

# Stan Oklobdzija on YIMBY Politics

Welcome back to the Abundance Podcast. In this episode, we chat with Stan Oklobdzija. He's an assistant professor of political science at Tulane University and the director of the Center for Public Policy Research at the Murphy Institute. His research focuses on housing policies, specifically how voters conceive of housing markets, and how these perceptions influence the policies that local governments pursue. He previously served as research director at California YIMBY, a pro-housing advocacy group that pushes reform at the state level. Have you heard of those guys? Oklobdzija holds a PhD in political science from the University of California, San Diego, and a master's degree in public policy from the University of Southern California.

In this episode, we dive into the politics of YIMBY, why so many people don't believe in supply and demand with housing, New Orleans, and some of the work that's coming up next. As always, if you haven't already, please subscribe, hit the like button, leave us a review, let us know who you want to hear from. We're eager to continue to serving you excellent material. With that, on with the show.

Nolan Gray: [Fade in] Yeah, no, YIMBYtown was great. Ned, you were saying something.

Ned Resnikoff: Oh, no, I was agreeing with you that we would've been absolutely way more responsible if it hadn't been for the time change.

Stan Oklobdzija: The jet lag that rustles your moral fibers.

Nolan Gray: Right. No, I mean I think YIMBYtown was great this year. There were a few pieces about this, opining on this. It had a really strong bipartisan feeling this year, which I think it inherently kind of has to, right. It's Texas. You're not going to pass anything unless you get some Republicans on board. But I was impressed by the extent to which that wasn't really an issue for any of the participants.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah. There was Twitter discourse, right, a week ago. I mean, there's always Twitter discourse about something, but the whole bipartisanship of Yimbyism generated some discourse. It's interesting.

Nolan Gray: Yeah, this is something I wanted to pick your brain on because you're a political scientist, is it is interesting to me. I look out at the policy landscape and I try my best to only think about zoning because that really is the only issue that matters, but sometimes I think about other minor issues like abortion or Israel Palestine or blah, what have you, minor issues, and they're so intensely partisan. And I wonder, why has Yimby not followed that track? What do you think is going on there?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, so housing is interesting because, in the grand scheme of issues, it really only starts becoming a thing that most Americans are thinking about in the last maybe two decades maximum or so. I'm kind of old, I just turned 41 a couple weeks ago, and I remember the days of, a person working at a coffee shop or a

bartender could afford a studio in San Francisco with no problem. So this crunch of housing scarcity, driving up prices in places that previously didn't have high housing prices, is a relatively recent phenomenon. So it really hasn't imprinted itself into the national political psyche as much as an issue like abortion, which has been hard fought since the 1960s, maybe even '50s. Well, even before that. But it really became a national issue that acquired this partisan valence, or gun control or something like that-

Nolan Gray: So your theory here is that if issues are just around for a long time, they get polarized?

Stan Oklobdzija: Well, not necessarily. So issues beget interest groups, and interest groups map themselves onto a party sort of dynamic, a party "platform," in big quotes. There's this big theory in political science of parties are just actually just networks of interest groups. So interest groups come together where they're sort of similar bedfellows, and the parties are where these interest groups hash things out and figure out, "Okay, I'm going to give you a six-week ban on abortion if you give me the right to buy an AR-15 same day," or something like that, so-

Nolan Gray: Natural pairings of issues, right?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, you're right. You know what I mean? They kind of go together, I guess. Weird. So yeah, housing, it's just recently a thing, right? Groups like California YIMBY have been around for what, I don't know, what, five years, six years now or something like that? SF BARF, the first big YIMBY group, just, I don't know, came around maybe less or about 10 years ago, about. So this is just recently acquiring groups backing it. So it hasn't really mapped itself onto either party's dynamic as much as other issues have.

Ned Resnikoff: And I should note for the record that this is an officially bipartisan podcast, because Nolan obviously is a big Ayn Rand devotee, and then I'm a filthy red, so even at the granular podcast level, the ideological lines are blurred.

Stan Oklobdzija: That's good, coming together.

Nolan Gray: Yeah, I gave a talk in Pittsburgh last week, which was good, and as with every YIMBY gathering, it's like 95% progressive Democrats, and somebody on the subreddit was like, "Ah, another Trump-supporting California YIMBY coming to make money off of Pittsburgh." And I was like, every aspect of that sentence is fascinating to me. Trump-supporting, I don't know who... Are there other California YIMBY people coming? Making money... It's just fascinating. But what's interesting to me about the movement is the extent to which you don't really get discourse like that within the movement. I think Conor Dougherty mentioned this in his piece, or he mentioned it on Twitter where he was like, "I couldn't really find anyone at YIMBYtown, even progressive Dems, to whine

about the presence of conservatives or more market-oriented people being present." And I'm like, you just don't get that level of discipline in other groups.

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah, it's striking the extent to which even interest groups that are more contained within a particular party or a particular ideological wing can fall apart over the most petty minor issues. Think about all the infighting and... I don't want to name particular groups, but you can see it on both the right and the left, that there's all this out-in-the-open infighting, oftentimes, in various other movements. And yeah, it doesn't seem to be, despite the broader than usual ideological diversity within YIMBYs, that doesn't really seem to be much of a thing.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, I think part of it is that we're just a new movement. The pro-housing movement is just a new thing, but also we have this advantage of being just centered on a really, really particular issue. I mean, there's not a Republican way of doing parking minimums and a Democratic way of doing setback rules or something like that. So it forces us, sometimes to our detriment, that we think everything's a housing issue, but it really focuses to keep our eyes on the ball, which I think is good for the movement so far.

Nolan Gray: Yeah, I think that's it, because I was thinking about this. I don't want to be beating up on... So a lot of YIMBYs, I think, are also in transit groups, but I've noticed that transit groups do seem to have a much bigger problem with this, and I suspect it's partly because there's a lot of very different reasons why you might support transit, or why you might be in a transit group that lead you in very, very, very different policy directions, in a way that I don't think is true of YIMBY advocacy. So everybody at a YIMBY meeting agrees we want to increase the overall supply of housing, and there's going to be maybe some disagreement on the details of how much public subsidy, how much social housing, how much are you allowing sprawl, horizontal development, but there's no disagreement on that very core thing of, we want as much new housing being built as possible.

And I wonder if it's just having that core shared, this is the specific thing we want to do... So if I'm a conservative in one of these meetings and somebody's talking about social housing, sure, if it gets more units built, that's fine. Whereas if a more progressive in those meetings is more market-oriented... Where there's this common agreement to where it's like, we're not going to pick fights with one another, that I think you just don't see in other groups.

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah. I'd like to test out a theory on the resident political scientist here, which is that this also has to do with the structural formation of YIMBY groups, and how it differs from a lot of other organizations or political formations that are called movements but aren't necessarily movements in the traditional sense, where you don't actually have these sort of clubs at the local level where people are coming together and bonding over this shared issue. A lot of it is much more distributed, online, non-profit led.

And obviously there are a lot of YIMBYs that are inveterate posters, and there's a large and growing non-profit ecosystem in YIMBY world of which we are a part, but at the base level, you're talking about almost like these social clubs, like people showing up into person to things, people showing up to community meetings. And I think it makes it harder to have those types of really vehement violent disagreements, because you actually... Like if you're more on the DSA side of things and you're in your local YIMBY chapter with a couple guys who are more libertarian, you actually know each other. You're not just threatening to kill each other on Twitter.

Stan Oklobdzija: I think the -

Nolan Gray: Nothing wrong with that, nothing wrong with that.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, right. Yeah. That's what makes Twitter fun, right. I think the IRL aspect of the movement is a real big boon. I mean, Nolan and I talk about this a lot, back when I used to live in Los Angeles, that one of the important things for this movement, and that's just bringing pro-housing people together around a table over some beers, maybe not necessarily to talk about the minutiae of zoning, but just to get people connected and build the social capital that a political movement needs. So yeah, there is a lot of networking done in virtual spaces in the YIMBY movement, but I think a lot of that is paired with a lot of in-person activism.

Could we be doing better? Could we be meeting IRL more and spending less time in Slack channels and on Twitter? Yes, absolutely. Everyone in the world needs to touch a little bit more grass, but I think as a pretty young movement, it's doing well so far, especially in the real epicenters of the movement, places like the San Francisco Bay Area or New York City, Open New York with that revolving happy hour that they do. Or the folks in Denver, I mean, really came from nowhere very recently, and knocked just some really big wins in Colorado over the last couple of years. So props to them.

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah, there's something very refreshingly old school about it. It puts me in mind of the Theda Skocpol book, Diminished Democracy, where she's talking about the sort of political function that the local Elks club used to play, or the Freemasons or something. And yeah, I feel like there's a little bit of that function here, where it's like we're both creating a social circle... Or we're not creating a social circle, these social circles are emerging organically and they're building social capital, but they're also aggregating people's political concerns and figuring out how to channel them in a way that's productive.

Stan Oklobdzija: Absolutely. That sort of pluralism is really needed for a movement.

Nolan Gray: Ned, I think you were the one telling me this story, but the origins of unions, it begins with working class bars where people who all work at the same place just go have drinks in the evening. And then they're like, then they start

commiserating and inspiring and one particular charismatic member of that group is like, "I think we can negotiate." But because they actually had a strong interpersonal bond, then the activism work becomes much more serious. Like I always say this, by the time Open New York had incorporated as a group, we were all friends. We had all been hanging out doing walking tours or riding bikes, or getting drinks, or going to public hearings for a year.

And so from that core... And then you form a core group that is motivating. I want to help my friends, I don't want to respond to the 12th text message from Nancy Pelosi asking for another 25 bucks, but oh, my buddy Stan messaged me and asked me if I can come to this public hearing. My response to that is very different, and then it becomes a thing that's a community. It's attractive to outsiders. They want to be a part of something like that. They want to contribute. I mean, to me it's fulfilling. The two needs that I think a lot of folks have is I want a community, I want friends, I want peers to hang out with, and I want to be doing something that I think enriches my community. And that's that pairing that I think becomes really, really attractive for people.

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah. It's not quite the origin of unions, but I think the conversation that we were having that you might be thinking of is, I was talking about this concept of the Red Saloon, which was this feature of 19th century Chicago, and that labor movement where you had these bars where it was basically the members of the Chicago industrial proletariat would hang out at these bars, and they would be there because their co-workers were there, their buddies were there. They weren't there specifically to necessarily to organize for any particular cause, but it was known, oh, this is the longshore workers or the iron workers' bar.

And as you spend more and more time there, you get acculturated to this idea of, oh yeah, we can band together and demand better working conditions from the bosses at the meat packing plants, which I think is actually more period and location appropriate than longshore workers, meatpacking. But I do think that that's what I meant when I say there's something a little bit old-school or a little bit of a throwback about YIMBY and the YIMBY happy hours and everything. The idea that, oh, yeah, this stuff is also supposed to be fun, and that you need to build deep, thick connections to a social community, which is not something you can do on Reddit or Twitter or Threads, for all the advantages that being on those platforms might afford you.

Nolan Gray: Yeah. Stan, I want to ask you a question here. So we're doing pretty good on this right now, but yeah, how do you keep YIMBY this kind of big tent, or are there lessons of other long-term movements that have avoided becoming so heavily partisan-polarized? Are there lessons there that you think YIMBY advocates could learn?

Stan Oklobdzija: Well, I think YIMBY's track record so far has been pretty good in maintaining this bipartisan appeal. It's just a sad fact of divided government in America right now that you're going to need some people to cross the aisle and band together on these cross-party coalitions in order to get anything passed. And I mean, at the

federal level, government is so polarized and so divided that everything is thought up as a zero-sum. So a win for the Democrats is a loss for the Republicans, if you're a Republican, you should never do anything that's going to benefit that party. And I think at the state level, just given what state legislatures look like in a lot of places, like being less professionalized, people that are sort of more new to politics, that really isn't as thick as it is in Washington DC or in places with more professionalized legislatures like California or New York or something like that.

So you have a little bit more opportunity for something like Montana to take place. So like, I am a registered Democrat. I don't really care for Greg Gianforte that much, his other policies, but you just got to hand it to him, that was a very, very important piece of legislation that he helped shepherd across, along with a lot of other folks in the Montana Republican Party. And so it's a net win for the people of Montana. And a really great example of what these sort of coalitions can look like going forward.

