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The New Politics of Housing:

Four Essays on Housing Movements and Policy in the United States and Germany

2008-2023

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Urban Planning

by

Kenton Howard Card

2023

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The New Politics of Housing:

Four Essays on Housing Movements and Policy in the United States and Germany

2008-2023

by

Kenton Howard Card

Doctor of Philosophy in Urban Planning

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Christopher C. Tilly, Chair

*What new progressive currents exist in the politics of housing?* The ideas, projects, and policies profiled here promoted market-regulatory and redistributive agendas that can be termed progressive – stepping forward within, but pointing beyond, the neoliberal capitalist housing system. I compare multiple political processes in the housing system across the United States and Germany between 2008-2023, only one chapter being a direct comparison. Chapter one examines *struggles over ideas*, or how mass public discourse on social media illustrates policy under discussion before, during, and after peak-Covid-19. Chapter two analyzes *struggles to collaboratively build new housing models*, where people aspired to create broad participation, sustainable architecture, social spaces, in some cases decommodification. Chapter three directly

compares *struggles to create offensive policy change* in Los Angeles and Berlin by tenant movement organizations and coalitions, to enact rent controls, expropriation of landlord property, and more. The cities provided representative examples of the radically inclusive and escalating influence of tenant power on policy in RALLY Cities (Renter, Activist, Large, Lefty). Finally, chapter four addresses *struggles to take the policy offensive to the federal level*, profiling a tenant network that created an innovative housing vision and built strategic partnerships with politicians, who advanced a new housing policy agenda in Washington DC.

Since 2008 tenant organizations have mobilized offensively against the capitalist housing system. My findings suggest that shifting debate across the United States concentrated increasingly on policy tools that strongly intervene in markets and protect tenants, suggesting that trends in new housing politics may have implications beyond RALLY Cities. The case exploring the intricate path to US national housing reform also signals the potential for broader change. At scales local to national, tenants have built coalitions with new digital tools, leveraged outside and inside strategies, and worked with allies to challenge institutional alignments among parties, interest groups, and agendas. In parallel with policy campaigns, on the community level groups developed projects to live out their politics, illustrating a hands-on dimension to the new housing politics that involves building a parallel solidarity economy, however imperfect. In varying forms, progressive housing politics is resurgent.

The dissertation of Kenton Howard Card is approved.

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris

Allan D. Heskin

Desiree Fields

Christopher C. Tilly, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

For my late friends and mentors,  
Edmund Brelsford, Thomas A. Dutton, and Anna Haila

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## Biographical Sketch

Kenton Card is an urban planner and filmmaker. He formerly worked for the Center for Community Engagement at UCLA, as a guest instructor at the Freie Universität Berlin, and as a guest to the WZB Berlin Social Science Center and Berlin House of Representatives. He is a former Managing Editor of Critical Planning Journal. Kenton's films have been featured by The Antipode Foundation; his award winning *Geographies of Racial Capitalism with Ruth Wilson Gilmore* received over 210,000 online views. He has a forthcoming film featured by the Interface: a journal for and about social movements, titled *Why Abolition Now?* He has published in Housing Studies, Architectural Theory Review, Design Philosophy Papers, Horizonte: Zeitschrift für Architekturdiskurs, Jacobin, Progressive City, and Shelterforce, among others. He has also formerly taught in the UCLA Community Scholars Program, which combines graduate students and Los Angeles community leaders to collectively learn and co-develop insurgent planning reports.



## **Introduction**

### ***Dissertation question***

This dissertation examines the shifting politics of housing emerging after the onset of the 2007 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and into Covid-19. I focus on the two largest high-income democracies across the North Atlantic: the United States and Germany. The primary focal point is on how progressive people, ideas, and practices drive a new housing politics. Like protagonists of social change in other times and places, the individuals and groups profiled engage in actions that depart from and transcend the status quo, often creating new models, networks, and visions. While each chapter poses a series of specific questions, this dissertation broadly asks: *What are the new progressive currents in the politics of housing in high-income democracies?* Next, I trace the agents and processes of the new politics in the United States and Germany, their effects on various institutions, and implications for housing across time.

### ***A new housing politics***

Politics encompasses more than elected officials writing policy that is implemented by government agencies as rules to regulate the market. I define housing politics generally as the ways that individuals or collectives – inside and outside of government – engage in forms of action to influence institutions (i.e., rules, structures, organizations) that govern the operation and reproduction of housing or the broader housing system. This definition alludes to broader dimensions, such as occupying space, tenant unions, party activities, public debate, backdoor negotiations, bribery, and coercion. Some practices conform to institutionalized political norms, for instance, speaking at committee hearings or petitions, while others challenge norms through

protest, performance, and rent strikes. Outcomes are multitudinous: new imaginations, social connections, participation, public dialogue, policy–introduction, –passage, or –failure, and the creation of safe and sustainable spaces. With this expansive definition, we can analyze how the housing system is made of numerous actors including individuals, groups, and governmental bodies, operating in a constant process of conflict and transformation.

### ***Four political economic shocks***

The chapters of this dissertation touch on a wide range of themes in housing studies and policy. The primary contribution to housing scholarship is interpreting how people have use grassroots mobilizations to humanize challenging capitalist housing systems during and after the GFC. First, I'll recount four macro-shocks over the past 30 years set the backdrop of the current political economic conjuncture, which has led to a widespread awareness that the housing system is broken. Second, the project tracks the shifting politics of housing, with particular emphasis on how progressive currents coalesced in movements and policy in important and unprecedented ways, which will have lasting significance in the future.

Four macro-shocks disrupted the dominance of neoliberal capitalist ideology and the Washington Consensus at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Streeck 2009; 2014). First, though the fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification of Germany symbolized an ideology of the triumph of capitalism over socialism (Fukuyama 2006), on the ground in Germany and in particular Berlin the transition created new tensions. A publicly peaceful unification nonetheless resulted in winners and losers, where historical victors claimed cultural gains over the former East, including its inhabitants still living in the city. The demolition of East Berlin's Palace of the Republic, loss of professional credentials, and removal of faculty from Humboldt University

were the tip of the iceberg. Sharp new urban divisions and conflicts emerged (Strom and Mayer 1998), occupation of housing and cultural spaces proliferated, and the city government plummeted into crippling debt as the city privatized its public assets (Bernt, Grell, and Holm 2014; Card 2020).

As debt and activism became hallmarks of Berlin's city politics, the global financial crisis (GFC) that began in 2007 triggered larger quantities of people to join neighborhood and then citywide initiatives to stop unhindered city growth, for example, at the former West Berlin Tempelhof airport, challenging the city government's conformism to new creative capitalist city ethos (Krätke 2012). Meanwhile back in the US, the GFC revealed that the dream of homeownership that had been sold to millions of Americans was a hollow one, as inability to pay predatory mortgages grew and foreclosures skyrocketed (Wyly et al. 2012). People experienced and observed growing evictions, polarization, homelessness, and political disarray due to the lack of a political vision to combat the crisis. Activists began blocking evictions, organizing grassroots organizations to challenge the class-based, racialized and gendered juridical violence ravaging communities.

In a third shock prompted by the GFC, Occupy Wall Street became the first widespread bottom-up challenge in a generation to a political and economic system that prioritized bailing out banks, rather than people experiencing foreclosure: framing US inequality as the 99% versus the 1% (Chomsky 2012; Gautney 2013; Smucker 2017). Where Occupy succeeded in changing the political discourse around inequality in the political and economic systems, it was criticized for not synthesizing its revolutionary critique and mobilization into specific policy reforms. The need persisted for a new progressive mainstream that could challenge and penetrate the two-party system.

In 2016, US politics experienced another macro-shock: a viable challenger to the Democratic Party establishment emerged in the presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders. His rise also came at a time of increasing public debate about inequality (Piketty 2014; Piketty, Saez, and Zucman 2022), and scholarly exploration of a range of concepts that aimed to grapple with the structural crisis: expulsion (Sassen 2014), econocide (Skirtz 2012; Dutton 2014), banishment (White and Card 2016; Roy 2019). Meanwhile, others have warned against the new focus on inequality at the expense of reflecting on innovative human practices to reorganize societies (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Herein, I try to trace such new practices.

The political economic sequence outlined above, the putative triumph of modern capitalism followed by its plunge into crisis, and the rise of major grassroots and institutional challengers, created a backdrop for the emergence of a new politics. It is against this backdrop that the housing crisis has grown ubiquitous, especially in large cities with divided racial regimes, such as Los Angeles and Berlin, in which a universal sense has grown that housing is unaffordable, unfair, and unsustainable (Gibbons 2018; Aronoff et al. 2019; Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies 2020; Pew Research Center 2022). For example, the Los Angeles times released a short book pulling together their comprehensive reporting on homelessness as the “disgrace” of the nation (The Los Angeles Times Editorial Board 2018; also see Blasi 2020), with similarly growing homelessness challenges and Berlin, and a widespread challenge to find rental contracts in the city (Mahs 2013; 2016; Holm 2021). Across all municipalities, counties and states across the US, a full time worker earning minimum wage cannot afford a modest two bedroom home (NLIHC 2021).

