereafter as cities) are important actors in housing construction. They play a role in zoning, and they often manage local

social housing organisations and development projects (Freemark, 2021a). These powers allow local politicians to influence planning. In France, leaders of all but the smallest cities are elected on partisan lines, and councils are led by a single party or coalition of parties (typically on left, right or centrist joint lists). I examine whether city choices about urban development policy are associated with resident ideologies and partisan control.

Two key questions for cities are how to orientate zoning policy and how much social housing to construct. Zoning establishes allowable land uses and requirements for new construction, including levels of affordable housing in new private projects, similar to US inclusionary zoning (Dorel, 2018). Cities direct the implementation of social housing, both by allocating local funds or tax relief to support its construction (in association with larger levels of assistance from regional and national governments), and also by approving building permits. Social housing units in France are rental apartments whose construction and maintenance are subsidised; whose rental costs are limited by national regulations; and which – depending on the subsidy used – can be occupied by residents with very low to middle incomes (Raad, 2017). Local social-housing development organisations must include local elected officials on their boards (*Le Courrier*, 2014). Municipalities also often manage major developments directly. Local development agencies, known as *entreprises publiques locales* (EPLs), are charged with acquiring land and either developing lots or directing private or social developers to construct pursuant to plans.

Municipalities must conform to certain planning requirements imposed by higher-level governments. Key among them is the *loi relative à la solidarité et au renouvellement urbain* (SRU law), originally passed by the national assembly in 2000 and reformed several times in the years since (Freemark, 2021b). Among other requirements, the SRU requires that municipalities with more than 1500 inhabitants in the Paris region achieve 25% social housing overall; cities not on track to achieve this level are subject to penalties.

Data

I collected city-level data on voting patterns and demographic conditions that may be associated with choices related to development. There were 463 cities in the Paris metropolitan area (which I define as co-terminus with the Île-de-France region) with major development projects during the period I examine (detailed below). These cities had a collective population of 10.2 million, or more than 84% of the Île-de-France population, in 2016.

I collected data from Insee, the French national statistics agency, on municipal populations; population growth; share of households that own; share of people who are immigrants; share of residents who are 15 years old or less; median net per-household income, adjusted for household size (*niveau de vie*); poverty rates; share of workers who are blue collar (*ouvriers*); housing units per capita; share of housing that is vacant; and vehicle ownership. I collected data on the share of city housing that is social (qualifying for SRU requirements) from Observatoire du Logement Social en Île-de-France.

From the Interior Ministry, I collected data on politics and partisanship: the share of voters in each city that voted for a left-wing candidate in the first round of the presidential elections in 2012 and 2017, and the controlling party in each city's council as of 2019, as chosen during the 2014 national municipal elections. The most popular left-wing party during this period was the centre-left Socialist party (*Parti Socialiste*); the most popular right-wing party during this period was the centre-right to right-wing Republican

party (*les Républicains*), named the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) until 2015. That said, there were several other left-wing, centrist and right-wing parties also present in local elections. The presidential data are highly correlated (0.96) between the two years; I use the 2012 data to represent the left–right ideological composition of a city's electorate, the key independent variable I examine to explore the relationship between *resident political views* and planning outcomes. The correlations between left-wing vote shares in the 2014 municipal elections and the presidential elections is much weaker. Council control reflects who makes decisions about development projects and is the second key independent variable I examine, this time to explore the relationship between *policymaker partisan affiliation* and planning outcomes. Demographic data comparing cities by local partisan control are presented in Supplemental Appendix Table A1.

To identify how municipalities include social housing in new construction, I collected data from the Institut Paris Région (IPR) regional planning agency. The IPR maintains a database of all major projects underway or recently completed, generally beginning in 2000; this list includes projects developed by EPLs, but also by national developers and private entities. I consider public and private projects because I have inadequate data to separate the two; most larger projects involve a combination of public and private initiatives; and private projects are also affected by municipal policies such as zoning standards and local approvals. The database includes information on the year when projects were first planned, but it does not provide details about when projects were completed (if they were) or how long development took.

I evaluate 1071 projects that were entirely or partly residential. The IPR database does *not* identify the share of each project's units that is social housing, my major dependent variable. As such, I used web searching to review each project to add information on project unit counts and the share of units planned to be social. I also identified whether projects are greenfield (constructed on previously agricultural or natural land), infill (replacing existing development) or something else, such as a renovation.

Of projects with a housing component, 39%, 8% and 52% were in cities controlled by left-wing, centrist and right-wing councils, respectively, in 2019 (Supplemental Appendix Table A1). Centrist council projects were most likely to be greenfield, while three-fifths of those in cities run by left- and right-wing councils were infill. Projects in left-wing cities averaged a higher number of housing units and had a modestly higher level of social housing (41.7% in left-wing cities versus 36.4% in right-wing ones), before controlling for other local characteristics.