So, especially in a lot of states where you see one party seeding into... Their numbers not giving them the ability to pass legislation that they might want to. Housing especially could be one of those issues, where a minority party legislature could band together with the majority party in order to do something and be able to claim some efficacy and some credit to their constituents. If you look at a state like Colorado, for example, Democrats sort of run Colorado. Colorado is no longer a purple state anymore. It's a solidly blue state, but there's this huge contingent of Republicans in Colorado that represent mostly rural interests, the sort of people that don't want that rural land being taken up by sprawl just to accommodate intransigent blue cities, that don't want to build any housing within their borders. So I think there's a real natural alliance that could be made.

Ned Resnikoff:

Yeah, that's a great point, and I think it puts me in mind of something I think it was maybe John Sides said, the political scientist, about bipartisanship and the somewhat unstable equilibrium we now find ourselves in at the national level. Where, when every presidential election is relatively close to a coin toss and control of Congress is constantly trading back and forth, there's actually very little incentive for bipartisanship, because if you undermine the majority party and undermine their agenda, that increases the already pretty substantial odds that you could be committee chair next year. But in a state like, increasingly Colorado or New York or Montana, where the governor's seat and the legislature are generally going to be controlled by one party, there's actually greater incentive for the minority party to engage in bipartisanship, because that's the only way they can actually deliver tangible benefits to their constituencies. And I think you saw a little bit more of that during periods where at the national level one party was dominating national politics for substantial periods of time.

Stan Oklobdzija:

No, I do have to say that dynamics in a state legislature are often different than they are in Congress. I mean, Congress is designed specifically to make it really easy to block legislation. You all had Francis Fukuyama on the podcast, so if

you've not heard of vetocracy, just refer back to that podcast for a better description than me just trying to do it off the top of my head. But it's a lot easier in Congress if you're the minority party, just to gulp up the works of Congress, I mean, how many bills have been passed to this Congress, 26 or 27? It's the least productive Congress in, I don't know, a while. In a state legislature, often because you have this shorter legislative period, you're part-time or something like that, the incentives are a lot different, so yeah.

Nolan Gray: So of course most of our work at California YIMBY is focused on California. That might surprise you all. But helping out with folks in states like Arizona, or recently Pennsylvania, I have come to appreciate, man, divided government is really, really, really bad for policymaking. I mean, we're having this conversation literally the day that Governor Katie Hobbs, democratic governor, vetoed what was originally a Republican-led, but has since become a very much bipartisan YIMBY zoning reform package, and just vetoing it. I think partly because an excessive deference to the League of Cities, which refused to negotiate on that bill, but partly on like, "Well, okay, it's okay if there's just a lot of chaos between now and November, because I think I'm going to be able to get the legislature back to my side," and it just makes serious policymaking just so much more difficult.

Stan Oklobdzija: No, definitely. Especially with housing, where deficits in housing just compound year after year after year. I remember, before I really even understood the YIMBY movement as a thing or what it entailed, I was just a grad student in San Diego listening to the hearing for SB 827 back in 2018, and, "It's not the perfect bill. We got to move back. We got to do this," and now it's six years later, and think about what could have been achieved in California, what the landscape would've looked like in California in terms of displacement, in terms of homelessness, in terms of sprawl, in terms of carbon emissions if we had just gone ahead and passed that bill six years ago. I mean, like-

Nolan Gray: Ned and I probably don't have jobs.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah-

Nolan Gray: Maybe we do. I don't know.

Stan Oklobdzija: We'd all be talking about something else. There's a trillion other problems we need to solve as a society. Why are we stuck on housing? I don't know.

Nolan Gray: Yeah. I do think we're making incredible progress. I always say this issue to me... The first policy issue that I got really motivated on as an activist was marijuana. And I think I partly started to lose interest in marijuana just because it was like, oh, this is so happening. It doesn't really need a big push and focus. And that was also an issue that by that point, it sort of had some bipartisan consensus, things were moving with it. But YIMBY, to me, had that attraction of, it's pulling from a broad section of people and it's happening. The Arizona bill is

disappointing, but that's, I think, an unusual exception to otherwise a track record of these things are happening really, really fast.

I was joking the other day, I had to turn off my Google AdWord for, I think, "minimum loss sizes" or something because I so constantly am getting hits on it, that so many places are having this conversation that it's almost not even unique. You don't have to seek out the place that's performing on some of these rules, which is cool, I guess. You were the former research director for California YIMBY.

Stan Oklobdzija:

I was.

Nolan Gray:

I heard they fired you to hire me. Totally ridiculous, but I'm happy it happened, right.

Stan Oklobdzija:

It's okay. We drew straws and I came up short, so I had to go back to academia.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah, in all seriousness though, we've never had this conversation, but I'm curious to hear your experience. What was that like? Did you change your mind on anything during that period, having been in a position where it's like, you're a researcher deeply engaged in the actual policymaking process. By that point, you had had a lot of training in political science, but I'm wondering, yeah, what did you learn? What did you change your mind on?

Stan Oklobdzija:

Oh, yeah, it was really interesting. So I started as the research director at California YIMBY back in 2020. So I was the first research director when they decided they needed someone to parse through academic literature and apply quant social science techniques to this movement, to the advocacy that California YIMBY was doing. So it was really interesting. Yeah, I'd had my fill of academia at that point, a little bit. I was kind of sick of it, and it was the pandemics so we were all stuck inside, so I decided to try to turn my hobby into profession. So yeah, no, it was really, really interesting, because there's a real big disconnect, especially with social scientists, and especially with political scientists that study policy processes, and the legislative process, and interest groups, and that sort of thing. It's really easy to create these gigantic abstractions of how these things work in your head, and that's sort of the currency we traded in, in academia, of one theory to rule them all, even if we're reducing human behavior to just these impossibly simplistic assumptions.

And it was really interesting to just take that into the actual world of like, well, the League of Cities is against us, or, well, the building trades control this veto point, so what do we do about that? It was really, really cool, and it's really interesting to see also, I think, especially as an academic, it's kind of like a black pill, as an academic, to see the actual currency of research in a lawmaking body. I mean, you can get something in the American Economics Journal, people spend years and years and years just going through the review process of that. And when something comes out, that's one study. But meanwhile, some



non-profit makes a pie chart. Well, that's another study, so you got one-to-one. So no one really knows who's right.

And that was really interesting, humbling, as an academic, to see exactly how seriously our research is taken outside of our stupid little profession. But yeah, no, it was really, really, really cool. I really, really enjoyed my time at California YIMBY. I was really sad to leave. But well, one, they definitely did a little upgrade with the research director in hiring Nolan. But two, I think it really has grounded the research I do now, and the actualities, the actual needs of the housing movement and things that will help really advance policy, rather than just sort of expand the realm of human knowledge or whatever weirdo thing we talk about in academia.

Nolan Gray: No, I mean, Stan to a point you were making, this has been a surprise for me as well, is the quality of the research that goes into a lot of policymaking. Totally shocking. And California is probably on the far upper end of this issue, which is, on the one hand, it's kind of distressing. On the other hand, it's cool. Because I always tell YIMBYs, I'm like, "Okay, you're a GIS tech, or you're vaguely quantitatively-minded, or you can just crack open a zoning code and make sense of it. You can be the researcher for your major American city. There might not be other people doing this work, or you can be the one person seriously doing this work in your legislature." So, shocking and distressing, but also an amazing opportunity.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, that's really one of the big advantages of the movement. Just given how convoluted and how really unsexy the issue of just zoning and urban planning is, it attracts a very certain type of person, a very sort of dedicated maladjusted sort of nerd. And it turns out that that person is just really, really good at scraping a bunch of data or just mapping various historic districts across the city or something like that. So it's a real high human capital movement. Very fortunate for us.

Nolan Gray: I do want to thank all the maladjusted nerds, tuning in. We know that you are our listener base, and Stan says that with great affection, as a maladjusted nerd, I think.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, exactly right. He who is without sin, et cetera, et cetera.

Nolan Gray: I want to ask you. I want to spend a little bit of time talking about an amazing paper that you put together with some co-authors on sort of the weird folk economics of housing, and there are a lot of amazing insights in there. But just to kick off the conversation, it was fascinating to me that people don't apply kind of basic Econ 101 concepts that they apply to every other aspect of the market that they interact with. Like cars, appliances, clothing... Everyone has this kind of clear understanding of basic supply and demand, but, then, housing comes in, and it's like everything changes. Why? Why is that?

Stan Oklobdzija:

Well, the short answer is we don't know, but we've definitely found that there really just is this sort of mental block that people have, when it comes to housing. Supply and Demand Econ 101 models are really sort of a useful abstraction in thinking how markets work. And there's dozens of assumptions that need to hold, in order for this Econ 101 Supply and Demand model to actually work and blah, blah, blah. All models are sort of abstracting away one aspect of reality, but it's a very useful tool for understanding how scarcity drives prices, and how high prices incentivize producers to come into a market, and produce more things. And if you're going to guess what the price of something in the future is, knowing how scarce that product is today, is a pretty good starting point for that.

So, in our paper, we find people can make these... They can abstract through these sort of more esoteric goods that they don't, necessarily, come into contact with. So we asked a question about a new fertilizer that increases grain production, drastically, in the near term. And I doubt that any of the 4,000, or many of the 4,000 people we'd surveyed across each of the three surveys does a lot of work in grain trading. I don't know. Maybe, we just got real lucky, and got a bunch of corn brokers, or something like that, but I doubt it.

Nolan Gray:

Emailed the survey out to Iowa, or something? I hope not.

Stan Oklobdzija:

Yeah, right? Maybe. But, just when it comes to stuff like grain, they can get it. When it comes to stuff like a program to train high school kids to be plumbers, they get the effect that has on wages. But, when you get to housing, there's just this mental block. There's just this... Something goes off the rails, and, suddenly, homes are not a commodity like other things. I can, personally, speculate as to why this is going on. I think we have a lot fewer interactions with the housing market than we do with other markets. Generally, one rents a home, and stays there for a year, or two, or something like that. Or if you buy a home, you stay in there for longer. Maybe, people don't really have accurate ideas about housing markets in their area. That's something I'm working on a survey with a researcher, now, at Colorado State, but going off to Ohio State, Dominic Stutsula.

We're going to be surveying people about their beliefs about housing markets, and what they think the median home price in their area is, and such. So I think just people don't have a lot of experience interacting with this market. There's a lot of sort of biases that enter their thinking. A lot of people will see housing prices going up. They'll see a new apartment building going up in a part of town where prices are going up, and sort of don't really get the temporal association. They think the apartment building causes the prices to go up, so it's like the umbrellas going up cause the rain to come down or something like that.

It's kind of funny for us, because we're steeped in housing markets, and housing economics, and stuff, but you think about the average person, right? They have so many trillions of demands on their time, and their attention. Are they going to sit through an Evan Mast paper, or are they going to read Kate Pennington on fires in San Francisco? Probably, not. They got better things to do with their lives.

So, you can sort of excuse people for this, but I think the bigger point of this is that people have these sort of erroneous beliefs about what causes housing prices to go up, and that could have the potential issue of causing them to advocate for policies that are counter to their interest of wanting housing prices to go down.

Across the board, in our surveys, we found people just overwhelmingly, especially, renters, want housing prices to drop in their communities, and homeowners say so, too. You could think, maybe, they're just trying to sound cool, like social desirability bias. But I think, to a certain extent, a lot of homeowners would like to see housing prices drop in their communities. Housing affordability is something they-

Nolan Gray: Can we talk a little bit more about that?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, sure.

Nolan Gray: Because I think a theory that motivates a lot of YIMBY interpretation of what's going on is homeowners are... This is kind of the classic homeowner hypothesis, simplified. Homeowners are, principally, motivated by maintaining home values. They want home values as high as possible. They're extremely risk averse. But that was a finding, and that's pretty consistent, too, right? Even homeowners are like, "Yeah, I broadly want housing to be affordable." What do you think's going on there? Is that economic homevoter literature just getting something wrong, or what do you think?

Stan Oklobdzija: No, I mean, so Bill Fischel's Homevoter Hypothesis is sort of a theoretical model about how to think about homeowners, how that motivates their politics. And there's a lot of empirical research that's been done about how homeownership motivates more political participation. So Jesse Yoder has a really good paper on that from a couple of years ago. The trio of folks from Boston University have a really great book on that, and a continuing research.

