Ned Resnikoff:

Alex Sahn, thanks for joining us.

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah. Thanks for having me. It's great to be here.

Ned Resnikoff:

So I wanted to maybe start off with a general framing question, which is just how would you describe your research interests? I mean, what specific part of housing and urban policy are you really interested in?

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah. So I'm a political scientist. And so when I talk to other political scientists, what I'd say is study is the intersection of institutions of municipal government in the US and the political economy of race and representation and which groups are better represented and get more policy outcomes that they want. And so both of those things intersect pretty directly with housing. Housing is a policy area that's almost entirely administered by local governments in the United States, and it's one that directly deals with where different groups of people live.

So housing policy can be used as a tool to integrate or exclude communities from different places. And so a lot of my work has to do more or less with the institutional piece versus the group and race and ethnicity piece, but it kind of sits at the intersection of both.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I mean, it definitely sits at the intersection of both because, I mean, I think nowhere else more so than in the first paper that I wanted to talk to you about, which is racial diversity and exclusionary zoning. So could you just maybe kick us off by talking a little bit about some of the research that you're building on from Einstein, Glick, Trounstine, and others, and what distinguishes your project with this particular paper from some of the work they'd already done?

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah, definitely. So the people that you just cited, Katie Einstein and her co-authors at BU and Jessica Trounstine now a political scientist at Vanderbilt, have really paved the way for the study of housing politics basically over the last decade. And so it's been a really exciting time to work in this area and also to see engagement from outside of academia with that work.

And so Trounstine's work in particular has done a really great job of advancing this argument that land use regulations contribute to segregation and lock people out from jurisdictions or even areas within jurisdictions that have high-quality public goods. So good parks and schools and public safety and things like that.

How I would summarize the contribution from the neighborhood defenders team is that this policy is made with the input of a very small slice of the population that happens to be very unrepresentative of residents of the city as a whole. Or unrepresentative both along demographic lines. People tend to be whiter, and wealthier. They tend to be homeowners, people who show up to public meetings in particular.

And they also have different opinions about how land use policy should be structured and implemented in local governments and they tend to be much more opposed to in particular the construction of new housing. And so my paper starts with this observation from Trounstine's work that a big driver of segregation and inequality in cities is land use policy. And if you read a lot of urban economics, they also point to these policies driving high housing costs and a lot of inefficiencies in local housing markets.

So my work tries to answer, well, if we know that these policies have all these bad outcomes, both in terms of housing costs and in terms of segregation and inequality, why are they on the books and cities across the United States? There's also a lot of urban planning work that shows that the United States is really an outlier compared to the rest of the world in particular and how much it restricts the construction of multifamily housing.

So to answer that question, I try to look across a bunch of different cities in the US and isolate the effects that race has on exclusionary zoning. So zoning that allows only single-family homes to be built at the exclusion of multifamily homes. And so there's this long-standing argument that the effects that Trounstine documents, that land use regulation contributes to segregation, that these effects are intentional. That they were actually put into place to achieve that goal.

So I try to test this systematically. And the way I do this is I look at this really critical time period in American cities basically from 1940 to 1970 when three things are happening. So the first, which directly speaks to the question I'm trying to answer, which is does an increase in racial diversity cause cities to zone more land for single-family homes? That is, does this kind of racial threat, what we call in academic literature, people reacting to increasing diversity, does that translate into this policy that's designed to exclude people from neighborhoods?

So I turned to this period from 1940 to 1970 to look at how different cities changed as a result of the great migration. So this is the largest internal migration in American history between 1940 and 1970 specifically. You see about three and a half million African-Americans leave the largely rural south to go to cities largely in the north and the Midwest and a couple cities on the West Coast. So this gives a shock of increasing racial diversity in cities during this period.

And so I look at whether cities that became more racially diverse today have more exclusionary zoning. And I find that basically for every 1% increase in Black population growth between 1940 and 1970, we see cities zone about 1% less land for multifamily housing today. That is they have these higher rates of exclusionary zoning. So there seems to be this direct link between this time period when there was this rapid increase in racial diversity, and there was also a lot of other policy change.

So a lot of the legal mechanisms by which segregation was maintained were dismantled during this time. So there's a lot of court action that renders things like restrictive covenants, illegal, the Fair

Housing Act outlaws discrimination by landlords renting to tenants of different races and forces sellers to not racially discriminate when they're selling their home to a new family.

So basically the argument that I advance from this is that the exclusionary zoning steps in as a race-blind substitute that can stand up to court challenges that are now able to be brought because of the Fair Housing Act, but that achieves roughly the same goal of locking racial minorities out of these single-family high opportunity neighborhoods.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I think this is a really important nuance. And so I want to recap it a little bit for listeners. But what you're saying is that there's been all this scholarship about how restrictive zoning leads to segregation and what you've identified is a sort of causal mechanism where demographic pressures, increasing diversity in a city seem to actually drive a response where wealthier, more affluent cities or neighborhoods begin to down zone or put in place stricter land use controls specifically to keep out Black residents.

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah. That's correct.

Ned Resnikoff:

I mean, a few follow-up questions for that. I think the first one is you mentioned the way in which this restrictive zoning can be used to regulate access to community benefits and resources. And I just wanted to maybe make that a little bit more concrete. So what are we talking about here? Are we talking about schools, other public amenities? What typically are these white homeowners, what have they been trying to block other people from having access to?

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah. So think about the city that you live in today. Obviously, there are neighborhoods that are more and less desirable. And a big part of that desirability comes from what we call public goods, which are basically things that the government provides. This could be anything from physical infrastructure. Some neighborhoods have streets that were recently paved, and some have streets that are filled with potholes. This can be amenities, things like parks.

Some have trash in them and some don't. Some have their lawn mowed and have facilities for kids to play at and some just have kind of concrete. So all of these things that governments provide tend to not be provided equally across neighborhoods. And so the school piece is obviously a big part of this. That overlaps but is not entirely the same as these other public goods because often school districts are not contiguous with neighborhood or city boundaries. But generally speaking, when you buy into a good neighborhood, you're buying into the set of things that the city government provides.

