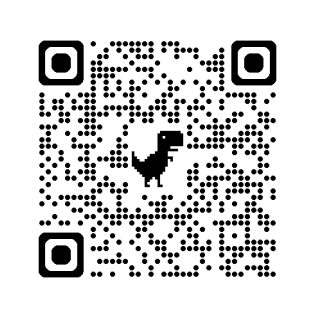


The Voters' Veto

Local Racial Demographic Change and Exclusionary Behavior

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Bottom line. When a neighborhood's white population shrinks, voters become measurably more willing to keep a veto over affordable housing, and this holds in majority Black and majority Latino precincts, not just white ones.

“Low-income black communities don't want low-income housing built in their communities either.”

Assembly Member Gebe Ferguson, defending Article 34 in 1993.

1 The problem

Racial threat theory predicts that a growing minority population elicits exclusionary behavior among the majority. Three gaps:

- **Who.** Research centers on non-Hispanic whites, treating minority voters as a static bloc rather than one also facing demographic change.
- **What.** Outcomes are attitudes, or behaviors that touch policy only indirectly: turnout, candidate choice.
- **Where.** The focus is national, though local exposure to change is governed by municipal zoning.

Exclusionary zoning sets a local price floor that blocks lower-income, disproportionately non-white residents, and it is decided locally.

Does local racial demographic change increase *behavioral* support for an exclusionary local institution, and is that response confined to white voters?

2 The case: Article 34

A 1950 amendment to the California Constitution: no “low-rent” housing may be built until a majority of the local electorate approves it: a **voters' veto** over affordable housing.

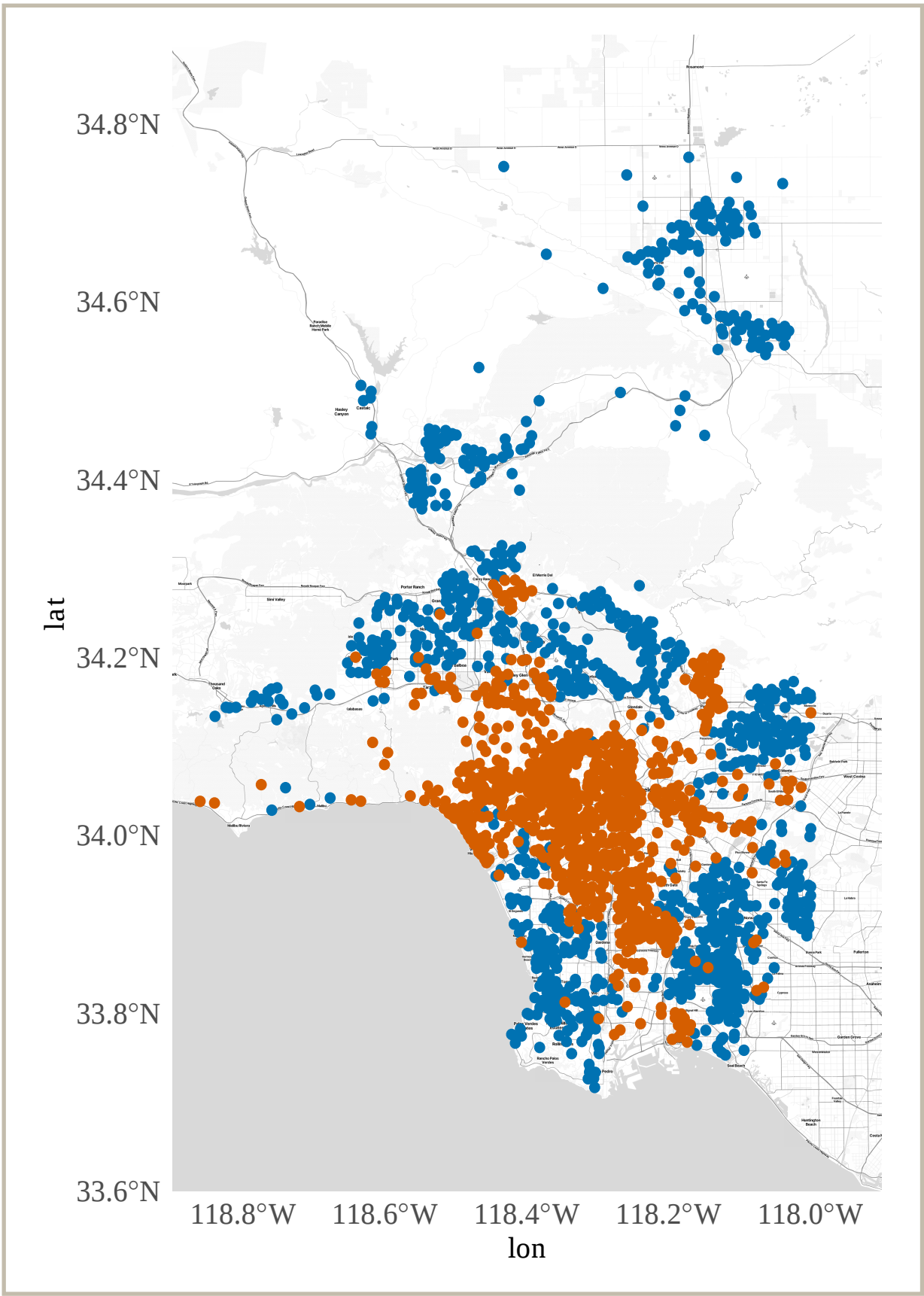
- Campaigned with the California Real Estate Association as a way to counter “minority pressure groups.” Upheld in *James v. Valtierra* (1971).
- By 1968 voters had rejected roughly 15,000 units statewide. Three repeal attempts (1974, 1980 and 1993) all failed.