So I think there's something to that, but I don't think that people are really as precise... Or homeowners aren't really as precise with their thinking about housing markets as perhaps the Home Voter Hypothesis theorizes them to be. Right? So, you can easily think of a person in a metro area, somewhere like Los Angeles, or something like that, that owns a home on the west side, right? Has a single family home, and thinks that apartments are going to ruin it. They're going to turn it into... I forget whatever all the NIMBYs used to say, like Abu Dhabi, or Manhattan, or whatever. Insert city here.

Nolan Gray: The unpopular city of the week, right? Yeah.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah. Right. So they can think maybe that it's inappropriate, here, "But I would like prices in the LA Metro to go down so my kids can live closer, and I can see my grandkids more.", and stuff like that. So they're not really thinking, too

precisely, about how these positions may be in conflict. And, then, of course, there's also just social desirability bias. It's really hard to get people to admit to... I don't know, questionable beliefs in a survey, right? We're humans, we like to be liked, you know? So I think there's a bit of both of that going on.

Ned Resnikoff: Reading your paper, it's a little bit disorienting in some ways, too. It's great work, but, on the one hand, you have this challenge where, for whatever reason, the YIMBY argument about housing supply, and housing prices does not seem to be especially intuitive for the median American voter. But, on the other hand, Arizona, and Governor Katie Hobbs aside, YIMBYs are winning a lot of political victories, and YIMBYism is genuinely popular. So I'm trying to disentangle why is YIMBYism popular, and growing in popularity with a base of voters that, for the most part, seem to intuitively disagree with the central argument of YIMBY policy?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yes. I think it really goes to show that a lot of politics isn't really a sort of mass movement. Politics is done by a certain sort of privileged society that has, 1. The human and social capital to engage in politics. It has the resources, and the free time to do it. Right? And it's not, necessarily, a bad thing. It's how you would expect politics to be done in a democracy. But I don't think there's really an incongruity in seeing a lot of elites in media, in academia, and just sort of politically active people getting into this idea? Sort of seeing how land use restrictions result in higher housing prices for people? Whereas a mass public doesn't really have very sharp ideas about how housing markets work, just because the issue just isn't very salient to them.

It's one thing to be concerned, and one of the things we find in surveys, and some follow-up surveys that we're doing to this is that housing, and homelessness are top of mind issues for people. But how do you connect that to single family zoning? How do you connect that to height restrictions, or setback rules, or whatever, massing rules or anything like that? There's a lot of intermediary steps. If you think about the Underpants Gnome metaphor, there's a really big question mark in the middle that you have to fill out before you get from steps one to three.

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah, the point about it not being especially salient, I think, is an important one because this is something I sometimes run into, especially, where... I lived in New York for a number of years, and you talk to people in New York, and the New York media market defines a lot of the national conversation around this stuff. New York City is a real outlier among cities in having a really, really large proportion of renters in its overall population, but most people don't rent. Most people are homeowners. It's kind of weird, the cognitive dissonance around that. And, I say that, I'm a renter, and part of the reason why I'm in this is selfishly, like, "I want my rent to go down.", but it's-

Nolan Gray: I want my townhouse, man. Everyone's like "Yeah."

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah. Totally.

Nolan Gray: Yeah. Everyone's always accusing YIMBYs of self-interest, that "Yeah. I want a townhouse in LA." It's not that complicated.

Stan Oklobdzija: I, too, would like one. Yeah. Would be nice.

Nolan Gray: I'm curious. Given your thoughts on this, I think this has been, probably, the path for a lot of YIMBY... To the question that Ned was asking, does seem to me that YIMBYs sort made a lot of hay out of elite persuasion. Everyone's, always, making fun of YIMBYs for spending all day on Twitter, but I think there's something, probably, pretty good about owning the sandbox where all the journalists, and politicos, and staffers hang out all day, and that's, clearly, mattered a lot. But I do think your work reveals something interesting about messaging this issue to normal people, dare I say, right? I'm curious, since the paper's come out, if you've thought about that more, or if you would have suggestions for YIMBYs based on how we know normal people think about housing markets?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, one of the things we're, actually, working on, right now, we have a survey in the field, is just actually testing out information messages on people, and seeing what that does to how they update their beliefs about housing. So we have a bunch of various information treatments. We talk about housing compared to cars. We show them a video from SiteLine, for example, and we just want to know, if we walk people through, and hold their hand a little bit about how a housing market works, does that cause them to update their beliefs? Because one of the things we found is that people don't really have these strongly held beliefs about housing. A lot of these beliefs are sort of mutable. There's a lot more variation we found in people's responses to questions about housing to, for example, questions about their partisanship, or other sort of more sincerely, and closely held beliefs.

Housing isn't really one of these core identity issues, yet, that really drive people's politics in the way that like LGBTQ rights are, or the way abortion is, or gun control, or immigration or just down the list, right? And as politics in America does get more identity based, a lot of those sort of issues are just kind of triggers, and turn people off in one direction, or the other. I think housing still is one of those things that that's more of a less salient issue, and as such, there's a lot more room to speak to people, and have their minds open about it.

Nolan Gray: Yeah. Still an opportunity to, maybe, be the first person who's seriously talked to them about the issue?

Stan Oklobdzija: Mm-hm.

Nolan Gray: Right.

Ned Resnikoff: Is the lack of federal action, and the just complete lack of productivity of this Congress, maybe, part of that? I'm trying to imagine. The YIMBY Act, which is a

bill in the US Senate that's co-sponsored by Democrats and Republicans... I think, it's Todd Young from Indiana, and Brian Schatz from Hawaii. That's a bipartisan bill, but I do wonder if there was a really, truly big federal push in Congress to do something... At the end of the day, the president who's going to sign it, or push for it, or oppose it, is going to be either a Democrat, or a Republican, and you can kind of imagine this getting polarized, very quickly. I wonder how much of the fact that all of the action is happening at the local and state level is really kind of insulating us from that.

Stan Oklobdzija:

Yeah. It's interesting, because most of the action on land use regulation in the United States is local. They're sort of just how we set up the big "police powers of government", right? Whether that is a good idea... Spoiler, I don't think it's a very good idea, but whether that's a good idea, or not, is immaterial. That's just sort of the way it is. So there's not really that many levers that the federal government can pull on housing, which is why I think there's a lot less motion there. Like in the Congress than there are in some of these state legislatures. Also, partly because housing activists realize that... What's the thing that all the YIMBYs on Twitter say? "State politics gets the good.", or "... gets the goods.", or something like that, right?

So there's just, naturally, more movement in state houses, across the country. But it was really interesting to see, Joe Biden did mention housing, a little bit, in his State of the Union, a couple weeks ago, or a week ago, or whenever it was. And it's interesting, right? So all the majority of the policies he proposed were just demand subsidies, which it's kind of wild. If you think about going somewhere with a famine, and handing out food stamps, or something, right? It's really not the issue that's causing housing prices to go up. It's not that people don't have enough money. It's that a lot of people are bidding up a very scarce commodity. We all lived through the pandemic, remember what toilet paper cost a couple years ago.

Nolan Gray:

To Ned's question, yeah, I do wonder about this. Would it be potentially harmful if a high profile, federal Democrat or Republican were to come out, hardcore, on this issue? Would it risk polarizing the issue if Biden, in the State of the Union address, just like, "By the way, you need to get rid of minimal parking requirements."?

Stan Oklobdzija:

Yeah, I don't know. It's really interesting because seeing a lot of strange bedfellows, too, with, for example, Greg Abbott. Greg Abbott, the arch-conservative Republican Governor of Texas has, recently, come out against institutional investors buying up all... "All of Texas's properties." This is a trope that Marxists, in California, have been banging on for the last couple of years. So it's a really, really weird sort of little party that they put together on this issue, and I think it really just kind of goes to show the sort of cross-cutting nature of these things. Yeah, I wonder, because I don't really think that there's going to be a big pivot amongst leftists in blue states against their sort of crusade against institutional investors, just because Greg Abbott has jumped onto the issue.

Nolan Gray: Yeah, I think that's right. Yeah. I want to dive into the Stan Oklobjia extended universe, your top cited paper, Diagnosing Gender Bias in Image Recognition Systems. I assume there's only one Stan Oklobjia, right?

Stan Oklobdzija: That's me, yeah. That was-

Nolan Gray: That's you?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah. Yeah, that was me.

Nolan Gray: What's the housing connection? Could you explain the housing connection with that particular paper?

Stan Oklobdzija: I wrote that paper, largely, in a house that I used to rent. A townhouse that I used to rent, actually. No, there's no housing connection. It's just a paper that I did with some folks from a Computational Social Science Conference. It was a lot of fun to write.

Nolan Gray: Well, okay. That's frustrating. Let's try this again. You've done a lot of work, actually, on dark money political donors, and actually, I was kind of joking on the first question, but I do wonder how that might inform some of your views on housing. I joked about this earlier, but the assumption is always that, "Oh, YIMBY's this dark money thing.", right? Getting all these money from developers, and it's like developers, actually, in most cities, don't seem to, actually, care or realize that there's a... And, certainly, landlords are actively opposed to kind of what YIMBY's are doing, but yeah, what's the dark money to housing connection?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, so when I got into grad school a while ago, I was really interested in the idea of campaign finance. It was really interesting to me, having worked a little bit in politics, myself, to sort of see how one can turn gigantic wealth disparities into policy outcomes that, perhaps, maybe a majority of voters wouldn't choose if given the option. So how does money subvert, and corrupt the political process? And it got me into dark money. I started grad school right after the Citizens United decision, so this was right after the 2012 election when political nonprofits spent hundreds of millions of dollars, in that election, and just that number has been growing exponentially, ever since then.

So it's a really, really interesting aspect of our politics that a lot of the money that goes into it is just completely untraceable. We just have no idea where that money's come from. No one's paying any reputational cost for it. You can't sort of link any quid to any quo anymore with this. And I don't really see any likelihood of reform given the current Supreme Court, and, also, given the fact that Democrats, since 2018, have become the big player in dark money, rather than Republicans. They sort of beat them at their own game. So why regulate it, now?

So I've, always, been really, really interested in interest groups and how interest groups are, at once, a really sort of pivotal part of a democracy. One person's nefarious dark money developer, shall is another person's good government advocate, champion of the people, et cetera. Right?

Nolan Gray: We're definitely the latter, to be clear.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, right, right. Exactly.

Nolan Gray: Of course. Just to be clear.

Stan Oklobdzija: It's an objective statement, there. Right. Yeah. So I was interested in the congressional level, at the federal level, but just through my experience living in California, doing my doctorate at UC San Diego. Dealing with that atrocious housing market, and being a lifelong Californian, the idea of where interest groups, actually, affect people's lives the most started sort of coming to my attention. A really good book just came out, last year, by a political scientist from Berkeley named Sarah Anzia about interest groups-

Nolan Gray: Whoa, whoa. Sorry, fellow academic advisory committee member for the Metropolitan Abundance Project. Also, a previous guest on the podcast, and my former professor.

Stan Oklobdzija: Oh, shoot. Yeah, so absolutely. Yeah, a lot of connections, here. So her book is just really about these myriad interest groups that are affecting local government, and skewing outcomes in local government. And if we think about it, everyone pays attention to presidential politics. Everyone turns out for presidential election. Everyone knows the various players of the US Senate, and stuff. But if you think about it, how often does the average American interact with the federal government? You pay your taxes on April 15th. Maybe, you go to a federal park once a year on vacation? But all of your real interactions with government, the way that government really affects your life is at the local level. The cop that pulls you over? That's a function of local government, like your housing prices. That's the function of local government. The schools your kids go to, that's another function of local government. So if we're really going to study how interest groups affect the material outcomes of Americans, I think you have to look at the local level, and I think what better place than housing?

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah. This comes to something that I've been thinking about a fair amount, recently, which is there's sometimes a tendency when we talk about American politics, to talk about it as if billionaires are the protagonists of history, and I'm pretty disturbed by wealth, and equality in the United States. It's something that, in my previous career, I spent quite a bit of time reporting on, and I do think that sort of outsized, political power of the billionaire class in the United States is a real problem. But political influence operates at different tiers so that it's not so cleanly bifurcated. So you see this a little bit in the way, sometimes,



people, going back to the folk economics, will talk about investors in property. Right?