And so there's this perception at this time that allowing Black people into neighborhoods is going to reduce the quality of public goods. It will either lead to crowding or contamination or the city government will become less responsive to that neighborhood because they see the need to cater to white neighborhoods. And so an integrated neighborhood might not get as much attention.

Ned Resnikoff:

There's also a home value and home assessment element of this because we're talking about during the era of redlining when essentially racially diverse neighborhoods were considered less desirable for actually providing housing financing or for just assessing home values.

Alexander Sahn:

So if I told this story to an economist, they would say, "This is totally consistent with what we're saying. All of the stuff you're talking about is priced into home values." You can have a white person who is not racist at all, but knows that there are other racist people in their neighborhood. And so an increase in diversity in their neighborhood is bad for them because it's going to lower their property values through the mechanism of these other people who discriminate wanting to lift their lives.

So that may be a reason why they support exclusionary zoning. So I show that it goes beyond just this property value story by looking at the attitudes of surveys of people during this time period. And so I show that there is an increase in people holding basically racially discriminatory views in cities that experience more of this demographic transition than others.

And in particular, there are questions on policies related to race and housing during this time period. Things like support for the Open Housing Act. I find that in the cities that are both experiencing more of this Black population growth and that ultimately adopt more exclusionary zoning, the white residents of those cities are more racially conservative. They hold views that are against enforcing open housing during this time period. So I argue that the step is that you have this demographic change, and then white people in that area update their attitudes. They become more racially conservative, and then they push for these policies that will protect their neighborhoods.

Ned Resnikoff:

That's interesting. I mean, an ongoing theme on this podcast sometimes is discussing the extent to which the home voter process, the home voter hypothesis is or is not accurate. And so for listeners at home who aren't familiar with it, the home voter hypothesis is just the idea that voter behavior among homeowners is driven in large part by a desire to protect or increase the value of their home.

I think there's maybe something to that in a lot of cases, but I think one of the things that your research points toward is that that doesn't explain the whole picture. Something that I've suspected for a long time is that when home values are invoked by homeowners in exclusionary suburbs, a lot of times that is a cover or dog whistle for a deeper feeling of racial threat, that it's not so much about the home values, but saying that you are concerned about the value of your home if affordable housing goes up in your neighborhood is more socially acceptable or a better line to tell a journalist

than saying, "I don't want low-income people in this neighborhood, or I don't want Black or Brown people in this neighborhood."

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah, definitely. I mean, people can have lots of different motivations in their heads at the same time and my story is not saying that the home voter hypothesis is wrong, it's just saying that there is this added element on top. It's really hard to figure out people's motivations for doing various things. That's a lot of what social scientists try to do, but particularly in the bluer parts of the country, there is a language that people use to talk about housing and change in their neighborhoods, and they know that saying things that are outright racist are not going to help them advance their goals. So they use the language that they think is going to appeal to other people in their community and the elected officials who represent them.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I mean, it's funny too because when you talk about this metering of access to public resources like parks for example, on the one hand, you can imagine a way in which access to or enjoyment of a park you might say is to a certain extent, zero sum, because there are only so many benches in the park. There's only so much space in the park. But on the other hand, I mean something that's sometimes striking to me about this stuff is that oftentimes by imposing restrictive zoning and thereby limiting the growth of the tax base and just the economic growth in a particular area, you're degrading the quality of those services. I mean, are you familiar with the Heather McGhee story about the swimming pool from The Sum of Us?

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah, I vaguely remember this.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. So the idea is, I think it was in Alabama when she was researching this book, she encountered a swimming pool that had previously been a whites-only public swimming pool, and then it had gotten desegregated, and then rather than just accommodating the fact that it was now a racially integrated pool, the white leadership of the town just filled in the pool with cement and then no one could enjoy the pool.

I might not be getting the story exactly right, but I think that was the general gist of it. And there's a little bit of an element of that to me in some of these stories about restrictive zoning because, again, if you permitted more density in some of these exclusionary suburbs, you would be growing the tax base. You would be making it easier to provide high-quality public services to the entire community.

Then I mean now as we get past several decades past the period that you were talking about a lot of these exclusionary suburbs are filled with aging households where there's no one in the immediate vicinity to provide elder care.

Alexander Sahn:

Those are all really good points and I think the costs are real, but as the swimming pool example speaks to, often people have these deeply held views and they're willing to tolerate a big cost to maintain a segregated area and live as they want to. We see it as a lose-lose, but I think a lot of the time, people are making that decision pretty consciously. I just want to mention one thing, which is that you're talking about these exclusionary suburbs.

And so my paper is looking at central cities, so the largest cities across the US. So typically we think of this story of there being these exclusionary suburbs that are almost entirely single-family zoned. That certainly is the largest case of using zoning to exclude all these white-flight suburbs, which were created basically from whole cloth to be single-family exclusive areas.

I look at 125 of the largest cities in the US -- you think of the center of every metropolitan region -- the median city in my sample, you can only build multifamily housing on 12% of all residential land. So while these suburbs may be like 0%, even our largest cities, places like Chicago, Indianapolis, and especially the newer Sunbelt cities, they just allow multifamily housing to be built on a shockingly low percentage of land, and it's this large international outlier, and it's nice to be able to put some data to that.

Ned Resnikoff:

That's a great point. You're right. I was kind of conflating the two and I think that's an important nuance because you're also looking at patterns from the Great Migration. The Great Migration was not a migration primarily to suburbs. It was a migration to those cities. I think while California and the Metropolitan Abundance Project, we love to beat up on exclusionary suburbs a lot. It's also the case in cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York. They have their own profound and oftentimes persisting to this day traditions of segregation.

Alexander Sahn:

I was just going to say and circling back to the homeowner story, if you have high degrees of exclusionary zoning, even in these cities which are like majority renter, clearly it can't just be this small cabal of homeowners who are explaining everything. I think there's something else going on.

