This is the fourth post in a series of six posts. The first post is here. The second post is here. The third post is here.

As I discussed in my last blog post, abundance policy reforms will necessarily require tradeoffs, which leads us to politics. Will the political context allow for making decisions about tradeoffs that are necessary to advance an abundance agenda?

Some advocates for abundance think so – two leading authors of abundance books argue that the failure to produce housing or implement major government projects is a key reason why Trump was so successful in 2024.

But the political science research does not align with such an assessment. That is in part because there is not a lot of strong evidence that American voters actually make their voting decisions based on the specific policy accomplishments of elected officials – what is often called "retrospective voting." In fact, there is very limited evidence that retrospective voting occurs, and when it does it is generally limited to attributing to the national President credit for the amount of economic growth in the months before a Presidential election. That level of retrospective voting, however, is unlikely to provide much of a lift to an abundance agenda. Even if abundance reforms succeed on a time frame in which voters are willing to attribute the changes to elected officials, the research indicates they are likely to misattribute credit. For example, a Republican governor who advances abundance reforms, and thus reduces housing costs in her state, but is unfortunate enough to govern when a Democrat is President will likely see her voters credit the President's party for the successes, not her.

Indeed, much of the arguments for the abundance literature are based on assumptions that allowing government to have more of a free reign to take actions will advance democracy because it will allow for clearer accountability to voters for those policy decisions. Government that is freer to act will be punished by voters for poor actions, and rewarded for good ones. Again, these claims have limited support in the political science literature even at the high level of the national economic environment and they likely have even less support for the kinds of small-scale, individualized policy decisions that are the primary focus of abundance reforms. Yes, Presidents may be punished for recessions or wars, but it is hard to see how many voters will be swayed by the policy decisions of the U.S. Forest Service or the Federal Highway Administration.

But there is an even more important political challenge for abundance policy reforms. In general, those reforms ask many voters to give up specific rights they have to protect their personal interests in the short-term in favor of longer-term, more diffuse benefits in the future. For instance, homeowners would give up their ability to block housing construction that might reduce their property values, reduce public services, or affect their neighborhood in return for the diffuse regional benefits of housing costs. Landowners would give up the ability to block the use of eminent domain across their lands in order to facilitate the construction of transmission lines that will, in the aggregate and over time, reduce greenhouse gas emissions by facilitating renewable energy, and potentially reduce energy costs overall. Asking voters to accept concrete costs for diffuse benefits is usually a losing strategy in politics – even when voters in the abstract support the overall goal that would produce the diffuse benefits.

And, as I noted in my last post, many of the targets of abundance policy reforms are in fact quite popular. Local control, and local control of land-use development in particular, tends to be quite popular with voters – even in places like California that have been the center of the housing crisis. Indeed, the reason there are so many obstacles to development in the United States – whether they are local land-use regulation, environmental regulation, community participation, or obstacles to eminent domain – is because those obstacles are popular with voters.