Like when you think of someone who is an investor in property who's really invested in inflating property values, or inflating rents, people think like Gray Star, Black Stone. But someone who owns a nice house in an exclusionary neighborhood who isn't a billionaire, but has, maybe, a million, and a million and a half dollars of wealth invested in that house, they have, to some extent, the same network of interest, there. It's not one-to-one, but there is some overlap, there. And I think on the local level, that's sort of influence is way more salient, because the Koch brothers are meddling in the local politics of some places. They did that in Phoenix with public transit funding, but they're not doing it in... I don't know. Long Island, necessarily. It's Long Island NIMBYs who are doing that.

Stan Oklobdzija: That's exactly right. I think there's a big focus on the top 1%, when we talk about inequality in the United States. And yeah, there is this outsized influence that the top 1% has, but we really get down to it, why do we not have the developed rail systems that European countries have? Why do we have this persistent school segregation, 70 years after Brown v board? Why do we still have these yawning racial wealth gaps? And it points more to the influence of a top 10%, which is a lot more uncomfortable for a lot of people. Especially, a lot of people that are active in the discourse, because they grew up in houses that were the top 10%. I was a member of the top 15%, when I lived in Los Angeles. If you looked at my income and my partner's income, and we lived in a crappy one bedroom apartment...

Well, it wasn't that crappy. It was okay. It was a pretty nice one bedroom apartment.

Nolan Gray: Hey, man, you had a pool.

Stan Oklobdzija: I had a pool.

Nolan Gray: I have a dream of having a pool, this time of year.

Stan Oklobdzija: It was a pretty nice pool. It was a pretty nice pool. The apartment, itself, was kind of crappy, but the amenities of the building kind of made up for it. But we were in the top 15%, right? So a lot of that activism, a lot of that politicking that creates these roadblocks... This guy at Brookings, Richard Reeves, has a book Dream Hoarders, which is sort of about that very phenomenon. It's said people that you wouldn't consider "rich-rich", you know what I mean? It's people with, I don't know, two sort of moderate incomes in a household.

Ned Resnikoff: It's lawyers.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah. Right?

Nolan Gray: Yeah. It's retired lawyers, retired architects. People who have some institutional knowledge, and a lot of free time, I think, actually, end up doing a lot of damage. The flip side is, when they get activated as YIMBYs, they're like some of our best allies, right?

Stan Oklobdzija: Mm-hm. Yeah, it's kind of interesting. There's this huge wealth dynamic in politics that creates a lot of inequality, but there's also a time dynamic. Right? So, you could have an investment banker in New York, or something like that that's pulling 400K a year, but that person lives at their desk, you know what I mean? That person hasn't had a meal not hunched over their keyboard in five years. So even though they have a lot of money, that person who has a lot of time to show up to all these meetings, to write letters, to politick, to knock on doors, that translates into a lot more influence than just money.

Nolan Gray: So you were in Los Angeles, let's talk about Los Angeles for a little bit. I know you've thought about the city a lot. I live here. Ned lives in the home of our colonial overlords. Our imperial overlords up, in the Bay Area, but that's okay, we're doing good. How do you feel about LA, right now? I'm feeling kind of white-pilled after the HLA decision. We're hitting permitting highs for permitting. LA just seemed so incredibly dysfunctional on a lot of margins, when I moved here, almost four years ago, now. But how are you feeling about LA, from afar?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah-

Ned Resnikoff: What's the recent decision?

Nolan Gray: Sorry, great question. This was a ballot initiative. HLA, a ballot initiative requiring the city to, actually, build out the protected bus, and bike lanes that had been adopted in its mobility plan. Essentially, the city had adopted this amazing plan to build a lot of bus, and bike lanes, but the city was not, actually, building these.

Nolan Gray: ... amazing plan to build a lot of bus and bike lanes, but the city was not actually building these when they would repave streets. The ballot referendum, which passed overwhelmingly a couple of weeks ago, said there's a legal requirement to actually do this now. Now, LA will have to build something like 300 miles of bus lanes and 200 miles of bike lanes.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah. I mean, that's a really big thing. HLA was, I think, one of the most important things to happen in California in the March 5th primaries. It was just really an incredibly consequential thing, but, I mean, it really speaks to a lot of the dysfunction of Los Angeles. I mean, I was in Los Angeles in 2016 when we all voted for a special sales tax to create money to build homeless-supportive housing, and we raised something like a billion plus dollars as a city to do that, to build tens of thousands of supportive housing units. And then, I don't know, six years later, we built just a tiny fraction of them.

I mean, Los Angeles voters will turn out for these incredibly important causes, but unfortunately, we just have this derelict political class... Not we anymore, I don't live in Los Angeles, but you all that live in Los Angeles, like Nolan, really just have this derelict political class that just can't do anything about implementation. Just will cave to the loudest local interest groups, will drag their feet, just have to be brought kicking and screaming into doing just the basics.

I mean, measure HLA is a fantastic measure, and just really shout out to Streets for All and all the other groups that were promoting that. But God, why did they even have to? You know what I mean? Why did they have to waste all their energy and money and time on that in a city that has a council of 14 outward Democrats and one non-partisan, who's probably a Republican, but will not come out and say that? Why do we need all that effort just to do something as simple as building bus and bike lanes? I thought we're against climate change as a Democratic party.

Nolan Gray:

Yeah. I mean, we talked about this element here of excessive influence of certain groups, and I think it's exactly that is. I mean, we've talked about this in the Neighborhood Defenders, the work by Einstein and Co on who shows up at these hearings and what are their attitudes and how do they diverge from the broader community. Of course, you might go out and do this general plan update where it's like, yeah, actually everybody's really down with bus and bike lanes, but then, oh, we actually propose to do it, and three crazy people showed up at the meeting and had a meltdown.

Until a couple of years ago, I would've said, and maybe this is still true, LA's political culture does seem uniquely dysfunctional. Maybe this is just proximity bias. I'm here and I'm watching it and I'm seeing it. But it just seemed like... It does seem uniquely tough, and we've had issues with corruption scandals related to discretionary zoning. But yeah, I'm sure you've thought about this a lot, but what are the political institutional changes that need to happen in a place like Los Angeles to deal with that underlying issue?

Stan Oklobdzija:

Oh, man. Where do we even start with the political institutional changes? I mean, but this is just to say-

Nolan Gray:

Urban governance broadly. Sorry, I just want to frame it. Yeah, yeah.

Stan Oklobdzija:

No, totally, totally. But I mean, this is just to say I was a resident in Los Angeles for nine years. All of my friends are still in LA. I still sort of think of LA as home. I think among American cities, Los Angeles is the city that we, as a country, most need to get right, because just given the layout of Los Angeles, given the urban form of Los Angeles, if we can convert the City of Los Angeles to be less automobile reliant, to be a place of housing abundance that people can start coming to again, that it can be like a sanctuary for people trying to flee oppression either within this country or from abroad. If we can do that with that City of Los Angeles, it becomes a beacon to other cities of the world, and

especially given the trials and what we're going to need to do to combat climate change or to mitigate climate change in the coming decades.

I mean, getting Los Angeles right gives a great example for cities, like Lagos and for Bangkok and Sao Paulo and such. I think Los Angeles is just really a city that we, as a nation, should be paying a lot more attention to. Again, also recency and availability bias. I'm sure people in Phoenix or San Diego would say, or Houston, would say the same thing about their cities. I just went to Houston for the first time, very cool place, terrific barbecue. Shout out to Houston.

Nolan Gray: I think you realize this when you drive from New Orleans to Houston, they're very clearly in the same cultural region. You might think you realize this looking at a map, but they really are clearly companion cities. I don't know what your feeling was.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah. I mean, Houston is kind of a bizarro New Orleans, where they have a government that gives a shit. Whereas in New Orleans, all bets are off. If you have electricity, it's a good day in New Orleans. But yeah, the cultures of the city, actually the layout of the city is very, very similar. It's kind of a Gulf south city. But yeah. Sorry, go on.

Ned Resnikoff: Well, I was just going to say, I mean, let's talk a little bit about New Orleans because that's where you reside now. I mean, it has a very different history from, I think, a lot of the other places that we tend to talk about on this podcast. I mean, the sort of history of segregationist, populist kind of governance throughout its history, but also kind of, in some ways, one of the original melting pots of the United States. And then, there's the things that have been in the headlines more recently, within the past 20 years or so, like Katrina. I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about what you've noticed there in terms of the way land use and land use patterns show up differently, and what are the housing challenges in New Orleans that are different from a place, like California or New York?

Stan Oklobdzija: That's a really good question, man. That's a really super good question. Yeah, I mean, I've been in New Orleans since August of last year. It's a great city. Terrific. If you've never visited New Orleans, do yourself a favor. Get a plane, come to the city. If you don't have fun here, it's entirely your fault because it's just impossible to not have a good time in New Orleans. I've been having too good of a time. I should probably go to Provo, Utah for a little bit and just chill out and get right with God or something. But no, New Orleans is a really interesting city, has housing challenges just the same as most other American cities. A lot of that was due not to an influx of people or a growth in population as it was in a lot of places, but to a destruction of a lot of the city's housing stock after Katrina in 2005. I think something like 800,000 units across the New Orleans metro were destroyed by Katrina.

Following Katrina, there was a destruction of a lot of the city's public housing, like the Iberville Projects, Lafitte Projects, the St. Thomas Projects, the Magnolia

Projects. If you're a juvenile fan, you know the Magnolia clap. Those were all taken down, and a lot of those residents were forced into places with low cost housing in the regions, primarily in the eastern part of the city, New Orleans East. Just given how American cities usually go, the parts of the city that are primarily Black in New Orleans are the worst parts of the city topographically. It's the lowlands of the city that are extremely flood prone, and a lot of those parts of the city were made even worse by drainage projects and pumping projects from the 1960s to create more sprawl land or more land, that first for all development.

It caused a big bowl effect in the middle of the city, which is... A lot of the destruction from Katrina came in that bowl. I mean, people think that the flooding in New Orleans came from a hurricane dumping water on the city, but actually the flooding came because the hurricane missed the city, dumped in Lake Pontchartrain and caused the levees, the inadequate levees to fail and fill that part of the city. New Orleans right now is a city that's losing a lot of population, and it's like a bifurcated loss of population. There's a lot of people whose home were destroyed in Katrina that weren't given any money for recovery, because a lot of that money was tied to the previous value of your home and just given typical segregationist zoning practices. Black people especially were given a lot less money because they had, quote, unquote, less valuable homes. Those people are gone or not part of the city anymore and are not residents of the city anymore.

But a lot of sort of higher SES folks have been leaving the city as well, because there's really just anemic job growth here, and there's really not much bringing people to the city. That's causing a spike in housing prices in a lot of these sort of... How do I put it? Sort of adjacent areas to the traditionally wealthier parts of the city. But New Orleans did segregation a lot differently than California cities did, just being a southern city. I'm from Berkeley, California originally. My hometown invented the infamous kludge of single family zoning to keep Black and Asian people out of the Claremont neighborhood. I mean, New Orleans could just do segregation the old-fashioned way. New Orleans had segregationist zoning until *Buchanan v. Warley*. But being the south, it enforced it... Sorry.

Nolan Gray: Do you want to unpack that a little bit? I think a lot of people don't know the history of *Buchanan v. Warley*.

Stan Oklobdzija: Shoot. Yeah, totally. Oh yeah, absolutely. Yeah, my bad. I mean, if we think about the origins of zoning in the United States, there's this history and the story of people not wanting to put homes near factories or factories near homes. But there's also this other sort of parallel track of zoning history in the United States where zoning was specifically to declare what group of people could live where. Some of the earliest zoning rules in America were in cities like San Francisco that were Chinese exclusion zones, or cities like Modesto or Stockton that had similar rules. Los Angeles had one of these first zoning code to-

Nolan Gray: I think I was reading about this. I think it was Modesto that actually had the first thing that is generally considered early point. I had to do a little bit more research on it, but it was some 1880 or 1890 where they were doing exactly this of to deal with Chinese residents to try to exclude them, but yeah.

Stan Oklobdzija: Right, yeah. San Francisco had something similar in the 1880s. I'm not sure who inched each other out first for America's first segregation zoning.