Methods

I use multi-variate regressions to control for city demographics to test how social housing provision is linked to political factors.

I compare local politics with *citywide* housing characteristics (equation (1)). First, I hypothesise that a city having a greater share of left-wing residents, expressed in terms of higher presidential vote shares for left-wing parties, is associated with higher citywide social-housing rates after adjusting for local demographics (H1a). Second, I hypothesise that cities with left-wing council leadership have higher social-housing rates citywide, compared to those with centrist or right-wing leadership (H1b).

$$\textit{City social housing share} = S_m = \beta_0 + \beta_1 E_m + \beta_2 P_m + \gamma X_m + \varepsilon_m \quad (1)$$

where S_{m} measures the share of primary housing units in city m that are social

(meeting SRU criteria) in 2016. E_m measures the share of the vote in that city that left-wing candidates received in the first round of the 2012 presidential election. P_m is a dummy variable that represents whether the city council is controlled by a left-wing party. X_m is a vector of the city-level demographic variables.

Next, I move beyond citywide social-housing shares (H1), which are the product of decades of policy choices, to compare local politics with *project-level* housing characteristics. I hypothesise that both a higher share of residents with left-wing views (H2a) and left-wing local council leadership (H2b) are associated with higher social-housing rates *in major projects*, after controlling for city characteristics (equation (2)). Higher project-level social-housing shares could be a reflection of political officials acting to represent resident viewpoints, assuming that voting for left-wing presidential candidates is a proxy for supporting redistribution through social housing; this would support the claim that voter preferences are determining planning outcomes. And/or, project-level social-housing shares could reflect the partisan affiliation of city leaders; this would support the claim that policymakers' views are determining planning outcomes. These two hypotheses are linked, since voters are likely to support politicians who share their ideological preferences.

$$\begin{aligned} \textit{Project social housing share} = S_r = \beta_0 + \beta_1 P_m \\ + \beta_2 S_m + \gamma X_m \\ + \theta Y_r + \varepsilon_{pm} \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

where S_r measures the share of primary housing units in project r that is social housing. Y_r is a fixed-effect variable for the year the project was planned to account for potential changes in approaches to social housing over time. P_m, S_m and X_m are the same as in equation (1).

To further assess H2, I conduct a series of regression discontinuity models that examine cities where left- and right-wing candidate lists achieved similar vote shares, meaning the election was tight (equation (3)). This allows me to consider the association between partisan characteristics and project social-housing levels, informed by these close elections. It gives us a clue as to what might have happened with project plans if a council of alternative partisanship had won.

$$\begin{aligned} \textit{Project social housing share} = S_r = \alpha + \tau P_m \\ + \beta_1 (T_m - c) \\ + \beta_2 P_m (T_m - c) \\ + \varepsilon_{pm} \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

where T_m measures the vote share of left-wing candidates in the last round of the 2014 municipal elections, and c is the cutoff for winning the election (50% of the vote in a two-party race). Other variables are the same as in equations (1) and (2). I also undertake a series of robustness tests.

Limitations

My findings may apply to the French context but not to that in, for example, the United States, where local politics is less contested on partisan terms. Moreover, partisanship is insufficient to explain the full range of decision-making by local-government actors, who may have viewpoints disassociated from their party membership. And my focus on political actors has its own limitations. Unelected government staff often lead conversations; in France, the bureaucratic state is well engrained. More detailed case studies could help elucidate which people make the most important planning choices – and why they do so.

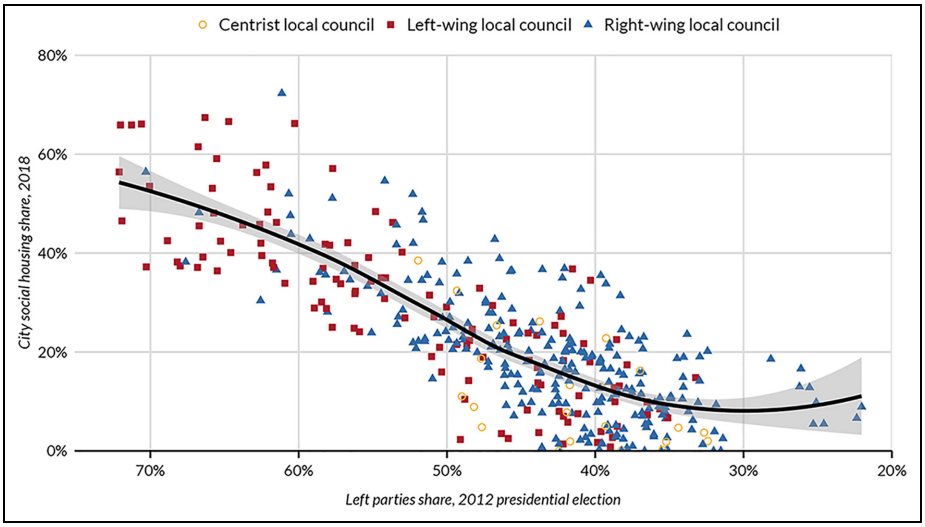

Figure 1. Local social housing share, compared to election results in 2012 presidential elections, by local partisan control.

