

Policy Agendas, Participation, and Nationalization in American Local Government

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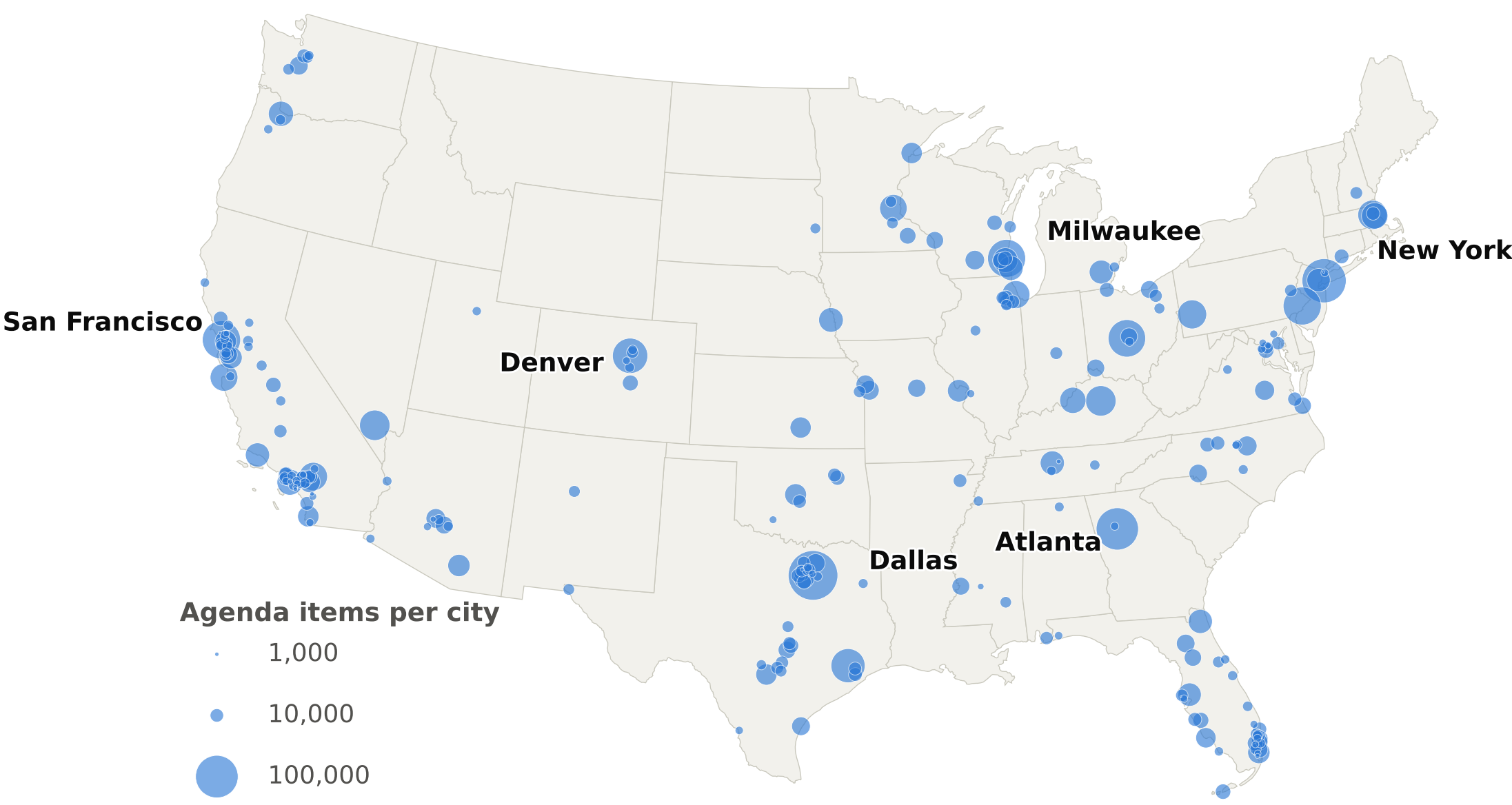
Stanford Graduate School of Business
Municipality-only analysis version



