Social Class Targeting of Property Buyouts

MEGAN MULLIN

As local governments face the burden of responding to climate-related hazards, their actions layer on top of existing class inequalities. This article reports on a survey experiment examining the responses of elected city and county officials to a proposed voluntary buyout of properties at risk from climate impacts. An experiment embedded in the survey tests whether politicians' responses to a buyout proposal depend on identification of recipients as wealthy or low-income. Results show a significant difference in support across the targeted recipients: even with an identical cost recovery period, elected officials were more likely to support buyouts for low-income homeowners. The effect of social class targeting became larger after respondents considered wide-ranging benefits and drawbacks of buyouts: they favored buyouts to a greater degree for low-income recipients, and to a lesser degree for wealthy recipients, than for homeowners not identified with a class marker. If these responses translate into differential provision of buyout opportunities across income groups, it could help mitigate large class-based disparities in capacity to recover from disasters, while at the same time contributing to class-based disparities in climate migration.

Keywords: managed retreat, climate adaptation, property buyouts, climate justice, social class, survey experiment, local government

In the United States, the burden of responding to climate-related hazards falls overwhelmingly on local governments. Through their control over land use, their responsibilities for infrastructure and public services, and their ability to set taxes, local governments can help reduce—or amplify—harm and disruption caused by flooding, wildfire, and other hazards. As communities attempt to become more resilient to climate risks, they may enact policies that reinforce existing inequalities. Research in local political economy demonstrates that local governments historically have exercised their powers in ways that benefit wealthy White property owners, contributing to widespread segregation and unequal access to public services (Einstein et al. 2019; Fischel 2001; Rothstein 2017; Trounstine 2018). Mechanisms intended to manage environmental risk often become instruments for exclusion or the protection of property val-

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ues (Glaeser and Ward 2009; Mullin 2009; Mullin et al. 2019). More recently, however, local land use and climate plans have started giving attention to equity and justice (Loh and Kim 2021; Diezmartínez and Short Gianotti 2022), suggesting a readiness among local governments to address legacies of inequality as they confront climate hazards.

Among the most controversial responses to climate hazards is managed retreat: the relocation of people and properties out of high-risk areas, especially through property buyout programs. For a purely willing participant, a buyout provides a welcome avenue for exit from a damaged or at-risk property. Those whose properties have been identified as eligible for buyouts may not have full agency over the decision, however, whether for reasons of property ownership, financial loss, event-related trauma, or perceptions of being coerced. Broader collective benefits of buyouts can include avoided government expenditures on infrastructure, response, and recovery in areas most vulnerable to climate hazards, as well as the provision of hazard mitigation and recreational benefits if acquired properties are then used as amenities such as restored wetlands or greenways. Yet buyouts may also produce collective harms by contributing to deterioration in property values, tax revenue, and quality of life in the surrounding community. The experience of buyouts both for recipients and for surrounding communities varies widely across contexts, with benefits most likely to be achieved when willing residents are matched with public officials who have the capacity and political will to deliver a buyout (Phillips et al. 2012; Koslov 2016; Siders 2019).

The decision-making processes that fund and implement buyouts are complex and multilevel, creating multiple avenues for inequities to manifest (Kraan et al. 2021). One avenue is through the decision making of local elected officials, because local governments nearly always play a leading role in coordinating and prioritizing buyout proposals, as well as funding the buyouts at least in part. Decisions about buyouts most commonly arise as part of post-disaster recovery planning, though a growing number of communities are executing buyouts as part of long-term risk reduction programs. In either case, local officials must consider a range of factors, including direct costs, competing recovery or mitigation needs, and the long-term fiscal impacts of converting developed to vacant lots (BenDor et al. 2020). On top of these considerations about collective costs and benefits are the identities of the residents who would receive the buyouts. Property buyouts typically occur in spatially concentrated clusters. Because of widespread patterns of residential segregation—patterns reinforced by the amenities and disamenities of living near water—affected residents often share class-based attributes that differ from the broader community. They may be wealthier than the typical resident or poorer. Consistent with how class and income have long shaped local land use practice (Whittemore 2021; Lens and Monkkonen 2016), the identities of buyout recipients may contribute to local officials' willingness to pursue a buyout.

This study investigates how the social class targeting of a property buyout proposal affects local elected officials' support for the buyout. Data come from a survey conducted in spring 2020 of over 400 elected US city and county officials nationwide. An experiment embedded in the survey tested whether politicians' responses to a buyout proposal brought forward by a group of homeowners depended on identification of recipients as wealthy or low-income. Results show a significant difference in support across the targeted recipients: even with an identical cost recovery period, elected officials were more likely to support buyouts for low-income homeowners.

Because most local elected officials were not likely to be familiar with property buyouts, the survey provided information and opportunity for reflection about a wide range of buyout benefits and drawbacks. After respondents considered the impacts of buyouts, the gap in support between income groups grew: Respondents expressed greater support for buyouts targeted for low-income recipients and lower support for wealthy recipients than for homeowners not identified with a class marker. Preferences for targeting low-income homeowners were stronger among politicians representing more Democratic communities, and survey responses indicate that resistance to buyouts for wealthy homeowners was rooted not in concerns about cost, but instead in concerns about fairness.

Although respondent officeholders were disinclined to support buyout proposals overall, their responses demonstrated a clear preference toward using buyouts to support recipients perceived as in need. Implications for inequality are complex. While this preference for targeting buyouts to low-income residents could help narrow gaps in people's financial capacity to respond to climate hazards, it may contribute to class-based disparities in climate migration.

PROPERTY BUYOUTS IN US COMMUNITIES

Exposure to climate risks is escalating throughout the United States, as communities confront record-breaking heat, rising sea levels, escalating wildfire hazards, and more frequent and intense storms. These hazards are not evenly experienced across people from different income and racial groups (Chakraborty et al. 2018; Qiang 2019). When exposure is mapped onto geographic patterns of social vulnerability, the disparities in risk from the impacts of current and future climate change are pronounced (Davies et al. 2018; Martinich et al. 2013; Tate et al. 2016; US Environmental Protection Agency 2021).

