

Governance in the Forest Zoo : An Empirical Analysis of City Council Meeting Patterns based on Geographical intelligence in US Democracy

Jayanth Kumar
jayanthjaiswal15@gmail.com

11 January, 2026

Abstract

This white paper analyzes large-scale city and county council meeting data to explore how local political participation varies geographically and correlates with economic indicators. Using an indexed dataset of 3,000+ hours of daily council meeting recordings across the United States (the GatherGov dataset), we identify striking regional patterns: western and Mountain states exhibit the longest meeting hours, while New England towns lead on a per-capita basis. We quantify how local deliberation (meeting hours per capita) aligns with market factors. In particular, we document a moderate national correlation ($r \approx 0.21$) between council meeting activity and real-estate sector revenues, but with a marked divergence by city size: in small counties, “more talk means more growth,” whereas in large metros the trend disappears. We also find that communities with higher average council activity tend to have higher median home values (up to a \$70K premium), reflecting that property-owning constituents disproportionately shape local agendas. These findings are framed through a novel theoretical lens: *Forest Zoo Theory*, which synthesizes the “Dark Forest” and “Zoo” analogies. This framework highlights how seemingly decentralized local governance can still be governed by hidden structures of influence, incentives, and information asymmetry. By combining empirical civic data with this theory, we discuss implications for participatory governance, equity in representation, and the use of civic intelligence as an emerging market signal. The analysis underscores the value of large-scale civic data for investors, policymakers, and community leaders in understanding the quiet undercurrents of democracy in action.

1 Introduction

Local government is the bedrock of policy implementation in areas like housing, infrastructure, and public health, yet it has long been under-studied due to data scarcity. Recent efforts have begun to remedy this gap: for example, the LocalView dataset aggregates more than 139,000 videos and transcripts of U.S. local government meetings to enable systematic study of local deliberation across cities and school boards [Barari and Simko, 2023]. Building

on this momentum, we use the GatherGov data set (a real-time index of city and county council meetings) to examine how local civic engagement manifests geographically and what economic signals it encodes (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Town halls are where democracy breathes—by, for, and of the people.

The importance of civic participation to democratic health is well-recognized. Alexis de Tocqueville famously noted that “the health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens” [de Tocqueville, 1835]. Empirical research also shows that homeowners and long-term residents — who have more at stake in their communities — tend to participate more in local politics [McCabe, 2013, Habitat for Humanity, 2021]. Participatory governance, which actively involves various stakeholders in decision-making, is widely seen as improving transparency and equity in cities [Srinivas, 2023, National Civic League, 2022]. However, questions remain: How does local political activity vary across regions? Does more civic engagement translate into stronger economic outcomes? And crucially, whose voices dominate at the council microphone?

We address these questions with a comprehensive analysis of council meeting data. We map regional variation in meeting lengths, correlate political activity with real-estate and housing metrics, and examine participation equity. To interpret our findings, we introduce the *Forest Zoo Theory* as an analytical lens. This theory, blending the science-fiction concepts

of the Dark Forest and the Zoo Hypothesis, suggests that powerful actors (elites, institutions) prefer to influence policy subtly rather than through overt force [Barari and Simko, 2023]. Under this metaphor, local governments operate like free-roaming “animals” in a forest whose boundaries and incentives are shaped by unseen zookeepers. We explore how this framework can elucidate the patterns emerging from our civic data.

The contributions of this paper are twofold: First, we provide the first large-scale empirical mapping of U.S. local council activity and its economic correlates, revealing novel geo-political structures in civic behavior. Second, we integrate a multidisciplinary theory to help explain why those patterns arise, advancing the concept of *geointelligence* — the idea that civic engagement itself is a valuable informational asset. This work is intended for policy makers, investors, and civic technologists interested in the intersection of geography, governance, and market intelligence.

2 Data and Methodology

Our primary data source is the GatherGov dataset, which continuously indexes public meetings of U.S. city and county councils. At the time of this analysis, GatherGov tracked and transcribed more than 3000 hours of council meetings per day, covering thousands of municipalities across the country.

According to the U.S. Census, there are 90,000+ 1 independent counties, municipalities, townships, school districts, and special districts in the United States (Figure 2).

Table 1: Distribution of Local Government Entities in the United States (Total = 90,400)

Government Type	Count	Percentage
Counties	3,007	3.32%
Municipalities	19,479	21.55%
Townships	16,100	17.81%
School Districts	12,575	13.91%
Special Districts	39,239	43.41%
Total	90,400	100.00%

Together, these bodies make and enforce policies that directly affect property values, land use, infrastructure, and economic development. Most counties, municipalities and townships serve relatively small communities, with the average population of roughly 14,700 people.

