

RACIAL EQUITY IN HOUSING POLITICS

Professors Katherine Levine Einstein & Maxwell Palmer

June 15, 2022

Boston University

MASSACHUSETTS IN HOUSING CRISIS

- Greater Boston housing prices have increased 53% in the last decade
 - Creates greater income and racial segregation
 - Makes it hard for employers to recruit and retain workers
 - Forces residents into socially and environmentally unsustainable commutes
- Gateway Cities
 - Affordable housing shortage
 - Stagnant subsidized housing inventory growth
 - Conversion of rental properties to owner-occupied housing
 - Large growth in the BIPOC population

MASSACHUSETTS IN HOUSING CRISIS

- We are not building enough market rate and affordable housing to meet massive demand!
- Political processes in Greater Boston and Gateway Cities create significant obstacles

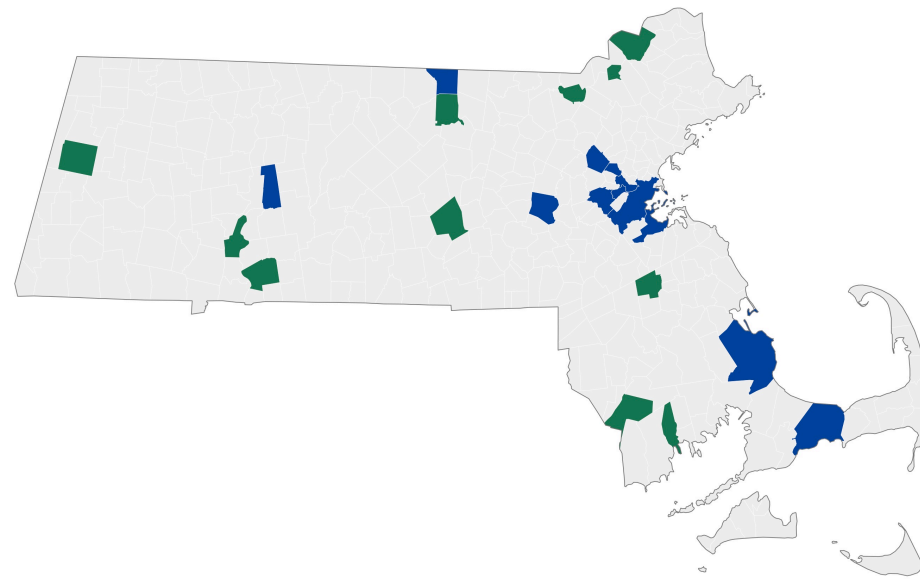
TOWARDS HOUSING EQUITY

- Be attentive to diversity on boards and commissions
- Be aware of representational inequalities in political participation and public meetings
- Remember the beneficiaries of housing programs, not just the loudest voices
- Use inclusive engagement practices to incorporate the widest range of voices
- Use inclusive outreach on surveys to reach a truly representative population

BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

- Collected information on the names of 932 public officials
- Match these officials with a commercial voter file to identify their race, sex, age, and homeownership status