Ned Resnikoff:

You mentioned the Fair Housing Act and just how because these exclusionary zoning rules are not explicitly race-based, they provide a nice end run around certain civil rights laws. I wanted to ask you, do you see in this research any possibility of actually being able to challenge that presumption in court? I mean, if you're demonstrating a causal link here, is that something that could eventually be used to challenge restrictive zoning under fair housing laws?

Alexander Sahn:

I'm not a lawyer or a legal scholar, so I don't know what the standard of evidence would be there, but certainly, I think we typically think about there being intent versus effects, and the effects are pretty clear. The intent, both looking at the statistical analysis that I do in my work, and also just there are a lot of fabulous individual case studies tracing out the process. I show across hundreds of cities, but just in one specific area.

So Amy Dane's work on the adoption of exclusionary zoning in Boston suburbs comes to mind, along with the stories in "The Color of Law" by Rich Rothstein. There are just many accounts that point to this being the intent of policymakers at the time. So I think those two pieces to me are pretty clear, but I definitely couldn't speak to how a court of law would evaluate that.

Ned Resnikoff:

Okay. That's very judicious of you. I mean, we're both UC Berkeley alumni and something I was thinking about reading this paper is there's the ability to demonstrate this at a high level of statistical significance as a recurrent pattern across the entire country, but then sometimes you just read specific examples of what was actually being printed in the local press in the city of Berkeley, for example, when they were inventing, or I don't know whether it was them or New York first, but possibly inventing single-family zoning.

I mean, they were not hiding their intent. I mean, they were pretty explicit about, "Yeah, we want to keep out Black and Chinese households." As you said the evidence now is pretty overwhelming, but I mean, your paper is a great contribution to that evidence, I think because it looks at it quantitatively and also establishes a clear causal link there.

Alexander Sahn:

I think the individual histories are fascinating and they're really helpful to illustrate what was actually happening. Another good example that I think I talked about in the paper is in the South also in the same time when zoning was first coming online in the 1910s and 1920s, a number of cities had explicitly racial zoning. So they have Black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods, and pretty quickly this is struck down by the Supreme Court. They say, "You can't do this." And so literally they just keep the same zones and they change the white neighborhoods to R1, and they change the Black neighborhoods to R2.

Ned Resnikoff:

Wow.

Alexander Sahn:

And so there's really no attempt to even hide what they're doing.

Ned Resnikoff:

Oh, that's amazing. That's incredible. Well, wanted to move on to another paper of yours. I was pretty fortunate to get a sneak peek at this one, but I understand it's on its way to publication now. So coming to an academic journal near you. This is about the relationship between public comment during housing permitting processes at the Planning Commission or the city council and public policy outcomes. So could you tell me again just a little bit about the background for this one? We mentioned Katie Einstein and her co-authors earlier, but just some of the work you're building on here and what you were trying to establish with this paper.

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah. So as I mentioned earlier, the Einstein, Palmer, Glick book does a great job of showing who shows up for these meetings and how they're distinctive. So in their case, they're looking at city council meetings in the greater Boston area. And there's some other work that echoes this. There's a paper by Jesse Yoder that looks at this in Houston and Palo Alto, and we just see these patterns that the people who show up are demographically super unrepresentative along racial lines.

They tend to be much more white than the population as a whole. Along age lines, they tend to be a lot older. This is often because these city council or Planning Commission meetings are in the middle of the day or at dinnertime on a weekday. And so people who have jobs or families to take care of just can't come. They also tend to be unrepresentative about how they think about their neighborhoods and how cities should change.

So in the Neighborhood Defenders book, they compare comments on affordable housing on the 40B development of Massachusetts, I think it is, and look at a recent referendum in each town, and they show that support for these referenda is way above the comments. And so this paints this really grim picture where we have potentially these people who are really out of step with the larger community weighing in on this process.

So what I try to do is take the next step here and say, "Well, okay, so clearly they're weighing in and clearly there's this problem that they're very unrepresentative. But are they actually influencing policy?" Is it the case that what they say matters for outcomes? Or is it just kind of an exercise and allowing these people to vent and to spend their three minutes talking to the city counselor or Planning Commissioner who's going to just vote the way that they were going to vote anyway?

So I try to answer that question like is there a relationship between the comments that people give and the likelihood of a policy or a proposal being enacted?

Ned Resnikoff:

And what do you find?

Alexander Sahn:

So I find basically that there is a pretty strong relationship between the not only number of comments, but also whether people are in support or opposed and whether or not something gets through. So what I'm looking at in this case is discretionary approvals in the City of San Francisco. So

I collect about two decades of data. And so as you are undoubtedly familiar with and probably a lot of listeners, there's this Byzantine approval process for a lot of development in San Francisco that allows the public to weigh in at many stages in the process.

So I zoom in on one stage of this, which is the Planning Commission will have a hearing for something like a conditional use authorization or a variance. These are just discretionary entitlements that a developer will need to get if they want to deviate from the zoning in that lot. And so the public can weigh in and speak either in favor or against. And so I go through the meeting minutes from all these public meetings and I can extract the names of everyone who comments and look at whether or not they were in support or opposed to the policy.

And then I look, I tally up the comments and support, the comments posed, and I look at the relationship between that and whether or not the Planning Commission votes for granting the entitlement.

Ned Resnikoff:

For listeners at home who aren't familiar, whether it's because they don't live in the Bay Area or they're just not paying super close attention to these things. The schoolhouse rock version of the permitting process in San Francisco is that you go to the Planning Commission and then you either get an approval or a non-approval from the Planning Commission and then it goes to CEQA litigation and then eventually the state legislature passes a law to try and get your specific project approved.

But it all starts at the Planning Commission. I mean, something that I found pretty striking in your paper is that the positive public comments, the public comments that say, yes, we want this project actually seem to be weighted less than the public comments opposing a project. And so can you talk a little bit about that finding?

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah. So I think the takeaway that I would draw from this paper is that the appointed officials on the Planning Commission are listening to the people. And so there is this relationship between comments in favor and comments and the likelihood of getting passed. And then there's also this relationship between comments opposed and the likelihood that something gets delayed or blocked entirely.