## *Defining progressive politics today*

Next, I define progressive politics, drawing on the literature. As a word, progressive abstracts the meaning of moving forward, which often implies improvement, and can be applied *persuasively* as a rallying cry (often by activists, planners, or politicians), or *descriptively* to analyze some phenomenon (Williams 2015, 187). First, in a persuasive application, in 1991 a group of US House Representatives founded a Congressional Progressive Caucus to advance policy on the Left flank of the Democratic Party.<sup>1</sup> In presidential politics, during a 2016 Democratic Party primary debate, progressive credentials were hotly debated between Hilary Clinton and Bernie Sanders (Bouie 2016). Sanders had long labeled his politics as progressive (Sanders 1997, 242) – despite his Independent or Democratic Socialist self-identification – for example, arguing that his 2016 campaign produced “the most progressive platform in the history of the Democratic Party” (Sanders 2018, 12). The explosion of Sanders’s politics onto the national scene reverberated internationally, as one significant and viable challenge to the simultaneous resurgence of right wing nationalist and xenophobic parties, for example through a new Progressive International linking up with former UK Labor Party Leader Jeremy Corbyn and former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis (Varoufakis 2018). Finally, “progressive” and “radical” also reverberated over the past years in publications, like the Planners’ Network’s relaunched *Progressive City: Radical Alternatives* or the new Radical Housing Journal, both since 2016.

Descriptively, progressive contrasts conservative in moving toward goals of greater equality and democracy. Some “progressive” city governments worked toward increasing public

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<sup>1</sup> The caucus was founded by seven members of the US House of Representatives: Maxine Waters, Bernie Sanders, Lane Evans, Thomas Andrews, Peter DeFazio, and Ron Dellums.

participation and reaping collective benefits from the private gains of growth machines between the late 1960s and 1980s (Clavel 1986), and later people attached progressive to participatory community planning (Angotti 2011). However, “progressive is a complex word because it depends on the significantly complicated history of the word progress” (Williams 2015, 186). The word progress long justified conquest, genocide, and enslavement practices of colonization and capitalism. As Dunbar-Ortiz wrote:

Subjugating entire societies and civilizations, enslaving whole countries, and slaughtering people village by village did not seem too high a price to pay, nor did it appear inhumane. The systems of colonization were modern and rational, but its ideological basis was madness.” (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014, 43–44)

Both Williams and Dunbar-Ortiz warned readers of rhetorical connections to “progress.” Nonetheless, as Clavel pointed out, progressive has simultaneously been mobilized by intersectional organizers across low-income, labor, anti-racist, tenant, antiwar, feminist, among other activists for over half a century (Clavel 1986). Clavel analytically labeled progressive governments as places where social movements captured political representation, increased participation of disadvantaged social groups in planning and policymaking, and weakened the corporate and ruling elite’s domination of the local economy, in-so-doing promoting redistributive policies (Clavel 2013, 4–6).

Other competing frames among planners are “radical” or “transformative,” offshoots and critiques of advocacy planning (Grabow and Heskin 1973; Clavel 1994). Friedmann argued that when planners deploy transformative theory to generate social change alongside social movements, they generate a structural critique and evaluation of some problem and context, identify strategies, propose outcomes, and employ a “forward-looking perspective” (Friedmann

1987, 389). This latter point echoed and overlaps with progressive, without naming it. Yet Friedmann stressed two points, which distinguished it from Clavel's usage: "[R]adical planning cannot be subsumed under familiar categories such as 'participation' or 'decentralization.' As an oppositional form of planning, it aims at ever-widening circles of liberated space on the terrains of state and corporate economy" (Friedmann 1987, 14–15). Thus, while Clavel saw increasing participation and distribution as key elements, Friedmann argued that radical planning goes a step further in being oppositional, despite significant overlap in being anti-corporate, supporting marginalized peoples, and forward looking. Tracing the growth of progressive, radical, or for that matter democratic socialist politics, proves a vexing, overlapping, and confusing endeavor. "[T]he dividing line," said Mayer, "between the 'progressive' and the socialist left cannot be clearly drawn" (my translation, Mayer and Hirschler 2023; also Mayer 2022). While these frames may be persuasively or descriptively deployed, they are also weaponized by opposition. For example, in the US culture wars phrases like the "radical left" have stigmatized culture of the left (Rufo 2023).

### ***Progressive and radical housing***

A long tradition of critical housing scholarship has engaged social change over the years (Engels 1872; Heskin 1983; Dreier 1984; Bratt, Hartman, and Meyerson 1986; Saegert 1989; Leavitt and Saegert 1990; Heskin 1991; Marcuse 1999; Bratt, Stone, and Hartman 2006; Holm 2010; Fogelson 2013; Bradley 2014; Fields 2017; Vollmer 2019; Martínez 2019; Anti-Eviction Mapping Project 2021; Rodriguez 2021; Dozier 2022; Vasudevan 2023; McElroy 2023). In lieu of a comprehensive review, I highlight two short examples characterizing progressive and radical politics, respectively, in the housing arena. First, in his analysis of the tenant movement, Beitel defined San Francisco "progressive" politics combining local control, anti-capitalist critique, and

Black nationalism. “While many of its chief architects continue to embrace explicitly anticapitalist politics, as a form of public discourse, progressivism is anticorporate, but it is not necessarily antimarket. As political ideology, progressivism is suspicious of the concertation of political and economic power” (Beitel 2013, 4). Second, in *In Defense of Housing*, Marcuse and Madden situate “radical right to housing” alongside Lefebvre’s right to the city, beyond a legal right, toward “an ongoing effort to democratize and decommodify housing, and to end the alienation that the existing housing stock engenders” (Marcuse and Madden 2016, 196–98). In short, we can identify similarities between progressive and radical housing politics in seeking increased control of government by ordinary people, but also distinction in that progressive politics tend to accept capitalism (although striving for a more equal distribution), whereas radical politics aim to transcend operations of capitalist housing systems. The essays that follow engage a wide range of multi-racial and class strategies to advance and thwart the passage of legislation, intersecting with emerging and pressing themes, like rethinking tenants as a class in racial capitalism (Dougherty 2022; Tranjan 2023; Raghuvver and Washington 2023), unequal distribution of assets (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2019), and connections between housing and climate change (Rice et al. 2019; Angelo et al. 2022; Cohen 2022). Creating a taxonomy of the degree to which policies and mechanisms deployed in tenant and landlord struggles fit along a political spectrum is beyond the scope of this project. Future scholars would do well to organize the full range of elements in housing politics, including xenophobic, pro-market, conservative, liberal, reformist, progressive, radical, democratic socialist, etc. Suffice it to say that in this new politics of rental housing encapsulating progressive and radical actors, the currents challenge and sometimes transcend the typical non-profit affordable housing advocacy infrastructure in the United States, and its equivalent around large tenant unions in Germany.



### *Rationale for focusing on the United States and Germany*

The United States and Germany are the two most populous and largest economies across high-income liberal democracies in the North Atlantic, and have long been compared as distinct capitalist regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990; P. A. Hall and Soskice 2001). Both countries have experienced post-GFC growing inequality (Streeck 2014) that has impacted the housing sectors (Fields and Uffer 2016). Scholars in housing studies have extended such analyses to housing regimes at the national level: the US a “dualist rental system” and Germany an “integrated rental market” (Kemeny 2006, 3). The two countries have very different institutional systems, in terms of political parties, distributive policies, and political histories.

This project does not aim to conduct a typical matched comparison, but rather examines a variety of political processes, mechanisms, and policy changes, ranging from the city level (Los Angeles and Berlin), to the state level (California), to the national level (Locke and Thelen 1995; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Only Chapter Three is a direct comparison due to limited resources and time, and the remaining three track different dimensions of the new politics of housing across Germany and the United States. In that comparative chapter, rather than assuming all nations or cities are converging, I carry out a divergence analysis (Kemeny and Lowe 1998), in which I locate Los Angeles and Berlin in a class of cities with renter majorities, activist legalities, large, and lefty. I call such cities RALLY Cities, and my findings have implications for generalization across similar contexts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Joseph Pierce for suggesting this acronym.