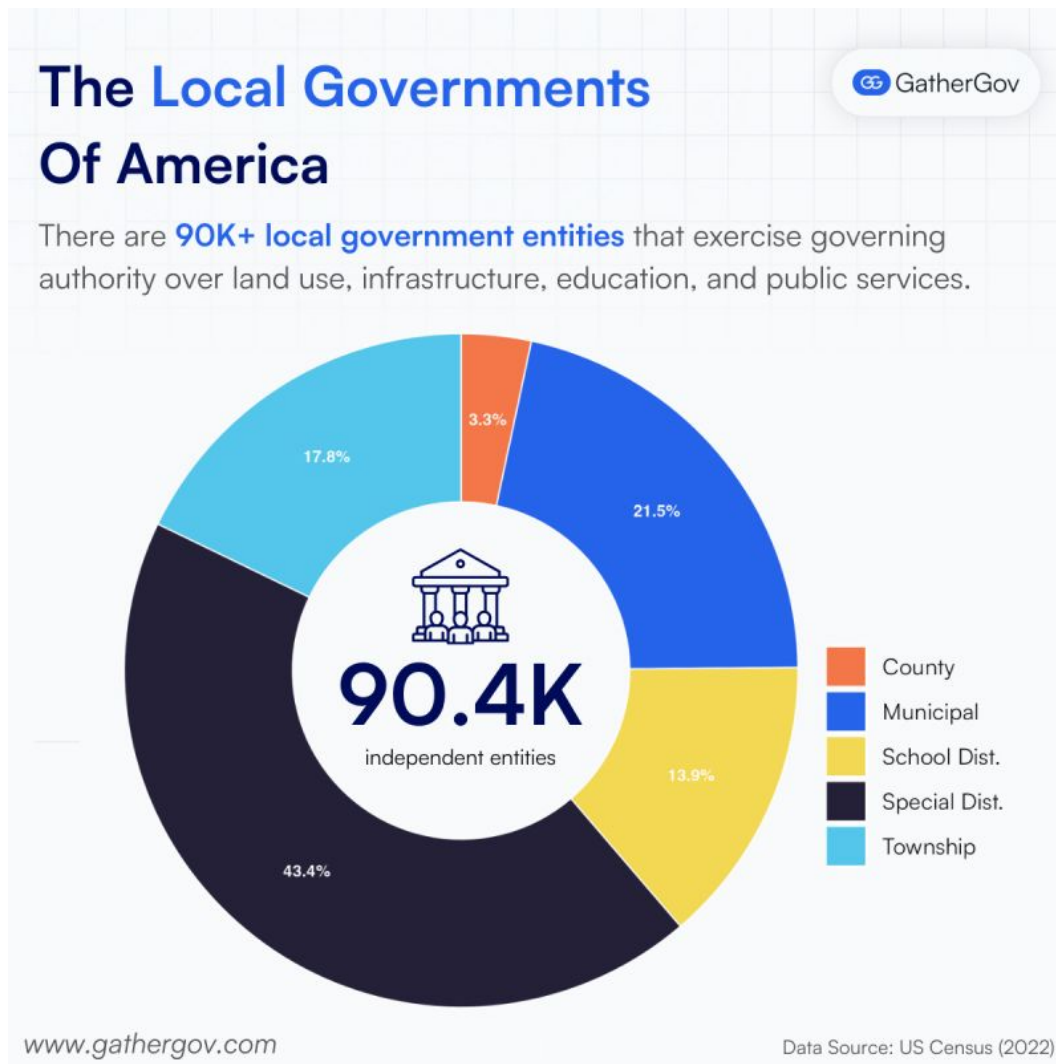


Figure 2: Distribution of the Local Government Entities in the United States

In 2025 alone, local governments across America spent 712,282 hours in city council meetings, debating land use, zoning, and infrastructure policies (Figure 3). From these transcripts, we compute metrics such as *meeting hours per week* and *meeting hours per 10,000 residents* for each city or county government. These serve as proxies for the intensity of local deliberation and civic participation.



Figure 3: In 2025, local governments across America spent 712,282 hours in city council meetings.

To link political activity with economic outcomes, we merge GatherGov metrics with publicly available economic and demographic data. For example, we use the U.S. Census Bureau’s Economic Census (NAICS code 53) to obtain state-level revenues from real-estate leasing, brokerage, and rental. We also used median home values and homeownership rates from the American Community Survey to gauge wealth and stakeholder participation in each community. Correlations and regressions are computed using standard statistical tools (Pearson and Spearman correlations, linear models), controlling for factors like population size, where noted.

We analyze geographic patterns by aggregating data at state and regional levels. For example, to map the intensity of meeting-hours, we calculate the average weekly council hours across all cities in a state. To compare cities of different sizes, we examine hours *per capita* (e.g. per 10,000 residents). Qualitative comparisons also consider regional typologies (East vs. West, urban vs. rural) to contextualize the findings.

3 Results

3.1 Regional Variation in Council Activity

We find remarkable geographic variation in local deliberation. Figure 4 shows the average weekly city council meeting hours by state. Western and Mountain states dominate: for example, North Dakota, Colorado, and California average substantially longer council sessions than many Eastern states.



Figure 4: Average city council meeting hours per week by state (darker = more hours). Western states and liberal-leaning areas show higher values.

This pattern holds even after normalizing by population: a map (Figure 5) of weekly meeting hours per 10,000 residents highlights New England (Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts) as a clear leader, despite smaller absolute city sizes. Indeed, Vermont leads the nation with more than 2 hours of council discussion per week for every 10,000 residents — roughly 1.5 times the level in second-place New Hampshire. We attribute these regional

differences to historical and cultural factors: Western states tend to engage in “volume governance” with sprawling jurisdictions and active citizen comments, while New England’s legacy of town hall tradition yields high per-capita engagement.

New England Leads in Council Meeting Time per Capita

In the past 6 months, Vermont has had more than 2 hours of discussion for every 10,000 residents.

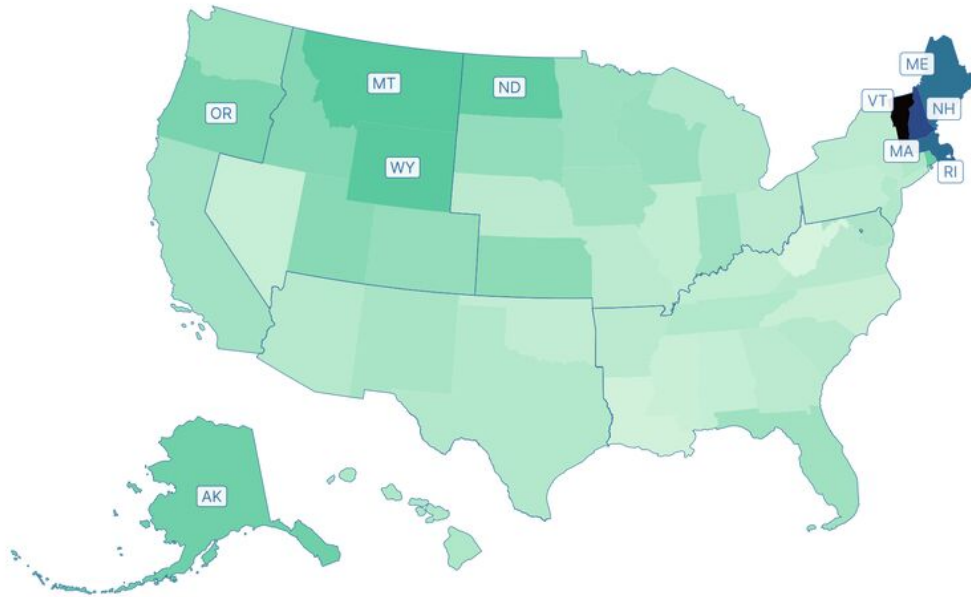


Figure 5: Average city council meeting hours per week by state (darker = more hours per 10,000 residents). Cities in both the West (e.g., Riverside) and older civic hubs (e.g., Boston) show high meeting intensities.