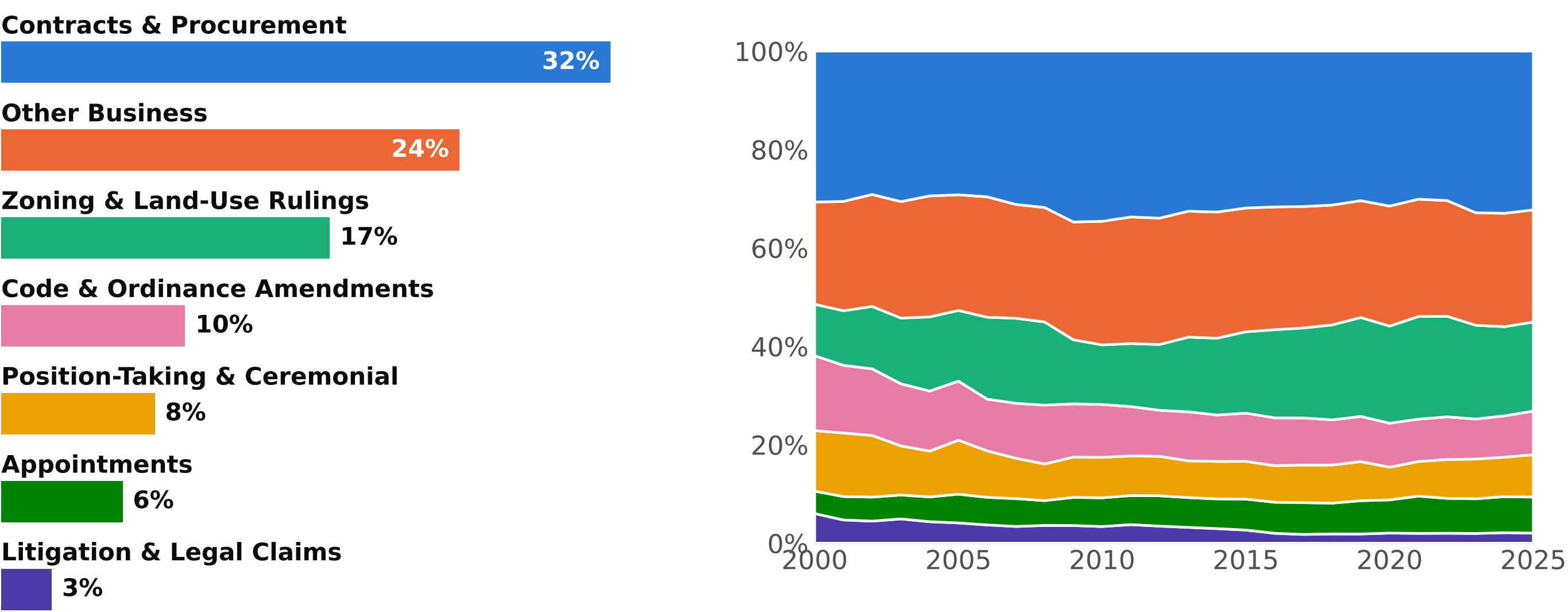
A Nationwide Corpus of City-Council Agendas & Minutes

- Scraped the meeting portals of 391 local governments $\Rightarrow$ 382,946 meetings of governing councils and housing, planning, zoning & development bodies, 2000–2025
- 5.37M agenda items recovered from online portals and PDF records, classified into topics by embedding clustering and LLM labels
- Details on item outcomes from 3.0M items matched to meeting minutes $\Rightarrow$ 639k named public commenters and 6.9M individual council votes