The concentration of people with low incomes and people of color in areas with higher exposure to environmental hazards is a legacy of local government planning, zoning, and financial practices that legalized segregation and reinforced disadvantage. Zoning ordinances dictate both the opportunity and the cost of living in risk-prone areas, and development in these areas has community-wide consequences for protective expenditures over the long term. Choices about where and how much to invest in protection privilege some neighborhoods or communities over others and may shift the financial burden of protection from public to private, or vice versa (Woodruff et al. 2020). Processes of planning and development that have unfolded over decades create zones of prosperity and disadvantage that manifest vulnerability to climate impacts (Hendricks and Van Zandt 2021).

Those experiencing high risk or repeat impact from hazards such as flooding or fire might choose to move, and studies show that extreme events often drive outmigration (Boustan et al. 2020; McConnell et al. 2024; Hornbeck 2012). But many who are most exposed to climate impacts face barriers or incentive problems that limit their mobility. They may not be able to afford relocation if their house value is less than what they owe on the property or than the cost of purchasing a comparable property elsewhere (Binder and Greer 2016; Keeler et al. 2022). Meanwhile, their incentive to sell may be low if they expect federal disaster assistance to absorb some of their expenses from remaining in place (Conrad et al. 1998).

Government funding for voluntary buyouts helps enable relocation away from vulnerable properties. Buyouts provide pre-event fair market value for the purchase of properties that have been substantially damaged, primarily by floods. The largest source of government support for buyouts is through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) under the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The Community Development Block Grant program under the Department of Housing and Urban Development offers another avenue for federal funding of buyouts, including for properties that are at high risk of flooding, and not just those that already have been damaged. On top of these federal sources of support, numerous states and localities have adopted their own buyout programs, self-financed from sales taxes, stormwater fees, green bonds, and general funds. In combination, these programs have accounted for thousands of additional property acquisitions (K. Peterson et al. 2020). The number of buyout programs is on the rise as localities expand their scope of activities in managing stormwater and begin to consider buyouts as a tool for managing wildfire risk (McConnell and Koslov 2024). In most cases—and by requirements of HMGP funding—acquisitions are deed-restricted against future structural improvements, with parcels permanently converted to green space or wetlands.

Regardless of funding source, local governments play a leading role in decision making to offer property buyouts. Although policy processes following an extreme weather event take place across multiple venues (Albright and Crow 2015), it is typically a local government agency that coordinates assistance requests for channeling to state and federal authorities. Of the more than 40,000 buyouts funded by FEMA as

of 2017, 94 percent were administered by a local government (Mach et al. 2019b). Many states also work with local governments outside of disaster circumstances to identify and prioritize at-risk properties. In deciding to pursue federal or state support for a buyout program, a local government must define which properties are eligible and secure the agreement of participating property owners. It also commits to funding the required cost-share (typically 25 percent under the federal programs) and to managing the acquired property. All in all, these are consequential political decisions that engage the participation of elected officeholders (Binder et al. 2020).

The impacts of property buyouts are context-dependent, shaped by the discretionary power of local decision-makers and the experiences of policy recipients (Revillard 2024). Some property owners battle to access a buyout, perceiving it as the only option for leaving a place that has already been abandoned (Koslov 2016). For others, refusing a buyout is a form of resistance to abandoning a place with history and community attachment (Phillips et al. 2012). Buyouts implemented with federal HMGP funding must be voluntary, executed without invoking the local government's power of eminent domain, but in some cases, property owners have felt that they had no choice but to participate (Binder and Greer 2016; Rakow et al. 2003; Siders 2019; de Vries and Fraser 2012). Renters and mobile home park residents often have no voice at all in decisions about loss of their homes (Dundon and Camp 2021; Kraan et al. 2021).

Beyond those immediately participating in the program, buyouts may contribute to deterioration in property values and quality of life for neighbors of the acquired properties and have negative impacts for the broader jurisdiction through the loss of tax revenue and reputational status (Ruppert et al. 2018). They also reshape the demographic makeup of communities if they contribute to disproportionate outmigration by one group over another. For all these reasons, the prospect of buyouts can seem threatening, and even the prospect of long-term planning for the abandonment of at-risk coastal properties has sparked local political battles (Bragg et al. 2021).

How these considerations influence the decisions of local officials may depend on the identity of potential buyout recipients. The collective benefits of buyouts are highest when properties are spatially clustered (BenDor et al. 2020). Because of widespread segregation in housing, residents of any small cluster of units are likely to be more economically and racially homogeneous than the broader community (Jayajit et al. 2014; Ueland and Warf 2006). In some cases, the vulnerable area is a low-lying, inland flood zone occupied by those who are most disadvantaged. In other cases, it is high-value properties on the coast or riverfront that are most at risk. All else equal, purchasing lower-value rather than higher-value properties allows the limited resources of disaster mitigation funds and cash-strapped local governments to be stretched further. Details of buyout implementation, including requirements for benefit-cost analysis and the importance of property value in the formula for designating substantial damage, can additionally favor the purchase of low-value properties (Siders 2019). However, higher-value properties may offer larger contributions to collective benefits such as infrastructure savings or land for recreation or flood control (Binder et al. 2020). Layered onto these programmatic rationales are the preferences and biases that inform government decisions of all types, potentially including decision-makers' predispositions about different constituent groups.

POLICY TARGETING AND PROPERTY BUYOUTS

Political scientists have documented the disproportionate responsiveness of the US political system to the interests and views of more affluent Americans (Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012; Wright and Rigby 2020). This bias in representation reaches down to the local government level, where public officials better represent the views of a community's wealthiest residents than the views of those who are less well-off (Schaffner et al. 2020). The lack of representation has meaningful consequences, including decades of local decision-making that has contributed to segregation by income and race and disparities in access to public services (Seamster and Purifoy 2020; Trounstine 2018). One of the primary domains for class-based local conflict is in housing, because of the private benefits or harms

that can result from decision-making about broader public goods (Danielson 1976; Einstein et al. 2019; Goetz and Sidney 1994).