Nolan Gray: Who was more racist.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, right. Who wrote the racism down first. A lot of cities picked up on that and zoned by race. This culminated in a 1917 decision by the Supreme Court, in the case of Buchanan v. Warley, which was about the racially exclusionist zoning to the City of Louisville, Kentucky, I believe it was.

Nolan Gray: I'm from Lexington, so you can beat up on Louisville all day.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, it was a Kentucky city. I wasn't sure whether it was Lexington or Louisville. I'm pretty sure it's Louisville.

Nolan Gray: Lexington would never do anything that, but never mind that we probably did do everything that bad. But yeah, go ahead.

Stan Oklobdzija: Sure. Yeah. There was a case, actually, an NAACP lawyer, Charles Warley, I think his name was, brought this... Actually, bought a house in the white part of town and then didn't pay the owner because he couldn't legally take possession of the deed because of this restriction. That predictably caused the owner to sue him and that case on its way up to the Supreme Court who invalidated racially exclusionary zoning in 1917. Now, did that stop racially exclusionary zoning in the United States? Absolutely not. It switched to mostly being enforced through covenants until a later Supreme Court case in 1948, in and Shelley v. Kraemer.

Nolan Gray: Buchanan is kind of a hilarious case too because it was decided on the basis that this was an abridgment of the rights of white homeowners. It's like the correct outcome of, guys, you can't actually do racial zoning, this is messed up, but decided in the most kind of ridiculous way. It's like, "Okay. Means and ends, right? Okay. Sure. If you want to appeal to white's property rights to sell to Black families, I guess that's fine." But this is the funny topsy-turvy way of getting there.

Stan Oklobdzija: It's absolutely weird. I mean, because in Shelley v. Kraemer, which overturned state enforcement of racially restricted covenants, I think three or four of the Supreme Court justices had to recuse themselves because their homes had racially restricted covenants on them. It was a weird 5-0 or 4-0 decision of the Supreme Court, which is a great institution, United States Supreme Court.

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah. Now, we've innovated where they've realized that they just don't need to ever exclude themselves, recuse themselves.

Stan Oklobdzija: Don't worry about it, man. It's cool.

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah, yeah.

Stan Oklobdzija: That's how a government should-

Nolan Gray: And that's your second favorite government institution after the Senate, right, Stan? You're a big Senate guy.

Stan Oklobdzija: I am. Yeah.

Nolan Gray: Sorry, let's get back to the New Orleans thing. There's so many little elements where I want to poke you, but *Buchanan v. Warley* in New Orleans. New Orleans has explicitly racial zoning, but that gets tossed out.

Stan Oklobdzija: Right, yeah. Later, it's enforced through racially restrictive covenants and also just, I mean, it's the south in the 1900s. I mean, things were enforced through unofficial non-state violence. I mean-

Nolan Gray: Yeah, terrorism. Yeah.

Stan Oklobdzija: ... paramilitary groups, terrorism groups, like the Klan groups of the White Citizens League, et cetera. I mean, New Orleans in 1874 tries to launch a coup against the federal government and fails, but there is a monument built to the former confederates of that coup that was just taken down in 2017. Ancient history, but yeah. New Orleans, it's interesting, doesn't have the sort of segregationism by zoning that you would see in a California city. New Orleans didn't immediately go and down zone itself to be all single family. I live in the uptown neighborhood of New Orleans. It's one of the wider parts of the city, and this part of the city has a lot of what we call missing middle construction.

I live in a fiveplex right now. There is a lot of smaller plex-style apartments with no parking in this neighborhood, because you didn't really have to zone for segregation in this city, or the whites in the city didn't have to zone for segregation. Now, following the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, when all the legal remedies for explicit segregation were taken away, one of the things that happened to uptown, where I live right now, and a lot of the places near the Mississippi River, which are mostly white, they became historic preservation districts. I live in a gigantic historic preservation district, which is really cool in the summer here because you have these really crappy wood leaky windows, and it's impossible to not swelter in these places. It would be nice to have vinyl windows and keep that cool in. But hey, historic charms, right?

Ned Resnikoff: Is there something... Because the architecture of New Orleans is pretty unique. I mean, it's a stunningly beautiful city, but it's also, in that regard, it's also a little bit different from... It's not the typical built environment that you would see in other major cities that were formerly part of the Jim Crow South. I'm curious if there are other factors at play here that have preserved that architecture as opposed to a less walkable, more car-oriented central area of a southern city.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah. I mean, one of the big thing... Well, I mean, the first big thing about New Orleans is New Orleans surrendered really quickly in the Civil War. New Orleans did not put up much of a fight. New Orleans didn't get the torch, like cities like Columbia, South Carolina, or Atlanta, or various other places in Sherman's path. As a result, a lot of the old architecture here, a lot of the old Spanish style was preserved. But another interesting thing about New Orleans and why it really didn't get the bulldozer a lot of other cities is that it wasn't really possible to sprawl out of the city until relatively late. The drainage technology didn't really exist to start building the exurb white flight communities of the city where they currently exist today until about the mid to late 1960s, I believe. As a result, you didn't have the highway administration just jamming freeways through the city, like you did in places like Cincinnati or something like that.

I mean, not to say that there isn't, like Louis Armstrong's old neighborhood of Storyville, the sort of former red light district here in New Orleans where jazz was created is now a stupid freeway interchange. They built an elevated highway through this primarily. It's actually like a middle to upper middle class Black neighborhood in the 1950s. That was just completely demolished. Now, you have this really stupid freeway that's really loud and awful, bisecting Tremé from Mid-City. Yeah, that's, I think, the big reason here. It's also interesting because a lot of the affordability challenges of New Orleans have to do with those now exurb city or suburbs and exurban parts of the metro area, enforcing these extremely, extremely strict multifamily housing bans. St. Bernard Parish around here made it illegal to rent to anyone who's not a blood relative. Jefferson Parish had a ban on multifamily housing, which is the next parish over. Steve Scalise represents that part of the state. Yeah, there's a lot of those implements going on in the newer parts of the metro.

Nolan Gray: Well, I feel like New Orleans is also in this difficult situation that so many American cities are in, where there are part of this broader state that resents the existence of their cities. They have this antagonistic relationship with the state that wants them to fail. I don't know if that's true of New Orleans, but I just see that in so many contexts of a state that's almost held hostage by... Or a city that's held hostage by a state that resents their existence.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, that's exactly true of New Orleans. Especially now, given the new governorship, Republican Jeff Landry just took over from a Democrat, one of the last Democrats in the Southern United States.

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah, important distinction there.



Stan Oklobdzija:

Yeah, right. Yeah. One of the last Democrats in the United States Governor. That's a weird sentence, but anyways, people get it. Yeah, that's been an issue recently. Despite the fact that Orleans Parish and this metro is responsible for most of Louisiana's GDP, there's a lot of attempts from Baton Rouge to stick state influence here. There's going to be Louisiana State Patrolmen taking over some police duties in the city, and those cases being adjudicated by the State Attorney General, who's a Republican, and not by our local district attorney, who's a Democrat.

Yeah, there's quite a bit. There's quite a bit. Obviously, climate change is a major, major concern for not just New Orleans but all of southern Louisiana. We have a governor now who is skeptical. I don't know if that's strong enough of a term about climate change. That state efforts to halt coastal erosion are kind of on hold for right now. A lot of challenges for New Orleans, which is a shame, because like I said, this is a fantastic city full of really, really awesome people who made this really great couple months for me so far.

Nolan Gray:

Well, I think an advantage that New Orleans has certainly over some California cities is it still has that alternative that we made illegal. It still has this missing middle housing typology. It still has these mixed use neighborhoods. I would hope that it's at least a little bit easier to point to something that actually exists and say, "Hey, guys, we have this thing that has been made illegal, and we actually really love it. To the extent we still have it, we desperately try to preserve it."

Stan Oklobdzija:

Yeah. I mean, the preservation aspect isn't really a challenge here. But the problem, and the big, big challenge for New Orleans, I think, is that just as this city or as climate change ramps up, and as the extreme weather events that we see in this city become more and more severe, we're going to need to move the population centers of this city away from where they are now and closer to the Mississippi River, which is the high ground of the city, and it's the part of the city protected by a river levee. I mean, it's the least flood-prone area of the city. As it stands right now, it's illegal to, I mean, build almost anything here. I mean, if it's not illegal, it's extremely cost prohibited because of the historic preservation zone.

A lot of the housing challenges of New Orleans could be ameliorated if we concentrated new growth in the part of the city that's best equipped to handle it. The part of the city that's highest resourced, the part of the city that fares the best against hurricanes and future flooding, and frankly, the part of the city where an influx of new wealthy residents isn't going to be as disruptive as one of the poor, less white parts of the city. A lot of the new construction is being pushed into majority Black, low-income of New Orleans. Frankly, where you really shouldn't be putting a lot of new people, just given the flood challenges of there. It's going to take a lot of attitude adjusting like it does everywhere, if the city is going to start building to meet demand and to try to tackle displacement higher housing prices.

Ned Resnikoff: What are the local elected officials like in New Orleans? Do they get it or do they not?

Stan Oklobdzija: I mean, it's a panoply of people. You know what I mean? New Orleans, obviously, majority overwhelmingly Democrat city, and there's sort of a schism in the Democratic Party right now, both at the state level and here in Orleans Parish. There's an old guard of Democrat that sort of made their careers by playing nice with the Republicans that run the State of Louisiana. There's been a lot of backlash against a newer, more progressive, sort of upstart branch of the Democratic Party, led by, for example, my state representative, Mandie Landry, who is doing incredible things to jumpstart that part of Louisiana Democratic Party and make the Louisiana Democratic Party sort of more of a viable presence in state politics. But I mean-

Nolan Gray: Is everyone in politics named Landry?

Stan Oklobdzija: It's a pretty common Cajun name, apparently. A lot of Landrys, a lot of Thibodeauxs. It's a thing I'm learning in my time in Louisiana. They're not all related, the Boudreauxs and Thibodeauxs. But as far as housing goes, I mean, the big, big housing issues that have been dominant New Orleans politics is one homelessness. Homelessness has been ticking up recently as housing prices increase. New Orleans has that double whammy of being an extremely low income on average city, where average wages here are extremely low combined with really higher than average housing prices.

Nolan Gray: Kind of the same situation as Miami, right?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, exactly right. Miami's a really good example of that.

Nolan Gray: It's like this good second home place, which is challenge when you're trying to deal with housing affordability issues,

Stan Oklobdzija: No, 100%. Yeah. I mean, that sort of leads into the second big housing issue here in New Orleans, which has been short-term rentals. The whole Airbnb issue in a lot of places is like a boogeyman that a lot of left NIMBYs bring up for not wanting to permit new housing. I think here in New Orleans, it might be one of the few places where a surplus of short-term rentals is actually pulling housing off the market in an appreciable manner. I mean, if you look at that inside Airbnb mapper, there's quite a sizable chunk of the city's housing inventory. If that short-term rental mapper, that data is credible, is being taken up by short-term housing. I mean, New Orleans is a city of 350,000 people or something like that that gets 1.4 million visitors a year. There's a huge influx of people coming in obviously. It rules. Come to New Orleans, have a good time.

Nolan Gray: I would assume there's a tension there too. I would imagine a huge chunk of the economy is dependent on tourism. You want facilities for tourists, but on the

other hand, absolutely, I mean, just the scale of Airbnbs or short-term rentals broadly in the city is pretty unusual, pretty extreme. Yeah.

Stan Oklobdzija: No, totally. Totally. I mean, there's this obvious issues that you don't want a bachelor party showing up on your block once a week on Wednesday when you got to go to work in the morning. That's obvious, right? But there is also this sort of idea that a lot of these Airbnbs aren't in the highest resource parts of the city. A lot-

Stan Oklobdzija: Airbnbs aren't in the highest resource parts of the city. A lot of these are in lower income Black neighborhoods that abut popular tourist parts of the city, like Treme for example, which abuts the French Quarter. It's a real easy walk from Treme into the Quarter, so a lot of Treme has been turned into, or a lot of those formerly low-income units have been turned into short-term rentals. There's a recent court decision actually that upheld a ban on short-term rentals in the city. But, like in Los Angeles with a lot of things, it's now up to the city to actually enforce that law. And so the other half of governance capacity is not just passing policy, but actually implementing that policy. And that's really where the rubber meets the road and it remains to be seen if anything can be done about it.