This poster: Data from 240 cities in 38 states

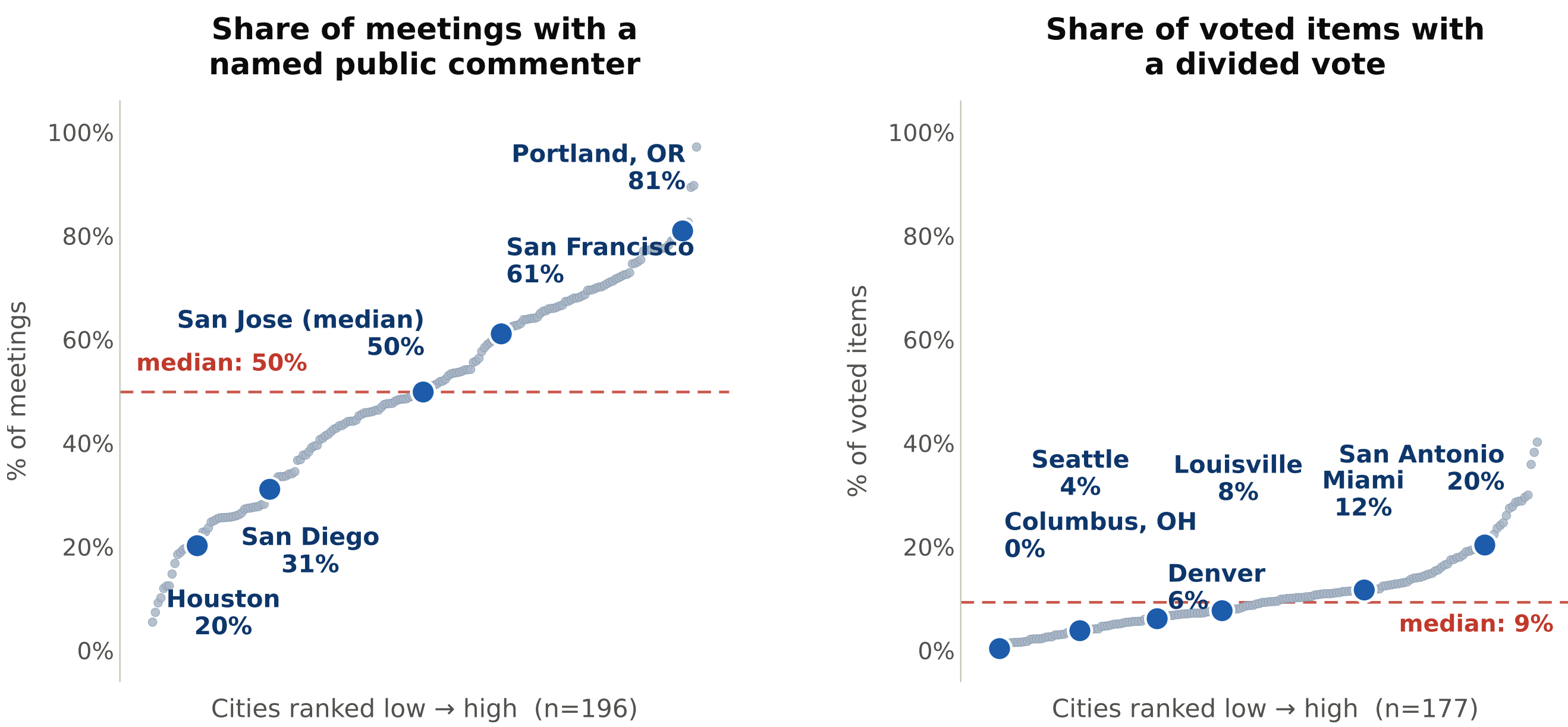


What's On the Local Agenda?



- Most municipal business (32%) concerns **procurement and contracts** for local service delivery
- Next most common items are **general business** (e.g. specific appropriations) and **zoning and land use rulings** on specific properties

