

January 2026

Lessons from YIMBYism

Taking “Abundance” Back
to Its Fundamentals

By Ned Resnikoff

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Introduction

Abundance started out as a simple idea. A little over a decade ago, the Yes in My Backyard (YIMBY) movement, in response to the housing crisis in high-cost American metropolitan regions, started organizing against the land use rules that make housing construction infeasible or outright illegal. Over time, a loose assemblage of policymakers, journalists, and academics concluded that the essential YIMBY diagnosis—high costs are caused by supply constraints, which are themselves the result of poorly designed planning regimes—is generalizable to other policy areas. “Abundant housing,” a common slogan among YIMBYs, evolved into capital-A Abundance.

The YIMBY movement is ideologically diverse, but it is cosmopolitan and urbanist in orientation. It is, in other words, liberal in the broadest sense: YIMBYs overwhelmingly believe in the open society. But “abundance” on its own has close to no ideological content at all. The political scientist Steven Teles has identified no fewer than six distinct “[varieties of abundance](#),” from Red Plenty abundance

(associated with democratic socialists like Zohran Mamdani) to Dark Abundance (associated with right-wing nationalism).

It is difficult to imagine how an idea that is so ideologically capacious could ever form the basis for a unified political program. And yet both its proponents and its detractors have often labored to impose some philosophical coherence on what is sometimes aspirationally referred to as “the abundance movement.” *The Nation’s* Jeet Heer [describes abundance](#) as “a reprise of the long-standing goal of centrists to make the [Democratic] party an avatar of the wealthy in alliance with the professional middle class, with the working class (both organized and unorganized) firmly restricted to the back seat.” The organizers of the 2025 Abundance Conference in Washington, DC, [call it](#) “a moral and civic imperative” to “revitalize the nation’s productive base, support working families, and reassert democratic control over technocratic systems.”

But the Abundance Conference’s list of speakers was itself confirmation that not everyone who claims the label follows the same set of moral and civic imperatives. It included both cosmopolitan liberals and MAGA-aligned intellectuals who endorse concepts like [“deportation abundance.”](#) These factions are not just different wings of the same movement; they are pursuing entirely different and mutually exclusive objectives. It is not possible to build a coherent synthesis that accommodates both.

Once we abandon the nominal goal of unifying all varieties of abundance into a single political program, we’re left with less a unified movement than a powerful, pragmatic set of policy heuristics drawn from the basic insights of the YIMBY movement. This essay restates and reemphasizes those heuristics, and describes what a generalized YIMBY approach to policymaking might look like. In particular, this essay describes in a general way how YIMBY conceptual tools can help achieve progressive outcomes across various policy domains.

I use the term *YIMBYism* instead of *abundance* throughout to emphasize that this essay is about a particular policymaking approach, and not about the larger ideological debates that have become part of the abundance discourse. While I draw most of the examples to illustrate my points from housing policy, YIMBYism is broadly (although not universally) applicable when it comes to grappling with contemporary American economic and social problems.

Why We Need More YIMBYism

A central goal of modern American progressivism—perhaps *the* central goal—is ensuring that every resident of the United States possesses the necessities required to live healthy, dignified lives as free people residing in a democracy. Those basic necessities include adequate health care, decent housing, a high-quality education, and access to good jobs. To quote one of the godfathers of modern progressivism, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the goal is “to make a country in which no one is left out.”

One of the most important tools the state has for achieving that goal is direct subsidy. FDR’s Social Security Act is a good example of this approach: Faced with a large and growing population of seniors who lived in abject poverty, the administration resolved to provide every citizen above a certain age with a basic monthly income. Other federal programs offer more targeted subsidies: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) subsidizes food purchases for some low-income families, and housing choice vouchers subsidize the rent of many households, for example. Some state and local programs (for example,

California's earned income tax credit, which supplements the federal EITC) provide additional income or targeted subsidies to qualifying households.

These subsidies are good and necessary. In fact, in many cases, the biggest problem with them is that they are not adequately funded or utilized. (This has become only more true since the passage of the Trump administration's [historically catastrophic](#) 2025 budget.) But the level of a subsidy is not the only factor controlling its effectiveness. The central question about, for example, SNAP is not: How much money does each eligible household receive? The real question is: Does every household receive enough to cover the cost of food that meets their caloric and nutritional needs?