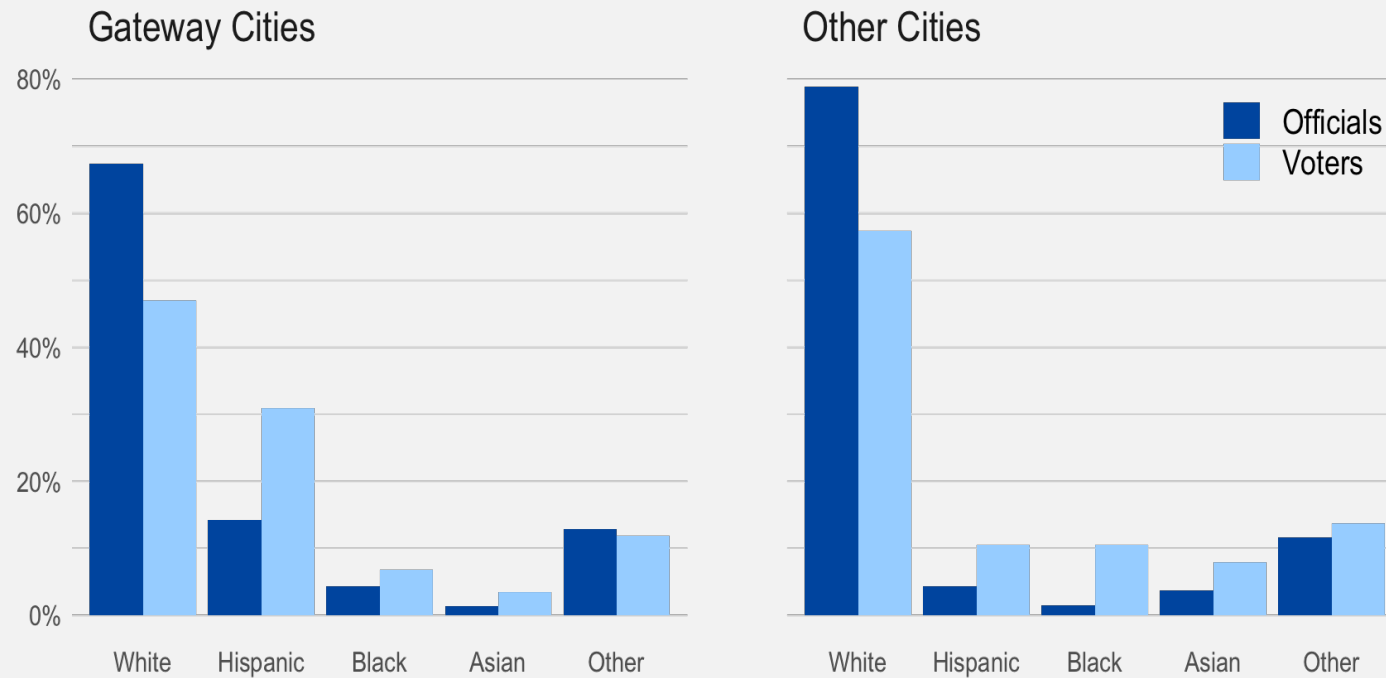
BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS



BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS



BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

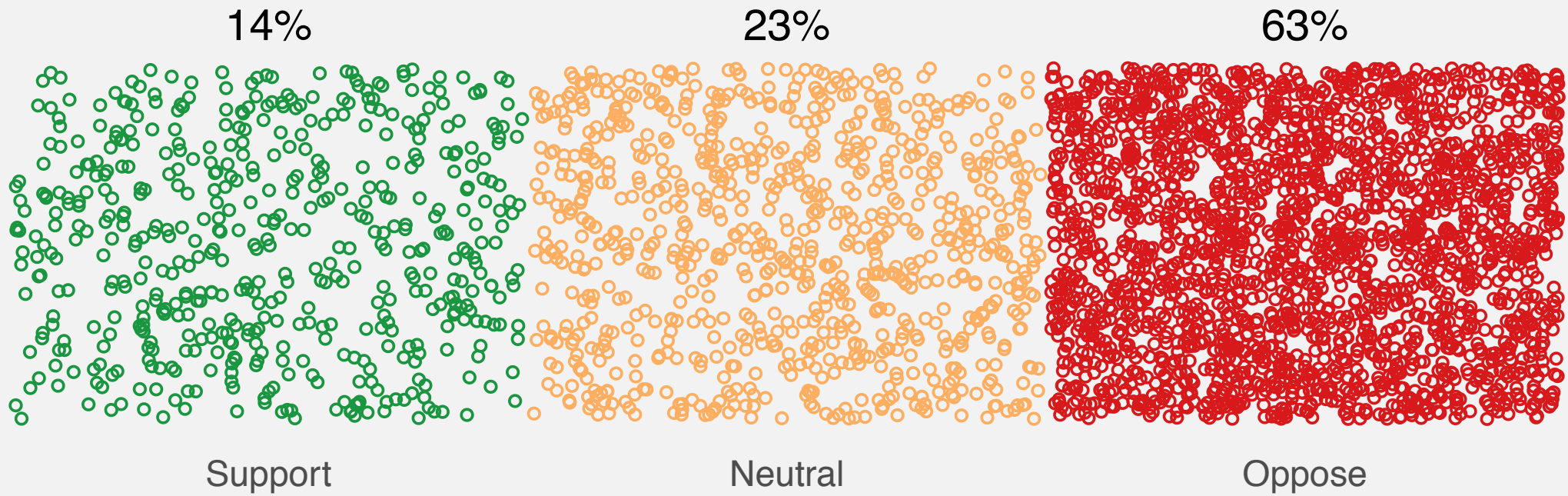


PUBLIC MEETINGS

Differences Between Commenters & Voters

	Commenters	Voters	Diff.
Women	43.3%	51.3%	-8.0%
Whites	95.0%	86.7%	+8.2%
Age > 50	75.0%	52.6%	+22.4%
Homeowners	73.4%	45.6%	+27.8%

PUBLIC MEETINGS



PUBLIC MEETINGS

- People who benefit from new housing almost entirely absent from these forums!
- Barriers to attending
 - May not live in relevant jurisdiction
 - Sense of efficacy
 - Interest/engagement
 - Time

INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

- Gateway Cities
- Newton

GATEWAY CITIES

- “Meet people where they are”
 - Especially low representation of Latino residents
 - Employ widely used technology in Latino community (WhatsApp)
 - Go out into the community (door-to-door, churches, civic spaces)
 - Partner with trusted community members and public representatives

NEWTON

- Multi-year rezoning process in affluent, inner-core suburb of Boston
- Small, but well-organized anti-development forces (SuperPAC that supports anti-development candidates and makes robocalls to community residents)
- Community Engagement Planner Nevena Pilipović-Wengler, Chief of Long Range Planning Zachary Lemel, and Cat Kemmet (Associate Planner) revamped outreach process
 - Youth outreach at local high school
 - Self-guided walking tours of village centers (Vision Kits)
 - **Surveys**
 - **Traditional public meetings**
 - **Equitable focus groups**