Note: Loess best-fit line shown. Correlation between left parties' share in 2012 presidential election and city social housing share is 0.79. Left-wing council parties are Communiste, Divers Gauche, Front de Gauche, Socialiste, Union de la Gauche. Centrist parties are Divers, Modem, Union du Centre and none. Right-wing parties are Divers Droite, Front Nationale, Union de la Droite, Union des démocrates et indépendants, Union pour un mouvement populaire/ Les Républicains. Standard French left, right and centrist partisan colours used.

Source: The author, using data from IPR (2019); Observatoire du Logement Social en Île-de-France (2016); Insee (2018); Ministère de l'Intérieur (2017).

My analysis, finally, is constrained by the limited data available related to development projects. It is possible that IPR's database is incomplete or biased in some way, or that its estimates do not reflect what was ultimately built. And the long project timelines inherent in project delivery could complicate the association between political viewpoints and planning outputs, though I attempt to address this issue through the robustness tests I describe below. Moreover, I do not measure change that has occurred more recently – at least at the national scale. France's political momentum has shifted in recent elections towards both Emmanuel Macron's centre-right party and the far right, reducing the salience of the traditional left/right binary between the Socialist and Republican parties. That said, those latter two parties continue to dominate at the local level, including in the most recent municipal elections in 2020.

Findings

Citywide, resident political ideologies are linked to social housing availability

I begin by assessing the links between local political attributes and citywide social-housing shares (H1). There is a strong and positive correlation (0.79) between presidential vote shares for left parties and city social-housing shares (Figure 1; note that the *X*-axis presents high left-wing presidential vote shares on the left and low left-wing shares on the right). This relationship could be bidirectional. On the one hand, resident preference for left-wing ideas may be linked to support

Table 1. Citywide social-housing share versus local political control and other local characteristics.

City characteristic	I	II	III	IV
Left party controls city (dummy)	0.12 (0.02)***	–0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	–0.00 (0.00)
Left share, 2012 election (R1)		1.25 (0.06)***	0.54 (0.05)***	0.70 (0.06)***
Poverty rate				–0.21 (0.11)
Blue-collar worker share				–0.20 (0.23)
Share residents under 15			1.15 (0.20)***	0.94 (0.25)***
Ownership share			–0.55 (0.03)***	–0.67 (0.06)***
Population growth 2009–2014			–0.12 (0.04)**	–0.16 (0.06)**
Population density				–0.00 (0.00)***
Population (logged)				0.01 (0.01)
Intercept	0.18 (0.01)***	–0.35 (0.2)***	0.03 (0.05)	0.08 (0.11)
N	397	397	397	330
Adjusted R^2	0.13	0.62	0.81	0.82

Note: Robust standard errors shown in parentheses. ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$. Only incorporates projects that are infill, greenfield or social housing renovations.

Source: The author, using data from IPR (2019); Observatoire du Logement Social en Île-de-France (2016); Insee (2018); Ministère de l'Intérieur (2017).

for social housing, and thus left-wing officials devoting resources to social housing in that community. On the other hand, more social housing may mean more residents who support left-wing parties, since lower-income people have historically been more likely to vote on the left. This association is similar across municipalities controlled by left-wing, right-wing and centrist local councils.

I explore the connections between resident left–right preferences in presidential voting (H1a), left-wing local council control (H1b) and citywide social-housing shares through a series of multiple regressions (Table 1). Presidential vote patterns are significantly associated with city social housing shares, even controlling for local demographic characteristics. For the average city, a 10-percentage-point increase in vote share for left parties in national elections is associated with a 5- to 12-percentage-point increase in a city's overall social-housing share (models II–IV).

There is a strong, positive link between a city having a left-wing council and it having a higher social-housing share (Table 1, model I). But this link disappears once controlling for presidential vote shares and local demographics (models II–IV). This may reflect the fact that much of the social housing stock is decades old; council control now may only have a marginal impact on overall housing conditions – but this is not true for new projects, as I show next.