How do class-based considerations shape politicians' responses to buyouts for willing property owners? Prior literature offers four possibilities. If demonstrated patterns of bias in local representation and outcomes reflect the personal biases of elected officials, they might favor buyouts that are targeted for wealthy constituents. The interests of the affluent consistently win out in local disputes over housing (Einstein et al. 2019), and politicians could justify a preference for buying out higher-value properties based on their perceptions about impacts on the broader community. Whereas acquired properties in affluent areas often become neighborhood amenities, adding to nearby property values, local planning processes fail to deliver the same benefits in less-affluent areas, where buyout sites more commonly become neglected or used for large-scale flood infrastructure (Loughran et al. 2019). A politician's preference for buyouts that target wealthy residents might therefore become stronger after consideration of community impacts, because of the dominant belief that a city's interests are aligned with those of its affluent residents (P. E. Peterson 1981).

Alternatively, local officials might favor buyouts for low-income residents, perceiving that they have few or no other options for moving from an unsafe property. If buyouts are a scarce resource to be distributed among those exposed to hazard, a commitment to fairness or environmental justice would lend itself to a preference for distributing buyouts to those with less wealth. Redistributive policies that promote upward mobility and make the poor better off are widely perceived as more fair (Rodon and Sanjaume-Calvet 2020). Social constructions depict the wealthy as less or perhaps equally deserving of benefits as compared to the poor, and the two groups are notably different in their perceived political power (Ingram et al. 2007; Kreitzer and Smith 2018). If politicians conceive of buyouts as a redistributive benefit, they should be more likely to favor the policy when it is directed at targets who have been constructed as dependents—deserving, but limited in power. Buyouts fit well with the type of policy benefits that dependents typically receive: highly visible but narrowly applied, and offering recipients little control over implementation (Schneider and Ingram 1993).

The third possible impact of class-based considerations is for judgments about buyouts to depend more on whether any group is targeted than on the identity of the particular targeted group. Politicians often favor policies depicted as more universal over those directed toward identified groups of recipients (Skocpol 1991). Mass public support for policies also tends to elevate general over specific benefits, for example favoring welfare policies directed at economic risks such as unemployment or housing loss that are not primarily experienced by those who are economically disadvantaged (Rehm et al. 2012). When faced with decisions about benefits for a subset of constituents, politicians might prefer if those considerations were not made salient. Finally, politicians may not be responsive at all to identifying markers when considering a buyout proposal. Audit studies testing whether public officials demonstrate class bias in responding to constituent requests have produced null results across numerous political settings, including for city mayors (Carnes and Holbein 2019; Hayes and Bishin 2020).

The purpose of this study is to understand how social class targeting affects local elected officials' responses to voluntary property buyouts. The study contributes to a growing, multidisciplinary literature on buyouts that generally focuses on completed buyouts, through case studies or quantitative analysis of the distribution of federally backed buyouts over time. The latter studies show that buyouts have occurred in counties that are wealthier and more populous than counties without buyouts, highlighting the importance of local government capacity in securing federal and state support after disasters. Within counties, results are more sensitive to modeling choices related to the treatment of income and race, but suggest that neighborhoods receiving buyouts have lower incomes and housing values relative to surrounding neighborhoods (Elliott et al. 2020; Mach et al. 2019a; Nelson and Molloy 2021).

Because of the complexity of buyout processes, any patterns in observed buyout inci-

dence cannot be attributed to decisions by local public officials. Buyouts may be more prevalent for lower-value properties because of higher exposure to natural hazards, higher likelihood of severe damage, higher willingness among property owners to accept a buyout, or many other processes not in the control of local officials. This article brings an explicitly political lens to understanding decision-making by local elected officials—including those who have yet to face serious impacts from flood, fire, or severe storms—by asking them directly about their buyout preferences. In examining the attitudes of a broad swath of elected officials, and not just those who have already faced buyout decisions, we can begin to anticipate how property buyouts and managed retreat might help shape the futures of climate-impacted communities.