## *The chapters*

The chapters address various dimensions of the new politics of housing. First, I start at the level of broad debate and discussion on housing issues and policy that characterizes the context for political contention, in this case analyzing the United States. Next, I examine local community development responses to rising housing pressures around gentrification and displacement, this time considering the German context in which these responses are particularly sophisticated. The third, comparative chapter explores the emergence and escalation of tenant political power in Berlin and Los Angeles in 2008-2020, identifying five mechanisms endogenous to the movement and three exogenous to the movement, which help explain the outcome of 22 policy initiatives. Despite this political ferment at the local level, left intervention in national housing policy remains extremely difficult in the United States. Thus, the set of empirical essays ends by going deeper into a federal-level U.S. that surprisingly was able to penetrate the US two-party system in Congress and *nearly* win progressive national legislation.

The first chapter, “Mapping Housing Discourse in Times of Crisis,” explores the new housing politics by way of mass public discussion about housing policy online. The paper draws on a novel dataset in order to understand how housing policy debate is changing across the United States. I ask how we can interpret the growth and changing structure of discourse between 2015-2023, covering the late GFC and Covid-19. While recent work has investigated suites of housing policy at the intersection of tenants and landlords across states (Hatch 2017), and research on politics to address displacement (Chapple, Loukaitou-Sideris, et al. 2022) and zoning reform (Freemark 2023), no work has investigated public debate or speech on housing policy across the country. In order to attack this large puzzle, I worked with my colleague Andre Comandon to develop a framework to analyze rental housing policy in six general policy areas: (1) private rental,

(2) subsidized rental, (3) state-owned, (4) pro-supply, (5) anti-development, and (6) fair housing. Together we identified 41 keywords that served as a proxy for public debate and agenda setting on twitter, where we extract data to create a corpus of 13.5 million tweets. The paper has implications for how we understand the trajectory of the new politics of housing within debate and agenda setting.

The second chapter, “Contradictions of Housing Commons,” focuses on new housing politics in the development process of two housing models that grew in popularity in Berlin, Germany during the peak of the GFC: Building Groups (Baugruppen) and the Tenant Syndicate (Mietshäuser Syndikat). As small groups developed collective living models in order to prevent their displacement and stay in the city, activists, architects, and politicians promoted the new housing models to grapple with the housing shortage. The models are types of self-help housing, which have long been criticized by some for their inadequacy in addressing the root cause of social inequality (Engels 1872). People involved in the projects defined their projects with a range of emerging theories of cities and social change, such as urban commons (De Angelis and Stavrides 2010; Horlitz 2012; Huron 2018), the decommodification of housing (Balmer and Bernet 2015; Vey 2016; Z. Jones et al. 2020), sustainable collective living (LaFond, Honeck, and Suckow 2012; LaFond and Tsvetkova 2017), and the creative class (Florida 2004; Lange et al. 2008). This paper addresses a gap in our understanding of the relationship between theory and practice in development of emergent models that aim to address the housing crisis on a small scale. I employ the framework applied to “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore 2002) in order toward interrogate the *ideology* and *embeddedness* of collective production and collective maintenance of housing spaces. I draw on interviews, participant observations, and documentary

film to analyze the Building Groups and Tenant Syndicate, with particular emphasis on the contradictions of urban commons.

The third chapter, “From the Streets to the Statehouse,” investigates the new housing politics through housing movements, allies of movements, landlord lobbying, and policy change. It asks how tenant movements affect housing policy in Los Angeles and Berlin. This essay serves as a case of the emergence, escalation, and impact of tenant power. The paper draws on multiple data sources, including interviews and participant observation over ten years. Previously scholars have identified the need for further research on how movements influence policy outcomes (Martinez 2019). I begin by tracking a basic unit of tenant movements, the tenant movement organization (TMOs), assembling a list of the most influential groups across both cities, and then tracking connections between those organizations, their coalitions, the various strategies they employed to influence the public and policymaking, and how rental housing policy transformed. I identify key mechanisms that explain the shifting landscape of 22 new rental policies in Los Angeles and Berlin between 2008-2020.

The fourth chapter, “The intricate path to progressive policy,” explores housing politics in the interaction between social movements, politicians, political parties, and agenda setting. The paper asks: how was a tenant movement able to significantly shift debate on national housing policy in Washington DC? I present the growth of People’s Action’s Homes Guarantee Campaign, and how they were able to engage in scale-shift from local to national politics, influence a number of progressive politicians, and participate through allies in Democratic Party agenda setting. The episode suggests housing movements can effect change at the national level of government when engaged in offensive dynamics, building strategic partnerships, with implications for the future of the Democratic Party.

### *The structure and aims*

The next four chapters investigate dimensions of new progressive housing politics. Following the four empirical chapters is a brief concluding chapter that synthesizes lessons from the four. Overall, this project aims to capture and problematize a range of processes in order to interpret these developments during this critical juncture of heightened housing consciousness and tenant mobilization. The chapters engage broadly a range of relevant themes intersecting with housing: sustainability, participation, decommodification, price controls, resocialization, anti-discrimination, social movement organization formation, bottom up and offensive policymaking, and challenging the US Democratic Party. Analyzing the themes throughout these chapters will hopefully support advocates, planners, and policymakers in understanding the state of the political conflict and which policies may help address the housing crisis.

## Chapter One

Supply Bros and Rent Woes: Mapping the changing structure of housing discourse in times of crisis<sup>3</sup>

### ***Abstract***

*How is the structure of rental housing policy debate in the US changing? We map the rental housing policy discursive field via online speech between 2015 and 2023, covering the 2007 financial crisis aftermath and Covid-19. Six policy areas comprise rental housing policy: (1) private rental, (2) subsidized rental, (3) state-owned, (4) pro-supply, (5) anti-development, and (6) fair housing. We measure political speech on Twitter with 41 keywords that proxy public debate and agenda setting, creating a corpus of 13.5 million tweets. We find an expansion and changing structure of discourse on rental housing in which two macro-socioeconomic shocks featured centrally, from a smaller discussion pre-Covid-19 in which public and subsidized housing prevailed, toward an expansion during the pandemic of speech addressing tenant precarity: price controls, eviction protections, and anti-discrimination. Our findings illustrate the rise, resilience, and dominance of discourse on strong-state and tenant-protectionist policy.*

### ***Introduction***

The nature of public debates about housing is changing in the United States, with the rental sector attracting increasing attention. Housing financialization via subprime lending triggered the 2007 global financial crisis (GFC) and recession thereafter, turning more households into renters and sparking anti-eviction skirmishes. Homes played a central role during the Coronavirus Pandemic (Covid-19) and subsequent economic crisis: families sheltered in place, renters demanded to

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter is part of a broader project in collaboration with Andre Comandon and Andrew Messamore.

#cancelrent, and elected officials passed eviction moratoriums across the country. Recovery from the GFC has been highly uneven economically, racially, and geographically (Chris Tilly 2018; Le Galès and Pierson 2019). Over the past decade, the growth of wealth among the super-rich has outpaced growth in either wages or asset accumulation in homeownership (Piketty 2014), while research and policy attention has intensified on inequality (Piketty, Saez, and Zucman 2022) and polarization (Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2019). Many metropolitan areas across the country remain unaffordable to lower- and middle-income people: cost-burdening households and leading many to sacrifice decent, healthy conditions and community relationships (JCHS 2022). The widespread affordability crises across the United States that characterized the last fifteen years galvanized residents, advocates, pundits, and elected officials to speak up about policy change. Polarizing debate has grown among different stakeholders, especially around the themes of upzoning, neighborhood change, and rent control, to such an extreme that one landlord association offers trainings in active shooter preparation for their members that rent out apartments.<sup>4</sup> In this article, we grapple with changing rental politics across the United States since 2015, when Twitter gained significant followers, and with particular attention to the pandemic period. *How is the structure of rental housing policy debate in the US changing in times of crisis?*

This paper examines the growth of mass political discourse about rental housing in the United States, through the proxy of social media activity on Twitter, in order to interpret the dominant trends. Online discourse serves as a lens into understanding mass salience of political topics, as: (1) there are 95 million twitter users across the United States, meaning approximately 28% of total population (including children) engages with Twitter; and (2) in 2022, 50% of adults in the United States access news on social media (Pew Research Center 2022). “Housing Twitter”

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<sup>4</sup> Apartment Association of Greater Los Angeles, “Active Violence Emergency Response Training,” August 17, 2023. <https://aagla.org/event/avert-active-violence-emergency-response-training-2/>, accessed on August 21, 2023.

– people sharing about housing topics on Twitter – has become a recognized place to discuss ideas, organize constituents, or heckle opponents, culminating into the largest arena for housing debate among ordinary people, activists, journalists, planners, academics, and political leaders (Brasuell 2019; Anzilotti 2019; Shepherd and Myers 2021).<sup>5</sup> Despite the increased attention and debate about housing online, a gap remains in measuring, analyzing, and interpreting the shape of these debates. To address this, we map housing speech online as a discursive field, attending to the themes that dominate and how macro-socioeconomic shifts, such as the Covid-19 crisis, punctuate speech over time and space.