Nolan Gray: Our New Orleans listeners are probably listening with bated breath right now. What is the zoning reform program for a city like New Orleans, that you would suggest?

Stan Oklobdzija: I mean, it's pretty easy. You should upzone areas like Uptown, right? I mean, if you look at a city like New Orleans that I think is like 55 or 60% Black, you have these parts of the city that are like 70% white and it's insane. I mean, if you're just drawing numbers out of an urn, what is the probability you're going to get something like that? These are the best parts of the city, like I said. They are the best situated to withstand extreme weather events and it's absolutely insane that we're not trying to add more density to this part of the city. So, I mean like, upzone my neighborhood, please upzone my neighborhood. There are a lot of really, really underutilized lots that could be turned into like 8 plexes, into 10 plexes. Even buildings that are a bit higher, right?

New Orleans has a really, really great urban layout. I mean, the city is easily navigable. It's all flat, so it's easily navigable by a bike, especially by an e-bike. And there's a lot of potential to run more frequent mass transit if you can get some more density in here. The city is famously served by streetcars, right? The Streetcar Named Desire. We still have a streetcar on St. Charles Avenue. It's like an old sort of museum piece, which is really nice in the four months of the year that the weather is nice, but is complete garbage in the summer. As you can imagine, somewhere with no air conditioner. But a lot of that could maybe be supplemented by Bus Rapid Transit or something like that, pick up the slack.

Nolan Gray: Mm-hmm. Why don't we jump into lightning round? These never end up being lightning rounds, but we're going to hit you with some questions here. Most underrated American City?

Stan Oklobdzija: Oh, man. My partner, she's from Kansas City and I just went and I'm surprised at how much I love Kansas City every time. The food's good, it's a pretty cool place, people are real nice. So yeah, Kansas City.

Nolan Gray: Yeah, I'm totally with. I had an amazing time in Kansas City. It's got a lot of good urban fabric, great architecture, the streetcar is pretty useful, barbecue.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah.

Nolan Gray: But I had not thought about Kansas City part of going. And yeah, the new airport, it's amazing.

Stan Oklobdzija: Oh yeah, super nice. Yeah, shout out to Kansas City. Great place. Go Chiefs, I guess.

Nolan Gray: Well, the fix was in, so yeah, the Chiefs won. Don't worry. Ned, what do you got?

Ned Resnikoff: All right. So, since living in New Orleans, you've had plenty of time to take in some local jazz. Give us a recommendation.

Stan Oklobdzija: Oh, man. So many good places. I'm going to recommend two that are good for different reasons. There's a bar called Bacchanal out in the Bywater, primarily a wine bar, though they have cocktails in the upstairs, like traditional bar section. It's a spot that you go in, you can buy a bottle of wine, they charge you a corkage on it and stuff, but you go out into this kind of gravel sort of beer garden-looking area. And they have a stage, musicians there all the time, always free, but tip the musicians, they're working hard for you. Really awesome place, like on a warm afternoon or evening to just hang out, listen to some music. Super chill, very cool place.

On the other side of the spectrum is a spot out in, I guess the edge of Treme called Kermit's Mother-in-Law Lounge, right? Famous New Orleans trumpeter, Kermit Ruffins. He has two loves, it's playing jazz and barbecuing. There was a bar that was undergoing some financial difficulties or something like that, so Kermit just bought it. He runs a gigantic barbecue outside, where when he's not on the stage, he's grilling up sausages and ribs and stuff. Tremendously cool guy, tremendously cool place, extremely awesome jazz energy there. Yeah, that is very cool.

Nolan Gray: You lived in downtown LA for a while. What's the best place to get a drink in downtown LA?

Stan Oklobdzija: Oh, man. That's a real good question and I guess it depends on the drink you'd like. If you're going to get cocktails, The Wolves over on Spring Street and maybe like, I think, 6th Street and Spring. Great cocktails. Get there early, it gets really crowded. More into the why is, there's a cool little balcony on the second floor that not a lot of people know about. So, if you see a little windy staircase, get your drink, go up there, walk outside, really cool. So, that's for cocktails.

If you're into beer, it's not technically downtown, it's kind of Arts District, but Boomtown Brewery is fantastic. Native Son also on Grand and 9th has a bunch of really good stuff. It's a brewery out of Anaheim, but they also carry a bunch of stuff, including this great brewery in San Diego, Pure Project, one of my favorites.

For wine, Propaganda in the Arts District. Also, some of the best pizza in the city. Yeah, those are my three. Oh, shoot, no. Cafe Triste in Chinatown also. Great natural wine bar, excellent spot.

Nolan Gray: Nice. Yeah, I was hoping you would say The Mermaid, man.

Stan Oklobdzija: Oh, The Mermaid is really good.

Nolan Gray: Good little cocktail Tiki kind of vibe, but all good recommendations. Sorry, yes.

Stan Oklobdzija: Not trying to blow up The Mermaid. It's a real small place. I used to live across the street from it. But Mermaid is good. Actually, yeah, no, go to The Mermaid. They need the business, go to The Mermaid.

Nolan Gray: Our dozens of listeners will. You've ruined it now, Stan, you've done it. It's no longer going to be... Dozens of YIMBYs tuning in are going to flood it on Friday, so.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, that's true. I don't live there anymore. So yeah, someone go be the new Stan and spend all your money at The Mermaid.

Ned Resnikoff: Favorite international city.

Stan Oklobdzija: I am extremely partial to Rio de Janeiro. I spent about six months there. Really, really like Rio de Janeiro. I think, in a lot of ways, the Zona Sul of Rio could be a vision of what the coast of Los Angeles could look like. Rio's another city where it's impossible to not have a good time in. If you don't have fun in Rio, it's also your fault. Yeah.

Ned Resnikoff: What's the coast look like? Why is it a model for LA?

Stan Oklobdzija: Oh man. So, the coast number one is extremely transit accessible, right? So there's several metro stops right along Copacabana and Ipanema Beach and Leblon as well. They extended the subway since I've lived there. So, the beach is

a real melting pot of the city. Because it's a city park, so people from all over the city are there. Various little lifeguard posts have different sort of vibes that people go for, so that's kind of cool as well. But also, I mean the beach in Rio is just surrounded by high-rise buildings, so there's a lot of life and things to do as you're getting closer to the beach or as you're leaving the beach. Whereas in LA, there's a gigantic freeway and a surface parking lot, which is kind of a bummer. So yeah, no, super cool spot.

Nolan Gray: Stan, are you suggesting that beach access is not maximized by having lots of parking next to the beach?

Stan Oklobdzija: I think a guy standing up at public meeting meme, you should have a train or bus to the beach is better.

Nolan Gray: Very good. Yeah. Okay. Hot take, controversial take. People might be tuning off after you've said that. What TV show should YIMBYs watch to understand cities, housing, urban politics, anything?

Stan Oklobdzija: Oh, that's a really good one. It's kind of an obvious answer, but it's really good, so I'm going to say it anyways. David Simon, about 10 years ago, made a miniseries called Show Me a Hero, about the fight to put public housing in Yonkers. I think it's one of the best things on housing ever made. It's fantastic. Yeah, so, Show Me a Hero.

Nolan Gray: Sorry, I kind of knew the answer to that, but Show Me a Hero is so good that I need every opportunity to beat YIMBYs over the head with it. I think you were the one who told me to watch it, actually.

Stan Oklobdzija: Oh, really? Oh, man.

Nolan Gray: I think so. And thanks. Oh my gosh, yeah, amazing.

Ned Resnikoff: It's a funny show because, even though it's the norm in a lot of places, you don't see very many shows depicting an actual weak mayor system. If I remember the show correctly, there's all this back and forth about whether or not they're going to build this affordable housing and the mayor is trying to slow down the progress of it and then the city manager just does it. The mayor's late to a meeting and the city manager just does it. And yeah, that's how it would... I mean, obviously that's how it worked in the story that Show Me a Hero was adapted from, but it's how it would work in a lot of other cities too.

Stan Oklobdzija: That's the truth.

Nolan Gray: You travel a lot, Stan. This is very much not a lightning round question, this is just me picking your brain. When you travel, how do you approach learning a new city? Do you have things that you try to do in different cities, different specific

things where you're like, okay, I'm going to do these few things to try to learn an aspect about the city?

Stan Oklobdzija: So, it's really easy to get online or ask people and figure out five or so, can't miss things, when you go to the city. If you go to Kansas City, you got to go to Oklahoma Joe's and get the Z-Man brisket sandwich, which is great, you got to go. But I feel like, you lay that out and then when you get to these places, just talk to people. Everyone is really stoked usually that someone is visiting their city and wants to tell you all about their city. So, be cool, sit at a bar somewhere, talk to the people sitting next to you and you're going to hear a lot about different things that you should check out next.

Nolan Gray: Take your headphones off maybe.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah. Interact with your fellow human being, it is fun sometimes.

Ned Resnikoff: Unless you're listening to this podcast, then keep your headphones on.

Stan Oklobdzija: It's true, that's true.

Nolan Gray: No, that's fantastic. Favorite fictional city?

Stan Oklobdzija: Man, that's a really good one. Oh, you know what it would be? It would be Los Angeles in Her, in the movie Her.

Nolan Gray: Oh man, gosh, you understand our listener. They're going to love this. Yeah, of course. I was just thinking about that movie this morning.

Stan Oklobdzija: I know what side my bread is buttered on.

Nolan Gray: Do you want to share your Twitter handle, by the way, while we...

Stan Oklobdzija: He's right you know. Brought to you by Carl's Jr. No, joke.

Nolan Gray: That's such a beautiful movie. It is just so nice too, to see a depiction of the future that's showing, here's a social challenge and we're very non-judgmental about it. It's complicated.

Stan Oklobdzija: It's also funny that the LA of the future is the Shanghai of today.

Nolan Gray: Yeah. I want to step back a little bit and another aspect of some of the work you've done that I think probably a lot of folks don't know about is, you are a crime reporter, right? In Sacramento for a little while. Do you want to talk about that?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, that was my, well, not my first, first job out of college, but the job I sort of landed at for the longest after for undergrad. So, I got out of college and I

wanted to go be a newspaper reporter, because as an academic, now I really know the growth industries and where the money is at, obviously.

Nolan Gray: You're just in it for the money, right? Absolutely.

Stan Oklobdzija: I'm thinking about typewriter repair next maybe or something like that. Yeah, so I bopped around newspapers around California, but ended up at the Sacramento Bee and then ended up about a year after I got there, on the night cops' desk. So, the way the Bee worked back then, we had two crime reporters. One was daytime, so a 10:00 AM to six P.M. shift or something like that. And there was a person at night that came in to pick up ongoing stories from the day, but also things that had happened right before the paper was about to go to press. So, my shift was, it was four to midnight or something like that.

And yeah, it was a lot of just driving around Sacramento with a police scanner, with a Thomas Guide, because this was the days before Google Maps. So, flashlight in your mouth trying to find grid A2, to figure out where to make a turn. And it was really interesting, because it's a really sort of unsupervised reporting environment. So, I'd cover the capital and you're dealing with someone's spokesperson, not deliberately trained with reporters and that sort of thing. But, when you're doing night cops, I mean you're talking to the sergeant that shows up to a crime scene or you're banging on the doors and talking to the neighbors and stuff, and you really get to understand and know a city. I mean, kind of unfortunately, by seeing it at its worst.

Ned Resnikoff: This is just a pitch to the listeners to this podcast, where if you aren't already, please become a subscriber to your local newspaper. I mean, if you're listening to this podcast, also odds are that you care about local politics and local land use in your city. And so, what better way to follow it than to subscribe to the local paper? Sac Bee is still doing great work. I think they're really doing an incredible job. San Francisco Chronicle also seems to actually be doing quite well these days. LA Times, little bit of a tougher thing, because their owner just sucks. But yeah, wherever you are, I really think that the local news environment is really incredibly important to the work we do and it's just worth supporting.

Stan Oklobdzija: It's like two beers a month, like 15 bucks, just do it.

Ned Resnikoff: Just cancel your Netflix subscription. Netflix is just increasingly useless, so just cancel your Netflix subscription and sign up for the Times, the Picayune or whatever your local paper is.

Nolan Gray: Great, Ned. Anyone else you want to beat up on while we have you rolling?

Ned Resnikoff: Well, I mean, I don't think we have the time for all of my grievances, but.