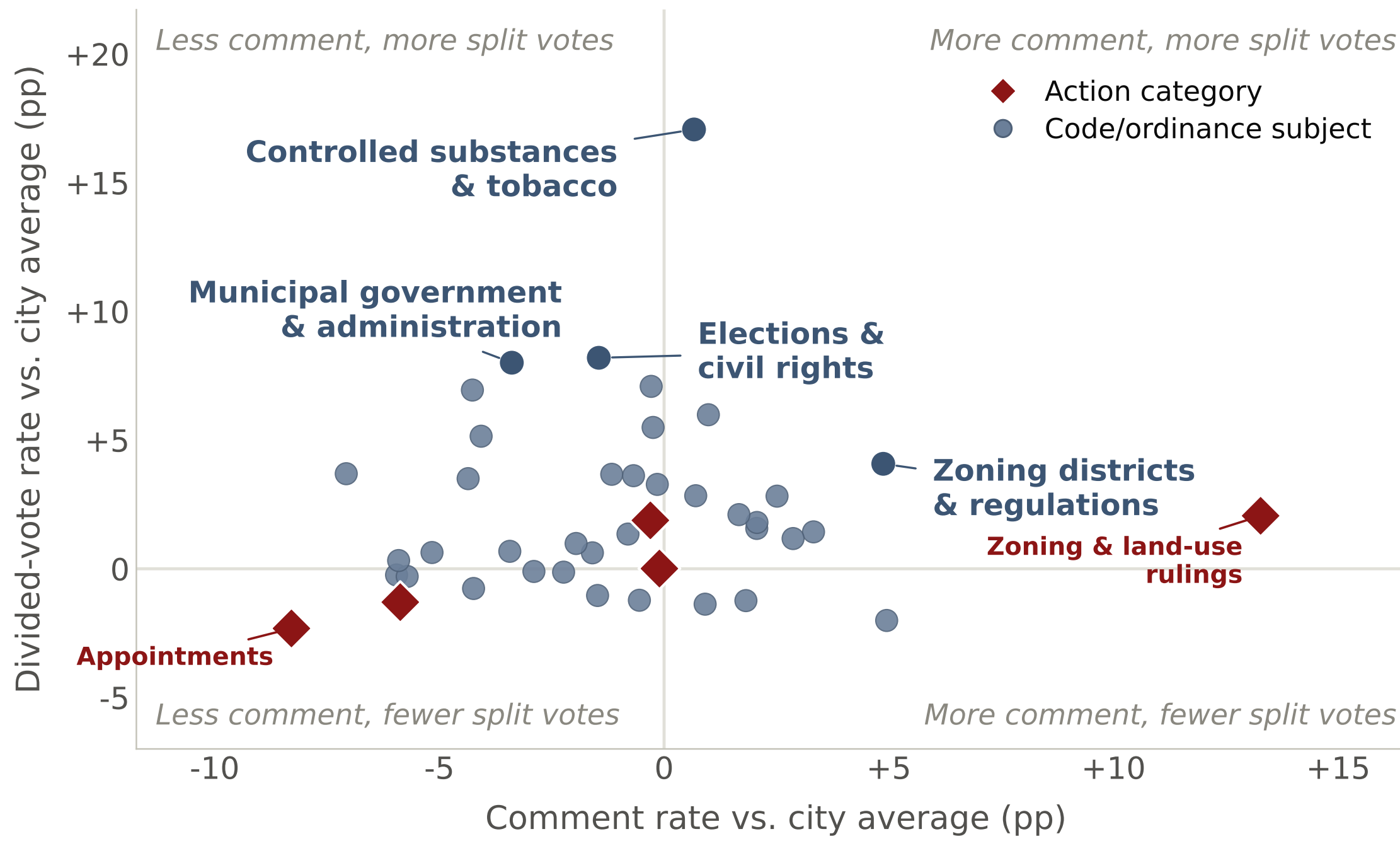
How Regular Are Comments and Divided Votes?



- Among meetings matched to their minutes, **half of meetings** hear a named commenter
- Among items with recorded votes, the **vast majority of votes** are consensus