Left-wing council control is associated with higher project social-housing shares

To evaluate the policy choices of local elected officials on issues they control, I next examine the social-housing shares of new development projects. Figure 2 illustrates best-fit curves for a city's social-housing share (X-axis) versus project social-housing share (Y-axis), comparing cities with left- or

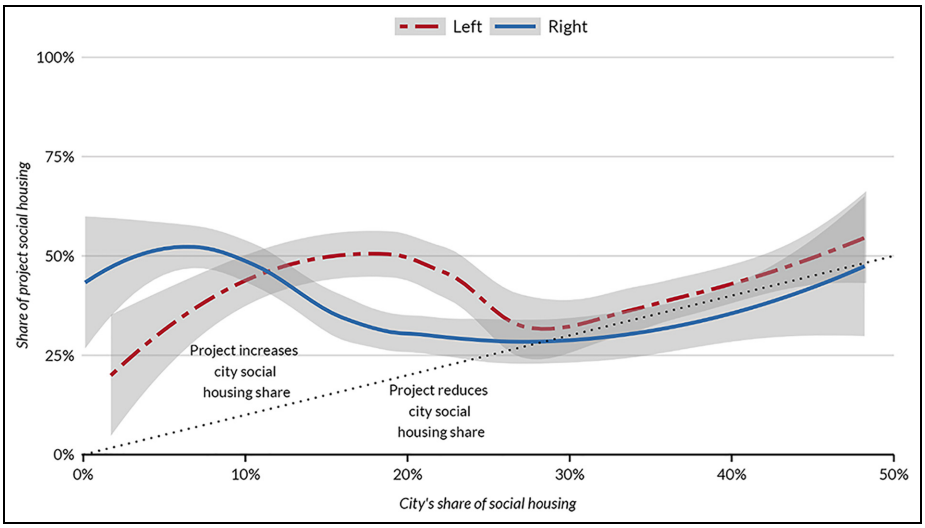

Figure 2. City social-housing share versus project social-housing share, by city partisan control.
Note: Loess best-fit lines shown. Standard French left and right partisan colours used.
Left-wing council parties are Communiste, Divers Gauche, Front de Gauche, Socialiste, Union de la Gauche. Centrist parties are Divers, Modem, Union du Centre. Right-wing parties are Divers Droite, Front Nationale, Union de la Droite, Union des démocrates et indépendants, Union pour un mouvement populaire/Les Républicains.
Source: The author, using data from IPR (2019); Observatoire du Logement Social en Île-de-France (2016); Ministère de l'Intérieur (2017).

right-wing council control. On average, major projects in left-wing cities include a higher share of social housing in new projects than already exists in those cities; this is not the case for right-wing cities with more than 28% existing social housing (though the difference is within the margin of error). This suggests that right-wing cities are working to achieve the SRU mandate (25% social housing), not go above it. Right-wing cities with a low share of existing social housing (less than 12%) add *more* social housing in projects than left-wing cities with a similarly low social-housing level (though there are only about one-quarter as many left-wing cities with that characteristic). But for cities with a higher share of existing social housing, left-wing cities add more social housing to new projects on average.

I next perform a series of regressions on project social-housing shares (Table 2). I find strong evidence that having a left-wing party in control is associated with a significantly higher project social-housing share. These results hold after controlling for city demographics, presidential voting results and citywide social housing shares (including whether a city has met SRU requirements). In contrast to the results related to citywide social-housing shares described in the previous section, I show that having a left-wing council is associated with a 7–11 percentage-point higher *project* social-housing share. This finding confirms H2b, the hypothesis that planning policy is informed by policymaker ideological viewpoints, expressed through partisan affiliation.

Table 2's models vary, but all include dummy variables for project type. Infill projects and especially social-housing renovations include, on average, a higher social-housing share than greenfield projects (the baseline). Table 2 also shows that projects in cities with less than 25% social housing

Table 2. Project social-housing share versus local political control and other local characteristics.

City or project characteristic	I	II	III	IV	V
Left party controls city (dummy)	0.11 (0.02)***	0.11 (0.02)***	0.11 (0.02)***	0.09 (0.02)***	0.07 (0.03)**
Left share, 2012 election (R1)	–0.62 (0.11)***	–0.36 (0.16)*	–0.32 (0.19)	–0.18 (0.17)	0.23 (0.22)
Poverty rate			0.53 (0.23)*	0.38 (0.23)	0.47 (0.48)
Blue-collar worker share			–1.74 (0.47)***	–1.52 (0.48)**	–0.90 (0.67)
Share residents under 15			0.87 (0.60)	1.17 (0.56)*	0.27 (0.64)
Ownership share			0.42 (0.14)**	0.32 (0.12)**	0.09 (0.15)
Population growth 2009–2014			–0.25 (0.18)	–0.24 (0.18)	–0.41 (0.20)*
Population (logged)			0.02 (0.01)*	0.04 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.02)
Immigrant share					0.14 (0.38)
Housing unit vacancy					0.57 (0.81)
Population density					–0.00 (0.00)**
Inequality index					0.01 (0.02)
Median net household income (logged)					0.24 (0.21)
City social housing share		–0.24 (0.10)*	–0.092 (0.14)		
Below SRU level (dummy)				0.19 (0.05)***	0.24 (0.07)***
SRU level × city social hsg. share				–0.83 (0.20)**	–0.97 (0.24)***
Project type: social housing reno.	0.34 (0.04)***	0.33 (0.04)***	0.28 (0.04)***	0.28 (0.04)***	0.27 (0.04)***
Project type: infill	0.13 (0.02)***	0.12 (0.02)***	0.08 (0.02)***	0.08 (0.02)***	0.05 (0.03)
Intercept	0.53 (0.05)***	0.48 (0.06)***	–0.13 (0.18)	–0.36 (0.19)	–2.73 (2.21)
Project planning year fixed effect	No	No	No	No	Yes
N	565	542	542	542	457
Adjusted R^2	0.16	0.16	0.19	0.21	0.23