We focus on the rental sector. Rental housing policy tweets between 2015 and 2023 serve as a window into understanding discussed topics, focusing on English language content about the United States. Twitter provides an efficient method to quickly identify and assess dominant themes, what topics generate intense debates, and how people discuss them. We used Twitter’s Application Programming Interface (API) to pull 13.5 million tweets representing six Policy Areas (or general clusters of similar types of policies) related to rental housing: (1) *private rental*, (2) *subsidized rental*, (3) *state-owned*, (4) *pro-supply* and (5) *anti-development*, and (6) *fair housing* (see TABLE 1). Then we divided the data into three time periods – before, during, and after peak-Covid-19 – to examine how discourse shifted during the most significant socioeconomic shock of the last decade.

We find that most debate on rental housing policy centers on interventions in failed markets to protect tenants against high rents and evictions, and around public housing, followed by discussions of discrimination and subsidized housing, trailed by housing supply or development debates (both for and against). *Private rental* regulations and *fair housing* speech rose significantly

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<sup>5</sup> The platform is changing since the purchase by Elon Musk, however our corpus ends before major changes took place, such as removal of influencer authentication by blue check mark.



after the onset of Covid-19 in March 2020, with all the other policy areas seeing some expansion as well, illustrating the escalation of housing policy debate over the past three years, despite Twitter users plateauing and Covid-19 receding. We interpret the data through a heuristic two-by-two chart introduced below, and determine that most discourse concentrated on policy tools applying *strong state interventions* and *protections of tenants*, as opposed to mechanisms relying on *market forces* or *production of new units*. Times of crisis triggered the growth and thematic emphasis on *strong-state* and *tenant-protectionist* policy, which is to say addressing ordinary people's immediate rent woes: high rent, threat of evictions, racial and other forms of discrimination.

The paper is structured as follows. First the Literature Review builds linkages between research on agenda setting, discursive fields, comparing sets of housing policies, and Twitter as a source of data. Next, the Method and Data section details how we use Twitter, building and cleaning our dataset, and interpretation. Third, the Findings section illustrates the dominant trends, how crisis influenced emphasis and intensity over time, source of tweets, hashtags, and geographical focus.

### ***Literature review***

#### *The growing significance of rental housing*

National homeownership rates and public favorability of purchasing have declined since the onset of the GFC (Gallup 2023). US homeownership peaked in 2006 at 69% and fell to its lowest level in decades in 2016 at 63% (US Census Bureau 2021). It saw some recovery since 2016 to 66% in 2022. Put another way, despite the country adding 25 million people between 2006 and 2016, the number of homeowners decreased by nearly 2 million. Especially among communities of color,

former owners returned to renting. Meanwhile renters remain underrepresented at all levels of government (Einstein, Ornstein, and Palmer 2022). The economic shock of the GFC and unequal access to housing has led to growing advocacy and pressure for government intervention (Dougherty 2022).

Policy responses have varied. While New York passed new legislation curtailing rent gouging, Minneapolis reformed single-family zoning, and California and Oregon did both. Many of these reforms originated with political advocacy organizations connecting and mobilizing with their members and the public through new digital channels. During this time period, housing scholars have made a range of major contributions on a variety of housing topics, such as situating rental housing in political economy (Aalbers and Christophers 2014), financialization and racial capitalism (Fields and Raymond 2021), foreclosures (M. Hall, Crowder, and Spring 2015), evictions (Leung, Hepburn, and Desmond 2021), single family conversions (Abood 2017; Christophers 2022), zoning reform (Manville, Monkkonen, and Lens 2020), and debating policy solutions (Rodriguez-Pose and Storper 2019; Manville, Lens, and Monkkonen 2020; Imbroscio 2021).

However, while some work has explored the political dynamics of housing in regards to lobbying (Jacobs 2015), local participation (Yoder 2020), attitudes on development (Manville 2021), and tenant advocacy (Card 2022), little scholarship broadly explores housing politics in times of crisis. Therefore, following Kemeny's suggestion to link housing studies with research innovations across the social sciences (1992, xv), we draw on recent work in political science and the sociology of fields to explore how online discourse and policy agendas operate as broad political processes.

*Linking agenda setting, discursive fields, and housing policy debate*

Behavioral economists have long held the foundational assumption that the goals of political leaders roughly match those of the public, represented by the median voter (Downs 1957, 140). This relationship between representatives and their constituents holds even at the local level, where ideological orientation is assumed to be less influential, despite institutional variation (Gerber and Lewis 2004; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). Yet, behaviorists are not without critics. In a new subfield in US political science called American political economy (APE), proponents of APE argue that behaviorists “[tend] to downplay the highly consequential political contestation that shapes the terrain on which mass politics unfolds” (Hacker et al. 2022, 199). Hacker and colleagues suggest that in order to grapple with growing inequality and polarization, political scientists should focus on the intersection of governance and markets, and the role of power across political arenas. Whereas much attention focuses on the so-called “last mile” of politics – where legislation is debated, passed, and implemented – APE encourages attention on the preceding activities of meta politics: “the processes of institution shaping, agenda setting, and venue shopping” (2022, 198). While some APE scholarship has taken up housing, in particular the role of exclusionary zoning and how housing constitutes the largest share of family wealth and local tax revenue (Trounstine 2021), we see an opportunity to contribute to the understanding of housing policy agendas. While we sympathize with the generalization by Ogorzalek that “the nation’s housing agenda ... relies almost entirely on incentives for private action that are insufficient to meet this challenge” (2021, 205), we aim to interrogate empirically the nation’s broader housing agenda. Therefore, following APE, we refocus analysis on political dynamics of agenda setting that impact one of the most housing-disempowered groups: renters.

Typical research on agenda setting captures how elites gatekeep the process of ideas moving through political channels toward legislation. “Elites,” as Khan defines, are “those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource” (2012, 362). Typical *elite agenda setters* are politicians (drafting bills), party leadership (establishing priorities), academics (publishing White Papers), public officials (allocating resources), journalists and editors (privileging certain informants or op-ed authors), CEOs, lobbyists, etc.<sup>6</sup> Whereas, *non-elite agenda setters* are ordinary people without privileged access to political influence. “One may engage in politics,” Weber wrote long ago, “and hence seek to influence the distribution of power within and beyond political structures, as an ‘occasional’ politician” (1946, 83). A direct comparison between elite and non-elite agenda setting is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>7</sup> Rather we share some trends of *elite agenda setters* on housing in a nationwide survey, and then paint a broader picture of online political speech, which has become the dominant arena to contest agendas between elites, non-elites, and in-between advocates. Social media is a space of interaction and contestation among the public, and so a close tracking of ideas online serves the understanding of the broader trajectory of political agendas across the country.

Elected officials commonly serve as the archetype of an elite agenda setter. In the 2022 Menino Survey of Mayors across the US, for example, “Mayors’ concerns about housing dwarfed other issues,” with 81% selecting “housing costs as one of the top two economic challenges in their city” (n=118, Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2022, 3). In an open-ended response format, 47% of mayors suggested either “increasing the housing supply” or “increasing affordable housing

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<sup>6</sup> On academic agenda setting, “ideological hegemony and power in housing research,” see Kemeny (1988).

<sup>7</sup> Previous works have debated whether elites control agendas (Dahl 1957; Lukes 2015), or which other mechanisms of power influence public perceptions and ideology (Lukes 2021). For a survey-based analysis of tenant ideology and homeownership, see Heskin (1983), reinterpreted by Lind and Stepan-Norris (2011).

funding” as policy strategies that could be taken to alleviate high housing costs (Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2022, 5).<sup>8</sup> The agendas pointing to two mechanisms (increasing supply and subsidies) can serve as a crude foil of the agendas of political elites, consistent with Ogorzalek’s aforementioned characterization of the national housing agenda that suggests it is dominated by incentivizing individual actors (2021, 205).

To grapple with agenda setting across the country, we combined research on (1) political communication, (2) discourse analysis in housing research, and (3) the sociology of fields. First, mass media has long been known to influence agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw 1972), laying the groundwork prior to drafting legislation (Liu et al. 2010, 69): to “inform and persuade,” “coordinate,” or “prime” voters (Dickson and Scheve 2006, 10).<sup>9</sup> “The structure of communication,” Chaffee writes, “shapes the structure of politics, both because so much of political activity consists of communication and because constraints on communication limit the exercise of power” (2001, 237–38). Social media provides a new opportunity for measuring the salience of various political topics, especially among groups traditionally playing a less substantial role in political debate, like the millions of Twitter users in the US. “Patterns of grievance expression and advocacy campaigns,” Carpenter writes, “begin as attempts to address issues of nondemocracy in agenda matters” (2023, 8.3). Social media remains more accessible to non-elite groups precisely because traditional gatekeeping barriers to traditional channels – party meetings,

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<sup>8</sup> The trends hold also over time. Pre-Covid-19, in 2018 the Menino survey found that 70% ‘of mayors want[ed] to see housing growth accelerate’ (Palmer and Einstein 2019, 2). In order to alleviate poverty, mayors again responded with housing solutions: 58% suggesting rent subsidies and 56% homeownership strategies (Einstein, Glick, and Palmer 2022, 2).