From our analysis:

- **Absolute meeting hours.** When analyzing raw meeting duration—the total hours local councils spend in discussion each week—a clear trend emerges: **large metropolitan areas dominate the top of the list.** This is not surprising given the density, diversity, and complexity of urban governance (Figure 6).

LA City Council sets record with more than 40 hours of meetings each week

But Texas is the most frequently appearing state among top 10 most active communities nationwide

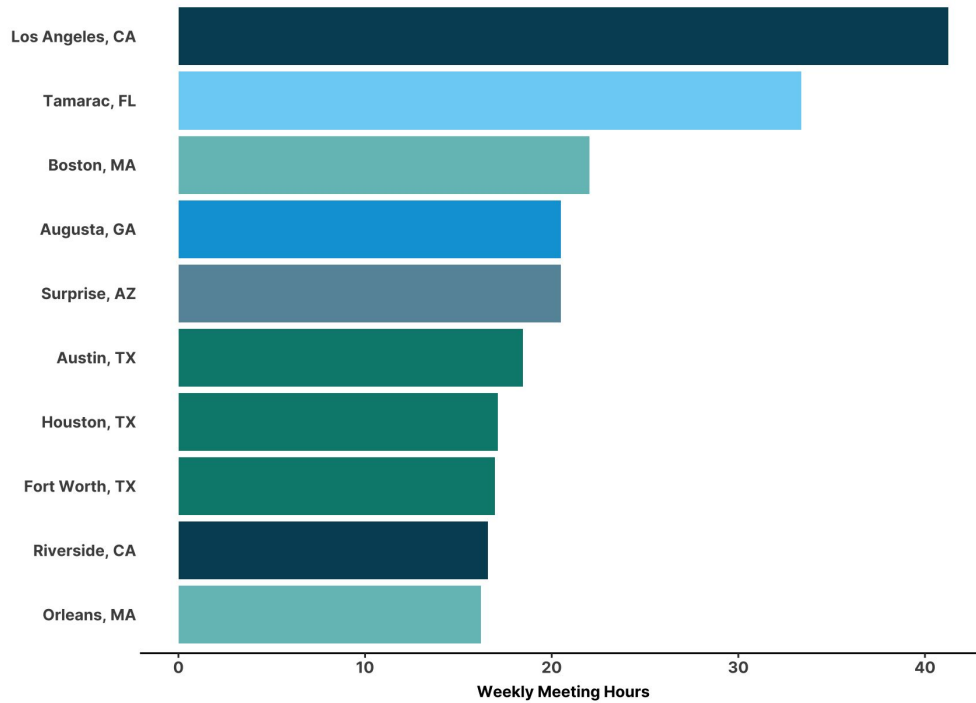


Figure 6: Top 10 Big Cities by City Council Meeting Lengths

Most notably, **Los Angeles, CA** stands out, averaging more than **40 hours of city council meetings per week**, the highest in the nation. This figure is especially striking when compared to the national average of just 2.3 hours per city per week. The extensive meeting time in Los Angeles reflects several contributing factors:

- A vast and diverse population base
- A fragmented governance structure with numerous subcommittees and neighborhood councils
- Complex agendas involving housing, transportation, climate, public safety, and zoning reform
- High levels of public participation and procedural rigor

Other large cities such as *Boston, MA*, *Austin, TX*, *Houston, TX*, and *Fort Worth, TX* also appear near the top, suggesting that as urban complexity increases, so does the time commitment required for public deliberation.

At the **state level** (Figure 4), this dynamic scales up: states with high urban concentrations—such as *California*, *Texas*, *Massachusetts*, and *Florida*—account for a disproportionate share of total meeting hours nationwide. This is consistent with the idea that denser jurisdictions tend to have:

- More frequent council sessions
- Lengthier deliberations due to layered stakeholder input
- Higher regulatory burdens and inter-agency coordination

This pattern underscores a fundamental principle of U.S. local governance: *the more urbanized and populous a region, the more intensive its public decision-making process becomes*. However, as we explore in subsequent sections, *longer doesn't always mean better*—and some smaller states punch well above their weight in deliberative intensity.

- **Population-normalized meeting intensity.** When we adjust city council meeting durations on a per capita basis—that is, hours of deliberation per 10,000 residents—a very different civic geography emerges: **small and mid-sized cities dominate the rankings** (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Top 10 Big Cities by Council Meeting Hours per 10,000 Residents

Leading the list is **Riverside, CA**, which averages more than **11 hours of council meetings per week per 10,000 residents**—nearly five times the national average. Close behind are *Knoxville, TN*, *Boston, MA*, and *St. Petersburg, FL*, each reflecting a distinct regional governance style with high levels of civic deliberation relative to their population size.

Several notable factors help explain these results:

- A strong culture of local civic engagement, especially in New England and parts of the South
- Smaller population sizes enabling more direct public input
- More streamlined councils with fewer procedural constraints on deliberation time
- Local issue salience—especially on zoning, development, and infrastructure planning

At the **state level** (Figure 5), these patterns become even more pronounced. *Vermont* and *New Hampshire* lead the nation by a wide margin, with more than 2 and 1.3 hours of weekly meeting time per 10,000 residents, respectively. This is consistent with New England’s deep-rooted tradition of direct democracy and participatory town governance.

