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Reply to "A Critique of an Urban Studies Article on the Housing Supply Impact of Land Use Reforms"

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LINK TO ABSTRACT

Recent research has examined whether land-use reforms that allow greater residential density lead to measurable improvements in housing supply and affordability. This article responds to a critique by Tobias Peter, Joseph Tracy, Edward Pinto, and Alanna Baker (2026) of our earlier study on this question. We appreciate the authors' close engagement with our study and welcome continued dialogue on how best to measure land-use reforms and their effects on housing supply. As we emphasized in our *Urban Studies* article, our project was an early attempt to use machine-learning tools to identify reforms at scale and to evaluate how the reforms that jurisdictions actually adopted—many modest, incremental, or encumbered by procedural constraints—relate to subsequent changes in overall housing supply. Our goal was methodological as well as empirical: to assess what machine learning combined with news articles can and cannot reliably capture, and to encourage continued refinement. This early contribution to the discussion is especially relevant given the rise of other AI-driven analyses of zoning reforms.

The AEI critique usefully highlights the importance of classification choices and the challenges of drawing inferences from local zoning changes. We agree that greater standardization in the field, particularly around what constitutes a "major"

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reform, how to treat reforms bundled together in the same legislative package, and how to distinguish direction from magnitude, would benefit all researchers. Many of the disagreements raised in the critique fall into these interpretive categories rather than factual errors. For example, we counted citywide zoning adjustments such as anti-mansionization reforms because they can meaningfully alter the feasibility and affordability of development by reducing land and materials requirements on viable parcels. Our analysis also intentionally included reforms that did not pertain to the entire city, under the assumption that increases in housing in a few neighborhoods could affect housing supply dynamics in the city as a whole. Reasonable scholars may choose narrower or broader definitions for what level and types of reforms may affect housing supply (and their directionality), but such choices do not imply that alternative classifications are incorrect.

At the same time, several claims in the critique are based on misunderstandings of our methods—including the assertion that we relied on incomplete article documentation alone for our determination of whether to include reforms. Another substantial part of the authors' critique rests on the claim that only city-wide reforms should have qualified, though our technical documentation noted (which they themselves reference) that our machine-learning training included reforms that affected either at least several neighborhoods or were an "extreme departure from existing practices." We clearly documented our coding rules and provided replication code and data within the constraints of the data-use agreement. We collaborated closely with the authors of this critique, assisting them in replicating our methods and explaining the points above.

Despite these differences in approach, the two studies reach broadly consistent conclusions: reforms that relax land-use restrictions are associated with increases in supply. Our estimate—a roughly 0.8 percent increase in overall housing stock within several years—is modest but statistically significant and reflects the incremental nature of the reforms enacted during the study period. The AEI authors' case studies, focused on larger reforms selected for their expected impact, identify larger effects of 1 to 2.5 percent per year. These findings are complementary rather than contradictory, as they address related but distinct empirical questions.

The central challenge facing the field remains the same: how do we build systematic, scalable, replicable datasets that allow us to compare reforms across jurisdictions and over time? Machine-learning tools are promising but not yet fully mature; case studies provide detail but do not scale. We hope our study, and this exchange, helps advance the methodological conversation. As zoning reforms and data availability evolve, so too will our ability to evaluate which tools are most effective in expanding housing supply and improving affordability.

We appreciate the opportunity to respond and look forward to continued scholarly engagement on this important topic.

References

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