<sup>9</sup> For example, policymakers and academics often advance agendas through op-eds – especially around pro-supply and subsidized rental housing – through publishing op-eds (Wiener and Kammen 2019; Steinberg 2019; Been and Ellen 2023).

interest groups, news sources – do not apply. Social media may even serve, as Bennett suggests, as a platform for the “democratization of truth” (2017, 258).

Second, scholars have long applied discourse analysis to housing studies, addressing the relationship between language, power, and policy. “To understand how housing policy is generated,” Jacobs and Manzi write, “insight can be gained from an analysis of the way in which certain terms gain acceptance. From this a connection between housing discourse and policy generation becomes apparent” (1996, 558). Discourse analysis clarifies how language influences the “construction of problems” (Jacobs et al 2003, 429), defining what is debatable in the public sphere. Scholars applying other traditions have drawn similar conclusions. Applying historical intuitionism and path dependency, Bengtsson advocates for deepening analysis of housing politics by combining *political actors* and *institutions* (2015, 677), such as “to relate formal institutions to *ideational* (or discursive) institutions defining the policy problems” (2015, 687). Therefore, we take from these studies the insistence to question how problems are defined and which ideas are considered in housing politics.

Finally, sociologist Bail and colleagues provide an instructive strategy for measuring and interpreting mass political discourse. The concept of “public conversation” is particularly foundational and instructive, which is “a discussion between at least two people about a social problem in a setting that can be observed by others” (Bail, Brown, and Mann 2017, 1189). Scholars extend conversations to online social media activity, suggesting that researchers construct broader “discursive” or “conversational fields,” defined respectively as “the public battlegrounds where collective actors compete to give meaning to an issue” (Bail 2012, 857), or “the social spaces where public discussion occurs about a given social problem” (Bail, Brown, and Mann 2017, 1190). Once the discursive fields are constructed, analysts can interpret longitudinal and macro-

socioeconomic trends, for instance, whether policy mechanisms discussed in the field reflect discursive trends of elites, conform to neoclassical market logics, or lean toward stronger welfare state intervention.

### *Analyzing sets of housing policy*

Recent work in housing studies provides a bird's-eye-view of multiple types of housing policy, which informs our selection criteria. First, Freemark (2023) examines all recent literature on how upzoning and downzoning influence construction, costs, and demographics. Freemark's keywords became a starting point for our analysis, which we extended further. Two other papers were beneficial in confirming that the breadth of our six policy areas addressed major currents in housing policy. Chapple et al. (2022, 3) examine twelve types of *local* housing policy that aim to prevent displacement, finding that *pro-production* and *rent control* policies receive the highest level of research attention. Finally, Hatch (2017) compares 22 *state* tenant-landlord laws across the country to typify states as *protectionist*, *probusiness*, or *contradictory*, in terms of whether regulations favor tenants or landlords, illustrating how tenants relocate less often in pro-business states. We reviewed the policies under examination by Hatch (2017, 118) to confirm that the most prominent policies she identified (rent control and price increase) are included in our sample, while more technical policies were excluded (e.g. late fees, quiet enjoyment). This recent scholarship develops important findings on how housing policy is operationalized and how it affects markets, segregation, mobility, and inequality. Our analysis complements these findings by expanding our understanding of discourse and agenda setting across the spectrum of rental housing policy mechanisms in the US.

### *Twitter as data*

Social media has gained traction as a major source of research data over the past decade across the social sciences, urban humanities, and increasingly to study urban issues. Twitter not only provides a valuable perspective from people involved in various salient conversations, its massive bandwidth also produces a more consistent coverage than newspapers (Steinert-Threlkeld 2018). Where news reports are selective, often relying on established sources and organizations, Twitter's expansiveness can help establish how people's discussion of topics has transformed over time.<sup>10</sup> Online activity provides one easily accessible, big data source for planners and policymakers to measure online behavior and public speech. Analyzing tweets in planning, scholars have observed negative sentiment towards transit patrons and how public agencies can actively engage on Twitter to combat disparaging slurs (Schweitzer 2014), the perceptions of neighborhood transition (Hess, Iacobucci, and Väiko 2017), academic careers (Sanchez 2021), and hashtags to examine the spread of movements like Black Lives Matter (Dadas 2018), relationships with movement opposition (van Haperen, Uitermark, and Nicholls 2023), and group dynamics in immigration reform (Nicholls, Uitermark, and van Haperen 2021).

Twitter has the advantage of combining multiple types of data to create a rich unit of analysis that can be broken down into different issues. Researchers often use only parts of the available data. For example, Twitter allows users to attach precise geographic location to their tweets. While only about 1% of all users choose to share their location, when multiplied by millions of users over years, this can generate tens of thousands of data points. This feature has been used to study segregation in cities (Shelton, Poorthuis, and Zook 2015), mobility in New York City

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<sup>10</sup> Twitter had made its data available freely to academic researchers until Elon Musk purchased the platform, eliminating free access on 29 April 2023. Our dataset is now presumed to be unique in that it cannot be replicated except by a steep purchase price.



(Wang et al. 2018), and to predict gentrification (Chapple, Poorthuis, et al. 2022). Furthermore, places mentioned within tweets can also yield location. We combine thematic, temporal, and geographical data to paint a complete picture of the housing twitter landscape.

We believe the primary richness of Twitter data is the text itself. Textual analysis usually relies on first creating a database pertaining to a specific topic before analyzing the content of relevant tweets. Scholars employ “‘tweets’ as a proxy to measure attention being paid to political issues” (Barberá et al. 2019, 884). For instance, the growth of social media platforms since the GFC also runs parallel to a cycle of contentious politics by way of connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), and across a range of issues: climate change, women’s rights, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ, trans rights, and migrant rights. By measuring mass political discourse online, we mean “to enlarge the human conversation by comprehending what others are saying” (Carey 1989, 47).

## ***Method and Data***

### *Defining housing discourse and data retrieval*

Much of the minutiae of housing policy lie outside large-scale public debates, due to its highly technical nature. Our data selection and collection aimed to create an overview of mass speech about rental housing policy, which captured its main contours, acknowledging non-comprehensiveness. We first identified the six primary *policy areas* related to rental housing in the United States: (1) *private rental*, (2) *subsidized rental*, (3) *state-owned*, (4) *pro-supply*, (5) *anti-development*, and (6) *fair housing* (see Table 1). These broad *policy areas* encompass specific tools applied to housing at the intersection of markets and government, and capture the essence of

policy debates without getting too specific.<sup>11</sup> For example, federal assistance for private rental housing, such as Section 221(d)3, which insures mortgages to facilitate the construction of new multifamily units is relevant policy, but hardly in the public eye. However, debates about exclusionary zoning and the supply of multifamily housing under the slogan of “Yes In My Backyard” (YIMBY) have received growing attention in recent years. Our selected terms capture specific policy mechanisms or tools within *policy areas*, not general descriptions of housing, which would create a sample beyond the scope of this paper.

We followed an established approach to analyzing social media data on political content (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013, 1288), applying inductive and deductive methods to create a dictionary of 41 keywords core to the *policy areas* (see TABLE 6). First, we sifted through policy documents, advocacy reports, news media, recent literature reviews, and online behavior to generate an initially larger set of keywords that indicated discussion.<sup>12</sup> These keywords include large policy programs like Section 8 and Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), and vernacular terms like NIMBY. Next, we ran the keywords through Twitter’s API count function, which has the capability to either pull all data tied to a tweet containing a keyword (or set of keywords) or generate a daily count of the number of tweets containing that keyword. We eliminated keywords from the list that were either too broad (i.e. they generated counts that overwhelmed the sample and captured debates that were difficult to attach to a specific *policy area*, like “affordable housing”) or too specific. We used 5,000 tweets as the cut-off for a term deemed too specific or marginal, like “minimum height requirements.” In some instances, we

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<sup>11</sup> For comprehensive works on US housing policy (Landis and McClure 2010; DeFilippis 2016; Schwartz 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Our keywords expand beyond recent literature reviews intersecting with pro-supply and anti-development: search criteria elsewhere included “Upzoning, downzoning, zoning change, zoning reform, land-use reform” (Freemark 2023, 13). We also examined HUD’s Policy Areas, but many of these programs were excluded due to insubstantial public debate. See <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/policy-areas/#rental-assistance>, Accessed 9/7/22.

developed word pairings, like “eviction moratorium” instead of “eviction” alone, to create more relevant searches.<sup>13</sup>

We then applied a script written in Python using Twarc2 to query tweets using these terms on Twitter. We used three rules: tweets published (1) between 1 January 2015 and 31 March 2023 (2) in English, and (3) including one of the keywords.<sup>14</sup> We use 2015 as the start date because that is when Twitter reached 300 million unique monthly users and that number has plateaued since (reaching 330 million by 2019). The year 2015 also roughly matches the timing of the rise of housing movements, tenant movement organizations, and policy outcomes, each of which emerged out of the unequal economic recovery (Card 2022).