This data challenges assumptions that civic intensity is confined to large metro areas. Instead, it suggests a more distributed model of democratic participation—where *smaller jurisdictions often devote more time and attention per resident to the public process*.

These findings reinforce a central insight in American localism: *deliberative democracy is not just a function of scale, but of civic norms, institutional design, and cultural context*. This suggests a regional civic ethos: citizens here routinely expect and engage in public deliberation.

- **Patterns by ideology and development.** We observe that traditionally liberal or progressive areas often feature longer meetings, consistent with strong norms of public comment, procedural transparency, and thorough policy review (e.g., environmental impact hearings, inclusive zoning debates). Conversely, some conservative-leaning, fast-growing regions also show high meeting volumes—but for different reasons. There, rapid suburban development and infrastructure scaling generate dense agendas and recurring public hearings.

As one heuristic: *Western metros and New England towns both exhibit high civic deliberation, but for distinct structural and cultural reasons*.

New England Communities Lead in Civic Engagement

Nine of the ten most active U.S. city councils are located in just 4 states

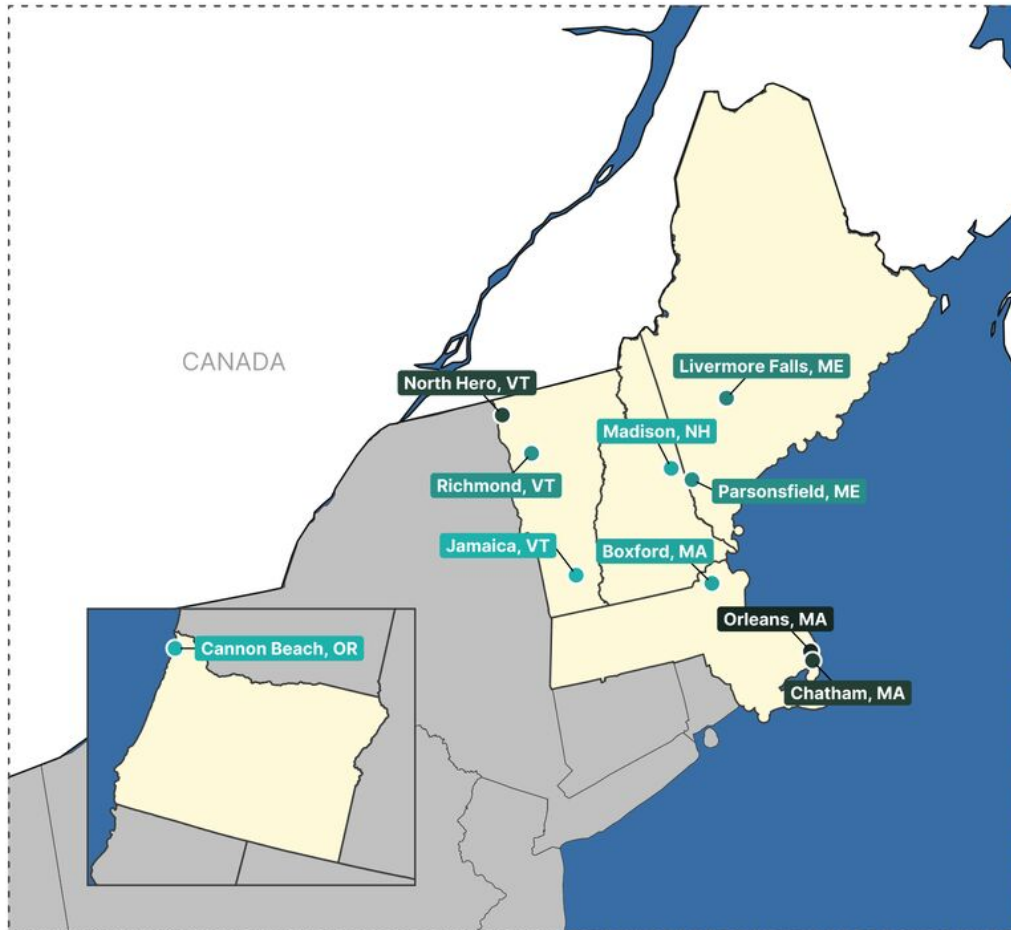


Figure 8: New England communities lead in civic engagement.

New England’s participatory governance model. Among the most distinctive civic regions in the U.S., New England stands out. Of the ten most politically active towns by per capita meeting time, nine are located in just four New England states: Massachusetts, Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire.

This concentration is not merely a function of small-town governance, but reflects a deep-rooted tradition of direct democracy and civic ownership. These communities average more than three minutes of council deliberation per resident in just six months—levels unmatched nationally. This suggests high public support, routine participation, and attention to the issue even in relatively small jurisdictions.

Such patterns echo New England’s long-standing norms of participatory town halls, direct voice in municipal governance, and civic identity tied closely to place-based stewardship.

In particular, only one city outside the region—Cannon Beach, Oregon—appears in the top ten, with the next non-New England entry not surfacing until the 28th place.

This outsized representation highlights how regional political cultures can shape the cadence and depth of democratic engagement in ways that aggregate national metrics may obscure. It reinforces the need for civic analytics to incorporate both quantitative signals and the qualitative regional context.

In general, these patterns reveal that *the local political culture is deeply geographical*. The structure of U.S. democracy is not just federal or state — it’s behavioral and cultural, played out in local chambers every day. In sum, council meeting-hours serve as a proxy for the “democratic density” of a community: how often and deeply citizens and officials debate shared issues.

3.2 Council Activity and Real Estate Correlations

Next, we examine whether active local governance is associated with economic performance. We focus on real-estate market signals, hypothesizing that more deliberation could attract investment by signaling engaged citizens and demand for development. Using economic census data (NAICS 53, real-estate leasing/brokerage revenues), we compute correlations with the intensity of council meetings (Figure 9).