So it's a little hard to say with certainty that one set of comments matters more than the other. I think a couple of ways of thinking about this is one is that comments that are more novel might be of more interest to these planning commissioners. If you have the same people showing up every week, you already know what they're going to say.

Now, one strategy might be to satisfy them because you know they're going to come back. But if you do have someone who's coming for the first time, you might weigh their comments more or less. So I think one thing that I'm interested in pursuing in future work is trying to figure out the process that goes on the heads of these public officials who are listening to this public comment, whose comments they weigh more or less, what considerations they give to it? And do they just try to be a

risk-averse and respond most to the comments that are opposed or do they kind of weigh the comments in favor and against equally?

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I mean, it's an interesting question. I mean maybe some of it comes down to just the actual outcome one way or the other and the tail risk on either end. So I mean, on the one hand, traditionally, I mean, I think maybe this is changing as NIMBYism becomes more popular nationwide. But I mean, traditionally the NIMBYs, the home voters are the ones who really turn out to vote. And I think there's also a difference between not getting a specific project built, in which case you still have a lot, or maybe a single-family household that's not going to be replaced with a larger building or whatever it is.

But in that case, the parcel pretty closely resembles what it was before this whole process began. But if you approve the project over people's objections, then especially if they live near it, it's like every day they will have this very large difficult-to-ignore visual reminder of the time that you went against their wishes. And so I wonder if that's part of the calculation here that it's not just who is more politically powerful, but also who if you cross them, they're going to be angrier. They're going to be more aggrieved about it.

Alexander Sahn:

So there are two things there that I think are really interesting. So one is who are the people who are going to make life hard for elected officials? We know that turnout in local elections is really low. People don't tend to know a lot about the candidates. And so if you have someone who's the head of a neighborhood organization who is someone who's trusted in a community and can sway a couple hundred votes, that person could be consequential.

And so figuring out who elected and appointed officials are responding to. We think of public opinion as being this mass of people, but when you get down into local politics, individuals and pivotal people can matter a lot. And then, the second thing is do people follow through on their threats? If they say, "If you build this, I'm going to vote against you in the next election." We don't really know that.

So if a building is built and it's this reminder of something that a politician did that they don't like, maybe that's for them to vote against them in the next election. Maybe they forget about it entirely. Maybe they see the building go up and it has a nice new coffee shop, and they are like, "Oh, actually this was kind of a good thing for my neighborhood." And so a project-

Ned Resnikoff:

That's a good point actually because there's polling data I think on this that suggests that people, they're much more likely to overestimate how unhappy they're going to be after a neighborhood change like that than they are to underestimate it.

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah. There's this whole set of findings in psychology that people tend to overestimate how bad things are going to be and then once they actually happen, they kind of adapt. That's a pretty universal mechanism. But I think in terms of politics, we think about it. We call this thing retrospective voting. Can voters look back on the term of incumbent politicians and evaluate them and decide whether to keep them or get rid of them based on their performance?

And so when we talk about that, it's usually in the context of national politics and people broadly just judging how the economy is doing. And so we know voters are bad at even judging whether or not unemployment is up or down or the stock market is up or down. And so it seems like a big ask to want them to remember a vote that someone took on a development three years ago and evaluate whether or not it was built and whether or not the effects were as good or bad as they intended.

Now, it may not be the case that everyone has to make that evaluation. It could just be that these people who show up at the public meetings who are hyper-engaged and really care about this, can do that evaluation and spread their recommendation to the rest of the neighborhood. But to me, it's an open question whether or not politicians really need to worry about this at all.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I mean, another angle of this that I think is interesting and I'm curious how it shows up in your methodology is there are so many different ways to kill a project from the perspective of a local approvals body. I mean, there are so many more ways to kill it than there are to entitle it. I mean, I'm just curious whether that's how that's reflected in the data you were looking at. Because you can imagine a situation, and this happens all the time in San Francisco in particular where you'll have a project that is opposed by a lot of local NIMBYs and the Planning Commission or a particular supervisor rather than just outright denying the project will say, "Well, we have some concerns about the design of it, the visual facade. We need more inclusionary units here. Is there going to be sufficient parking?" All these different questions ultimately cause a developer to back out because it's just too expensive to keep moving forward with the project.

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah. I totally agree. I mean, there are a million different ways to stop something, but only one path to get it built. And that's just how the institutions are set up. The presumption is that nothing is going to change and to make a change happen, you have to get all these approvals. And so I think in the data that I'm looking at, San Francisco is obviously a weird case. One, the politics of development are very salient and there are a ton of really concerned people.

It's a large city with a lot of large development projects. And so there's large firms that have a track record of doing business in the city and there's consultants who are paid to advise basically on how best to navigate the political process. And so you have to be pretty uninformed to propose something that doesn't have a path to getting built.

So what I'm looking at is the public process at the very end of the line, but there's probably a ton of stuff going on before these projects are even proposed where developers are trying to figure out

what is feasible. They're probably talking to members of neighborhood groups and people who could be potential opponents ahead of time and trying to proactively address their concerns.

So that whole behind-the-scenes engagement, you can't really characterize systematically, but it's probably where a lot of the action happens. So what happens in my data is actually that things aren't as controversial as you may expect if you read about a couple of projects that are tied up in dozens of Planning Commission hearings and end up never getting built. And it's also not the case that most things get delayed a little bit but ultimately get built.

So it's less a case of these Planning Commissions blocking things outright, and it's more them slowing things down, getting changes that either reduce the scope of the project or bring some kind of benefit that a community member or someone who represents that area is asking for. But I think that's also just reflecting the strategic behavior of developers and property owners to begin with. They know that this is a really tough political process to navigate, and so they don't enter it lightly.

Ned Resnikoff:

I mean, just to note on the process here describing because this is a particular hobby horse of mine. The fact that the way to get things built in a city like San Francisco is to do all of that pre-work that you're describing, working with local elected officials, working with local power brokers, and trying to figure out what will get them to approve your project.