Note: Robust standard errors shown in parentheses. ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$. Only incorporates projects that are infill, greenfield or social housing renovations. Median net household income is adjusted for household size (this metric is referred to as *niveau de vie* by Insee).

Source: The author, using data from IPR (2019); Observatoire du Logement Social en Île-de-France (2016); Insee (2018); Ministère de l'Intérieur (2017).

('Below SRU level') average a far higher project social-housing share (models IV–V), and that projects in cities with higher existing social-housing levels have a smaller share of social-housing units (models II–III). Though not the focus of this article, the models offer some evidence that higher rates of poverty, youth residents and homeowners, combined with lower rates of blue-collar workers and population growth, are each associated with higher project social-housing shares.

I do *not* find evidence to confirm the hypothesis (H2a) that higher voter support for national left parties – my proxy for residents' left/right views – is associated with increased project social-housing shares. This suggests that project characteristics are more likely to be influenced by the partisan control of city councils than resident views, though, again, the existence of a left-wing council also reflects resident ideologies.

To test the robustness of these results, I perform several additional regression models. First, I test just projects planned since 2008 to control for the possibility that results are influenced by projects with initial planning before the 2008 local elections; this showed no difference. Next, in Supplemental Appendix Table A2 (models I–III), I exclude projects in Paris to ensure that the central city's dominance in the region is not biasing results. I then exclude projects in cities that had a transition in council control between the 2008 and 2014 elections to account for situations in which projects were planned under varying partisan control (models IV–VI). These results reaffirm the aforementioned findings: a positive and mostly statistically significant association between left-wing council control and higher project social-housing shares. Outside Paris, left-wing council control is associated with a 5–8 percentage-point higher project social-housing share. Including only cities with no change in partisan control, I find that left-wing council leadership is associated with 13–15 percentage-point higher project social-housing shares, suggesting that Table 2's estimates may be conservative. When I ran regressions only on projects planned since 2008 but in cities *with* a change in partisan control, I found no significant impact of having a left-wing council in the period since 2014 (results not shown). These robustness tests reaffirm that residents' political viewpoints have little direct impact on social-housing shares; these are mediated through council partisan control.

Competitive elections reveal partisan cleavages on affordable housing policy

The above analyses demonstrate the divergence in approaches to projects between cities run by left- and right-wing parties. By themselves, they do not provide adequate evidence to show impacts of *changes* in partisan control – and I have inadequate data to document alterations in project design following elections. Using regression discontinuity models, however, I can focus on differences in project design in cities above and below the 50% threshold in municipal elections. Generally, if a coalition of left parties achieves more than 50%, it controls the city.

Table 3 presents the results of several models using regression discontinuities. I consider three bandwidths: the full sample (models I–II); cities where left parties achieved between 35% and 65% of the vote in the 2014 local elections (models III–IV); and cities where left parties achieved between 47% and 53% of the vote, the most closely fought elections (models V–VI). The coefficient of the first variable (left party controls city) is the estimate of the effect of having a left-wing council; this is similar to estimates in Table 2. The coefficients of the second and third variables (left share – 50%) predict the outcome based on election results, depending on the competitiveness of the election. Models I, III and V

Table 3. Regression discontinuity: Project social-housing share versus local political control across three bandwidths.

