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

In my last post I noted some important political challenges to abundance reforms: It is unlikely that they will produce immediate political benefits, but they will likely entail short-term political costs as a result of tradeoffs with popular policies like community participation in government decisionmaking.

On top of those political challenges, abundance requires some agreement that there is an abundance problem, and about what tradeoffs to make to advance solutions to that problem. The first step is non-trivial: Consider federal energy policy. Is the problem that we have not enough energy period? Not enough fossil fuel energy? Not enough decarbonized energy? There is sharp disagreement on these questions across the parties, particularly under the second Trump Administration. And with disagreement, it is very difficult to develop the political agreement needed to enact policy solutions.

And the second step is also challenging. In advancing reforms, what other policy goals do we compromise or tradeoff? If we want more housing, is it housing anywhere (and thus compromising environmental goals around sprawl, habitat protection, and climate change)? Is it housing in urban areas (potentially limiting the ability to scale up housing and reduce costs)? Is it advancing desegregation of neighborhoods (as opposed to just producing housing where it is cheapest)? Even if political actors agree there is a problem, they may be deeply divided about what tradeoffs to make. Of course, one can dodge the question by imposing a wide range of constraints on abundance reforms, to avoid any tradeoffs at all. But that leads to what Ezra Klein has critiqued as “everything bagel” policymaking, in which imposing so many constraints on policy outcomes makes it impossible to actually make any progress on the underlying policy.

Abundance policy in short appears to require at least some sort of consensus as to the problem and tradeoffs. And if anything is in short supply in our current-day polarized political environment, it is consensus. It also probably requires some sort of trust among political actors – reforms to reduce procedural requirements, litigation, and other veto points on decisionmaking create the risk that one set of political actors will take advantage of the expanded policy space to pursue outcomes that other actors do not find acceptable, and may not even have been originally envisioned as part of the set of reforms. But again, trust is in short supply in current American politics, especially in the second Trump Administration.

Interestingly, it is the lack of trust in American politics – in contrast to Europe – that abundance advocates often point to in arguing for reforms. Abundance advocates draw on prior legal scholarship (led by Robert Kagan, formerly at UC Berkeley) to argue that the legalized, procedural, and litigious policy process in the United States reflects a polity that is deeply distrustful of governmental power and other political actors. The contrast is then made with Europe, where, it is claimed, policy is much more consensual, with less procedure and litigation, resulting in quicker and cheaper policy making and infrastructure, and better policy outcomes (including on environmental outcomes). The argument concludes by claiming that if the United States adopted more European modes of governance, with less process and litigation, we could get the same or better outcomes with less time and cost, and that in turn might address the issues of trust in government.

Even assuming the various factual claims in the above argument are correct (and many are contestable), the problem with this line of reasoning is that it gets cause and effect backwards. The lack of trust is the reason for the adversarial legalism; addressing the adversarial legalism will not necessarily solve the lack of trust.

In the next blog post, I'll examine ways to overcome these political obstacles.