In other words, the effectiveness of a subsidy is largely a function of its size *relative to the cost of the goods that are being subsidized*. If there is a mismatch between the size of a subsidy and the cost of whatever it is supposed to subsidize, then pumping more public funding into the subsidy is only one of the available tools for correcting that mismatch.

In some cases, it may not even be the best tool. When real-world supply constraints are the reason for high costs, subsidizing demand risks simply inflating prices further. For example, in cities with severe housing shortages, increasing rental subsidies for low-income tenants may simply lead to greater competition for apartments, allowing landlords to ratchet up their rents. The same logic applies to various other types of government subsidies, including [publicly provided health-care coverage](#) (when the number of health-care providers remains relatively fixed) and [grants for scientific research](#) (when greater investment in research and development isn't accompanied by a larger supply of scientists and engineers).



In order to keep FDR's promise and build a country where no one is left out, progressives must devote as much attention to supply as they do to subsidy. YIMBYism is not an alternative to social policy; it is a strategy for making social policy work as intended.

Even where demand subsidies are not purely inflationary, supply constraints mean less “bang for our buck.” The more severe a housing shortage becomes, the more rents rise, and the more the government needs to pay in order to keep a single individual stably housed. Further, higher costs increase the share of the population who require government assistance to afford market rents. In healthy housing markets, households that earn [as little as 60 percent of area median income](#) can generally find a rental unit affordable at their price point. That means policymakers can direct the bulk of their rental subsidies toward households that are genuinely poor. In high-cost cities like San Francisco, on the other hand, it is possible to earn six figures and still be considered “low income”—meaning people in that income range may be eligible for rental assistance that could otherwise be going to less affluent households. Housing assistance programs are oversubscribed and rationed across the country; higher housing costs directly result in fewer families getting the help they need from existing programs.

In many cases, pouring more funding into subsidies is not, on its own, a politically or economically viable strategy. In order to keep FDR's promise and build a country where no one is left out, progressives must devote as much attention to supply as they do to subsidy. YIMBYism is not an alternative to social policy; it is a strategy for making social policy work as intended.

Policy Tools for Increasing Supply

Broadly speaking, policymakers who want to increase the supply of a particular good—whether that good is housing, medical care, childcare, or anything else—have two options. They can either tweak market rules to encourage more production, or invest public funds to grow the supply of that good.

Of course, there's no reason why public investment and regulatory reform can't work together. But in order to understand when and how policymakers should use these approaches, it is worth taking a step back to consider them separately.

Regulatory Reform

Progressives are sometimes hostile to the term *regulatory reform* because it sounds like a synonym for *deregulation*. And market deregulation, according to popular understanding, is essentially Right-coded: a way of granting capitalists the untrammelled power to chase financial returns at the expense of consumers, workers, the country as a whole, and the climate. Imposing stricter regulations, on the other hand, is supposed to be what progressives do.

But the regulation-versus-deregulation dichotomy is misleading. Formal markets are, by their very nature, creations of the state; they cannot exist without government-enforced property rights, a standard unit of exchange, and a latticework of various other rules that set the terms of competition. (For example, you can't have a functioning market without a strong legal prohibition on murdering competitors and stealing their wares.)

That does not mean regulation is inherently good. The concept of regulation is essentially morally neutral; like the exercise of state power in general, whether it is good or bad depends on the goals behind it and the outcomes it produces. Decriminalizing contraceptive use was “deregulatory” in the sense that it lifted a legal prohibition, but that does not mean it was the reactionary or unjust thing to do.

With that in mind, the question for policymakers is not whether a particular market should be subject to more or less regulation. Instead, policymakers should examine a particular regulatory framework holistically and consider whether it should be adjusted to better serve the public interest.

Let's consider an example. In many US cities, virtually all new construction is subject to a process called discretionary review. If a developer wants permission to build, say, a four-story apartment building, they need approval from the local city council or planning commission. This body has discretion to reject the permit application for virtually any reason, even if the proposed building complies with all the legal preconditions for approval (such as adherence to local zoning, building codes, and objective design standards). Discretionary review also typically includes a public input process, whereby residents can weigh in for or against the project.