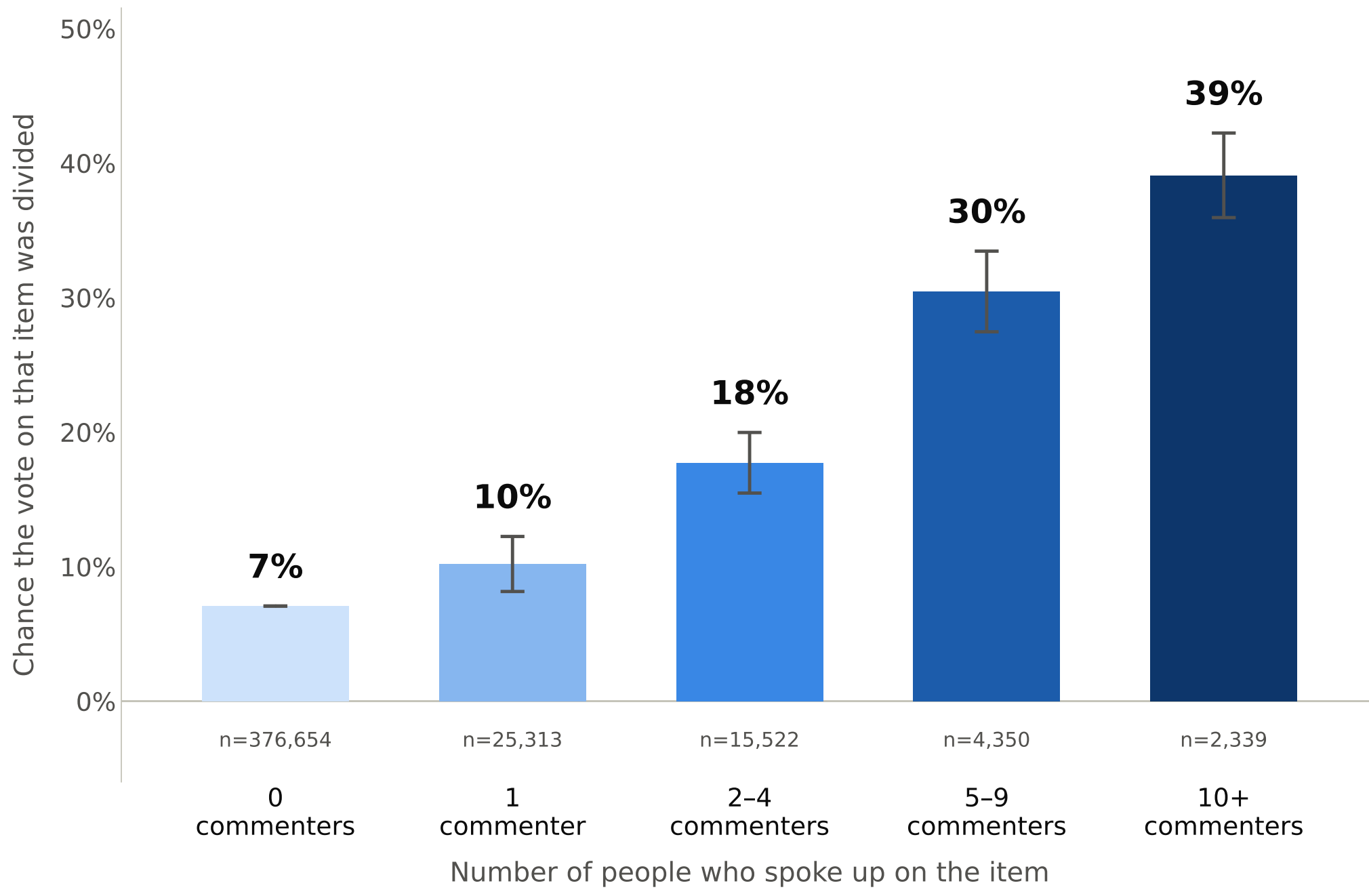
Which Items Attract Comment and Divided Votes?

- We subclassify **Code & Ordinance Amendments** and **Other Business** into 37 topics derived from clustering municipal-code chapters



- Specific **land-use rulings** and **zoning code amendments** draw the most comment
- Controlled-substance regulation and governance topics produce high rates of divided votes

