

Do Private HOA Members Engage in Public Life? Evidence from Voting Behavior

Ron Cheung, Oberlin College

Rachel Meltzer, The New School

In municipalities across the country, homeowners associations (HOAs) are increasingly becoming the principal way in which new housing is developed and built. HOAs are found in planned developments, gated communities, condominiums and cooperatives, and they require that members pay a binding fee in order to receive exclusive services and amenities. Local governments find them appealing, since they can often offload infrastructure and service responsibilities onto the developer and the association. While HOAs are expected to supplement the services provided by the public sector, evidence suggests that they instead often substitute for them and that their existence can exacerbate citywide segregation. Both empirical evidence and media-portrayed anecdotes suggest that HOAs play a role in exclusive and fragmented communities. Given this, how engaged are HOA members with their larger communities? Do they exert influence over policies or decisions that affect circumstances outside their exclusive residential neighborhoods?

To shed light on these questions, we consider the voting behavior of HOA members. Theoretically, the impact of HOA membership on voting behavior is ambiguous. Membership in an HOA could mean withdrawal from public engagement if one's local needs are largely met by the association. Alternatively, HOA membership could coincide with a stronger demand for public action more generally and can even set up a mechanism for forming voting blocs; both would result in more influence over public decision-making. We rely on a rich dataset on parcel-level HOA membership and on voter registration and participation for a sample of metro areas across Florida, one of the most HOA-saturated states. The data will allow us to look at participation in federal, state and local elections, and a selection of voter characteristics, such as race and gender—all in the context of HOAs of varying size and age. Although states and municipalities have facilitated the proliferation of HOAs without much hesitation, there is little empirical evidence on how they affect civic life more broadly. The results from our analysis will help local governments, policymakers, and even homebuyers, understand how HOAs, and other similar “private governments,” influence quality of life outside their borders.