This is the sixth 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. The fifth post is here.

As I discussed in my last blog post, the politics of abundance reform are difficult. Reform often requires short-term concrete sacrifices by voters of popular policies for long-term diffuse benefits. It will involve consensus about what abundance is lacking, and how to manage the tradeoffs that reforms will require. And it will require trust in implementation. All of these are difficult propositions, all the more so in our polarized political environment. So what is the path forward?

The Yes In My Backyard (YIMBY) movement has had remarkable success at the state level in advancing legislation to increase housing production. Its success has not been limited to blue states like California or Washington; it also has succeeded in red states like Montana and Texas. A key to the YIMBY movement's success has been a focus on housing, rather than on other issues, and a pragmatism to embrace framing and tradeoffs that are acceptable in the state where policy reform is being advanced. For instance, YIMBY activism in California has played up the climate and equity benefits of increasing housing production, including policy changes that focus new housing in urban infill areas. But activists have taken different approaches in states like Texas.

But is such a pragmatic approach that plays to the specific ideology of particular states plausible at the federal level? At the state level, political polarization is less, allowing the YIMBY movement to build bipartisan coalitions at the state level. And land-use regulation and housing policy has long been primarily seen as a local issue, which reduces polarization as well. These factors can contribute to greater consensus and trust at the state level on land-use and housing reforms.

But at the federal level, it can be harder to build varying coalitions. Having a single legislature, as opposed to fifty, reduces the ability of reformers to vary their framing and policy specifics depending on local conditions. There is always the risk that a particular reform will get coopted by one side or another to raise its salience, and thus increase polarization – eliminating the possibility of consensus.

The difficult politics of abundance may mean that reforms may be more feasible when they are lower salience and more elite-driven. State-level reforms are by definition lower salience than federal reforms. Reforms that focus on the specifics of land-use regulation and draw on elite-led consensus may be more successful. Increasing the salience around abundance can create incentives for one or the other

party to polarize the topic, drawing on public resistance to proposed reforms.

Abundance policy is thus like climate policy in many ways. Both involve short-term, specific costs to produce long-term, diffuse benefits. Both may require substantial changes to the legal and physical status quo to produce a better future. As such, public support for the policy may be fickle, and vulnerable to polarization when the short-term costs of the policy become clear. Climate activists worked hard to raise the salience of climate policy over the past several years, on the grounds that it might advance more fundamental policy change. That gamble appears to not have paid off, as increased salience created an opportunity for opponents to polarize the issue, and highlight the short-term costs of climate policy. Abundance activists may accordingly want to resist raising the salience of abundance reforms.

This does make abundance reforms at the federal level more challenging. Strategic coalition building is harder in a unified national legislature. Federal policy is generally more salient, and there are incentives for either party to use potentially (but necessary) policy proposals as an opening to use for mobilization in broader political fights. State and local reforms provide more opportunities, and fortunately that is (as David Schleicher and Nicholas Bagley have noted) where most of the work for abundance needs to be done. States are the primary leaders for issues such as housing and renewable energy siting.

Unfortunately, though, there are some key issues – such as electricity transmission – that require federal action. And here a low salience, elite-driven approach may be the best one. In many ways that has been the approach taken by advocates of "permitting reform" at the Congressional level, where the effort has been mostly about organizing special interest group support for bipartisan changes. Whether that approach will ultimately succeed is still to be determined. As with climate, the need for change is urgent and important, but sometimes the best way to change is not the quickest one.