City or project characteristic	I Full sample	II	III Bandwidth: Left vote share 35%–65%	IV	V Bandwidth: Left vote share 47%–53%	VI
Left party controls city (dummy)	0.16 (0.03)***	0.16 (0.03)***	0.13 (0.06)*	0.13 (0.06)*	0.28 (0.09)**	0.29 (0.09)**
Left share, 2014 election – 50%	–0.00 (0.00)**	–0.00 (0.00)***	–0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.01)	–0.11 (0.03)**	–0.10 (0.04)*
Left party city control × (Left share, 2014 election – 50%)		0.00 (0.00)*		–0.01 (0.01)		–0.01 (0.06)
City social housing share	–0.35 (0.07)***	–0.35 (0.07)***	–0.27 (0.11)*	–0.24 (0.10)*	–0.35 (0.30)	–0.35 (0.30)
Project type: social housing reno.	0.32 (0.04)***	0.33 (0.04)***	0.33 (0.06)***	0.32 (0.07)***	0.17 (0.10)	0.17 (0.11)
Project type: infill	0.11 (0.02)***	0.12 (0.02)***	0.06 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	–0.09 (0.07)	–0.09 (0.08)
Intercept	0.30 (0.03)***	0.27 (0.03)***	0.32 (0.06)***	0.34 (0.07)***	0.37 (0.11)**	0.38 (0.12)**
N	518	518	198	198	55	55
Adjusted R^2	0.16	0.17	0.18	0.18	0.15	0.13
Slopes for left and right	Same	Different	Same	Different	Same	Different

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

Source: The author, using data from IPR (2019); Observatoire du Logement Social en Île-de-France (2016); Insee (2018); Ministère de l'Intérieur (2017).

assume the same slope for both left- and right-wing-controlled cities for each marginal vote share received by left-wing parties (simple analysis of covariance); models II, IV and VI assume different slopes for cities based on partisan control.

Table 3 reaffirms previous findings. When I conduct regressions across the three bandwidths, I demonstrate a continued, significant effect of having left-wing parties in control. These models show a 13–29 percentage-point increase in project social-housing shares in contexts where left-wing councils win elections. Results are similar whether or not assuming the same slopes for left- and right-wing cities. I considered a wide array of other bandwidths; the positive coefficient for left-wing control is maintained across all, but results fall into insignificance ($p > 0.05$) for bandwidths between 40–60% and 46–54% of the vote going to left parties. At other bandwidths, the effect is significant ($p < 0.05$).

In Figure 3, I plot the shape of several of these regression discontinuities using linear models with different slopes for the cities based on partisan control (as in Figure 1, Figure 3's *X*-axis plots high left-wing vote shares on the left and low shares on the right). I use local linear graphs following Fan and Gijbels (1992), who point to their benefits in reducing bias. Graphs are shown for all projects (left column) and those that are infill only (right column), on three bandwidths. In each case, there is a significant decline between the left-wing and right-wing cities at the 50% threshold. This difference – the estimated average treatment effect of having a left party win council control – ranges from about 10 to 20 percentage points in project social-housing share, suggesting a major impact of left-wing officials gaining power.

All of the Figure 3 charts show a positive slope for left-wing cities. This means that as a city's residents *reduce* support for left-wing candidates in municipal elections, the project social-housing share increases (as long as a left-wing party wins). One explanation may be that cities with a greater share of left-voting residents have higher levels of existing social housing, and thus do not include as much in new projects. Another possibility is that close electoral contests heighten contrasts between candidates; Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw (2020) find that tight partisan splits produce more divergent policymaking in US counties.

To assess the robustness of this phenomenon, in Supplemental Appendix Figure A1, I chart only cities that have not yet met SRU requirements (meaning they do not yet have at least 25% social housing). Among these, there is an even larger discontinuity apparent at the 50% threshold compared to Figure 3, with left-wing cities planning for a 25 percentage-point higher project social-housing share than right-wing cities at the cutoff. Finally, also in Supplemental Appendix Figure A1, I assess an alternative specification, testing as a dependent variable the project social-housing share as a multiple of the citywide social-housing share (e.g. a ratio of 2 could mean that a project has a 30% social-housing share in a city with a 15% overall social-housing share). Here, again, I find a large discontinuity at the cutoff.

Conclusions

Projects in cities with left-wing council control include, on average, significantly more social housing as a share of total units than those in cities with centrist or right-wing control. These findings offer evidence that local governments can, and do, intervene to promote redistributive policies through planning. Left-wing candidates are not just speaking publicly about the importance of social housing but are integrating it into the projects they control to a greater extent than are right-wing councils.

Left-wing councils may be increasing social housing availability for a number of reasons. Perhaps their members want to amplify their future election prospects by increasing the number of voters on the left.