That's just such an obvious breeding ground for graft. Of course, you're going to end up with a corrupt approvals process if that sort of exercising political influence is the precondition for getting things built. I think there's this idea of the massive corrupt developer that we need to fight against by in part having more discretionary processes by putting more breaks and hurdles into the approval process.

But it's like, "No, those are the only developers who can navigate the system that we've created." We're keeping out the people who can only operate under a transparent, unambiguous, clear set of rules.

Alexander Sahn:

Totally. And this is not unique to San Francisco. This happens in cities and jurisdictions all over the country, and this even happens in the federal government. There are notice and comment processes for all federal rules where the public is supposed to be able to weigh in on some arcane financial or agricultural regulation. And there's a lot of great research and political science showing basically the people who do comment on these things are the large corporations who are being regulated because they have the resources, they have the expertise.

So obviously whether or not an apartment should be built in my block, that's a little easier for ordinary people to access. But I think the larger point is that these processes that require a lot of time and a lot of expertise, are by definition going to enable the people who have the most resources to get

their preferred policies. And that goes back to the neighborhood defender story. The people who show up are the people who are influencing policy.

Ned Resnikoff:

So let's talk a little bit about your research on civil service reform because this is a topic of I think significant and growing interest to people who are generally YIMBY-aligned or abundance-aligned. Talking about this question of state capacity, you've been doing some interesting research in this area just on the structure and quality of civil services at different points in history. So tell me a little bit about that.

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah. So I have a piece that I just co-authored with Nick Kuipers who's a professor at the National University of Singapore. We look at this stylized fact in American history, which is that you have cities at the turn of the 20th century that are super corrupt and machine-dominated and that jobs are traded for votes. So you have people in poor urban neighborhoods, particularly European immigrants who are given jobs by the political machine, usually blue-collar manual labor jobs, and in return the neighborhood votes to maintain the power of the machine despite corruption and all these kinds of other bad things.

So you have these Progressive-era, like capital P Progressive-era, reformers who come along and they propose all these sets of reforms to both municipal politics, but also later state and national politics. A really central one of these reforms is to standardize recruitment in civil service. So basically to create a set of standards by which people are hired to make sure that jobs are advertised in local newspapers to have a written exam and to also control how people are fired from their jobs.

So one echo that's coming up now in national politics is there was a proposal late in the last Trump administration and one that is proposed if he wins reelection next year to reclassify a bunch of federal employees who are protected by these civil service laws to a political appointee status, which allows them to be fired en masse for no reason. And so the reason that we tried to insulate bureaucrats is to make sure that politicians can't put their thumb on them and ask them to do something that is of political benefit to them, but not really of social benefit to people. So the idea behind all these reforms was to increase the quality of service delivery in cities.

But one other strain was that a lot of these reformers were like WASPy Protestant, good government types. Now, this is going back to the progressive era. And if you read some of the writing of these reformers at the time, it seems like another motivation was to basically get Irish, Italian, and European immigrants out of politics and out of government jobs. They saw them as naturally corrupt and incapable of steering government responsibly.

So this is something that pops up in a lot of urban histories during this period. We try to investigate whether the story is true using some big data from the US census. What we find is that the story may have been true in Boston and New York and some of the cities that had large immigrant populations

and that had really strong machines. But we actually find that if you look at all the cities across the US at this time, immigrants were actually discriminated against and government hiring and jobs.

This makes sense. They were also discriminated against in the private labor market during this time. And that standardizing the recruitment procedures benefited immigrants that they increased their share of blue-collar government jobs following these reforms. And that's some of this discriminatory hiring decreased as a result.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. That's super interesting. Looking at the civil service in the present day, I mean, I used to work in Sacramento in state government. And something that I've just been continually really struck by is just the diversity of the civil service. I mean, it really has been this incredible lever for creating stable white-collar jobs for people who have been traditionally excluded from stable, high-prestige white-collar jobs up until the present day.

Intuitively, that makes a lot of sense to me. I'm curious though, so you mentioned that the story is a little bit different in cities with really powerful machines. So like Tammany Hall. When you say the story is different, do you mean that in that city, the share of Irish immigrants and civil service jobs did in fact decline?

Alexander Sahn:

The specific piece of the paper I'm referring to here is we kind of break up cities into size quintiles. So basically, we're looking at the top 20% largest cities in the US. And the effects there are smaller and indistinguishable from zero. So basically, we don't see a change in the share of government jobs held by immigrants. But basically in all the other quintiles of cities. So the zero to 80th percentile, we do see that they in fact benefit.

So what the kind of results tells us is that the story that you read about in a lot of history books may be true, but there's certainly not a lot of strong evidence for it in the largest cities and it appears to actually be the opposite in the smaller cities.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. What about the quality of service delivery? I mean, is that something you looked at, or that you have thoughts about how that might've changed after civil service reform?

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah. So in our paper, we actually don't look at service delivery as an outcome, but there is a new paper by three political scientists, Dan Thompson, Julia Payson, and Maria Careri, where they look at not specifically the civil service reforms, but some of these other progressive error reforms. And they look at a bunch of different outcomes. I don't want to misstate this off the top of my head, but I believe that they don't find really big differences in service delivery outcomes as a result of adopting a lot of these progressive-era reforms.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. That's interesting. I mean, I feel like so much of the progressive era is still up for debate what exactly happened in a really interesting way. It's something we talked about when we had Francis Fukuyama on the show, a fellow member of the academic advisory council for MAP, and has also written some books. He was talking about the progressive era as in some ways, I think a cautionary tale where you create a bunch of new institutions or reform a bunch of institutions to deal with the problems that are confronting you at that moment.

And then those institutions persist past the period when circumstances have changed significantly and all of a sudden the reforms that you implemented are kludgy enough that a new generation has to reform those and take things in a new direction. I feel like sometimes we're in a little bit of that phase with certain progressive error reforms.