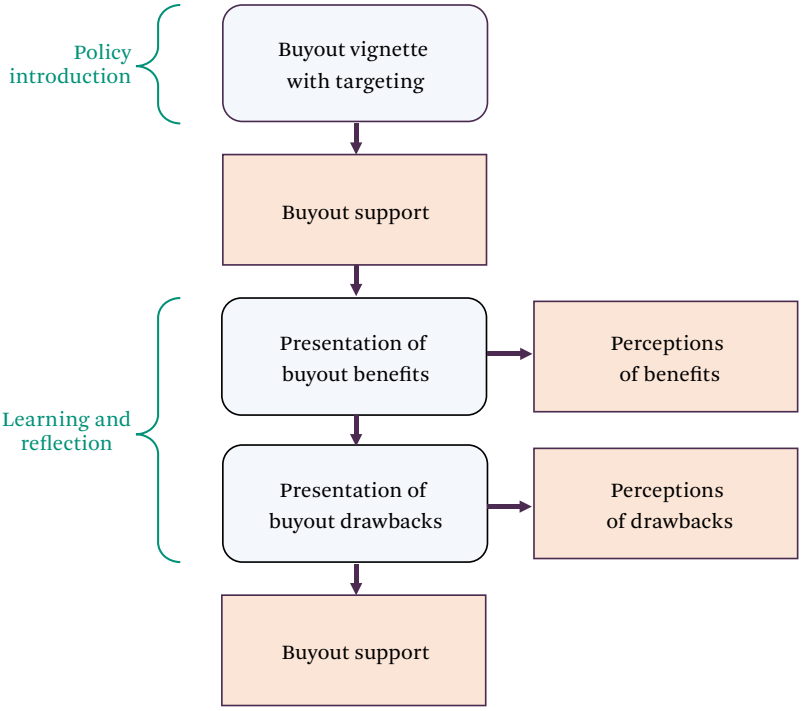
STUDY DESIGN

The study used a pre-registered vignette survey experiment to test the impact of class-based targeting on local elected officials' support for a buyout proposal. Because most local elected officials are not likely to be familiar with buyout policy, the survey provided information and opportunity for personal reflection about the wide-ranging impacts of buyouts. When people begin to form opinions about a new public issue or policy question, they typically do so in an environment of competing messages (Chong and Druckman 2007). Exposure to different arguments or frames can motivate more conscious consideration in opinion formation (Druckman 2004). Research on deliberative democracy has demonstrated that internal reflection about arguments related to an issue contributes to changes in opinion and policy knowledge, sometimes to an even greater degree than the discussion stage of a deliberative process (Esterling et al. 2011; Goodin and Niemeyer 2003; Luskin et al. 2002). Although politicians may be more directionally motivated than members of the mass public in how they process new information (Baekgaard et al. 2019), individual reflection is nonetheless a critical part of collective policy learning (Heikkila and Gerlak 2013). To the extent possible within the limitations of a single survey, the design simulated the competing messages environment that would exist in communities as they consider a buyout proposal.

Figure 1 illustrates the experimental design. The survey presented a vignette, displayed in figure 2, introducing the concept of buyouts and outlining a buyout request from a group of homeowners who had experienced repeated flooding. The buyout would be funded primarily from a state program and, consistent with HMGP requirements, would require a 25% local match. In the experimental element of the vignette, respondents were randomly assigned to learn that the request had come from low-income homeowners (33 percent of respondents), wealthy homeowners (34 percent), or homeowners not identified by income (33 percent). Wording of the vignette was otherwise identical, and respondents were asked their likelihood of supporting the buyouts. In order to elicit responses based on respondents' attitudes about the recipient homeowners, rather than the direct cost of the program, the vignette specified an identical thirty-year cost recovery period across all conditions. It also stated that homeowners were requesting the buyout, so that assumptions about buyout recipients' consent would not confound the results.

Following the vignette, the survey displayed lists of benefits and drawbacks to buyouts, asking respondents to rate the importance of each. These questions provided the opportunity for learning and reflection about the impacts of buyouts on recipients, other homeowners, and the broader community. Considerations included on each list came from the literature on property buyouts (for example, BenDor et al. 2020; Environmental Law Institute and University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill 2017; Koslov 2016; Ruppert et al. 2018; Siders 2019) and were presented in randomized order. Although the intent was to balance the number, complexity, and strength of considerations across the two lists, a buyout program's direct costs is likely to be the strongest consideration in its availability and accessibility to local elected officials and in their ability to apply the consideration to an unfamiliar policy (Chong and Druckman 2007). After rating the importance of each benefit and drawback, respondents were asked again about their likelihood of supporting the local cost share for the buyout in a question that repeated the identity of recipients as wealthy or low-

Figure 1. Experimental Design



Source: Author's diagram.

income for those respondents assigned to a treatment group.

The survey was conducted by CivicPulse, a nonprofit organization that maintains comprehensive lists of US government officials and their publicly available contact information for the purpose of conducting surveys on government issues. For this survey, CivicPulse invited a random sample of township, municipal, and county elected officials to participate. A total of 616 elected officials responded. Results are reported for the 435 respondents who received the same survey instrument.[1] To protect respondents' confidentiality, CivicPulse did not provide their specific jurisdictions in the data release, sharing only the terciles that a respondent's jurisdiction fall into for population, urbanicity, education, and county-level presidential vote. I used these terciles in my analyses, but could not introduce additional covariates specific to an officeholder or a jurisdiction, such as data on local buyout history or hazard exposure.

Online appendix table A.1 reports descriptive information provided by CivicPulse about the respondents, who come from forty-eight states.[2] The jurisdictions represented by the local government officials who responded to the survey are somewhat larger and more urban than the averages nationwide, but they are a more representative sample than in most local government research, which typically uses a minimum population threshold when sampling jurisdictions. Demographic characteristics of respondents generally conform to what is known about people who run for office. As reported in table A.2, random assignment produced treatment groups that were well-balanced on most personal and jurisdiction characteristics.

1. Respondents randomly selected to receive an additional long survey module on an unrelated topic before the buyouts module were omitted from the analysis in order to remove any bias from selective non-response. For more detail on non-random attrition in this survey, see the supplementary material in Mullin and Hansen (2023).

2. The online appendix can be found at https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/11/4/254/tab-supplemental.

Figure 2. Buyout Vignette

> Some local governments have used voluntary buyouts to help people whose homes are at risk from flooding or wildfire. Buyouts also can reduce hazards community-wide and save local governments money over the long term by bringing down costs for emergency response and damage to public facilities.
>
> Suppose, after repeated flooding, a group of [low-income/wealthy/--] homeowners in a town or small city requested buyouts from a state program requiring a 25% local cost share. The local cost is expected to be recovered over 30 years based on future savings.
>
> With only this information, how likely or unlikely would you be to support the buyouts?

Source: Author-designed survey vignette.