Nolan Gray: He's cooking. Okay. Yeah, subscribe to your local paper. I mean, this is very much absolutely tied up with what we do, which regularly shocks me is, there's so few



people paying attention to the stuff we do. That to me is a big part of my theory of why YIMBYs have been effective is, it's kind of just a lot of normal people paying attention to some of these fights for the first time ever. And they might've been fights that 40, 50 years ago would've been intensively covered by some local journalists, who would eventually write an amazing book. And nowadays, it's like nobody is covering this stuff, nobody... You have these YIMBYs that become very influential, because it's like, I'm the one who goes to my planning hearing and tweets about it, and that was historically a function fulfilled by a journalist, but they've since been laid off and I'm the only one doing it. That's hugely influential just in terms of sharing what's going on and then shaping the narrative.

Stan Oklobdzija: I mean, totally, man. My first newspaper jobs, that's what I was doing. I was sitting in city councils of cities that were like 8,000 people, like 4,000 people in one case, and just covering the minutiae of city government. That used to be a paying job. Not a very well-paying job, but it was a job that one could do and not anymore. So, a lot of YIMBY's are picking up that slack, and would be good if it was paying a job still, but... This is why you should subscribe.

Nolan Gray: I mean, this is pretty untethered from, I think, our core interests. But I'm curious, what would it even look like to revive local media? What's the path there?

Stan Oklobdzija: This is a kind of out there idea, but I really think that the post office should create a newswire. So, employ people to do local reporting, just straight down the line local reporting and run an AP style newswire. Make it creative commons or something like that, so everyone could pick it up. It'd be a great thing for American democracy.

Ned Resnikoff: We're really turning the post office into the everything app. There's postal banking, there's post offices newswire, there's Nolan's idea about, let the post office build housing.

Nolan Gray: In keeping with my far right, I'm the far right Trump Republican of California YIMBY. I support turning the post office into a massive homebuilder. It's a classic conservative issue.

Ned Resnikoff: It's going to be a public sector version of Mitsubishi in South Korea, where it's just in every industry.

Stan Oklobdzija: The American zaibatsu is the post office.

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah.

Nolan Gray: I mean, Ned, I want to hear your thoughts on this, right? Because it does seem like, just so much attention gets absorbed on national issues, where it's like, Stan, to a point you were making earlier, the average reader can just do nothing. It's almost like, you might as well be reading about a political sci-fi novel. You

can't really do anything about national politics, it's pure fun consumption. Whereas if you get more people reading about their local politics, they can read, understand a situation, and then act on it and meaningfully shift what happens. And so, I don't know, Ned, what do we do? How do we revive local media?

Ned Resnikoff: I mean, I think some of it is going to have to come down to trust busting. The fact that, so much of how people access news is mediated by massive platforms, with sort of opaque systems for actually delineating what news gets shown to people. And then the fact that there's also an oligopoly in digital advertising. I think you need to attack both those things. Because, right now there was actually some good writing about this from Josh Marshall at Talking Points Memo recently. Their advertising revenue has cratered over the past decade or so, and in part it's because of just the cartelization of that industry.

I think the other thing is that, there's actually a lot of good nonprofit journalism happening at the state and local level. And so, shout out to here in California, CalMatters, which is a nonprofit organization that reports on things at the state level. Berkeley side and Oakland side and the Bay Area have been doing great work. I think we're seeing some of these smaller, more flexible, oftentimes alternative business model approaches to journalism at the local level. So, I definitely think those things should be supported. For any listeners in New York, I would say, subscribe to THE CITY, subscribe to Hell Gate. But at the end of the day, I think it's also just sort of the really dysfunctional distribution model that has emerged in part, because the United States for a long time just gave up on antitrust enforcement.

Stan Oklobdzija: Got to shout out The Lens here in New Orleans, give them a subscription too.

Nolan Gray: So, Stan, what are you working on next? It seems like you're doing a lot more work on this. You've just gone out to Tulane. You're an assistant professor, so you have to be cranking out like one paper a month, right? What are you working on? What's next on the housing? You've said you've done a little bit of survey work, but I'm curious to hear what you're thinking about now.

Stan Oklobdzija: So, with Chris Elmendorf and Clayton Nall, I'm working on another survey. Like I'd mentioned about, informational treatments that can, their effectiveness in shifting people's perceptions about housing markets. So, can you cure supply skepticism by teaching people a little bit more about housing markets? We're also looking at the sort of policies that people think would be most effective in ameliorating the housing crisis. So, are people right now more in favor when they have an opinion about housing of things like rent control or for a liberalizing zoning? What else?

What I'd mentioned before with Dominik Stecula, where we're looking at how people's perceptions about their current housing markets and the places that they live, and also their willingness to, let's see, to liberalize zoning to allow more housing, based on different perceptions of who might live there. Whether

it's going to be people of their same race or a different race, people of their same political affiliation or a different political affiliation.

So, that's something we're putting together right now. Those are the housing related things. I also have another thing that I'm working on with a guy named Chris Witko at Penn State. It's not a lot about housing, but I think it's something also really important about American politics and it's about parts of the country that are mostly male right now, because the women have gone on to better opportunities either to college or to move to more productive metro areas. So, what happens with the political beliefs of people who stay behind in these areas? Something interesting to me, and I think that...

Nolan Gray: What parts of the country are male dominated? I don't know anything about this.

Stan Oklobdzija: So, there's a lot of parts of the former Rust Belt, parts of the Midwest and the Deep South are, especially when you look at prime marriage age, are overwhelmingly male. So, given a lot of really well needed and positive advancements in equality between the genders, women have become a majority of college graduates and even professional school graduates, right now. Before, women pay the childbearing penalty, women earn more generally than men. And women are doing this in places like New York City or San Francisco or Los Angeles, these high productivity metro centers. But they're coming from places around the country and leaving them behind. So, a woman in a previous generation would've stayed in a place and just kind of married the guy from high school. She's gone, and that dude from high school is by himself. And so, what has that done to people's perceptions about immigrants, for example, or people's perceptions about politics and what they want to see out of elected officials? That's something we're working on right now.

Nolan Gray: That's super fascinating to me. I'm just popping off, I'm a low info observer on this space. It seems to me that this is related to this whole thing of the loneliness or the rise of loneliness. You have a lot of singles, you have a lot of people that don't have any friends. Of course, that's not true of anyone on this call, but they are out there. I mean, what's your sort of punch going into this of, I would assume, yeah, do these folks become more resentful? More radical in a certain sense on their views of like, throwing out the social order? We know that young single men are this potent source of radical energy, right?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah. So, there's a lot of work right now about boys and young men sort of falling behind recently in socioeconomic status and even things like life expectancy. So, a lot of the new knowledge economy is leaving this group behind. And that has consequences to it, right? There is a huge amount of political instability that's created when someone previously with a high position in society has to go down a rung or two. It creates a lot of resentment and a lot of potential for political violence. And I think that's an important thing to acknowledge to understand better. As we see angrier, nastier turn in our politics

and an uptick in instances of stochastic terrorism by people like this, I think it's important to see the motivator and the drivers of this phenomenon.

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah, I mean, this is something I've been thinking a lot about, and I feel like we could do another two hours on it, even though it's somewhat outside the scope of what the Metropolitan Abundance Project focuses on. But I mean, for thousands of years basically, having an excess supply of young men without any ability to absorb them into the social mainstream or into labor capacity or anything like that, that's been a massive problem. And I think you can start to see the... You can really see the consequences of that now in the United States. I mean, especially with the breakdown of any sort of... I mean, it goes back to the Theda Skocpol argument that we were talking about earlier, or Bowling Alone, and just the absence of even those sort of platonic social institutions that give people's life a social thickness and have some sort of socializing function, in the sense of, preventing people from spinning out into political function, in the sense of preventing people from spinning out into political radicalism?

Stan Oklobdzija: That's totally correct. Yeah.

Nolan Gray: Yeah. One of the things I wonder though is, what do you even do about that? I think this is actually somewhat more connected to our work than we're maybe at first considering. I think everyone on this call would say it's good, we need to let cities be big, massive engines of opportunity, let everybody who wants to move to a city, move to a city. And that might partly solve the problem. There might be a lot of people who are stuck in these declining opportunity places, places with a severe gender imbalance where it's like, if you could just move more guys to DC which has a gender imbalance and more women than men, you make some progress on the issue.

But there're always going to be these places that get left behind. I think that's the common argument against letting cities rip. It's like, but then aren't you just going to absorb all of a certain type of person out of these lower opportunity areas, and they're just going to get worse and they're going to get more radical? And then because we have a system in the US where it's land votes, we get more dysfunctional national politics. What would you say to somebody who made that argument, Stan?

Stan Oklobdzija: This is a problem that a complex society needs to adjudicate. It's one of the problems of having land vote. If you have a US Senate where 70% of the population gets 30% of Senate votes, you're really straining the definitions or straining the boundaries of what can legitimately be called a democracy. But to the bigger problem, a dynamic economy is going to have shifting winners and losers.

The first industrialization of the United States is the Connecticut River Valley, when all of that industry moved into Ohio and to Illinois and Pennsylvania and stuff, just because it was more efficient to do it there and to transport it. The Erie Canal and Chicago ate New Orleans's lunch as a shipping center. But places

adapt, places search for new comparative advantages. And I think the state is wise and also morally has a duty to intervene, to aid in this transition.

One of the things that's really difficult though, it's easier to abstract it out as an economic issue, and I think that's where most policy should go, but sense of place is really important for human beings. A sense of a home and a sense of a geographic location as having a lot to do with a person's identity is important. And people don't abandon it as easily or as quickly as our economic models might have them. They cling to places. There's value in that. It's a complex issue, for a state to balance and for a state to deal with, and I don't really have an easy answer for it.

Nolan Gray: It's partly self-resolving. This is the story of the US until quite recently, that there were mass migrations of people out of low opportunity areas to higher opportunity areas, and as a result of that, you get higher wages in the sending areas, 'cause you just have more labor scarcity. That was why wages went up in the south over so much of the 20th century is that poor people, both white and black, were just leaving the region en masse. To the extent that we've stopped that up, I think that might potentially be a major factor in why we're seeing declining reductions in regional inequality, for example.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah. Just the gains for being in a high productivity area now are just so much more than they used to be. I forget, there's a statistic about the average wealth difference between St. Louis and New York City from 1960 versus today, and it's just orders of magnitude greater. There's a lot more returns to being in one of these high productivity areas now, just given the nature of the new economy.

And I'm not sure what the answer is. How does one fix that? How does one make a place like Appalachia viable?

Ned Resnikoff: Isn't this the theory of the Inflation Reduction Act though, at least in part, that you're going to cite the major manufacturing centers of the new green economy in some of these areas, and that's how you integrate them into the high productivity, high modernist world of sophisticated green tech and just the tech world in general?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, sure, to a certain extent. But it's really difficult to figure out exactly where these things would go for the most bang for your buck. It's a difficult problem. That's why we should have government with a capacity, to solve these difficult problems.

Nolan Gray: You mentioned the issue of democracy. I think this is an interesting issue that I'd be curious to hear from you as a political scientist on is, I look at urban governance in the US and there are a number of weird features of it. I was just in Pittsburgh giving a talk last week when we recorded this. They're closed primaries, they're odd year, and then also, Pittsburgh proper is a little bit of a rump state, it covers maybe a quarter to a third of the metropolitan region.

On so many margins, you just have Democratic weirdness. The metro area of Pittsburgh is completely fragmented among, I think in the case of Pittsburgh, literally hundreds of jurisdictions. The odd year thing reduces participation. The closed primary and what is effectively a single party city closes participation.

New York is another extreme example of this. Almost nobody participates in the meaningful election, which is the Democratic primary. I'm wondering, besides this maybe being a little bit of a concern for us, if we want to believe we live in a democratic society, is this a problem for housing policy? Is this a problem for metropolitan abundance, that people don't participate? How do urban politics change if cities incorporated maybe their far-flung suburbs and normal people actually came out to vote for elections?

Stan Oklobdzija:

I think the big issue is less participation and more the fact that parties in government aren't really able to exercise this power of governance and voters aren't really able to recognize who is in power, such that when elections come, they can vote them out or give them another term. So, this is really, really different from, for example, a parliamentary system where you know the coalition that's in power, and so you see how are things going. And if things are going bad, you know exactly who to blame. And the other parties are coming out saying, hey, it is these people's faults, vote for us.