I don't think that the idea of having a non-political civil service in general should be up for debate like Schedule F which is the Trump White House proposal that you mentioned to essentially politicize the civil service. For the record, I don't think that's a great idea, but there is this challenge with certain elements of the modern civil service at the progressive area functionally created that I think we're now really grappling with.

I mean, the one that comes to mind in a place like San Francisco where I think this is also the case in New York, is you've created these systems where you have civil service exams that are incredibly difficult, I think to keep out a lot of really high quality candidates. It's impossible to hire people, and it's impossible to fire people in a lot of civil services. So I mean, this is a little bit beyond the scope of the paper, but I'm curious how you think about that, how some of these institutions, how we grapple with what prior generations have created.

Alexander Sahn:

I think that's a really wise point and I think it has some echoes to the public participation requirements that we were talking about with regards to public meetings where you have these policies that were intended to achieve one thing, but create this really high bar. And so they lock out a lot of the beneficiaries or the intended beneficiaries of the policy. So with civil service jobs, as it becomes more and more onerous to apply for and get government jobs, maybe you have some people who select out of that market or with public participation if you have a program that's designed to surface underrepresented voices, but you make the meetings at an inconvenient time and the substance of what people are supposed to comment on really arcane, you're going to get people who are already empowered being the only people who show up.

I think it's a challenge that policies often have unintended consequences, and they can often be really hard to repeal once they're put into place. So in social scientists, we call this path dependence. Once you're on a track, it's hard to veer off it. And institutions and policies are really durable. It's really hard to get something put into place in the first place, but once it's there, it's really hard to remove.

And so I think these kinds of municipal progressive-era reforms are a great example of that where there was this huge flurry of reform in the 1910s and '20s and '30s. And since then we've just been tinkering around the edges and have kept a lot of these, frankly, pretty weird reforms, this kind of mix of very democratic things like the initiative and the recall, and then also super anti-democratic things like moving elections off cycle and moving hours out of the hands of elected officials and into appointed city managers and things like that.

They make sense, as you said in the context of trying to solve this problem of machine domination and corruption, but perhaps less so in the 21st century when we're facing a different set of challenges.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I think one of these unintended consequences that I think we're wrestling with now as a movement is, well, what replaced the traditional party machines? There's this really fascinating book by James Q. Wilson from the '60s or so that's called "The Amateur Democrat," and it's about the transition from some machine-dominated cities and some not machine-dominated cities to having the Democratic Party controlled by essentially upper-middle class white-collar professional volunteers with very little pecuniary stake in the positions that the Democratic Party takes, but a strong ideological stake.

You could say in some ways like, "Okay, this is clearly a good outcome that here now we have the party under the control of people who make up the ideological base of the party pursuing non-self-interested ends." But there's also some danger with that, right? Because you've removed some of the ability to do actual politics because there's not much horse-trading that can be done in that kind of situation. The people who control the party are in some ways less representative of the base of the party than the machines were because the machines were in some sense responsive to working-class immigrants.

And now we're talking about doctors and lawyers and psychologists and whomever who are volunteering their free time for this and might have ideas about what would benefit low-income communities in their cities, but don't actually necessarily have a meaningful connection to those communities.

Alexander Sahn:

I mean, I think that's something that definitely echoes in politics today. And there are always debates over whether the Democratic Party is being pulled in one direction or another by activists who don't have the interest of the base at heart. But I do think going back to cities, what happens in the absence of parties is that there's an organizational problem not only for horse-trading, but also for picking good candidates to run for centralizing a policy platform.

One thing that has been interesting for me to observe as a political scientist is for a while, it was unclear what the main cleavage of local politics was. In the absence of a big Democratic-Republican split, most large cities in the US are pretty Democratic. There are some kind of factional fights within

the Democratic Party, but I think over the last decade or so, the issue of housing and development and growth has emerged as kind of the main cleavage. That's the thing that people fight over.

And so you have kind of pseudo parties that form around this issue and that make the stakes to voters clearer than they have been in a long time. And so I think it's an interesting development. I don't know to what degree it'll become institutionalized, whether there will be formal parties that coalesce around this, but there's this constellation of interest groups that at least inform voters kind of signal to them which team they should pick.

Ned Resnikoff:

I agree. It's pretty interesting. I mean, the YIMBY movement is very much part of that new constellation of informal parties. I think you're touching on something that sometimes gives me quite a bit of heartburn, which is the fear that the way this gets formalized into the party system is that YIMBYism gets polarized and gets owned by one of the two major parties. And then in that case, all of a sudden you've essentially cut the areas where you can make meaningful progress on these issues in half in that case, whichever party comes to own it.

I think you could make a credible argument maybe for either one trying to embrace at least certain parts of the upzoning agenda. I mean, if that happens then I think the movement is probably going to go a lot further in some places, but then be in real trouble in other places.

Alexander Sahn:

I mean, this is a question I'm interested in, and I'm doing some kind of work on this right now, but I think the broader kind of growth of the YIMBY movement has been to move away from large ultra-democratic cities into other parts of the country. And I think that is just a response to the fact that the housing crisis has spread beyond expensive coastal cities. And where I've looked at this is at the state level where you do see the politics of it playing out very differently depending on the ideology of the state and who controls the state legislatures.

So if you look at votes on housing reform bills in blue states like California, Washington, and Massachusetts, ideology is super predictive of how legislators vote. The more liberal legislators vote for more housing reform bills and the more conservative legislators vote for less. But that same relationship is totally flipped in states like Arizona or Montana, where Republicans control the state legislature. And so the content of these policies is slightly different, but not that different.

And so it's really interesting to see how that has evolved on two separate tracks. There are not many issues in American politics that aren't polarized. And so I don't know if it's inevitable that it will sort into one party or another, but it's something that I'm watching and very interested in.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I'm watching it too. I mean, in a way it is interesting because it also... There's an element of it that seems almost old-timey in the way that you had during the '60s or into the '70s, liberal Republicans and liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans and conservative Democrats. I

don't know if I would describe the particular... I mean, there are certain elements of the whole kind of abundance package that you might be able to characterize as more liberal or conservative, but in general, I think the analogy I'm trying to draw is just, yeah, you have this sort of coalitional politics that is happening outside of the parties in a way that you haven't really seen since... I don't know.