Items Attracting Public Comment are Likely Non-Consensus

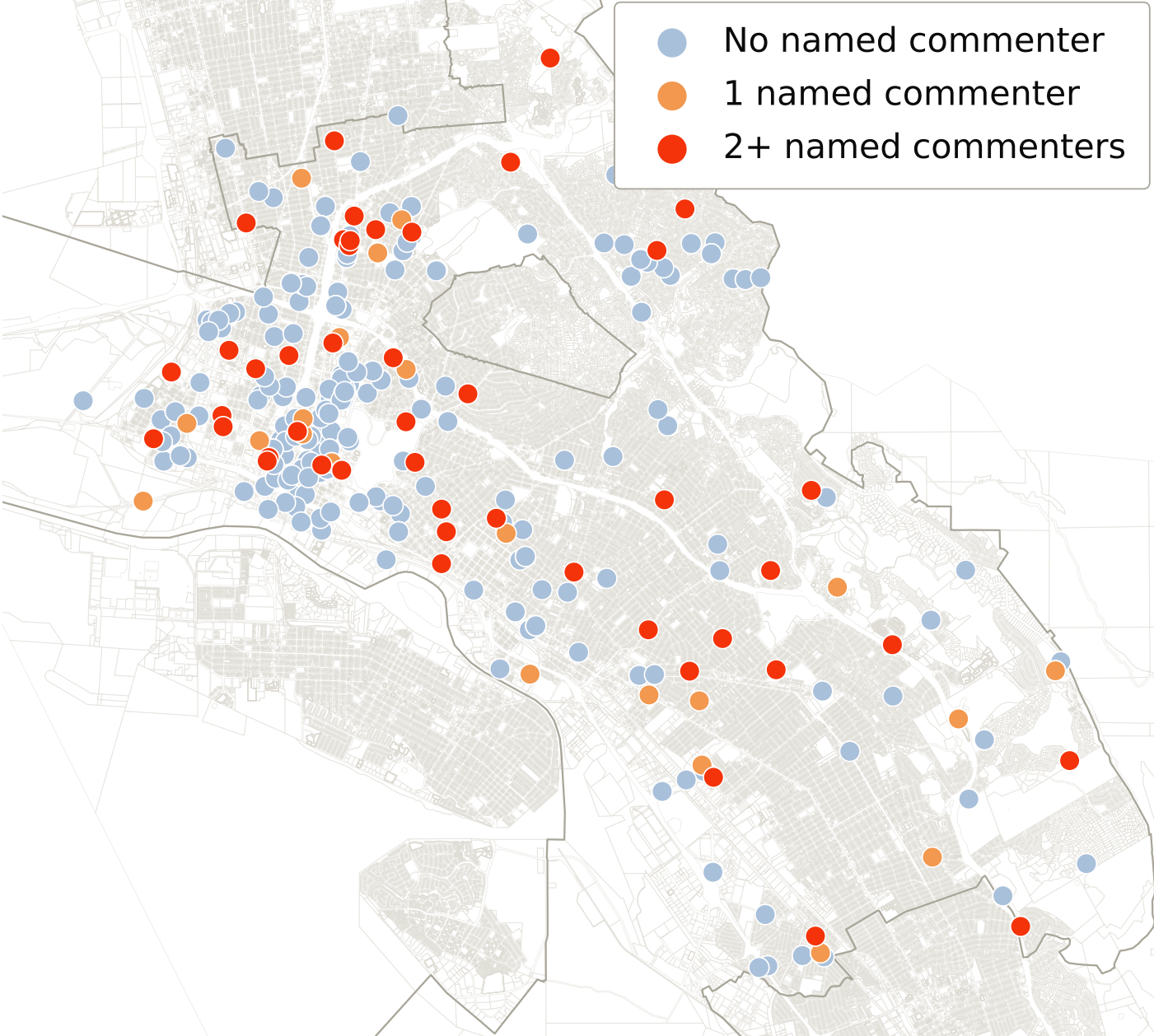


Error bars show 95% CIs for differences relative to zero-commenter items; zero commenters is the reference.

- Within the same city and category, more public commenters predicts divided votes

