

Renters underrepresented in local, state and federal government, study finds

November 17 2022



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Renters make up more than a third of the U.S. population, but new research from the University of Georgia suggests they're grossly underrepresented in all levels of government.

The study found that roughly 93% of members of Congress, federal judges, mayors, [city](#) councilmembers, state legislators and governors are homeowners. And according to the researchers, that's likely an undercount.

The researchers matched 10,800 [public officials](#) across the above categories to property and other administrative records to estimate the rate at which renters run and are elected to public office.

When they focused specifically on 1,800 city councilmembers and mayors across the 190 [largest cities](#) in the U.S., the researchers found that more than 90% of the local officeholders likely own a home. Mayors and city councilors were 38% more likely to be homeowners than the average residents in their cities.

"For me, the most surprising finding is that even in places like New York City, Boston or San Francisco—where the population is overwhelmingly renters—city councils are still dominated by homeowners," said Joseph Ornstein, corresponding author of the study and an assistant professor in the School of Public and International Affairs.

That lack of representation across local, state and federal political offices puts renters at a decided disadvantage when it comes to policymaking.

"The people who show up are the people who make policy," Ornstein said. "If you don't show up, then your agenda doesn't even get put on the table."

Zoning, tax policies favor homeowners over renters

Previous research has documented how restrictive zoning policies

banning multifamily homes favor homeowners over renters, as do decades of federal government policies like the mortgage interest deduction.

Ornstein and his colleagues have previously documented that people who own their homes are more likely to participate in politics. They vote at higher rates, particularly in local races that influence future zoning and land use policies, and they're more likely than renters to show up to local city council and planning meetings.

Homeowners are also more likely to run for office themselves.

Understandably, once in office, those homeowners tend to push policies that maintain or elevate home values.

"We've seen an unprecedented increase in home prices over the past decade, and whether that is a good thing or a bad thing for you depends on whether you own your own home," Ornstein said. "If you've owned a home for the past 10 years, that's great! You're now two times wealthier than you were a decade ago."

Renters, on the other hand, are paying roughly twice (if not more) than they were before the home value boom.

"If most of the people in elected office are homeowners, then government is less likely to consider the rise in home prices an urgent crisis in need of addressing," Ornstein said. "I think there are lots of people who rent their homes and are affected by policies made by their local city council but don't consider running for office. But they're residents of the community, and they deserve to have their voices heard."

Renter representation can make a big difference in [policy](#). In

Minneapolis, Minnesota, for example, a recent surge in city council members who rent resulted in a variety of renter-friendly legislation, including new tenant protection ordinances and a broad upzoning of residential areas throughout the city, allowing duplexes and triplexes in neighborhoods that previously banned anything but single-family homes.

"That was over the strong objections of a lot of homeowners in Minneapolis, but it was something that, because the city council had experience with renting and had experienced the crushing cost burden of renting in an expensive city, they made a priority," Ornstein said. "And they were able to get the legislation passed as a result."

Published in *Housing Policy Debate*, the study was co-authored by Katherine Levine and Maxwell Palmer.

More information: Katherine Levine Einstein et al, Who Represents the Renters?, *Housing Policy Debate* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/10511482.2022.2109710](https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2022.2109710)

Provided by University of Georgia

Citation: Renters underrepresented in local, state and federal government, study finds (2022, November 17) retrieved 24 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-11-renters-underrepresented-local-state-federal.html>

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