Correlation of Council Meeting Lengths and Real Estate Revenue

Weekly discussion lengths correlate positively with real estate revenue in New England, but negatively in the West.

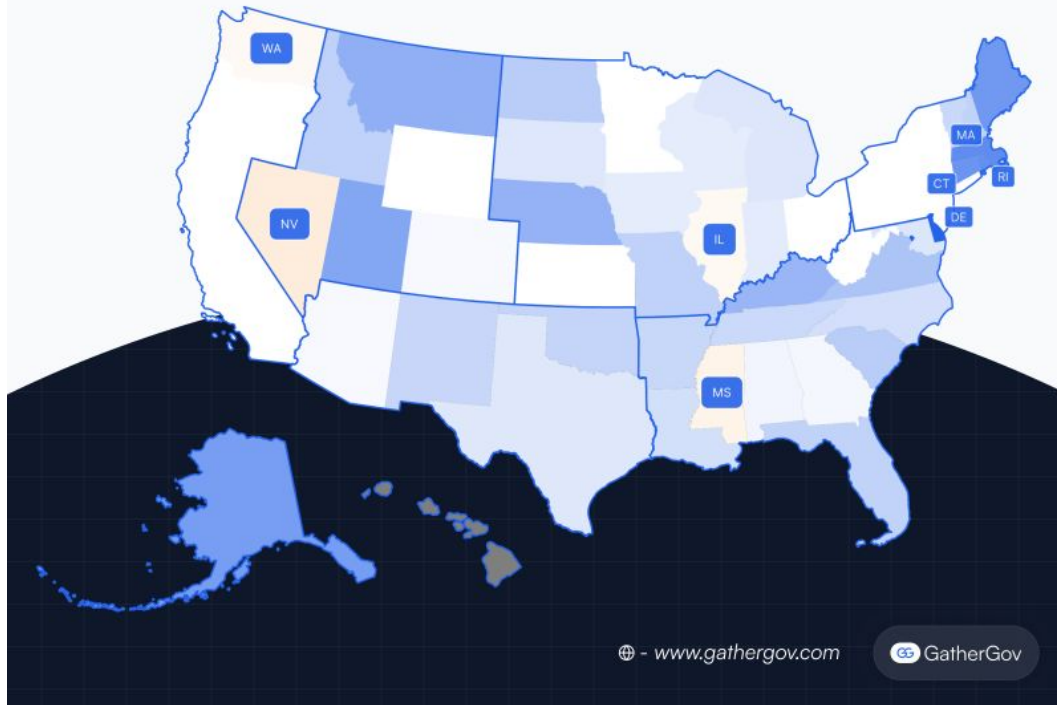


Figure 9: Correlation between weekly council meeting-hours versus real-estate sector revenue (NAICS 53) for the States.

In general, we find a modest positive correlation ($r \approx 0.21$) as the national average between weekly meeting hours and the revenue of the real-estate sector (Figure 10). In other words, on average, places with busier councils see stronger real-estate market activity. However, this aggregate trend masks a sharp size-dependent split:

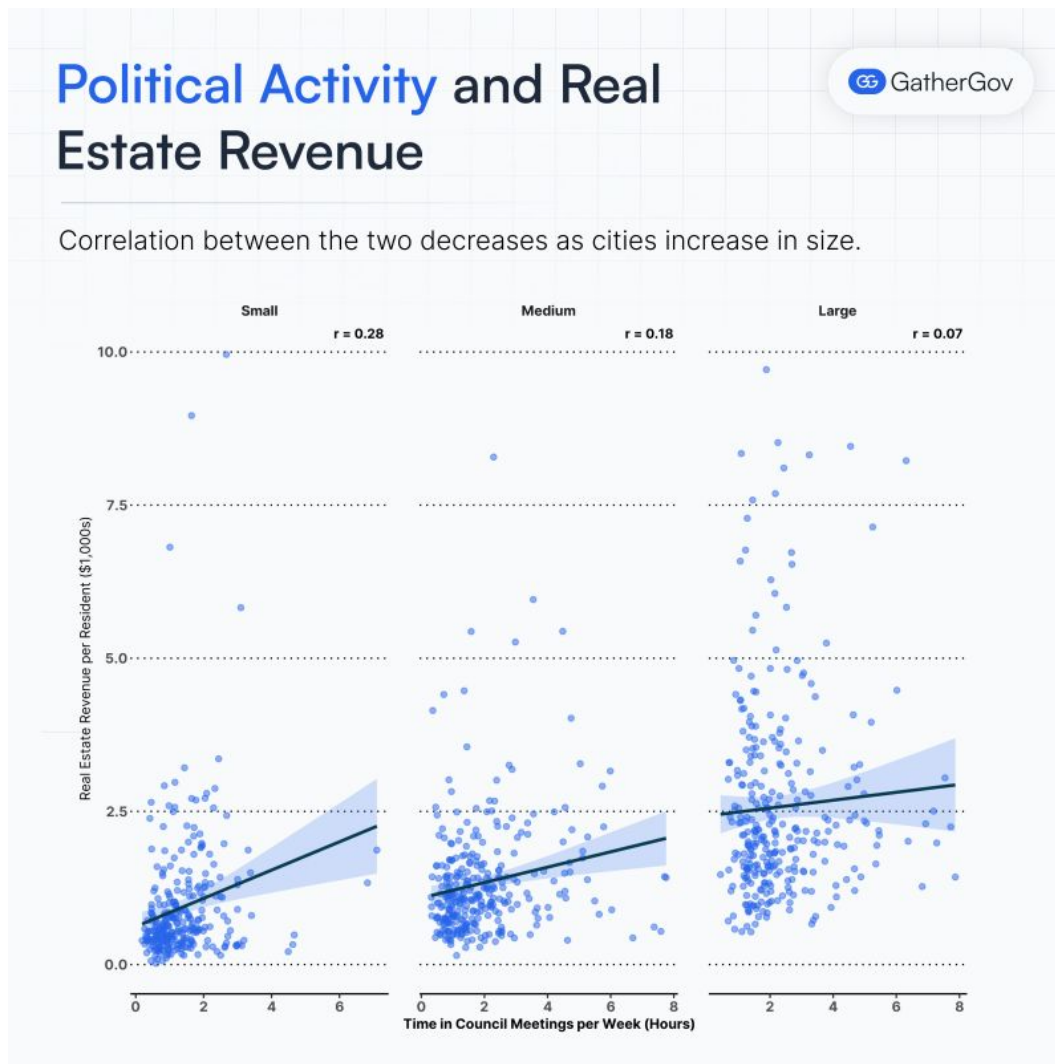


Figure 10: Scatter plot of local meeting-hours versus real-estate sector revenue (NAICS 53). Small counties (<35k residents) show a clear positive slope, whereas large counties (>134k residents) do not.

Small communities - In counties below 35,000 residents, the correlation is strong and positive. In these small towns, “more talk means more growth.” High civic engagement appears to align with rising real-estate leasing and brokerage revenues. We interpret this as reflecting local momentum: when towns are active in zoning, infrastructure planning, and public discussion, developers and investors interpret that as a sign of welcoming demand, lifting property-related revenues. In short, deliberation, visibility, and civic momentum attract investment for smaller communities. **Large metros** - In contrast, in counties above 134,000 residents, the correlation vanishes. Once cities reach a certain scale and complexity, development outcomes depend more on institutional efficiency and regulatory processes than on citizen activism alone. The same volume of discussion does not necessarily correlate with higher real-estate revenue. In fact, very active councils in large cities often reflect bureaucratic complexity (e.g., multi-year project reviews) rather than simple demand

signals.

Figure 10 illustrates the split: in a scatter plot of all meeting hours of all counties versus real-estate revenue, the upward trend is driven by small locales (left-hand scatter plot), while large-county data (right-hand scatter plot) cluster without clear slope. A representative interpretation is “the politics of small towns may create growth momentum, whereas in large metros, success depends on predictability and timing rather than raw participation.”

These results suggest that local deliberation can serve as an early *civic* signal to markets, but its meaning depends on the context. For developers and investors in small communities, active councils likely signal a cooperative environment and an engaged community (a growth opportunity). In contrast, in large cities, active meeting time may signify regulatory friction rather than demand.

In fact, further analysis at the state level confirms this nuance: for example, Nevada shows a negative correlation ($r \approx -0.32$) between council hours and real-estate revenues. A naive read might conclude that “less activity means growth” in Nevada, but our contextual analysis reveals that Nevada’s lengthy meetings actually reflect structural bottlenecks (water shortages, land-use constraints), not market vitality. In short, without local context, raw civic activity data can be misleading. For stakeholders, the lesson is this: *Monitor local political discussions for competitive intelligence* but always interpret them in light of regional constraints and incentives.

3.3 Home Values, Participation, and Representation

Our final focus is on housing and the equity of participation. We find that communities spending more time in council meetings tend to have higher median home values (Figure 11). Specifically, the most politically active tier of municipalities shows approximately a \$70,000 premium in median home value compared to the least active tier. This is a significant difference when about 30% of U.S. household wealth is tied to home equity. The implication is that in areas with high property values, citizens have more “skin in the game,” and local politics become high-stakes financial stewardship. Zoning changes or tax policies in such places directly affect wealth preservation, so council agendas reflect that intensity.