As I've discussed in a [previous publication](#) for the Roosevelt Institute, this approach to urban planning creates significant collective action problems. The perceived drawbacks to building a particular four-story apartment building are highly

concentrated, but the benefits are more diffuse: Neighbors to the construction may be strongly opposed, while the city's overall population of renters may be unaware of the project or its potential effect on their own rents (which, in the case of a single apartment building, will be marginal). As a result, it is generally the Not-in-My-Backyarders (NIMBYs)—particularly white, affluent, older, homeowners NIMBYs—who are able to most aggressively leverage discretionary review. It is a system that inexorably produces, sustains, and exacerbates housing shortages.

A lot of YIMBY policy advocacy has focused on turning discretionary approval procedures into ministerial ones. Ministerial review processes are objective, administrative procedures: If a project meets the legal and regulatory qualifications for approval, then it is approved. There is typically no community input or public comment stage to a ministerial process.

Anti-YIMBYs on the Left will sometimes deride the transition from a discretionary to a ministerial process as “deregulatory,” because it smooths the path for more private construction. But ministerial review does not intrinsically mean less regulation—that depends entirely on the objective standards that become part of the review process. In a sense, ministerial review could be understood to require a *stronger* regulatory apparatus because it shifts the locus of decision-making from project-by-project haggling to real citywide planning.

A similar logic applies to progressive efforts to reduce administrative burdens in the provision of social safety net benefits. For example, most US states means-test free and reduced price school lunches; only children from low-income households are eligible to receive free meals at school. However, several states have eliminated this means-testing and instituted universal free school meal programs. Low-income households in these states may experience this change as “deregulatory” because they are now able to receive the same benefits without having to first demonstrate eligibility. But eliminating means-testing in this way is not deregulation; universal school meal programs instead operate under an alternative regulatory framework that better achieves the policy goal of combating childhood food insecurity.

Public Investment

While regulatory reform sets the rules for market transactions, public investment does what markets cannot do. It is best thought of as a complement to regulatory reform, not as an alternative to it.

Broadly speaking, public investment can ease supply shortages in three ways. First, the public sector can directly fund production of goods that the market is unable to provide. Second, public investment can create high-quality, affordable “public options” that compete with private goods. Third, public R&D funding can unlock new technologies and production methods that benefit society as a whole.

Filling a Gap in the Market

One use for public investment is to produce certain types of goods that even well-structured markets will not produce on their own. As previously noted, a healthy housing market will probably generate enough private housing to adequately shelter people who earn 60 percent or more of area median income. What this housing market will *not* do is produce adequate housing affordable to genuinely impoverished households. The state will still need to step in to guarantee housing stability for those households.

In a market with sufficient housing supply, that can primarily be accomplished through demand-side subsidies: rental vouchers or direct cash transfers. But a segment of the population will require not just housing subsidies but a specialized *type* of housing. For example, many high-needs homeless individuals need permanent supportive housing (PSH), which includes access to intensive, round-the-clock supportive services. Building and operating PSH will never be profitable for a private firm absent significant government subsidy.

Public Options

In addition to filling gaps in markets, public subsidy can nudge markets in the right direction to satisfy progressive policy goals. One way to do this is by creating public-sector entities that compete with private actors, leveraging both public provision and market competition to serve a larger population than public provision alone can serve directly. This can sometimes be more effective than explicit regulation at imposing guardrails on the market.

This was the theory behind the Affordable Care Act's (sadly stillborn) public option: It would set a minimum standard for health coverage against which all private insurers would then need to compete, thereby keeping the nationwide standard for health care above a certain acceptable level. Similarly, large-scale public employment during the New Deal era through programs like the Works Progress Administration led to tighter labor markets, which put pressure on private firms to raise wages and collectively bargain with their employees.

Public colleges and universities serve as another important example of a public option. In California, all graduating high school seniors who meet certain eligibility criteria are guaranteed admission into one of the California State University (CSU) system's colleges. (A smaller share of graduating high school students receive guaranteed admission into the more selective University of California (UC) system.) In addition to providing millions of Californians with access to economic mobility and a high-quality education, the UC and CSU guarantees force private institutions to compete for students.