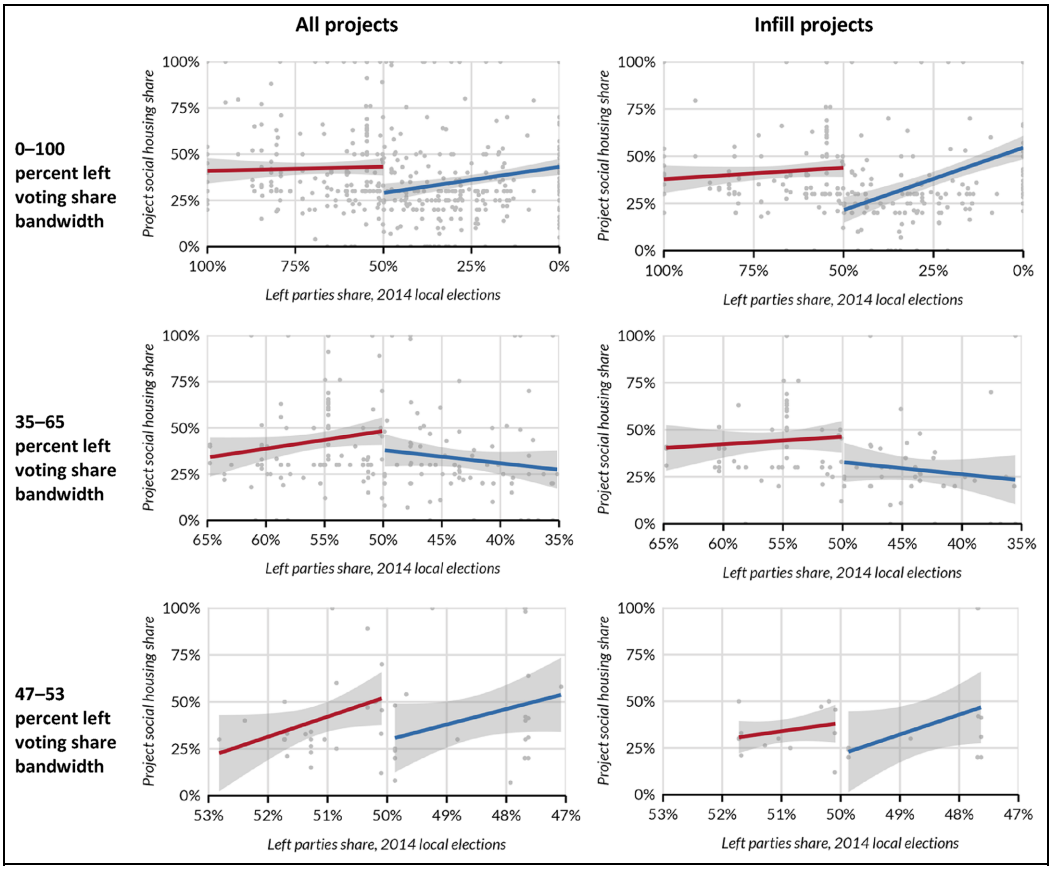

Figure 3. Regression discontinuities: 2014 left vote share in municipal elections versus project social-housing shares.

Note: Excludes projects in cities where left vote share was below 50 % but the left still controlled the council. Standard French left and right partisan colours used.

Source: The author, using data from IPR (2019); Observatoire du Logement Social en Île-de-France (2016); Insee (2018); Ministère de l'Intérieur (2017).

Perhaps they feel they are representing constituent perspectives. Additional research is necessary to understand variations in political motivations in urban planning.

But partisan control of local councils appears to have a greater direct influence on project planning than do resident viewpoints. This indicates that there are substantial urban policy implications of closely fought elections. A left-wing party winning could mean considerably more social housing in a future development project in that city than in a project planned in the context of right-wing party control. This does not mean resident political perspectives do not matter – a city with a greater share of voters with left-wing views is more likely to elect a left-wing council – but it does suggest that elected officials themselves play an essential role in achieving the outcomes those voters desire.

Acknowledgements

I thank Daniel Nichanian, Justin Steil, Kathleen Thelen, Lawrence Vale and Jinhua Zhao for their review of previous versions of this manuscript. I appreciate the detailed feedback from the anonymous peer reviewers.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Yonah Slifkin Freemark https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3622-6354

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

References

Adler D and Ansell B (2020) Housing and populism. *West European Politics* 43(2): 344–365.

Ansell B (2014) The political economy of ownership. *American Political Science Review* 108(2): 383–402.

Aurand A (2010) Density, housing types and mixed land use. *Urban Studies* 47(5): 1015–1036.

Benedictis-Kessner J and Warshaw C (2016) Mayoral partisanship and municipal fiscal policy. *The Journal of Politics* 78(4): 1124–1138.

Benedictis-Kessner J and Warshaw C (2020) Politics in forgotten governments. *The Journal of Politics* 82(2): 460–475.

Benedictis-Kessner J, Jones D and Warshaw C (2024) How partisanship in cities influences housing policy. *American Journal of Political Science*. Epub ahead of print 23 March 2024. DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12856.

Blanc M (2007) La "politique de la ville": une "exception française"? *Espaces et Sociétés* 128–129: 71–86.

Brenner N (2004) *New State Spaces*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bucchianeri P, Carney R, Enos R, et al. (2021) What explains local policy cleavages? *Social Science Quarterly* 102(6): 2752–2760.

Clegg L (2021) Taking one for the team. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 23(4): 680–698.

Clegg L and Farstad F (2021) The local political economy of the regulatory state. *Regulation & Governance* 15(1): 168–184.