When was the last time in American politics when that was even remotely plausible? By the '90s, it probably was basically dead, at least by the Gingrich Revolution.

Alexander Sahn:

So the party system, the New Deal party system as we call it, basically had four parties that were forced to come into coalitions and become two parties because of the structure of American electoral institutions. It's just impossible or not impossible, but it is throwing away votes to have a third party. So you did have these four different groups that had very, very distinct concerns, but that were able to horse-trade. And that was reflected in both office holders and party institutions, but also the public.

A lot of that has just really flattened to the point where your preferences on taxes and abortion and the environment and all these issues are all super predictive of one another in a way that they weren't necessarily 30, 50, or 60 years ago. So we're always on the lookout for emerging issues that could split open the party coalition, and immigration and trade may have been those issues when Trump exploited them, but it's still early to tell whether or not there's a realignment going on where people are going to be shifting from one party to another.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I mean, in some ways housing might not be as good a candidate for that because... Well, I always try to push back against the idea that it's not a federal issue because I actually think the federal government could be doing a lot more to encourage the end of exclusionary zoning nationwide. I mean, it is true that most of the policy action and most of what's politically feasible in terms of policy action happens at the state and local level.

So maybe in that way, it's a little bit harder to -- If you have a strong viewpoint of one kind or another on gun control, which is a federal issue or much more of a federal issue. It's not going to be as predictive of where you fall on this more state or local issue.

Alexander Sahn:

I think a large part of that is most people probably just don't have super calcified opinions on zoning policy. It's just not something they've heard a lot about on the news or from hearing politicians talk about it. But the federalism point that you brought up, the relationship between these different levels of government, I think is super interesting as it pertains to housing. As you said, it's not a federal issue.

The federal government could make it an issue if it wanted to. There are many ways for the federal government to coerce states to do things it wants it to do. This happens all the time. But the state

versus local battle is one that I think is really interesting and really active. I mean, local governments have no real powers of their own. Everything is delegated to them by the states. And so the state can step in and preempt a lot of local zoning policies, and it's a political choice to either do that or not and to what degree.

And so the state-level action over the last couple of years, I think reflects the frustration and the inability to get stuff done at the local level for a bunch of different sets of reasons. But probably chief among them is that when you're operating at the local level, the NIMBYism problem is more acute, that as you have these smaller units, any person who's impacted by a given thing is going to be more a larger share of the voter population.

When you go up to the state level, it's maybe less of a concern, the impacts of that one part particular project. It's been interesting to see the interest group strategy shift towards states and for state legislators to, I think hear from their voters that, "Wow, this is a big issue for a lot of people regarding housing affordability and that they feel like it's something they need to step in and take action on to the vociferous opposition of leagues of cities and individual cities and lobbying groups who really don't want that local control taken away.

Ned Resnikoff:

So what's next for you? What are you working on now?

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah, good question. So I have a couple sets of projects that relate to housing and local governance. So one is something I was talking about when we were discussing my public meetings paper which is to see if the conditions for retrospective voting, this idea that voters can, a couple of years down the line hold politicians accountable for a position they took approving or not approving a project.

So we're going to try to follow some of the people who spoke at public meetings and recontact them later on and see if they remember what they thought about a project, whether they noticed if it's been built, and what their opinions are down the line. Another set of projects is trying to think about ways to structure community engagement more constructively and productively.

So I think in a lot of public processes, just doing community engagement is seen as a normative good, but I think we could also be thinking about what outcomes we want to get from that, whether those are outcomes on if we're engaging the public on a rezoning proposal, if we want to have some goals on what that rezoning proposal should accomplish, what strategies are most effective to getting towards that?

And then also what types of community engagement make people feel empowered? What increases trust in government, and feelings of efficacy? I think it's important to, if we're going to spend a lot of time engaging the public on a lot of issues, to have an idea of what we want to get out of it, instead of just checking a box to say that we had eight sessions of community engagement.

And then the last project I'm currently working on is thinking about how neighborhoods are represented in city government. So we were talking about the progressive era. One of the benefits of machine politics was you had this close relationship between neighborhoods and the people who were making decisions. And a lot of that geographic representation, the specific concerns, the specific geographic areas is left out of cities when they switch to smaller city councils, so fewer districts.

And also moving from having individual wards. So having "one city council represent one geographic area" to "at-large representatives who are supposed to represent the city as a whole." And so one shift that I document is that a bunch of cities have developed these advisory neighborhood-level institutions where neighborhoods are allowed to weigh in on certain issues. And so I'm interested in whether those advisory positions are actually taken into account, what effects they have on policy, what types of issues these neighborhood governments are weighing in on and trying to think about this kind of subsidy level of representation, which I think often gets left out in the way that we traditionally think of federalism, which is just state, federal, and local.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I mean, that's interesting. There are also a lot of different examples of, I think pretty convoluted neighborhood governance structures. I mean, I used to live in Washington DC and I never fully wrapped my head around exactly what was going on with the ANC system except for finally learning that it was not in fact the African National Congress. It wasn't Nelson Mandela's party. It was like a specific neighborhood body. But I mean that's something that I've always been meaning to learn more about and find fascinating that hyper-local democracy.

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah. So the ANC and DC are a great example. There are neighborhood councils in Los Angeles. There are community boards in New York, and they're all set up a little bit differently, but my hunch is that they all, because they have this geographic focus, are dealing with some of the issues that we talk about when we talk about space, things around housing development, public goods like parks and roads and streets and parking. And so these are all issues that a small number of people may have really strong feelings about. And my hunch is that this is another institution by which they're able to nudge the dial in their preferred direction.

Ned Resnikoff:

I have a question about the second project that you mentioned. So thinking about a different way to do community input. What's your approach there?