Our selection rules ultimately generated a database of 13.5 million tweets scraped from Twitter. Twitter provides more than 70 variables associated with each tweet, but in analysis, we focus on six core variables: (1) the *text* the user posted (up to 280 characters), (2) the *date* and *time* the tweet was posted, (3) the *type* of the tweet (*original* content vs *retweet* or *quote*), (4) the *unique ID* of the user, (5) any full *URL* attached to the tweet, and (6) the information Twitter generated about the *contents of the text*. It is important to note that some tweets are scraped because keywords may appear in the full URL attached to the tweet, indicating that users are commenting on a linked

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<sup>13</sup> We also remove all non-text elements from the tweets, such as images and emotions that can be embedded in tweets, and delete common “stop words”— such as “and” or “very” — that contain little substantive information. Furthermore, we delete from each tweet all spaces ( ), hyphens (-), underscores ( \_ ) and quotation marks (“”), and covert to lower case, in order to reduce variation in language and create standardized dictionary matches. E.g. such that “anti-displacement”, “anti displacement” and “antidisplacement” would be captured by the token “antidisplacement.” One instance that appeared in our investigation was the hashtag ‘#bb22.’ The hashtag refers to the 22<sup>nd</sup> season of the reality television show Big Brother which uses the term ‘eviction’ when someone is eliminated from the competition. While the hashtag was sometimes tied back to housing issues as people criticized the use of the term ‘eviction’ in the midst of a real eviction crisis, the non-negligible volume of noise this use generated made the use of single keyword, like eviction, impractical.

<sup>14</sup> We began examining tweets also between 2010 to 2015, but these five years only made up 11% of all tweets, so we focused on the post-2015 period. 85% of relevant data for our research also followed 2015, illustrating the explosion of housing speech during this period.

page. We concatenate any such URLs with the main text in a tweet and employ this combined text variable in the analysis.

### *Data Processing and Analysis*

Data cleaning and analysis followed three steps. First, we pre-processed each tweet and flagged which *policy area* had caused a tweet to be scraped by Twarc2. Next, we extracted the geographic information mentioned and linked this “place” information to a standardized coordinate reference system, enabling an analysis of how housing discourse varies when it is discussed in the context of different places. Finally, we generated summaries of the tweets’ content, examining trends and variation across time and place.

We rely on “place names” mentioned in tweets to develop a geotagged subset of housing discourse. Twitter automatically attempts to identify geographic places (“place names”) mentioned in tweets, and roughly 21% (2.9 million) of our scraped tweets contain mentions of such places. We linked place names to GeoNames, a freely accessible gazetteer that contains coordinate and geographic information for over 11 million place names worldwide. In creating matches, we prioritized matches both based on the population of the place and on a set of rules designed to increase the likelihood of a successful match.<sup>15</sup> Finally, once we connected place names and coordinates, we linked geotagged tweets to the U.S. Census’ cartographic boundary files for metropolitan statistical areas (“cities”) and states.

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<sup>15</sup> For example, if “Paris” was mentioned in a tweet, we flagged this as “Paris, France” rather than “Paris, Texas” based on population. This strategy alone had a success rate of 87.2 in a random sample of 1000 tweets coded by the three authors. However, we also developed a set of custom decision rules (e.g. as forcing all mentions of “LA” to “Los Angeles, California” rather than “Louisiana”) to solve other recurring errors.

It is important to emphasize that our geotags indicate *places mentioned* in the tweet and not *places situated when writing* tweets.<sup>16</sup> Discursive content serves as the primary object, as people produce political speech from varied places. For example, our dataset captures the universe of tweets discussing rent control in Los Angeles, whether the tweets originate in Los Angeles, New York, or London. Geocoding shows which places people communicate about while tweeting about rental policy, rather than where people tweet from.

We analyze our dataset to illustrate the total volume of tweets across *policy areas*, and how discussion evolved over time. Given that one-in-five tweets contained usable geographic information, we assume that our data is representative of the national distribution of tweets across MSAs and summarize metropolitan tweet volume to investigate differences across cities.

We also compared our analyses consisting of all tweets (including *derivative* tweets) to analyses consisting of only *original* tweets (tweets posted by a user rather than a user re-posting someone else's tweet). *Original* tweets illustrate unique comments, whereas *retweets* and *quote* tweets show amplification and resonance of conversations. When analyzing *original* tweets, we remove all tweets that have identical text in addition to dropping *retweets* and *quote* tweets. We do this because many tweets are generated from common sources like newspaper or blog articles that have a function to share the headline directly from the article, and eliminating such "standardized tweets" reduces the weight such sources have. By doing so, we hope to distinguish between *original* content and *derivative* tweets.

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<sup>16</sup> Tweets can also mention multiple places. When analyzing trends in a particular place, we analyze all unique tweets that mention a place at least once.

### *Interpreting the concentration of debate*

Policies deploy various tools to elicit response: sticks and carrots, rules and incentives, penalties and guidelines. Following calls to analyze agenda setting – or the process of informing, coordinating, and priming publics (Dickson and Scheve 2006, 10) at the intersection of governance and markets (Hacker et al. 2022) – we created a heuristic device to interpret our findings (*see* FIGURE 1).<sup>17</sup> The chart has two axes: (1) the *x-axis* aims to capture the spectrum to which policies utilize state intervention (on the left) or unrestricted market processes (on the right) (State-to-Market), and the second (*y-axis*) aims to capture the relative goal of “producing units” versus “protecting individuals” (Production-to-Protection). The four quadrants are labeled accordingly: (1) Market-Production, (2) State-Production, (3) State-Protection, and (4) Market-Protection; thus, the STATE MARKET PROTECTION PRODUCTION (STAMPP) CHART.

### ***Findings***

#### *The dominance of state-protectionist policy*

As the total volume of tweets between 2015-2023 demonstrate (see Table 2), regulation of *private rental* housing dominates online political speech with 4.2 million results, especially around keywords such as rent control, rent relief, rent freezes, and eviction preventions. The second most dominant *policy area* is *state-owned* rental housing, with 2.4 million tweets, with *fair housing* (2.3 million) trailing close behind. Whereas *subsidized rental* (1.8 million), *anti-development* (1.4 million), and *pro-supply* (1.39 million), saw somewhat less activity. The trailing of *pro-supply* mechanisms is noteworthy, as recent policy discourse among elites (e.g. mayors, op-ed authors,

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<sup>17</sup> None of our categories should be seen as absolutes, as “markets” are functionally embedded in government regulations (Polanyi 1944; Granovetter 1985) and other dimensions of culture, racism, sexism, transphobia etc.

and academics) has tended to focus on these market-based, housing unit productive interventions, like upzoning and density increases. The first overarching takeaway is that the top three major policy discussions fall in Quadrant 3: State-Protection, illustrating that most discourse concentrates around strong-state and tenant-protectionist policies (see FIGURE 1).<sup>18</sup>

### *The rental housing discursive field during Covid-19*

We periodized our data into three time periods: (1) pre-Covid-19 (2015 to March 2020), (2) peak-Covid-19 (March 2020 to March 2022), and (3) after peak-Covid-19 (March 2022 to March 2023).<sup>19</sup> The data show *policy areas* fluctuate in dominance over time (see TABLE 3.) We see significant increase in discourse including policy mechanisms to protect renters (*private rental*), against discrimination (*fair housing*), and smaller increases by NIMBY (*anti-development*) since 2015. *State-owned* dominated pre-pandemic – a surprising finding in itself, which warrants further investigation – yet, has continued to decline in relation to other themes. *Subsidized rental* declined during the peak-pandemic, but has recovered somewhat since then. Finally, *pro-supply* begins low, declines during pandemic, and recovers a little to overtake *subsidized housing* after peak-pandemic. The comparisons are relative to each other – in order to understand the entire spectrum and emphasis of the discursive field – despite debates among *policy areas* often taking place independent of the others.

The frequency of total activity (*original*, *retweets*, and *quote* tweets) doubled after the onset of the pandemic, with more than 8.4 million housing tweets registered during and after peak-

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<sup>18</sup> We echo Hatch, who applies ‘protectionist’ to ‘states with mostly prorenter laws’ (2017, 106).

<sup>19</sup> While our data strongly correlate with Covid-19, we did not conduct a natural experiment to test whether Covid-19 caused discursive pivots. Other confounding factors exist, for instance, Trump discussing public housing in racist terms and the Black Lives Matter mobilizations in the Summer 2020.