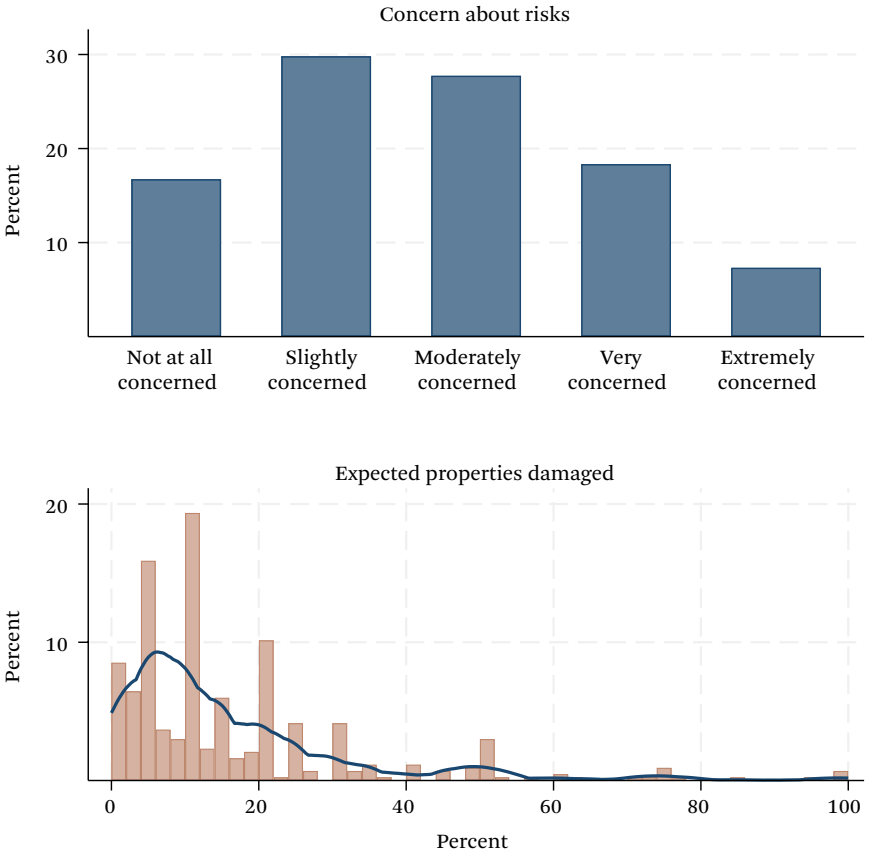
Two survey questions measured respondents' perceptions about risks to their own communities from extreme weather events. Aggregate responses to these questions appear in figure 3. When asked about their level of concern about risks from flood, wildfire, and other extreme events over the next twenty years, elected officials exhibited a good deal of variation in their responses. The modal response was slight concern, but over a quarter indicated that they were very or extremely concerned. Respondents were also asked about the percentage of properties in their communities that they expected would be damaged by extreme events over twenty years. The mean response was 16 percent of properties, and less than 4 percent of respondents expected no properties to be damaged. Analyses in table A.3 reveal lower levels of concern among Republicans (relative to independents and Democrats), elected officials in the Midwest, and city officials (relative to county). Damage expectations were highest among Democrats and female elected officials, and lowest among those in the Midwest.

The survey was in the field from April 2 to May 14, 2020—during the early weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown, and before George Floyd's murder sparked widespread protests spotlighting racial inequality. While the epidemic and associated lockdowns may have contributed over time to higher levels of sensitivity toward people with low incomes, evidence from an unrelated panel survey shows that Americans' mean support for economic inequality and inequality-oriented government policies had not changed in May 2020 from a year prior (Wiwad et al. 2021). Because buyout policy is less directly tied to inequality than the policies examined in that study, as well as less familiar to most respondents, attitudes reported here should be similarly consistent with attitudes prior to the emergence of COVID-19. How well the survey represents current attitudes is less clear. Over the five years since this survey was conducted, the United States experienced an average of twenty-three $1 billion weather and climate disaster events per year, a rate more than double that of the decades prior to 2020 (NOAA 2025). Rising public attention to these climate risks and the growing visibility of environmental justice on the national political agenda may contribute to even stronger preferences among local officials for policy that supports economically disadvantaged people in confronting climate impacts. These preferences may also be more divided than at the time of the survey, reflecting the growth in partisan polarization that has coincided with rising attention to environmental justice and climate risks (Egan and Mullin 2024).

RESULTS

Elected officials' overall responses to the buyouts vignette, aggregated across experimental conditions, appear in figure 4. Unsurprisingly for a complex policy choice in an unfamiliar domain, some respondents reported that they would be neither likely nor unlikely to support the described buyouts. However, over two-thirds provided a directional response, with a majority of these (62 percent) indicating when first asked that they would be unlikely or very unlikely to support the buyouts. After respondents spent time learning and reflecting about the advantages and disadvantages of voluntary buyouts, opposition increased. With the support

Figure 3. Concern About and Perceptions of Risk to Community from Extreme Events over Twenty Years



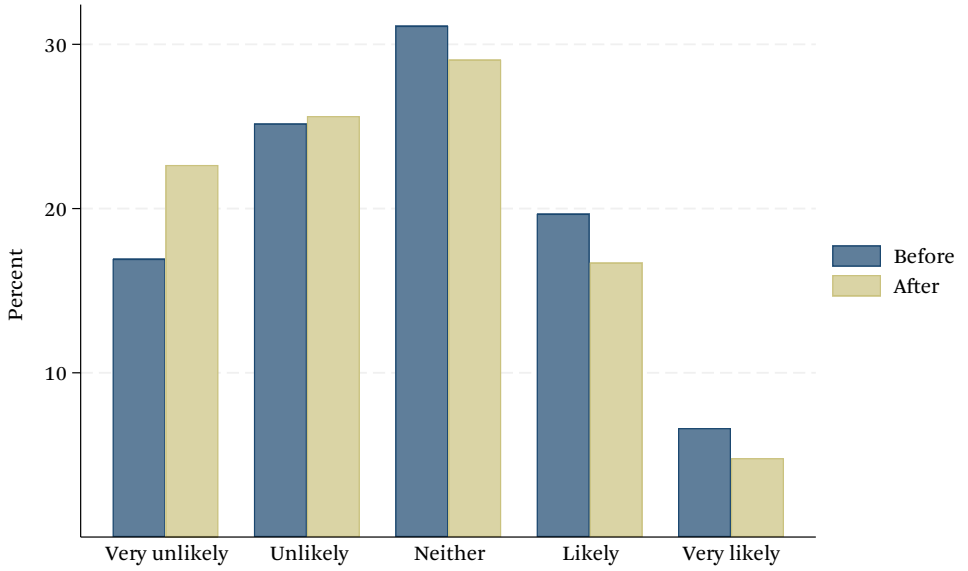
Source: Survey responses to the questions, "Turning to your own community, how concerned, if at all, are you about risks from flood, wildfire, or other extreme natural events over the next 20 years?" [top] and "If you had to guess, approximately what percentage of properties in your community will be damaged by flood, wildfire, or another extreme natural event within the next 20 years?" [bottom].
Note: $N = 435$.

scale scored 0-1, the mean score declined by 0.05, a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$) driven mostly by an increase in those very unlikely to support the buyout.