The 1993 vote is a rare thing: direct behavioral support for an exclusionary tool, cast during rapid local demographic change.

3 Data

- **3,718 precincts**, Los Angeles County, November 1993.
- **Outcome:** precinct vote share for keeping the veto. Weighted mean 55.4%.
- **Treatment:** 1980–93 change in non-white population, as percentage points and as proportion ($r = .66$), winsorized at the 5th/95th percentiles.
- **Construction:** tract Census data overlaid on precincts, weighted by each precinct's share of tract voters; 1993 interpolated from 1990 and 2000.

Setting. The county's white share fell from 53% to 38%. The median voter's precinct gained 13.2 points (+41%) of non-white population. In 1992, 56% of residents said their neighborhood was changing ethnically, rising to 78% among Black residents.



Support for the voters' veto, 1993. Blue = top tercile ($\geq 62\%$ in favor); orange = bottom tercile ($\leq 47\%$). Support concentrates outside the urbanized core.

4 Design

- A • Internal change.** Support regressed on the standardized 1980–93 change in non-white population, with 1980 pretreatment controls, Census place fixed effects, population weights, and errors clustered by place.
- B • Proximity.** Hold within-precinct change fixed; use distance to a rapidly diversifying tract instead, following Reny and Newman (2018).

5 Diversification predicts the veto

+4.5 pts

increase in support for the voters' veto per one standard deviation (+9.9 percentage points) of growth in a precinct's non-white population, 1980–93 ($d = .31$)

As proportion change: +3.4 points ($d = .24$). Both $p < 0.001$.

	Model 1	Model 2
SD pct.-point Δ in non-white pop.	0.045*** (0.011)	
SD proportion Δ in non-white pop.		0.034*** (0.010)
1980 pretreatment controls	Yes	Yes
Census place fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Precincts	3,651	3,651
Clusters (places)	142	142

Vote share supporting the veto, 0–1 scale, so 0.045 = 4.5 points. Population-weighted OLS. *** $p < 0.001$.

6 Not just white precincts

If this were racial threat as conventionally theorized, the reaction should sit in majority white precincts. It does not.