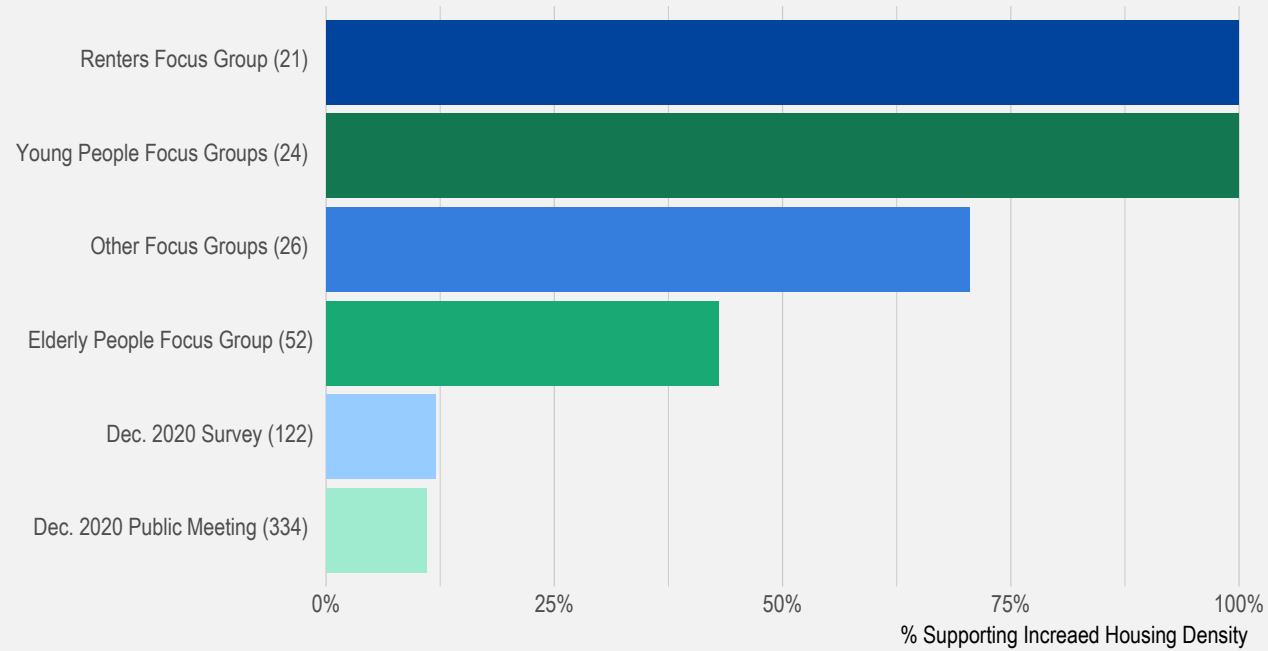
NEWTON: EQUITABLE FOCUS GROUPS

- Facilitated by community members/relevant commission committee (e.g., Human Rights Commission, Youth Commission)
 - Planning Department officials served as notetakers
 - Broad guiding questions about desired community changes (if any)
- Focus groups:
 - Young people (15-24)
 - Young people (25-35)
 - Creatives
 - BIPOC
 - Elderly
 - People with disabilities
 - Renters (Mandarin translation and site visits conducted for Mandarin-speaking public housing residents)

NEWTON EQUITABLE FOCUS GROUPS

- Focus group members volunteered to participate (opted in on a website)
- Sessions were moderated by non-city staff with planning staff serving as notetakers
- Moderators provided modest honorarium
- Interested participants who couldn't make meeting times were able to participate by phone
- 139 participants

NEWTON SUPPORT FOR HIGHER DENSITY HOUSING

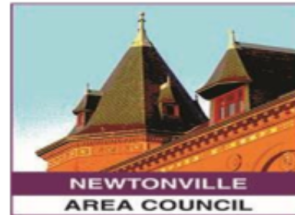


Other Focus Groups include focus groups of BIPOC and LGBTQ people, and people working in the arts.

NEWTON: CREATING SPACES FOR EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION

- “As a person of color, and having only lived here for a few years, I have struggled to feel confident to engage in the process when people who are lifelong residents begin to get loud.” (participant in BIPOC focus group)
- “I have rented in Newton for more than 20 years and have never participated before. Typically, people in Newton get involved through their children’s’ school. I do not have kids and I always felt disconnected. I heard about this focus group through my landlord and just the fact that the City reached out directly to renters, like me, is why I am participating now.” (participant in renters’ focus group)
- “I would applaud what you’re doing here tonight - I’ve lived here 23 years, and this is the first such invitation for communication - so showing that Newton is welcome to other voices, a very small population of other voices in Newton but just showing that you’re interested in other voices sends a message, so that’s great.” (participant in BIPOC focus group)

NEWTON EQUITABLE FOCUS GROUP: BACKLASH



ZONING REDESIGN: VILLAGE CENTER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT BEGINS THIS THURSDAY, MAY 20, 6-7 pm

Early last December over 500 residents made their views known about proposals and near-proposals put forward by Newton's planning institutions. The **administration was responsive** and pivoted away from some of the most important of those, at least until the end of this City Council term.

As the process moves to discussing Village Centers, you can make your voice heard, by learning about this next stage of Zoning Redesign on Thursday and then participating in the aspects of it noted below.