Publicly Funded Research and Development

Public investment may also spur certain types of market outputs, particularly innovative new technologies. The 2009 federal stimulus package's investments in renewable energy research are a laudable example. To an individual firm, the risk involved in developing a novel, untested renewable energy technology may be unacceptably high; it entails significant upfront cost, and there is no guarantee the technology will actually work, much less generate any profit. But federal subsidies defused that risk, allowing the private sector to pursue research programs that helped stimulate an ongoing green energy revolution.

In addition to derisking research, public research subsidies can radically accelerate the development and deployment of important technologies. For example, under Operation Warp Speed the federal government awarded billions in grants to pharmaceutical companies attempting to create a vaccine for COVID-19. As a result, a number of COVID-19 vaccines, using novel mRNA technology, became available within a year of the first pandemic lockdowns in the United States.

Public research and development funding could also likely ease the American housing shortage. Productivity in the American construction sector has been largely stagnant for more than half a century, even as overall labor productivity has grown. With sufficient funding for research, technological innovations in how we build apartments—for example, through novel uses of mass timber or modular

construction techniques—could significantly increase productivity in the sector, thereby lowering the cost of construction and making it possible to build many more homes.

A Note on State Capacity

In the previous section, I discussed regulatory reforms that emphasize urban *planning* over project-by-project political contestation. Such reforms are important, but they will only be successful in a context where the relevant public-sector bodies (city planning departments, regional governments, etc.) have the capacity to engage in serious, large-scale planning.

That's one reason why YIMBYs tend to be preoccupied not just with stimulating more supply but with enhancing government capacity. A rule-bound, abundance-oriented regulatory regime can't function as intended without the support and careful oversight of empowered, competent government departments. These departments need to be able to accurately assess the potential social, economic, and environmental impacts of particular building projects—not just in isolation, but in their broader regional context. They also need to be capable of evaluating trade-offs, considering the competing priorities of various stakeholders, and reaching judgments that best serve the public interest.

Many other developed countries have planning departments and other civil service agencies that are better at achieving those goals. (See Dan Davies's "[The Problem Factory](#)" for a useful comparison between the Anglo-American planning model and the continental European one.) These agencies are often larger, better-resourced, and more flexible than their American counterparts. Bringing the managerial strength and competence of American public bureaucracy up to the standard of peer nations must be part of any comprehensive YIMBY program.

Evaluating Trade-Offs

Policy design always involves trade-offs, and often some very difficult ones. Prevailing wage requirements, inclusionary zoning, environmental review processes, and community input mandates don't come free—each one of them either makes it more expensive to build housing and other infrastructure, makes the construction process take longer, or both.

Even time itself is not free: Long permitting times impose both real costs (such as basic upkeep costs on a disused lot) and significant opportunity costs. They also get in the way of resolving genuinely urgent crises; if we are going to keep global temperatures from rising more than two degrees Celsius, we do not have an infinite amount of time in which to build green energy infrastructure and transmission lines.

This is why YIMBYs and abundance liberals often complain about what Ezra Klein has called "[everything bagel liberalism](#)": the well-intentioned attempt to avoid any policy trade-offs by layering requirements and qualifications onto supply-side interventions until they become virtually unworkable.

This is a real problem. But one should not take the "everything bagel" argument to mean that requirements such as fair labor standards are inherently bad. The point is that they impose costs even as they create additional benefits. Adopting a YIMBY approach to policymaking means taking those costs seriously.

Sometimes—as with the site-specific community input requirements addressed above—the cost isn’t worth it, and those requirements should be discarded or revised. Other times—as with regulations that ban the use of unsafe building materials—the cost is very much worth it, and it is reasonable to impose those costs on private entities such as homebuilders.

But many proposed regulatory requirements are edge cases: They satisfy important goals, but the costs they impose threaten to significantly blunt the impact of YIMBY policies. In those cases, there are a few ways to resolve the dilemma other than adopting or rejecting the proposed requirements:

Rigorous cost-benefit analysis. The first and most important step when assessing these edge cases is often to estimate the size and impact of the costs to society associated with either accepting or rejecting a proposed rule. Such estimates are imprecise by nature, but they at least provide some basis for reasoning through the dilemma.