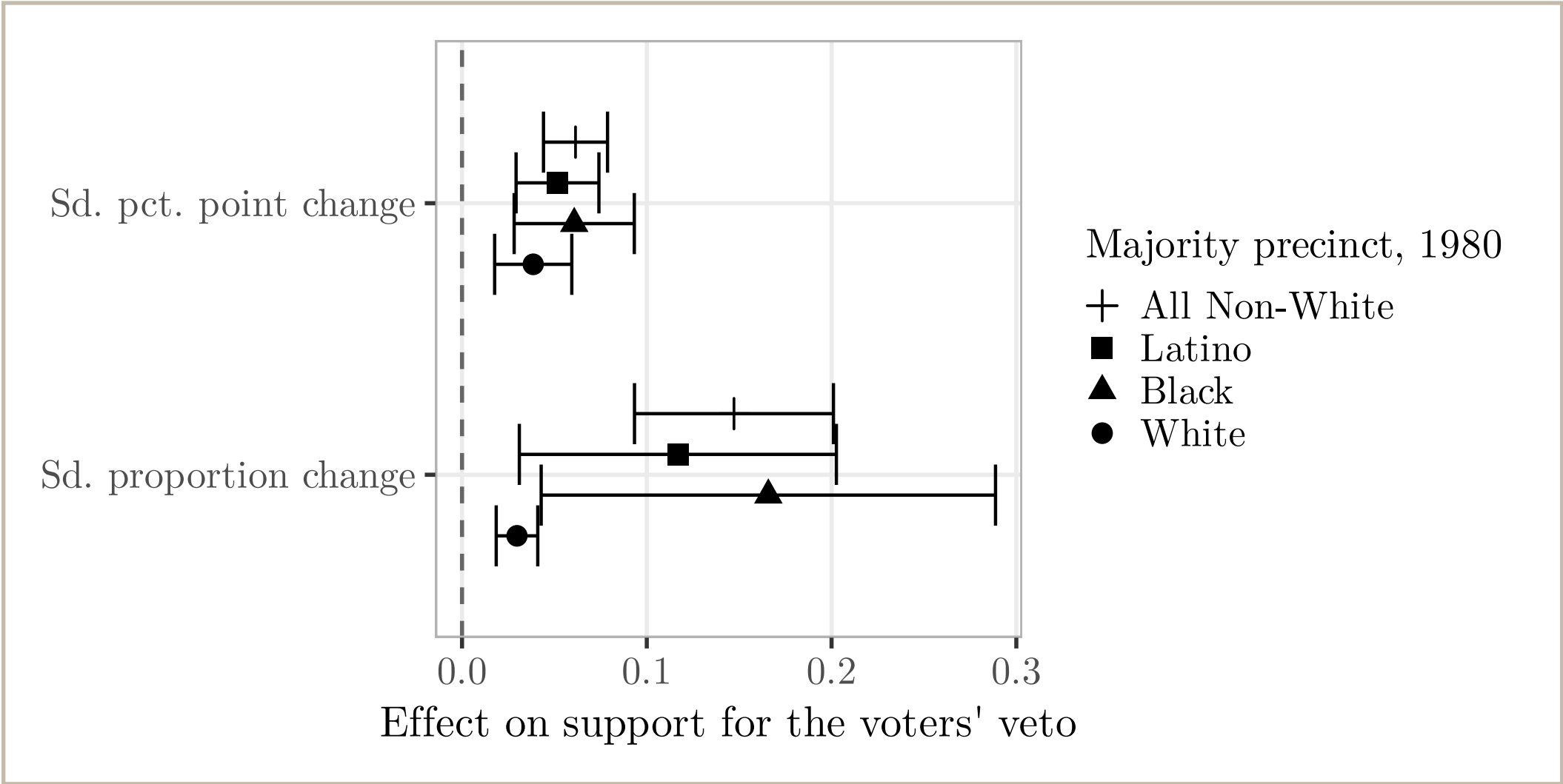


Figure 1. Treatment $\times$ 1980 majority composition. 95% CIs.