Covid-19, as opposed to a total of 5 million tweets during the pre-Covid-19 period, despite that period covering three more years (*see* TABLE 4). Increased activity during peak-Covid-19 was likely attributable to people staying at home with more time to be online and tweeting, the passage of eviction moratoriums, and other conversations in the media around Black Lives Matter that contributed to increasing political engagement. The escalation of activity has been partially driven by *retweets*, as *original* tweets accounted for less than a third (29%) of housing tweets during peak-Covid-19. Our data also demonstrates escalating and sustained attention to housing after peak-Covid-19. The total volume of tweets after peak-Covid-19 (2.7 million) is on par with the yearly rate during the peak of the pandemic when economic and housing uncertainty were most acute. *Original* tweets as a percentage have risen in the last year to 45% of total housing tweets. Finally, Covid-19 also correlates with growing housing speech about places outside of the US, as discussions of US places online have become slightly less dominant compared to tweets about non-US places.

We visualize the growth of the discursive field on rental housing policy as two streams in relation to Covid-19, by tweets-per month (*see* FIGURE 2). Stream plots illustrate change in absolute magnitude (i.e., count) and relative magnitude of *policy areas* in relation to one another. The top panel (Panel A) highlights the significant growth in activity on Twitter. Until 2018, overall activity was moderate, tens of thousands of tweets every month across all *policy area*, with no area clearly dominating. The balanced nature of *policy areas* is reflected in Panel B, which only includes *original* tweets. Echoing Table 3, pre-Covid-19 *original* tweets balanced more equally among *policy areas*, hovering around 25,000 tweets-per-month, with the largest volume addressing *subsidized rental* (“vouchers” and “Section 8”) and *state-owned* (“public housing”), or the poorest and most housing insecure. During the onset of Covid-19, housing speech blew up to



nearly 110,000 *original* tweets being registered in March 2020 alone (a jump by 80,000). This peak was greatly amplified through derivative tweets (Panel A), inflating the number of tweets to over half a million in a month at the peak of activity. In peak Covid-19, *private rental* peaked a few times, and *fair housing* took up a much larger share than previously. After peak-Covid-19, discussions on protecting tenants against discrimination, eviction, rising rents, and displacement have increasingly become the dominant topics. The larger share of *original* tweets after peak-Covid 19 is clearly visible in the different magnitude of the peaks in Panels A and B. The moments of highest *original* tweet production post-peak Covid-19 are nearly as high as those during the peak. In Panel A, times of highest activity during peak Covid-19 dwarf all other spikes, reflecting the role of derivative tweets. Notably, the discursive field illustrates growth in *original* tweets after peak-Covid-19 (in comparison to pre-Covid-19), with somewhat larger activity overall in all tweets after Peak-Covid. The crisis resulted in an explosion of rental housing policy debate.

An overview of the top ten hashtags per six *policy areas* between 2015-2023 illustrates how anxieties about rent woes and pandemic-induced recession expanded housing debate (see FIGURE 3). The top three hashtags – #rentrelief, #evictionmoratorium and #covid19 – discussed *private rental* housing, indicating a very active and widespread public conversation, around the time that municipal, state, and federal governments intervened to freeze evictions and to mitigate the economic hardship on renters. The dominant hashtags in tweets among the *state-owned* or *subsidized rental policy areas* tended to focus on tax credits (#lihtc), vouchers (#section8) or housing generally (#publichousing or #affordablehousing). The spike in housing discourse waxed and waned, but was never completely reversed as the pandemic proceeded, as housing discourse has continued to exceed 60,000 per-month. In other words, our data reflected huge surges in online housing speech due to Covid-19 and the government’s responses to Covid-19, demonstrated by

the fact that three of the six most prominent hashtags were #Covid19, #evictionmoratorium, and #rentrelief, with the latter significantly out performing all the other hashtags. Altogether, as of 2023, housing policy debate experienced a decisive shift on twitter: from a relatively small conversation focused on insecurity experienced by the most disadvantaged (i.e., Section 8 voucher recipients and public housing residents), towards a much larger discussion on regulating *private rental* markets and protecting renters generally from displacement and discrimination. Substantively, the most frequent hashtags reinforce that the significant and enduring shift in public discourse concentrated attention on *strong-state* and *tenant-protectionist* policy mechanisms, which occurred as a direct response to the crisis of Covid-19, even as the initial shock and policy responses to the pandemic dissipated.

#### *Geographical focus of housing discourse*

We also tracked the geographic focus of housing speech, counting the number of mentions (originating from anywhere in the country) of the twenty metropolitan statistical areas (MSA) with the greatest frequency of mention in our dataset (see TABLE 5). Geography influenced housing discourse in terms of (1) city size, (2) share of *original* versus *derivative* tweets, and (3) thematic differences across regions.

While city size plays a significant role in discursive output, results varied in important ways. Mentions of New York City overshadow those of all other US cities in discussions of housing, accounting for nearly as many tweets as the next ten most popular cities combined. Some metro areas like Portland, meanwhile, show greater presence than they would in a population ranking, while others, like Houston, are lower. Portland and Seattle – in states with active housing reform agendas – are topics of highly active housing debates. Metro areas in California are also

mentioned unusually frequently. However, cities can also be catapulted into prominence following public events. For instance, Memphis appears on the list of most tweeted cities because it memorialized the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Memphis Sanitation Strike in 2018, as well as the death of Martin Luther King Jr., leading to many public discussions of public housing in the city.

The share of *original* tweets also differs by cities mentioned. An unusually high percentage of tweets referring to San Jose (CA) are *original* tweets (49.4%), suggesting that tweets about Silicon Valley received fewer derivative tweets by other users and may not be engaging people beyond those directly concerned with the city. In contrast, highly nationalized cities – such as New York City and Washington DC – have *original* tweet percentages closer to 20%, indicating that discourse about such cities became amplified by a larger public. The contrast may suggest that places with an active local housing policy debate spark more *original* social media content, whereas cities like NYC and Washington serve as exemplars for national conversations about housing.

Significantly, the content of housing political discourse varies across the MSAs being discussed. Discussion of *private rental* market regulation is widespread, but associates most strongly with capital cities where legislators write and pass laws, such as Albany and Washington D.C. Speech on *state-owned* housing most often discusses cities with large public housing programs, such as Chicago, Miami and New York, and cities with relatively high poverty, such as Baltimore. *Pro-supply* debate associates heavily with Western cities, notably San Francisco, Portland, Denver, and Silicon Valley, and cities friendly to developers, like Dallas. Meanwhile, *anti-development* (NIMBY) speech tends to spatially mirror discussions of YIMBY topics, suggesting that the themes interact with each other in the same cities. Further research is necessary on how the discursive field affects policy and vice versa.

## *Conclusion*

This paper investigates the changing structure of rental housing policy debate in the US. Despite housing becoming one of the major political challenges of our time, triggered by two recent global socioeconomic crises, we know fairly little about the broader processes or dynamics of housing politics – e.g., how people participate in making political claims – and their political ramifications across levels of government. Battles rage over the governance of housing markets, punctuated by rising inequality and polarization. Elites consistently argue that the best policy solutions to soaring housing costs lie in increasing subsidies and supply. While these mechanisms may play a role to address market failure around housing, no silver bullet policy exists. Like other complex and urgent public policy challenges (e.g., climate change), housing requires a multi-pronged policy program that includes short-term interventions to protect the most vulnerable and long-term planning to equitably increase capacity. The results show that mass debates centered around *strong-state* and *renter-protectionist* interventions, implying that the subsidy and supply toolkit advocated by elected officials (e.g., mayors) may overlook a broader set of approaches.

We reveal the broader conversation about housing policy by measuring – for the first time – broad public discussion in the rental housing discursive field as captured by six policy areas. Our aim is to make visible a range of largely overlooked messages in and about politics, therein balancing the scales between conventionally powerful and disempowered voices. As communications scholars remind us, what the public talks or writes about matters. “The role of agenda-democratizing processes and institutions,” Carpenter writes, “is thus crucial to the study of democracy” (2023, 8.3). Arguably, people’s voices are even more important in housing policy and planning, fields that strive to increase participation. Understanding the shifting public

conversation around housing will aid future interpretations of the long-term trajectory of housing politics in the United States. Our findings show the realignment of the discursive field of rental housing policy in times of crisis, but further investigation could deepen the understanding of the discursive field through sentiment, network, and survey analyses.

Social scientists focusing on new media suggest that “institutional authorities hold less sway” (Bennett 2017, 10) in online political arenas. We find that housing speech shifted on Twitter from a smaller discussion addressing public and subsidized housing, towards a significantly larger discussion on protecting tenants from eviction, increasing rents, and discrimination. Crisis drove significant discursive shifts, involving an explosion of attention to policy mechanisms utilizing *strong-state* intervention and *protections-for-tenants*, as opposed to ones relying on the free market or production of new units (mentions of these policy tools did increase, but the rises were comparatively less significant).