Neighborhood Predictors of Land-Use Ruling Comment

Example: Land-Use Rulings in Oakland, CA, 2003–2024



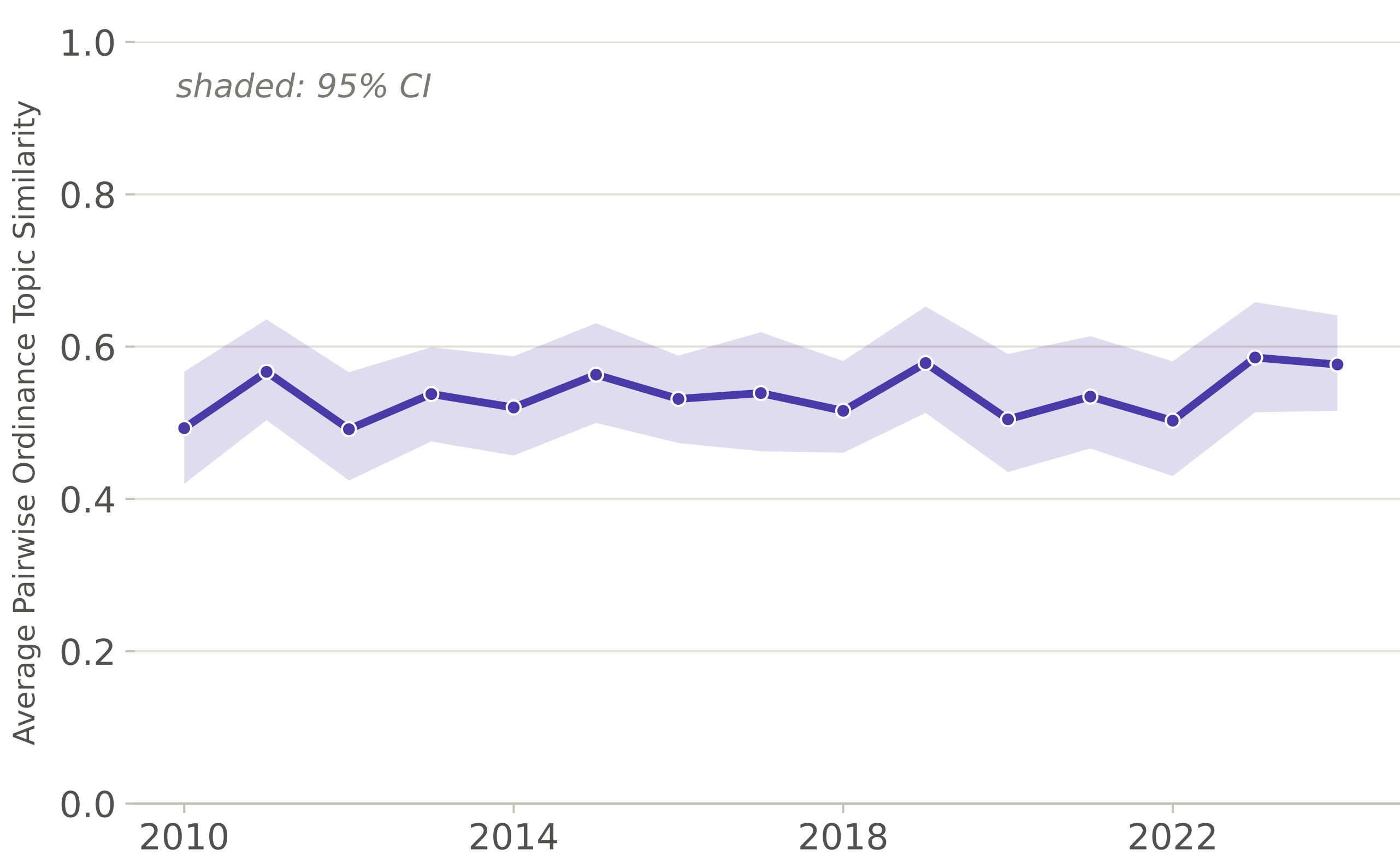
- We **geocode** land-use rulings to see **block-group demographic predictors** of public comment

Commenters	Any	2+
Log Med. HH Inc.	0.0036	−0.0010
Log Med. Home Val.	0.0060**	0.0083***
Log Pop. Dens.	0.0037	0.0045***
Share BA+	0.0012	0.0050*
Share White (NH)	−0.0029	0.0106*
Median Age	−0.0003	0.0004
Meeting FE	Yes	Yes
N	114,967	114,967

- Land-use rulings in **whiter, more educated, wealthier neighborhoods** are more likely to attract multiple commenters

Do Cities Legislate on the Same Things?

- Among **code & ordinance amendments**, we compute the **average pairwise cosine similarity** between the topic mixes across cities



- The legislative topic mix across U.S. cities **has not become more or less similar** across cities in the past 15 years