Effects of Targeting on Buyout Support

Results from the targeting experiment appear in figure 5. Effect estimates are from OLS regressions with robust standard errors, controlling for covariates specified in the study's pre-analysis plan (partisanship and education of the respondent, and population size and government type of the jurisdiction). As shown in the top panel of figure 5, elected officials initially were more likely to support buyouts when they were targeted for low-income homeowners. Support also was higher for low-income targeting than for targeting to the wealthy, consistent with a pre-registered hypothesis about the directional effect of class targeting. Specifying recipients as low-income increased buyout support by 0.07 points on the 0-1 outcome scale, an effect that is modest in size but significant. Targeting buyouts to wealthy homeowners had no effect on buyout support. In combination, attaching a class identifier to the buyout recipients had no

Figure 4. Likelihood of Supporting Buyout, Before and After Presentation of Benefits and Drawbacks



Source: Survey responses to the vignette, aggregated across treatment and control groups.
Note: $N = 435$.

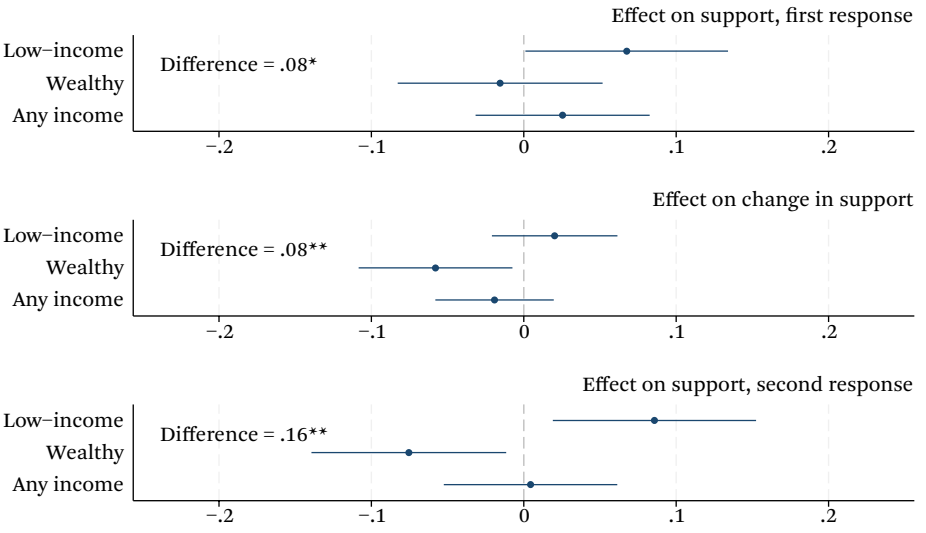
effect on initial buyout support, counter to my pre-registered hypothesis that elected officials would be more likely to support buyouts when the policy was portrayed in more universal terms and recipients were not specified as wealthy or low-income.

The second panel of figure 5 shows the effect of targeting on change in support after reflection about the advantages and disadvantages of buyouts. Although all respondents were exposed to the same arguments for and against buyouts, expectations about who would receive the buyouts could have influenced how respondents interpreted and processed those arguments. Results show that the decline in support for a buyout proposal after consideration of balanced arguments is concentrated among those faced with a proposal to buy out wealthy homeowners. Exposure to buyout considerations slightly increased buyout support for low-income homeowners while significantly reducing support targeted to wealthy homeowners, counter to a pre-registered hypothesis. The bottom panel shows that after reflection, elected officials clearly favored buyouts to a greater degree for low-income recipients, and to a lesser degree for wealthy recipients, than for homeowners not identified with a class marker. Between the two groups with class identifiers, support was 0.16 points higher for low-income recipients as compared to wealthy recipients, a difference of more than half a standard deviation in the outcome. As a comparison, the effect of targeting buyouts to low-income rather than wealthy homeowners was approximately the same size as the difference in overall buyout support between Democratic and Republican officeholders.

Effects of Targeting on Buyout Considerations

To understand the mechanisms producing a preference for buyouts that target low-income homeowners, I examined responses to substantive arguments about the benefits and drawbacks of buyouts. Response distributions on the importance of these considerations appear in figure 6. The items are highly intercorrelated, especially for buyback benefits; on average, respondents did not draw large distinctions in the importance of different benefits. Those seen as most important were community-level ben-

Figure 5. Effects of Class Targeting on Buyout Support, Before and After Presentation of Benefits and Drawbacks



Source: Survey responses to the vignette.
Note: Estimates from OLS models presented in online appendix tables A.5–A.7. $N = 405$.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