If you don't fit into one of the designated focus group categories, say, if you are a homeowner or a white, middle-aged person, be creative and sign on as part of the creative community. The idea, I've been told, is to maximize participation.

The following description ("Where We Are in the Process") is excerpted from the website of the Planning and Development Department. Please go to that website and scroll down to the bottom of the page to click on the links shown below (but which are inactive on this page) to register and sign up at: <https://www.newtonma.gov/government/planning/plans-policies-strategies/zoning-redesign>

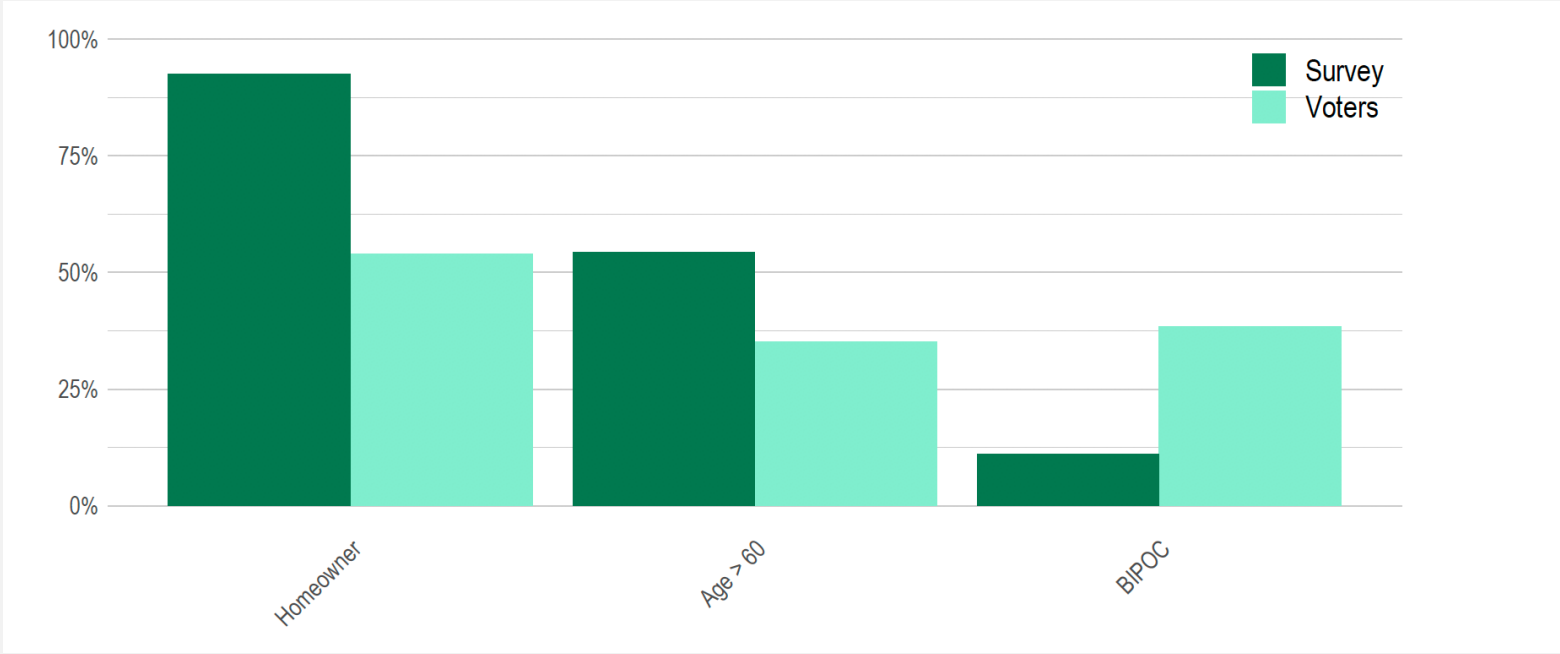
LESSONS FROM FOCUS GROUPS

- Create spaces for voices that are typically unheard from in public meetings or surveys
- Generate trust in government and coalitions of support for housing
- Politically challenging and vulnerable to backlash from traditionally overrepresented groups