Dorel (2018) *Le Récolement Général des PLU des 131 Communes de la Métropole*. Paris: Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme.

Einstein K and Glick D (2018) Mayors, partisanship, and redistribution. *Urban Affairs Review* 54(1): 74–106.

Einstein K and Kogan V (2016) Pushing the city limits. *Urban Affairs Review* 52(1): 3–32.

Einstein K, Glick D and Palmer M (2019) *Neighborhood Defenders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Enright T (2016) *The Making of Grand Paris*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Fan J and Gijbels I (1992) Variable bandwidth and local linear regression smoothers. *The Annuals of Statistics* 2(4): 2008–2036.

Ferreira F and Gyourko J (2009) Do political parties matter? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124(1): 399–422.

Fischel W (2001) *The Homevoter Hypothesis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Freemark Y (2021a) Doubling housing production in the Paris region. *International Journal of Housing Policy* 21(2): 291–305.

Freemark Y (2021b) *Mandating access to affordable housing, city by city*. Working paper WP21YF1. Cambridge: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

Freemark Y and Steil J (2022) Local power and the location of subsidized renters in comparative perspective. *Housing Studies* 37(10): 1753–1781.

Freemark Y, Woodbridge-Hudson A and Zhao J (2020) Policies for autonomy. *Urban Science* 4(4): 55.

Gay C (2017) A room for one's own? *Urban Affairs Review* 53(1): 40–70.

Guttenberg A (2009) Planning and ideology. *Journal of Planning History* 8(4): 287–294.

Hajnal Z and Trounstine J (2010) Who or what governs? *American Politics Research* 38(6): 1130–1164.

Hansson A (2019) City strategies for affordable housing. *International Journal of Housing Policy* 19(1): 95–119.

Insee (2018) Données locales. Available at: https://www.insee.fr/fr/information/3544265 (accessed 8 July 2024).

Institut Paris Region (IPR) (2019) Projets d'aménagement en Ile-de-France. Available at: https://data-iau-idf.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/041ac6032e02455a9db22dc6c14b8ad9_0/explore?location=48.670577%2C2.445700%2C9.55 (accessed 8 July 2024).

Judd D and Swanstrom T (2011) *City Politics*. New York, NY: Pearson.

King D and Fischer L (2016) Streetcar projects as spatial planning. *Journal of Transport Geography* 54: 383–390.

Lang R, Anacker K and Hornburg S (2008) The new politics of affordable housing. *Housing Policy Debate* 19(2): 231–248.

Le Courrier (2014) Guide à l'usage des élus locaux: Le logement social et les politiques locales de l'habitat. June–July. Available at: https://www.union-habitat.org/centre-de-ressources/habitants-politiques-sociales/le-logement-social-et-les-politiques-locales-de (accessed 8 July 2024).

Le Galès P (1995) Politique de la ville en France et en Grande-Bretagne. *Sociologie du Travail* 37(2): 249–275.

Ministère de l'Intérieur (2017) Les archives des résultats des élections en France. Available at: https://www.archives-resultats-elections.interieur.gouv.fr/ (accessed 8 July 2024).

Molotch H (1976) The city as a growth machine. *American Journal of Sociology* 82(2): 309–332.

Observatoiredu Logement Social en Île-de-France (2016) Les données repères. Available at: https://www.ols-idf.org/donneacutees-repegraveres.html (accessed 8 July 2024).

Palus C (2010) Responsiveness in American local governments. *State and Local Government Review* 42(2): 133–150.

Peterson P (1981) *City Limits*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Phelps N and Wood A (2011) The new post-suburban politics? *Urban Studies* 48(12): 2591–2610.

Pinson G (2009) *Gouverner la ville par projet*. Paris: Presses de SciencesPo.

Prudent R (2020) Municipales à Paris: Propreté, logement, sécurité. *France Info*, 17 June. Available at: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/elections/municipales/municipales-a-paris-proprete-logement-securite-quels-sont-les-programmes-d-agnes-buzyn-rachida-dati-et-anne-hidalgo_4008777.html (accessed 8 July 2024).

Raad L (2017) Pour qui produit-on du logement social? *Espaces et Sociétés* 3(170): 33–50.

Scanlon K, Whitehead C and Arrigoitia M (2014) *Social Housing in Europe*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Schleicher D (2007) Why is there no partisan competition in city council elections? *Journal of Law and Politics* 23: 419.

Swyngedouw E, Moulaert F and Rodriguez A (2002) Neoliberal urbanization in Europe. *Antipode* 34(3): 547–582.

Tausanovitch C and Warshaw C (2014) Representation in municipal government. *American Political Science Review* 108(3): 605–641.

Wetzstein S (2017) The global urban housing affordability crisis. *Urban Studies* 54(14): 3159–3177.