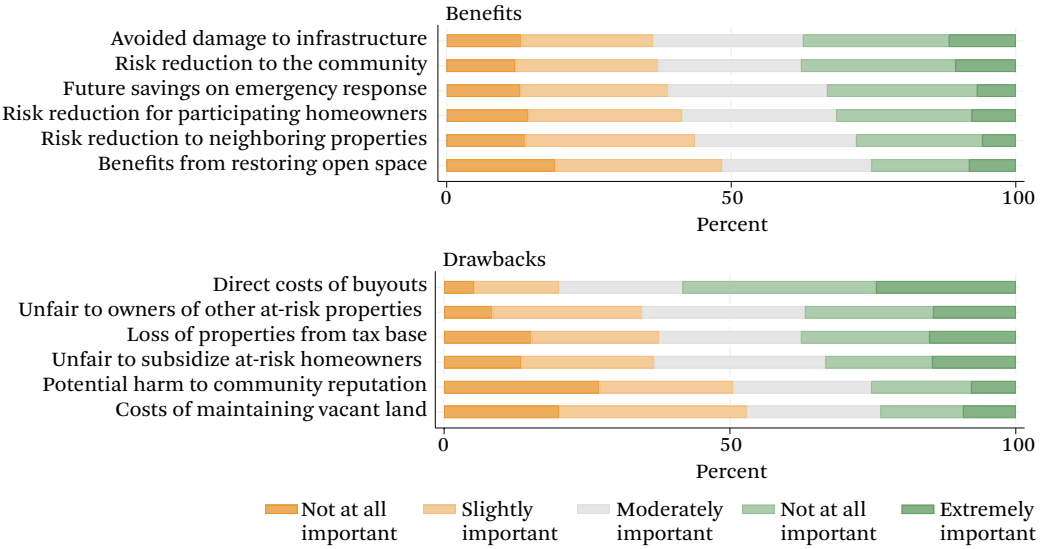
efits, especially those with fiscal effects like avoided infrastructure damage and savings on emergency response. Respondents attached slightly less importance to risk reduction for immediate recipients or their neighbors. Among drawbacks, the direct cost of buyouts was clearly the overriding consideration for elected officials. Concern about fairness to other at-risk property owners and loss of properties from the tax base also resonated for respondents. Whether framed as a benefit or drawback, the use of vacated land lagged behind other considerations.

Figure 7 displays the effects of class targeting on the importance that respondents attached to these various considerations. Overall, targeting did not have a sizable impact on how respondents perceived the benefits and drawbacks of buyouts. For several of the arguments about buyout benefits, any specification about the policy's beneficiaries increased the perceived importance of the benefit, regardless of whether the beneficiaries were specified as wealthy or low-income. Any form of policy targeting may have made it easier for respondents to visualize how these benefits would manifest in their own communities, but responses did not meaningfully diverge based on the class identity of recipients.

Among drawbacks, the absence of any treatment effect on the importance of direct costs is notable, because it provides assurance that results are not attributable to expectations about program cost. If respondents were withholding support for buyouts under the wealthy homeowner condition out of concern about cost, then buyout cost should be a more important consideration for those respondents. Instead, their concern is equal to those considering buyouts for low-income or unspecified homeowners, suggesting that considerations other than cost are likely driving the difference in buyout support across class recipients.

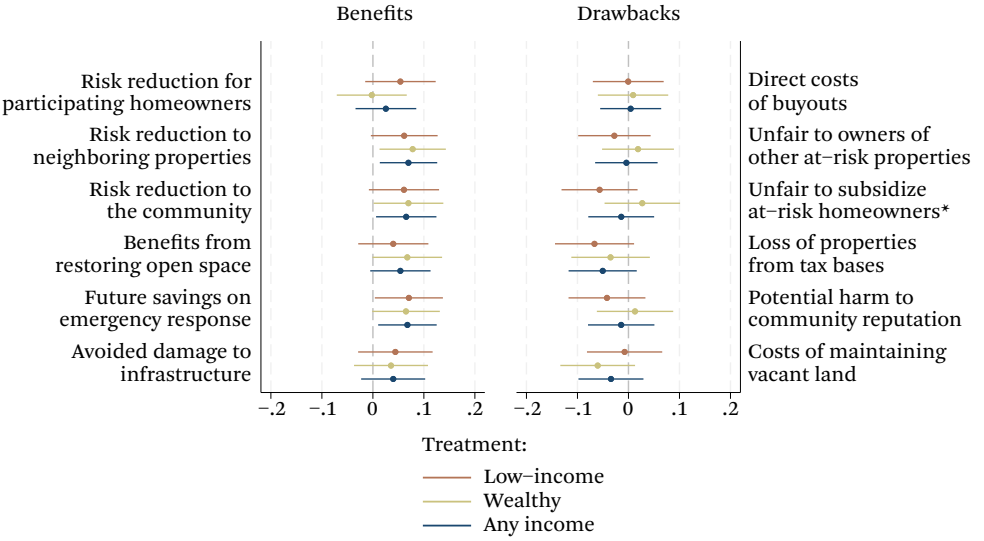
Among all stated policy benefits and drawbacks, only the argument about unfairness in subsidizing at-risk homeowners generated significantly different responses between the two treatment groups. Unfairness was deemed a more important consideration when buyouts were targeted to wealthy homeowners. Although the substantive effect size is small, this result suggests that politicians' responses to a buyout proposal are rooted partly in their beliefs about fairness.

Figure 6. Importance of Buyout Benefits and Drawbacks



Source: Survey responses to the questions, "Local officials have discussed a variety of possible benefits and drawbacks to voluntary buyouts. In thinking about your own views on the issue, how important or unimportant are each of the following benefits of voluntary buyouts?" [top] and "How important or unimportant to you are each of the following drawbacks of voluntary buyouts?" [bottom].

Figure 7. Effects of Class Targeting on Importance of Buyout Benefits and Drawbacks



Source: Survey responses to questions about buyout benefits and drawbacks.
Note: Estimates from seemingly unrelated regression models presented in online appendix table A.8 and A.9. Difference between treatment group coefficients significant at * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Differences in Targeting Effects Across Officeholders

To further explore officeholders' motivations, I tested the heterogeneous effects of buyout targeting across respondents' personal political attributes, constituency characteristics, and perceptions of risk in their own communities. Personal attributes included three political considerations and predispositions: the respondent's self-reported partisanship, whether they faced an opponent in the previous election, and their ambition to run for higher office. Constituency characteristics included demographic composition of the respondent's locality and partisan composition of the county. Perceptions of risk were measured with the two questions reported in figure 3. Tests for heterogeneity included interactions between these attributes and treatment, first for each of the two targeting treatments separately, and then with the two class treatments combined together for a single measure of targeting.