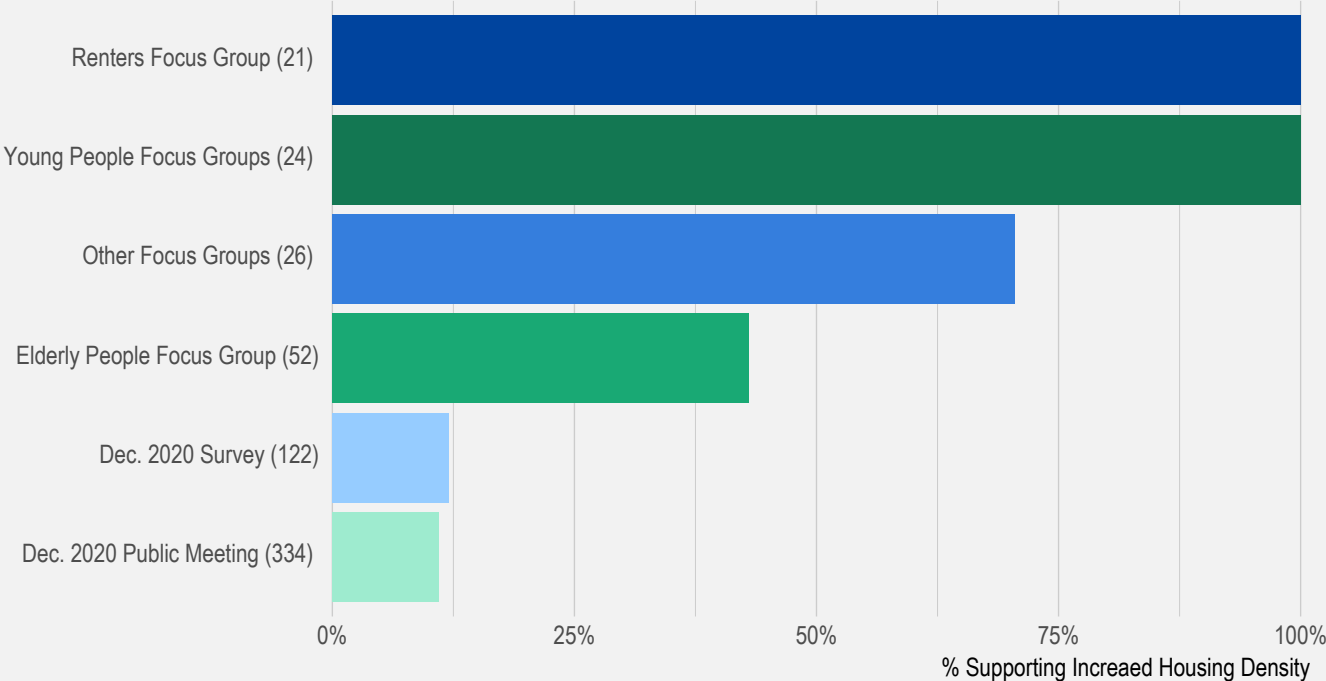
SURVEYS

- Tempting to rely on surveys to obtain representative information from the community
- But...they can suffer from many of the same pitfalls as traditional methods of community engagement, attracting participation from a vocal minority

SURVEYS: THE CASE OF NEWTON



SURVEYS: THE CASE OF NEWTON



Other Focus Groups include focus groups of BIPOC and LGBTQ people, and people working in the arts.

CONCLUSION

- Inclusive political processes require deliberate attention to multiple stages of housing development
- It is not enough to simply make it easier to politically participate
- Must also increase engagement and sense of trust in the political process
- **Deliberate outreach to underrepresented communities is key!**