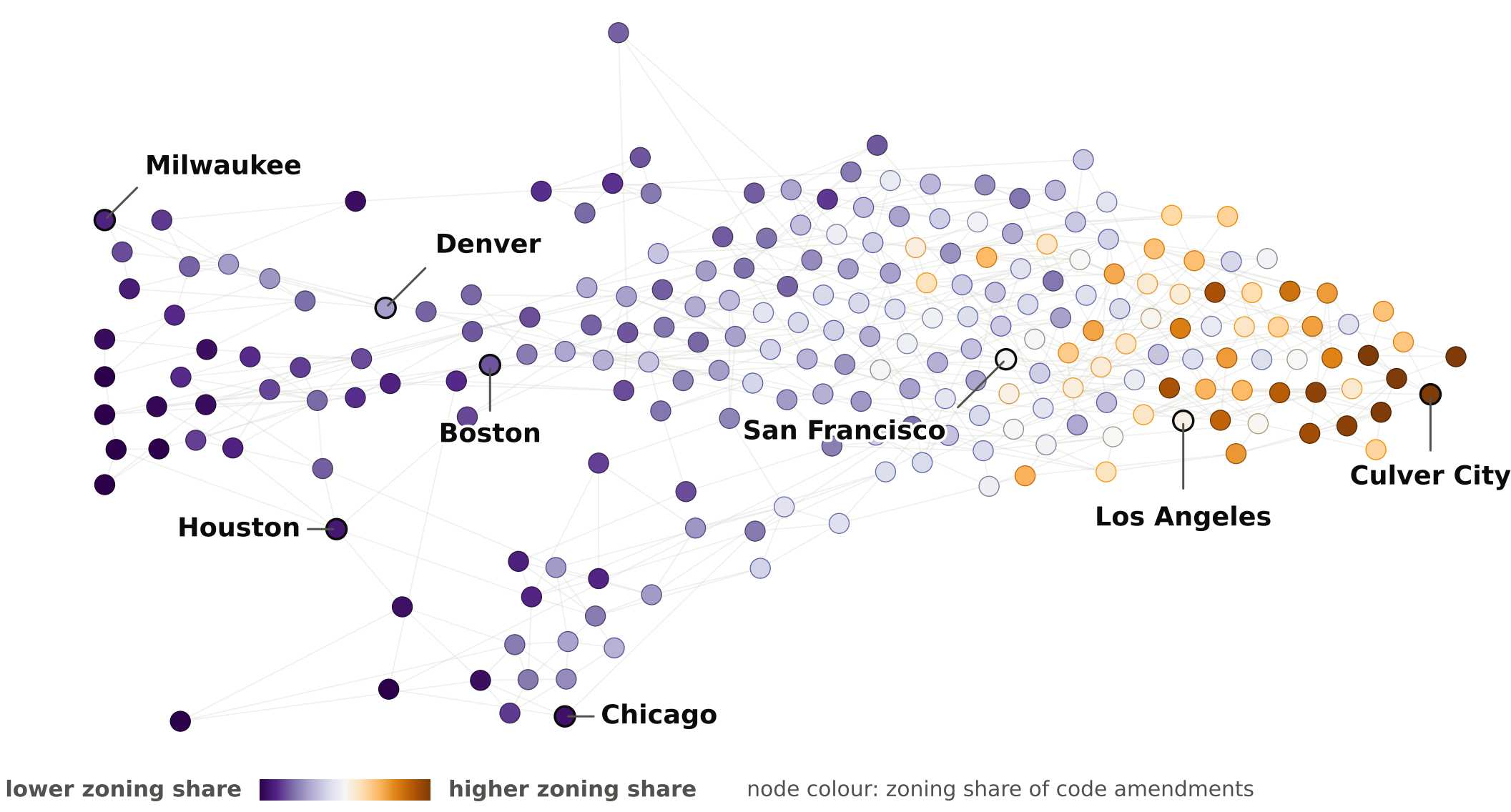
Which City Traits Drive Agenda Similarity?

	Effect of a 1-SD wider gap (SDs of lawmaking similarity)
Housing permits per 1,000	−0.106 ($p = 0.029$)
Black population share	−0.097 ($p = 0.039$)
Population (log)	−0.097 ($p = 0.010$)
Homeownership rate	−0.085 ($p = 0.058$)
Median household income (log)	0.069 ($p = 0.317$)

- Dyadic regressions relate cosine similarity to city-pair demographic gaps, controlling for same-state status and distance (permutation p -values).
- Larger gaps in **housing growth, population, and Black population share** predict less similarity.

Zoning Organizes Municipal Agenda Similarity

- Plotting $k = 3$ cosine-nearest neighbors for code & ordinance amendment topic mix



- Among 37 topics, **zoning share** best predicts which cities are nearest neighbors ($p < .001$)
- Dyadic regression: one-SD larger **zoning-share gap** predicts 0.34 SD lower cosine similarity ($p < .001$)