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah. So I think there are two sets of interventions that I'm interested in looking at. The first is setting explicit goals and having people work towards them rather than leaving things open-ended. So this dovetails with a lot of state-level efforts like the regional housing needs allocation in California or the MBTA communities, Massachusetts where targets are given to a city. You need to plan for X number

of new housing units. And then the community discussion is like, "How are we going to do that?" It's a distributive question rather than, "Should we do this or not?"

This is typically how a lot of participatory processes are structured like the public meetings I study at the Planning Commission in San Francisco. It's like, should this project get its conditional use authorization? And people are either saying yes or no. So shifting the focus from an up and down vote to this thing is happening and how would you like to see it happen?

And then the second piece is on the role that facilitators and experts can play in this process. So we have a lot of planners and cities and counties and other jurisdictions that facilitate these outreach programs. What role do they play in guiding how people come to decisions? What does their presence do to the dynamics of groups? There's a lot of interesting research on deliberation and group dynamics that I think would be interesting to pair with this specific focus on how can we increase community engagement to advance towards goals of this agenda like permitting more green energy infrastructure or allowing more housing to be built.

Ned Resnikoff:

Great. Well, definitely looking forward to that one. I think this is a big question on a lot of people's minds right now which is "how do we make these systems work in a way where you're getting people closer to I think just our general social and political goals as a society?"

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah, definitely. I'll just say for anyone listening, if you work at an advocacy organization or for a city or county government and are interested in partnering and bringing academics on board to evaluate programs that you're trying out, that's always something that we researchers are open to. I've learned just a ton from talking to practitioners and people who are working in this space. And so please feel free to reach out.

Ned Resnikoff:

How can they find you?

Alexander Sahn:

I have a website, which is alexandersahn.com and you can find my email there.

Ned Resnikoff:

Okay, great. All right. The last portion of this interview is always the lightning round. So just a few questions for you. Rapid fire. First off, most underrated US City.

Alexander Sahn:

Oh, easy, Philadelphia. I lived there a couple of years ago. I was doing a postdoc just for a year. I grew up actually not that far from Philadelphia, but I've literally never been despite living on the East Coast

for 25 years. And yeah, it's amazing. It's the most, I think, charming European City. It's very cheap. It's the only affordable city on the Acela Corridor, I guess, other than maybe Baltimore. It's very beautiful, great parks, great food scene, super kind of interesting history. You walk down the street and there's a house that Ben Franklin did something in 400 years ago. I feel like you don't get that a lot in the US where everything is very new. So I would definitely recommend Philadelphia.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah, no, great answer. Love Philly. Favorite international city?

Alexander Sahn:

Oh, that's tougher. Hard to choose, but actually I was just in Vancouver and I was really, really impressed. Great combination of a great city with a lot of natural beauty. I love that combo. So places like Vancouver. I feel like Rio also hits both those marks, but a lot of great cities out there. I mean, it's always fun to go explore a new place.

Ned Resnikoff:

I've been meaning to go to Vancouver because it's also one of the rare international cities that you can actually access by long-distance Amtrak. It doesn't require getting on a flight.

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah, that's true. I guess as the train goes from Seattle.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. So you've got the Coast Starlight that goes from LA up to Vancouver. Those are the two termini.

Alexander Sahn:

Okay. How long does that take?

Ned Resnikoff:

If you were doing the entire route from LA, honestly, it would probably take a couple days.

Alexander Sahn:

Yeah, that sounds right.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I mean, I've done Bay Area to LA on multiple occasions and driving is like five and a half hours. Amtrak is 12 hours. So if you need to get there in a hurry, then it's not the best way to travel. But I love it. I vastly prefer it to driving or flying if I actually have the time to do it.

Alexander Sahn:

I mean, I love taking a train. That's just a much more comfortable way to travel. It's a huge bummer that there are not more areas of the US where you can get between places doing that. I mean, the Portland to Vancouver corridor seems like one of the places where it would really make sense to invest a lot more in that. But that's a topic for another two-hour podcast.

Ned Resnikoff:

Right, exactly. All right. Next lightning round question. Best movie or TV show about housing policy?

Alexander Sahn:

Oh, I'm trying to think what comes to mind. There was that, I think it was called "Show Me a Hero," an HBO show about Fair Housing in Yonkers a couple of years ago. I don't know. I feel like I should have a good answer for movies. I teach a class on local government in the US at UNC, and I have students listen to a lot of podcasts. Actually, I have a great Twitter thread of podcasts related to local government, but I should find a good movie to add to the syllabus.

Ned Resnikoff:

All right. Well, best podcast other than this one?

Alexander Sahn:

On housing policy, I learned a ton from, I think, it's the UCLA Housing Voice Podcast. They just have really interesting academics from all different types of fields who work on housing policy. So you can learn about public housing in France and Singapore and also the minutiae of the low-income housing tax credit in the US. Would recommend that for people who haven't checked it out.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah. I definitely second that recommendation. I think the term of art is a friend of the pod, Shane Phillips. So definitely endorse the UCLA Housing Voice Podcast. All right. And the last one is, I got a couple of questions about the research triangle. So Rally Durham, Chapel Hill. First of all, someone's there for 24 hours. What's one place they should go, one thing they should do?

Alexander Sahn:

So I like to eat and I think by far the best place to eat in the area is this place called Saltbox Seafood which is fresh fish from the coast. Either get it grilled or fried on a plate around a sandwich. Really, really good. Right between Durham and Chapel Hill. I always like walking around university campuses because that's my bread and butter, but UNC has a really beautiful campus. Dukes, I will say it's not

really my style. It's kind of the fake Gothic thing, but it is also very beautiful and they have a really incredible botanical garden. And just last week I went and all the magnolias were blooming and the cherry trees.

It's definitely spring down the south. I think I would stay in Durham which is a cool downtown. There's an old set of tobacco warehouses that have been converted into mixed-use development right next to downtown and that's kind of a fun area just to walk around.

Ned Resnikoff:

Great. Well, my last question was going to be about the one place to eat in that area. So I think we answered that one. Alexander Sahn, thanks so much. It was a pleasure.

Alexander Sahn:

Thanks, Ned. This was a lot of fun.