Overall, respondents' personal political considerations do not seem to play a role in explaining their preference for buying out the properties of low-income, rather than wealthy, homeowners (table A.10). Across partisanship, the competitive context of an incumbent's own seat, and their plans for future officeholding, the two class targeting treatments had similar effects. Democrats more strongly support buyout proposals overall, but they are not differentially responsive to the identity of buyout recipients. Targeting of any kind reduces buyout support among Democrats and Republicans more than among independent officeholders, but this result is is only weakly significant. The results also lend no support for two preregistered hypotheses that any form of targeting would have a larger effect on politicians experiencing electoral pressure because of their ambition for higher office or the competitiveness of their current seat. In fact, those who did not intend to run for higher office were the most responsive to targeting, though there is considerable uncertainty around that result because of the small portion of the sample (7.5 percent) in the category of "not ambitious" based on the survey's question wording (online appendix B).

Elected officials may be influenced more by the composition of their communities than by their own political predispositions in responding to the vignette. Controlling for other political and community characteristics (table A.11), the partisanship of a respondent's home county has the strongest association with their response to the vignette. Elected officials representing more Democratic areas were more favorable to buyouts designated with any class identifiers, and especially those designated for low-income households. Although the variable for partisanship is measured at the county level rather than for the specific municipalities where most respondents serve, the result may reflect responsiveness to constituency preferences for more redistributive policy, consistent with other findings of policy responsiveness in local government settings (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). Combined with the results on buyout considerations, the targeting of buyouts for low-income households may reflect a concern about fairness that is more prevalent in more strongly Democratic communities. This result is not decisive, however, considering the mismatch in measurement scale and the multiple tests (with mostly null results) conducted in the heterogeneity analysis.

Finally, the tests offer no evidence that the effects of targeting differ across local officials based on their level of concern about or expectations for impacts of extreme events in their own communities. Consistent with a preregistered hypothesis, risk concern is associated with higher overall support for buying out properties from willing owners; a shift in concern from the minimum to the maximum value is associated with a 0.14-point increase in support for the buyout proposal. The test of a hypothesized relationship between damage expectations and buyout support produced a null result (table A.4). Neither concern nor expectations about damage is related to the class-based treatment effects (table A.12). Whether or not a policymaker anticipates that they may face a buyout decision does not seem to affect their attitudes about who should benefit from the policy.

DISCUSSION

As climate impacts become more visible and widespread, local governments are coming under growing pressure to take actions that protect lives and property. In some cases, the decision

is about protecting residents in place through the construction of physical infrastructure. In others, the decision is to reduce exposure through regulation that controls development in risky locations. Where residents are already exposed and protection in place is not viable, the decision is to help people relocate out of harm's way. Managed retreat is attracting more attention as a growing number of states and cities develop programs for voluntary buyouts, even in the absence of federal financial assistance.

This article offers evidence about local elected officials' support for managed retreat. The broadly representative survey was conducted in the absence of a pressing hazard or event that would bring buyouts to the top of a local agenda. Instead, it presented a typical scenario and balanced policy arguments to encourage deliberate reflection on a topic that, in many settings, can prompt resistance and heated debate (Bragg et al. 2021). Results indicate that even outside a setting where buyouts might be considered in the short term, buyouts were not immediately popular among elected officials, and deeper consideration increased opposition to a buyout proposal. Opposition was particularly strong, especially after consideration, for buyouts of properties of wealthy homeowners.

When asked directly about their concerns related to buyouts, the leading concern for politicians was the direct financial cost. Because cost concerns were no higher among those considering buyouts for wealthy homeowners than among those presented with a proposal for low-income or unspecified homeowners, the direct cost of the buyout proposal seems not to be the primary driver of differences in support in this survey. In the real world, the importance of cost cannot be ignored. Since the time of this study, buyouts of high-value properties have been undertaken, but with unusual conditions that minimize taxpayer support. In the coastal North Carolina community of Rodanthe, oceanfront properties that had received national press coverage for the public hazard created as they collapsed into the sea finally were removed in 2023 through buyouts funded from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, which invests earnings from offshore oil and gas leases. In 2024, the southern California coastal city of Rancho Palos Verdes obtained a commitment for $42 million in FEMA HMGP funds for voluntary buyouts of less than two dozen high-value properties being destroyed by landslides. The 25 percent local match is being borne by property owners—a departure from the provision of predisaster fair market value under other HMGP-funded programs—while the city pays only certain in-kind costs. In both contexts, covering even a 25 percent share of buyouts for all the high-value properties on the verge of collapse may be a fiscal impossibility for local government. It may also defy decision-makers' ideas of fairness, which the survey demonstrated to be an important consideration when buyouts were targeted to the wealthy.

The vignette experiment has limitations. On the one hand, it is overly general, ignoring the specifics of any community context. On the other hand, it is overly specific, with responses that apply only to the language of the vignette. Responses are first (and second) impressions, about a policy that may not be relevant in many respondents' communities. Although the survey was designed to encourage reflection, it cannot capture opinion change that would occur after a community conversation. Future work could be designed to test explanations of local officials' preferences in more depth and explore attitudes toward buyouts of less willing property owners.

Even with these limitations, the study offers a glimpse of the complex interplay between local inequality and political response to climate risk. If treated as a redistributive policy, property buyouts may help mitigate the gap in adaptive capacity across income groups. Poorer households have fewer options for hardening their homes against natural hazards or finding buyers for properties they want to leave. Buyouts can provide an exit option for those who lack financial flexibility to reduce their vulnerability through other means. Yet while buyouts offer an option to those who feel trapped, inequities persist through migration and resettlement. After a buyout, property owners from less-wealthy neighborhoods resettle farther from their old homes and from one another, disrupting structures of social support (Elliott et al. 2023). Meanwhile, those with more privilege often relocate through market means to safer

housing in more affluent neighborhoods (see Elliott et al. 2026, this volume). Buyouts must also be considered as part of the full package of local government actions to protect communities from climate risk. In other areas of adaptation policy, patterns of privilege continue to be replicated. Local governments are more likely to plan for flood risks when those risks are concentrated in high-income neighborhoods (Buntaine et al. 2025), and they make investments in protective infrastructure that ultimately allow the wealthy to adapt in place (Mullin et al. 2019). In combination, the consequences of local decision-making may be to relocate people with the most economic need, even as localities continue to protect remaining property owners.

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