You don't really have that in American urban governance. Number one, there's just so many different layers of government in our federal system that it's almost impossible to figure out who is to blame for something. Who's to blame for housing scarcity in Los Angeles? Is it the government of Los Angeles? Is it the LA Board of Supervisors? Is it the California Assembly, or what about HCD? There's these so many trillions of layers, that people just throw up their hands and say, all government is bad. It just creates this cynicism about governance, so people just don't participate, they don't care. It's just something inevitable that's going to be wrong with the world.

That more heightened transparency and, I think, a move to a more party-based system of urban governance rather than a centered system of urban governance, and more flattened governing structures so that there is one body or one person that people can vote up or down on, would be a lot better for these issues that we're concerned with.

Nolan Gray:

I want to pick on one issue that you raised there. I think one of the classic progressive reforms was, let's make local elections nonpartisan. I don't necessarily know exactly why that happened, but it happened. You go in and vote in many US cities and it's not even clear who's in which party. You've argued actually the opposite, which is that we need more parties in cities, we need multi-party democracy in cities. What's the case for that? You have a great post on Slow Boring, which is Matt Yglesias' blog, but I want to give you a moment to unpack that a little bit for folks who haven't read it.

Stan Oklobdzija:

In the city of Los Angeles, everyone is ostensibly a Democrat. Even if you are a Republican, you go to extreme, extreme lengths to hide the fact that you're Republican. Rick Caruso was a lifelong Republican. He famously deregistered before he went up against Karen Bass two years ago. Elections become candidate-centric, but it's really difficult to find information about candidates. What's the difference between a Democrat like Aaron Peskin in San Francisco or Dean Preston in San Francisco versus another San Francisco Democrat like Matt Haney? You really need to do a lot of research and you need to send a lot of energy to understand which positions these candidates have and how they map on to your own positions. And it's a lot of work, I mean, just multiply that through the entire list of candidates that the typical person has to go through.

Parties are a really, really good shortcut for this, because by knowing a candidate's party you know their position on a variety of issues. The way politics is right now, these policy positions can map pretty neatly onto various political subfactions. A group that's done this extremely well in urban politics have been leftists and progressives. Leftists and progressives are doing extremely well in Los Angeles elections because they throw these progressive labels onto their candidates. You know if Ground Game endorses a candidate, what this candidate is for on a lot of things. So, it makes things really easy. It's a great shortcut.

I think changing the structure elections to make them more party centric, and there's a lot of ways you can do this, I can get into it if you want to, would do a lot to reduce the information burden on voters, so that you can see that right now the city of Los Angeles is being governed by, I don't know, let's say, homeowner Democrats. And I don't like this, so I'm going to throw in a vote for the Socialists, or I'm going to throw in a vote for the pro-housing candidate, or I'm going to throw in a vote for a Republican. I don't know. That's a lot easier to do than go figure out, Joe Blow is trying to come down from the state Senate, what kind of votes did Joe Blow make there? It's a whole big thing.

Nolan Gray:

The natural next question then of course is, how do you build that multiparty system at a local level?

Stan Oklobdzija:

One of the big things you can do is something that progressive reformers tried doing about 100 years ago, and that's multi-member districts. One of the things that happens when you have a single-member district... And just to clarify these terms a bit, a single-member district is what most American cities have right now, so you have a geographic chunk of area and one person represents that chunk. I used to live in Los Angeles Council District 14. It's a big chunk of Downtown LA and Boyle Heights and El Sereno. It's governed by one dude, Kevin de León, now maybe someone different, come November. I live in New Orleans Council District B right now, so it's this big chunk of area. One person represents it.

That's not necessarily the way governance is structured across the entire world. In a lot of countries, more than one person will represent a single geographic area. You can have two people, three people, five people, seven people all

representing one area. It helps a lot, one, because it allows for more niche candidates. If you have one candidate per area, the incentive for the parties is to become the biggest tent possible. You want to swallow up all these little niche positions, create a giant tent, so you're winning that plurality of the vote. If you don't have to be the first place winner, you can go for a more niche slice of the vote. And especially in an American city, that makes a lot of sense when you have a lot of ethnic diversity.

I used to live in Koreatown in Los Angeles. Koreatown is an incredibly diverse place. You have a huge Armenian population, Korean population, naturally, given the name, but also Bengali population. You have a bunch of immigrants from Mexico. But also, besides just Mexico, a bunch of immigrants from Oaxaca who speak a different language, several languages in fact. You have immigrants from Central America. Just a whole panoply of people that lack representation when there's only one person that's representing the district. That also translates to ideological differences. You can have a pro-renter party, for example, representing renters who may not be the plurality of the district, but represent a large chunk.

When you have that many candidates, and these candidates are running more niche positions, the incentive to run on slates to reduce its information burden is increased, and so you have more slate voting, more party list voting, et cetera. Depending on the way you structure this election, you can incentivize that more or less.

Nolan Gray: You envision these being slates? Because I think status quo. I'm a Democrat. Good, status quo works for me. My party completely runs cities. It might not be the Democrats that I like, but I would be concerned of if there's actual genuine multi-party competition, it might dilute the extent to which people identify with my party, which might make them do weird things when they're voting in state or federal elections. Right?

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah. I feel like the average voter at the municipal level really doesn't gain much utility just by being represented by all Democrats, like I certainly... My life was not made demonstrably better by living in a city that is run entirely by Democrats-

Nolan Gray: Right.

Stan Oklobdzija: ... especially given the extreme heterogeneity between a party. I think, just given recent trends in politics, people are looking for these more niche types of candidates within their preferred party and just having that slate endorsement. Depending on how you want to do it, you could have a fusion ballot where someone can be a YIMBY, comma, Democrat or something like that, or Democratic Socialist, or I don't know, Libertarian Republican or something to that effect. I feel the ideological orientation is more what matters than the party label.



Nolan Gray:

Yeah. I would assume that this would only increase participation. I would assume that a lot of people just sit out local elections 'cause they're like, look, what does it really matter?

I'm curious. I wonder to what extent does ranked-choice vote help you to get at some of this? Something I really enjoy... I lived in New York for a while, and New York is very much barely a democracy. It's really hard to vote, it's closed primaries, odd year, long lines at the voting booth. I just didn't vote, unless I thought it was actually an election where... The plus side of this is that the vote polls are actually so small that you actually... And the universe of your individual vote might matter. But the downside is, the vast majority of people don't participate.

Moving out to California, now we're living in a context where it's like, great, cool. I'm voting in a jungle primary. The two top winners are going to go forward. These are a relatively small turnout, but my vote actually does matter, even if I'm not registered for the right party or I forget to show up for the right election. Even if I forget to show up for the primary, there's still going to be a meaningful election in the general. I wonder to what extent do you see that as a slight improvement, or no?

Stan Oklobdzija:

This all goes to say we should make it as easy and as painless and as costless to vote as possible. I think one of the big deficiencies of our constitution is that there's no affirmative right to vote in the constitution. I live in Louisiana right now. I voted for governor in, I think, late September of last year. The turnout was something abysmal, like 30% of people. Most of us didn't even know there was an election. You have to register ahead of time. You have to present a state ID to vote. It's just a gigantic... It's like a nightmare. So, turnout in this state is abysmal. Someone can win the governorship with, I think, 18% of votes cast. It's something appalling like that.

We know in the United States how to make voting easy, and that's through Vote-by-Mail. There's eight states, I think, that do it, California being the latest addition to it. It's the cheapest way of conducting an election. It gives people the opportunity to vote at their leisure. There's literally no argument against it, except if you believe in fairy tales of voter fraud, which is just absurd. It's just completely absurd on its face. There's been 12 instances of voter fraud over a 12-year period over billions of vote cast. You might as well be worried about alien invasions or something like that if you're going to be caring about voter fraud. It's a very low-cost fix to make voting easier and to boost turnout.

But I think beyond that, we really should be thinking more in the housing movement and then in the abundance movement generally about our political institutions in the United States. We have extremely peculiar political institutions compared to the rest of the developed world. And I think it's no secret why our outcomes are so divergent, especially given the fact that we're such a wealthy, wealthy country. Missouri has the same GDP as Denmark, I think, which is crazy if you have ever been to either.

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah, I am totally in agreement with you that we need to think about governing institutions, and urban governance in particular, very carefully. I would even go a little bit further than you on the question of having a right to vote. I believe Australia has a compulsory voting model. You actually receive a small fine if you don't vote. And I mean, why not? I think that's a good idea, personally, as long as it's also at the same time made very easy and convenient to vote.

I also think though, in some places, there's also this question of just the clarity of what you're voting for. This is where the weak mayor, strong mayor distinction that I alluded to earlier comes in. Not to dwell too much on California, but I think also here, but in other places as well, you have these sprawling ballots, where it's like you're voting for the executive on the mosquito abatement district or whatever, and you're voting on a ballot measure to make some extremely esoteric change to the state constitution.

Stan Oklobdzija: You could do dialysis.

Ned Resnikoff: Yes, yes. The dialysis one is the one that was on my mind as a California resident.

Nolan Gray: I'm proud to be voting for the YIMBY mosquito abatement officer, as opposed to the NIMBY.

Ned Resnikoff: I'm actually pretty NIMBY on mosquitoes myself, but you do you, Nolan.

Nolan Gray: Fair, fair.

Ned Resnikoff: I think that's the other element of... There should be a relatively small number of officials that you are actually required to know their positions on in order to make informed decisions. And then also, those officials need to be imbued with the authority to actually do things so that you can then judge their performance and decide whether to keep them in next term or vote them out.

Stan Oklobdzija: I think that's absolutely correct, and I think party-based elections can help solve a lot of that information asymmetry.

Nolan Gray: Interesting. We're going to be thinking a lot more about metropolitan governance. A whole issue that we didn't even scratch the surface of is just metropolitan fragmentation. Metropolises are basically unified labor housing markets. They're clearly distinct cultural regions. You get out into the outer suburbs of New Orleans and people are still rooting for the Saints. And yet, these regions are covered by 100s of different governing entities, which I think also makes it confusing for people. It's not really entirely clear what they're voting on or who runs their city, which is a very strange thing.

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, it's one of the other faults of American federalism. Everyone gets to create their own endogenous government. If we think about when the explosion of new cities was, especially in California... Not to bring it back to California, but

California is most of this country, or the plurality of this country... that explosion of new cities came during the era of white flight. One of the things you want to do when you create your own city is wall off other people. It creates these really, really terrible incentives for municipal government that you don't have in more unitary systems.

What's the added benefit of incorporating a new city in France, for example, that has a national zoning code, or Japan? It's outside of my wheelhouse, but I think this problem gets even more pernicious when we talk about law enforcement, because we have so many overlapping law enforcement jurisdictions in this country with extremely, extremely heterogeneous standards for training and for officer accountability. And it creates a horrendous system that you also, again, don't have in the more unitary states.

Nolan Gray: Yeah, I think this affects a whole host of different issues. That could be another three-hour long conversation.

Stan, thanks for coming on. I'm excited to see what work you're doing going forward. New Orleans is lucky to have you. We miss you here in California, but the moment you left, things started getting a lot better in LA, so I appreciate you splitting and clearing a path for us.

Stan Oklobdzija: I had a curse on the city for so long, I figured it was about time for me to bring that curse somewhere else, so looking forward to outcomes getting worse in new Orleans. No, no. Jokes.

Yeah, great talking to you guys. It was a lot of fun. Thanks for having me.

Ned Resnikoff: Yeah, and please-

Nolan Gray: Thanks for joining Abundance.yeah.

Ned Resnikoff: Please lift the curse on Berkley soon, please. I don't know what we need to do, but...

Stan Oklobdzija: Yeah, I don't know. We'll try, man. We'll try. You guys are building your own bus benches though. I see Darrell's doing that on Twitter, so shout out to those people. Doing the Lord's work.

Nolan Gray: Tactical urbanism. Remember that?

Stan Oklobdzija: Mm-hmm.

Nolan Gray: Yeah, we're doing it. All right. Stan Oklobdzija, thanks for joining Abundance, and we'll talk to you soon.

Stan Oklobdzija: All right. Thanks you all.

Nolan Gray:

Okay. Good to see you.