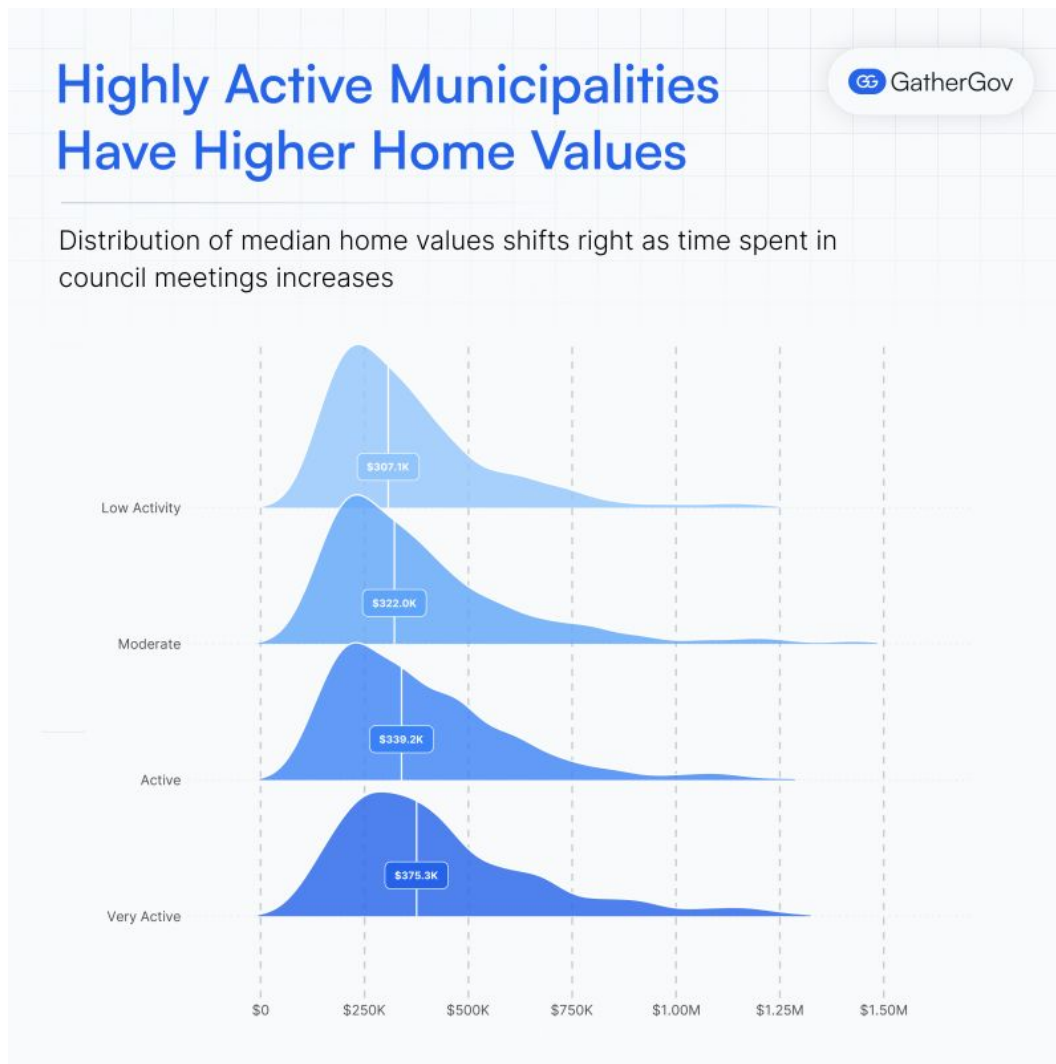


Figure 11: Median home values by quartile of council meeting activity. Highest-activity communities (right tailed) have substantially higher home values.

In a deeper dive, we observe that higher homeownership rates are also correlated with more meeting hours per capita (Figure 5). Places with large shares of homeowners naturally have constituents with a greater vested interest in local policy. This echoes the well-known findings: homeowners participate more in local affairs, likely due to their residential stability and investment in community outcomes [McCabe, 2013, Habitat for Humanity, 2021]. In our data, cities with higher homeownership rates consistently spend more hours in council discussion.

However, this raises equity questions: If the most active forums are dominated by homeowners, then which voices are shaping those debates? Analysis of demographic proxies of New England Figure 8 suggests that active meeting times often correlate with older, wealthier, and homeownership demographics. In short, homeowners show up more, speak more and shape local decisions more — because policy directly affects their equity. From an equity standpoint, this concentration can skew policy outcomes. Without deliberate inclusion, high

participation can merely amplify a subset of stakeholders (often white, older homeowners) rather than the full community.

4 Forest Zoo Theory: An Analytical Lens

To synthesize these findings, we adopt the *Forest Zoo Theory* as a conceptual framework. This emerging theory blends two metaphors: the Dark Forest Hypothesis (from astrophysics) and the Zoo Hypothesis (from the Fermi paradox). The Dark Forest notion is that survival favors silence and invisibility; the Zoo Hypothesis posits that advanced intelligences (zookeepers) observe without overt interference. The *Forest Zoo Theory* suggests that in modern geopolitics, powerful actors exercise control indirectly and subtly. In this view, “elites use lobbying and subtle control to monitor and influence global affairs — e.g., funding think tanks or NGOs to shape policies, maintaining dominance while avoiding direct conflict” [Barari and Simko, 2023].

Applied to our civic findings, this lens reveals how the multiplicity of local government bodies may belie an underlying structure of influence. For example:

- **Distributed yet aligned outcomes;** We observe diverse local processes (some places deliberate for hours, others move quickly), yet at higher levels many policy outcomes (e.g., regional planning trends, tax rules) show convergence. The Forest Zoo Theory explains this by noting that power is often hidden in incentives and information. As one formulation puts it: “The quietest players often shape the loudest outcomes... In a world where visibility equals vulnerability, modern power is not loud: it is invisible and structural” [Barari and Simko, 2023]. Our data reflect this: although city councils operate independently, factors like statewide policies or funding pipelines create consistent patterns of growth or constraints across cities.
- **Local autonomy under structural design;** Powerful actors (governments, federal agencies, or influential interest groups) can be seen as “zookeepers” designing the environment. In practice, this means that national or state-level incentives (e.g., infrastructure grants, tax incentives), and broad regulations set the stage for local governance. For example, a city may have lengthy debates on housing policy, but the overall trajectory of development is heavily influenced by upper-level planning frameworks. In our Forest Zoo analogy, councils (the “animals”) believe they are freely governing, but they move within paths pre-laid by invisible fences of policy and capital.
- **Power through narratives and incentives.** Today, influence often flows through narratives, institutions, and funding rather than brute force. Our analysis shows that the intensity of meeting-hours does not simply map to better outcomes — the signal of civic engagement only becomes meaningful when combined with context. Similarly, the Forest Zoo view suggests that major conflicts are avoided because incentives are aligned through the structure. In our case, local governments across different regions may align more than it seems: e.g., many states, regardless of nominal ideology, show patterns like short sessions correlating with growth. This could be interpreted as a design choice (suburban growth models) rather than as a purely local variation.

Figure 12 represents the Forest Zoo concept: powerful actors (represented by the zookeeper) maintain control behind the scenes, while local councils (the animals) operate with the illusion of freedom. In this framing, civic data like GatherGov’s become a tool for revealing the invisible architecture. The fact that we can detect structured relationships between local meetings and macro indicators is evidence that “markets move where democracy breathes” [Barari and Simko, 2023].