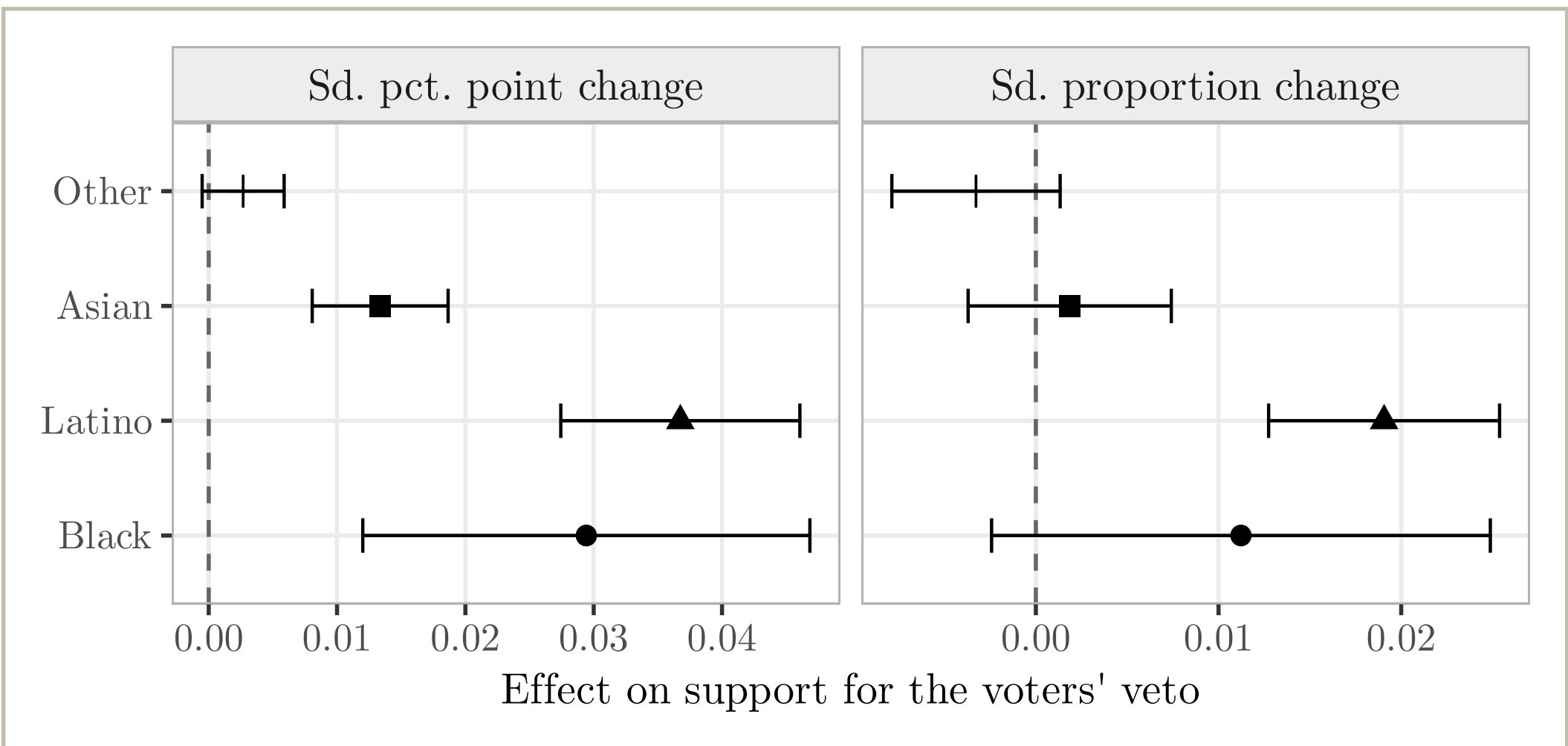


Figure 2. Each group's growth, standardized and entered together with 1980 levels. “Other” is a residual category and is null.

7 Not simple group threat

Do minority precincts react to losing *their own* group's share? No. In majority Black and majority Latino precincts, a rise in the non-Black and non-Latino population produces no reaction.

Only a declining local white share predicts support. This is not symmetric ingroup defense.

8 Is it just new voters?

Support could be rising because new residents arrive. But precincts with more non-white voters show *lower* support, and exit is likeliest among the least tolerant, so composition should attenuate the result rather than create it.

Direct test. Among precincts in the bottom tercile of *both* churn and own racial change, use proximity to a rapidly diversifying tract.

+3.0 pts

increase in support for the veto per one standard deviation (≈ 3.4 km) increase in proximity to a diversifying tract ($d = .28$)

Both defined as proportional change instead: +4.0 points ($d = .39$).

9 Robustness

- **Not diversity.** Change in fractionalization is *negatively* associated with support (-0.9 pts), and the two measures correlate at only .23.
- **Not class.** Proximity to a *poor* tract runs the other way (-2.8 pts). Racial proximity survives when both are entered together (+2.5).
- **Competing correlates.** Churn and foreign born are inconsistent; density and falling income matter, but less than racial change.
- **Spatial dependence.** A spatial Durbin error model returns the same sign and significance, attenuated (+0.8 to +2.8 points).
- **Specification.** Holds without winsorizing, with time-varying controls, and at 85th and 95th percentile thresholds.

10 What it means

Neither contact nor conflict. A shrinking white share activates broadly shared concerns about a neighborhood's trajectory: what Pattillo-McCoy (1999) calls middle-class Black neighborhoods working to “fortify” themselves. Not equivalent to prejudice, but it deepens segregation all the same.

- As minorities suburbanize, voters across racial backgrounds may defend exclusionary zoning.
- A fourth repeal attempt was pulled from the November 2024 ballot after polling underwater.

Scope. One county, uniquely dense and diverse.