It is important to emphasize that producing credible cost-benefit analyses requires in-house expertise, access to reliable data, and a considerable amount of staff time. This further underscores the need to enhance US state capacity.

Amending the proposed rule to mitigate its projected cost. Sometimes the only option is political compromise. Other times, technical adjustments might make a proposed regulatory requirement less costly without significantly undercutting its impact. For example, California’s statewide rent stabilization does not apply to rental units that were built within the past 15 years. This exemption lasts just long enough to ensure rent stabilization does not impact developer and lender forecasts of a building project’s expected profitability. Rent control rules that apply to newer buildings can, in contrast, suppress homebuilding and, perversely, cause rent inflation. The California rent stabilization law sidesteps this problem while still protecting the vast majority of the state’s renters from price gouging. In YIMBY policymaking, the granular details are everything.

Offsetting costs through public subsidy. Sometimes the public sector can resolve the tension between competing priorities by providing either a direct or de facto subsidy. Several jurisdictions have used this method to great effect in order to fund inclusionary zoning (IZ) requirements.

IZ rules mandate that developers of multifamily properties set aside a certain share of the units in those properties to be offered at below-market-rate prices. For example, a city might require that 15 percent of the units in all new multifamily rental buildings be offered at rents affordable to low-income households—often defined as households that earn between 50 percent and 80 percent of the area median income.

When IZ requirements are unfunded, property managers are expected to “cross-subsidize” the below-market units with the revenue from units that they rent at market rate. But this cross-subsidy may not be enough to offset the cost of offering some units at below market rates. (To say nothing of the administrative costs associated with income verification to ensure those units are going to genuinely low-income households.) If developers can’t make the math work, then they won’t build any new housing at all, and rents will continue to climb for everyone.

Sometimes the solution is to pare back or even eradicate unworkable IZ requirements. But policymakers can also search for ways to keep IZ in place while

offsetting the cost for homebuilders. For example, Portland, Oregon, [funds its IZ program through property tax abatements](#). California's [density bonus law](#) offers a less direct type of subsidy: Developers that agree to set aside a certain share of below-market units are permitted to build larger projects than the underlying zoning would typically allow. In this case, zoning relief acts as a de facto subsidy by allowing developers to build more revenue-generating market-rate units.

Of course, the most direct way to produce below-market-rate housing is by simply having the public sector pay for its construction and operation through public housing or social housing programs. Sometimes having the state directly pay for (or even develop) a particular good is more effective than imposing a mandate and expecting the private sector to shoulder the cost.

It should go without saying that direct and indirect subsidies, while they are often useful and worthwhile, come with their own costs and trade-offs. The relative balance of those costs and trade-offs sometimes depends on the level of government doing the subsidizing. The federal government has enormous fiscal capacity and the ability to maintain long-term deficits; as a result, it has the flexibility to spend its way out of conflict between some (but not all) competing policy priorities. The obstacles to doing this are often more political than financial (which is not to say that political constraints are themselves easily ignored).

On the other hand, local and state governments are limited both by their relatively modest spending capacity and by their need to maintain balanced budgets. They consequently operate under tighter constraints when it comes to balancing trade-offs, and so policymakers in those jurisdictions need to be more parsimonious in how they rank competing priorities.

Conclusion

YIMBYism is not a totalizing worldview. It is an intellectual tool kit that can apply to a variety of different policy areas, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the area. Although it is difficult to come up with a plausible account of what “YIMBYism for criminal justice reform” or “YIMBY foreign policy” might look like, there are many other policy domains where supply constraints present a serious obstacle to progressive goals, and where a YIMBY policy approach is warranted.

What this means will obviously vary to a considerable degree by subject matter. The tools and concepts described above are intended to serve as a sort of generic road map for thinking through what YIMBYism means in various contexts. But the most important virtue of adopting a YIMBY mindset is more dispositional: At its heart, YIMBYism is about finding the right balance between hard-nosed pragmatism and future-oriented optimism.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Michael Madowitz for his feedback, insights, and contributions to this paper. Any errors, omissions, or other inaccuracies are the author's alone.

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