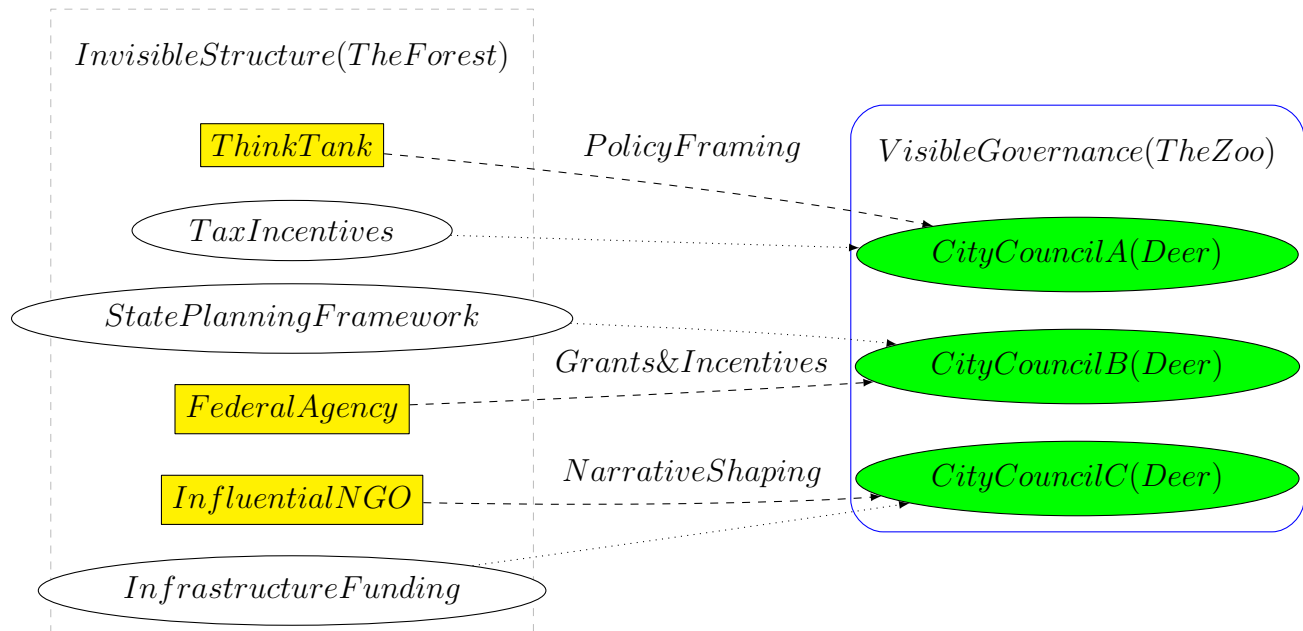


Figure 12: Graphical representation of the Forest Zoo Theory. Local governments operate visibly, while hidden actors shape outcomes structurally.

5 Discussion

Our findings have several implications. First, they confirm that civic engagement is geographically uneven and economically consequential. Western states and New England have deeply rooted participatory cultures, suggesting that democracy at the local level is not uniform. For practitioners, this means that one-size-fits-all engagement strategies are misguided. Investors and developers, for example, should tailor their approach: in a small New England town, building relationships with active local committees can unlock opportunities, whereas in a Los Angeles-scale city, aligning with regulatory agencies might be more critical.

Second, the link between meeting hours and market signals underscores the value of what we call *civic intelligence*. Local council data offer early warnings and insights that go beyond traditional metrics. Long meeting times in a small city could be interpreted as an indicator of a larger development driven by the community, whereas similar activity in a large city could signal bureaucratic delays. In either case, these data allow stakeholders to “follow local government conversations” as part of due diligence.

Third, the analysis highlights equity considerations. Higher intensity of meetings correlates with wealth (home values) and homeownership, implying that property-rich constituencies drive much of the dialog. Without deliberate inclusion efforts, this dynamic can exacerbate inequality: policy outcomes may favor incumbents if renters and under-served populations are absent. To promote equitable governance, tools and policies should ensure that participation in the meeting-room reflects the diversity of the community (in tenure, income, race, age). As noted in our data, the voices that influence outcomes must represent all stakeholder groups. In practice, this could involve participatory budgeting, improved notification systems, and support for non-homeowner advocacy.

Finally, integrating the Forest Zoo Theory helps us understand why we see these dynamics without overt coordination. It suggests that local civic processes are part of a larger ecosystem where the influence is diffuse. For example, national institutions (such as the World Economic Forum or federal grants) rarely impose policies by decree, but they shape the agenda and discourse that percolate down to city councils [Barari and Simko, 2023]. In this sense, our study shows how grassroots data can illuminate the hidden structures of power: we see that despite the formal fragmentation of U.S. federalism, common patterns emerge, hinting at shared underlying incentives.

6 Conclusion

This paper has combined large-scale civic data with theoretical insight to shed new light on the geography of local governance. We have shown that civic deliberation is patterned by region and linked to economic signals — and that these patterns can be interpreted through the Forest Zoo lens of subtle, distributed influence. The key takeaways are:

- *Regional models matter:* Local political cultures vary (West vs. East, metro vs. small town), and these differences should inform policy and investment strategies.
- *Civic data as intelligence:* Metrics like council meeting hours encode valuable market-relevant information (real estate signals, development friction) that can supplement traditional economic indicators.
- *Equity in participation:* High engagement does not guarantee equity. We must couple data-driven monitoring with efforts to diversify who has a voice.
- *Invisible power structures:* The Forest Zoo analogy underscores that understanding local governance requires looking beyond formal institutions to the incentive structures and narratives that guide them.

We recommend that economists, real-estate analysts, and civic leaders incorporate local meeting data into their analyses. Platforms like GatherGov are making these once-hidden signals transparent. In an age where markets move on information, knowing “where democracy breathes” can yield a competitive edge.

Acknowledgments

We thank the GatherGov team for providing the civic participation dataset and for valuable discussions. The analysis also benefited from insights into Forest Zoo Theory as formulated by Jayanth Kumar.

References

- Barari, S., & Simko, T. (2023). LocalView, a database of public meetings for the study of local politics and policy-making in the United States. *Scientific Data*, 10, Article 135.
- National Civic League. (2022). *Why Civic Engagement Matters*. (Online resource).
- Srinivas, H. (2023). Participatory Governance: Better Cities, Better Livability. GDRC Concept Note Series E-202, September 2023.
- Habitat for Humanity. (2021). Research series: How does homeownership contribute to social and civic engagement? (Research brief, Habitat for Humanity).
- McCabe, B. J. (2013). Are Homeowners Better Citizens? Homeownership and Community Participation in the United States. *Social Forces*, 91(3), 929–954.
- de Tocqueville, A. (1835). *Democracy in America*. Saunders and Otley.