“Policy regimes,” suggest Hacker *et al.*, “are formed and reformed through multiple rounds of contestation across multiple sites of political activity” (2021, 7). Institutions – such as political parties, grassroots coalitions, public policy, and elite agendas – often realign gradually across venues and time. The discursive field of rental housing policy since Covid-19 demonstrates a seismic, dramatic, and fairly rapid transformation around *state-interventionist* and *tenant-protectionist* policy. To the extent that public discussion could forecast policy attention, it appears a housing policy agenda realignment – centering the most vulnerable tenants – may be underway. Our findings do not interpret whether users supported or opposed a specific policy, nor should they be interpreted as replacing surveys or natural experiments. Constructing the discursive field can complement other approaches. Nonetheless, the concentration of discourse around *strong-state* and *tenant-protectionist* tools suggests the need for more research on the political dynamics,

policy, and outcomes of often-overlooked dimensions of rental housing, especially regarding renewed discussion of public housing, preventing discrimination, and renter protections.

## Tables and Figures

Table 1. Major Policy Areas of Rental Housing

POLICY AREA	OWNERSHIP	PROBLEM	SOLUTION	EXAMPLES
<b>PRIVATE RENTAL</b>	Private	Prices too high; eviction too easy; tenant precarity	Regulate landlord-tenant interactions	Rent stabilization/control; just cause eviction
<b>SUBSIDIZED RENTAL</b>		Prices too high; limited number of affordable units	Subsidize tenants or development of affordable housing units (non-state ownership)	Section 8; LIHTC; Inclusionary; Housing Trust Fund
<b>STATE-OWNED</b>	State	Private market fails to adequately house people	State build, manage, and maintain housing stock	Public housing
<b>PRO-SUPPLY</b>	Private or State	Regulations too burdensome on developers; sprawling cities	Deregulate zoning and construction sector	Abolish single-family zoning; abolish minimum height restrictions, New Urbanism, missing middle, YIMBY
<b>ANTI-DEVELOPMENT</b>		Development changing neighborhood character and creating gentrification	Stall and stop development	NIMBY; exclusionary zoning; anti-gentrification
<b>FAIR HOUSING</b>		Discrimination or inadequate zoning for housing	Fund compliant jurisdictions	Fair Housing; AFFH

Table 2. Total Mentions of Rental Housing Policy Areas, 2015-2023

POLICY AREA	QUANTITY*
PRIVATE RENTAL	4,225,990
SUBSIDIZED RENTAL	1,827,622
STATE OWNED	2,468,999
FAIR HOUSING	2,357,499
PRO-SUPPLY	1,391,732
ANTI-DEVELOPMENT	1,431,595
<b>TOTAL TWEETS</b>	<b>13,537,953</b>

\*Tweets can reference multiple policy areas. The total number of mentions surpasses the total number of tweets.

Table 3. Policy Areas Mentioned by Time Period, 2015-2023

POLICY AREA	TIME PERIOD		
	Pre-Covid-19 (%)	Peak-Covid-19 (%)	After Peak-Covid-19 (%)
PRIVATE RENTAL	16.0	48.0	24.0
SUBSIDIZED RENTAL	19.7	8.4	12.8
STATE-OWNED	23.0	17.0	14.0
FAIR HOUSING	18.0	14.0	23.0
PRO-SUPPLY	11.9	6.9	14.4
ANTI-DEVELOPMENT	11.0	8.0	16.0

(1) Pre-Covid-19 (2015 to March 2020), (2) Peak-Covid-19 (March 2020 to March 2022), and (3) After peak-Covid-19 (March 2022 to March 2023). The tweet counts are non-exclusive, meaning a single tweet can mention multiple keywords and thus be counted twice among different policy areas. Therefore, total of proportionate percentage surpasses 100%.

Table 4. Rental housing tweets: timing, quantity, source, and domestic/international

TIMING	QUANTITY	SOURCE (% original tweets)	<i>Tweets about US</i>	
			<i>Tweets about US</i>	<i>Tweets about other countries</i>
Pre-Covid-19	5,060,564	38	3.21	
Peak-Covid-19	5,750,431	29	3.80	
After peak-Covid-19	2,726,958	45	1.91	



Table 5. Top 20 Metropolitan Regions Mentioned on Housing Twitter, 2015-2023

METROPOLITAN REGIONS	TOTAL ACTIVITY		PERCENTAGE BY POLICY AREA						
	QUANTITY	ORIGINAL %	PR	SR	SO	PS	AD	FH	
New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ-PA	606203	21.2	16.1	24.0	25.4	7.5	4.3	23.2	
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	168275	20.4	61.3	8.5	10.5	4.89	4.16	12.8	
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, CA	120661	30.6	42.2	11.8	20.6	8.2	12.8	11.9	
San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward, CA	107140	35.7	32.6	10.4	10.6	20.58	24.66	7.5	
Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN-WI	69649	35.5	17.0	10.4	34.0	8.4	9.2	22.6	
Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH	58699	34.2	46.6	8.7	14.3	11.65	8.21	11.5	
Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA	41841	35.2	39.2	9.9	10.5	17.3	18.7	6.4	
Memphis, TN-MS-AR	35279	4.2	2.5	1.4	92.4	0.97	0.62	2.5	
Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX	33817	24.8	23.4	6.3	32.1	12.4	6.9	16.4	
Baltimore-Columbia-Towson, MD	32866	36.7	6.5	18.6	46.7	8.54	6.63	13.0	
Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, MN-WI	32574	30.0	37.0	11.8	20.0	11.5	15.5	8.9	
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach, FL	27251	31.0	22.9	9.1	37.9	13.03	5.85	6.4	
Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD	21690	41.1	19.8	12.4	25.9	16.9	13.9	12.9	
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Roswell, GA	20286	37.1	13.8	27.9	23.6	14.70	9.65	21.5	
Denver-Aurora-Lakewood, CO	19412	41.1	31.4	13.6	12.6	20.8	11.2	11.1	
Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, OR-WA	19009	41.8	35.8	9.0	9.4	25.42	16.90	8.3	
Albany-Schenectady-Troy, NY	18366	31.7	68.7	4.4	14.4	6.1	2.8	6.4	
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA	18228	49.4	32.5	9.2	2.6	23.72	29.39	5.7	
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	17930	38.5	11.3	17.4	6.3	35.5	18.8	12.6	
Columbus, OH	16786	41.8	17.0	18.3	18.0	15.20	8.34	21.4	

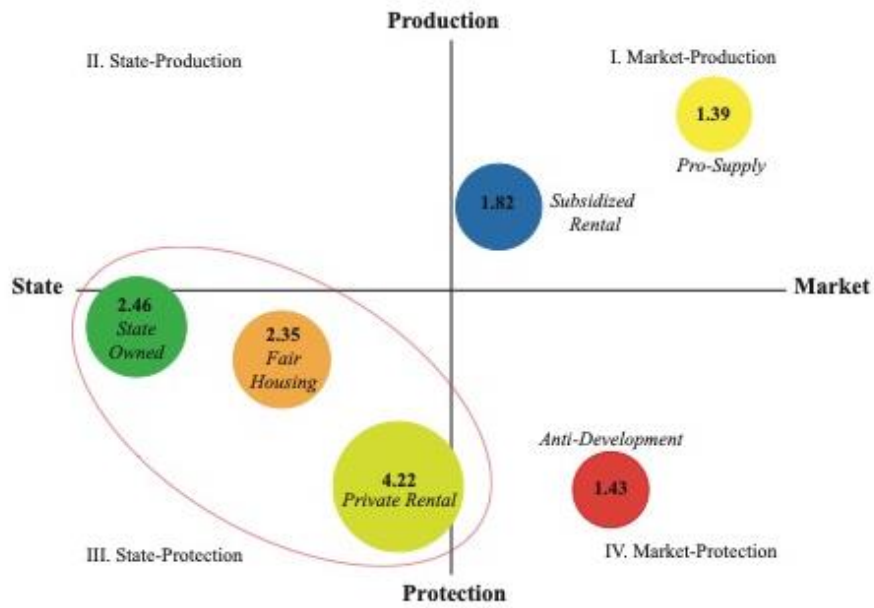
Note: "PR" refers to Private Rental tweets; "SR" refers to Subsidized Rental tweets; "SO" refers to State-Owned rental tweets; "PS" refers to Pro-Supply tweets; "AD" refers to Anti-Development tweets; "FH" refers to Fair Housing tweets.

Table 6. 41 Keywords on Rental Housing Policy Mechanisms

PRIVATE RENTAL		SUBSIDIZED RENTAL		STATE-OWNED	
Rent regulation	44,163	Section8	1,345,450	Public housing	2,463,082
Rent regulations	18,934	Housing voucher	83,683	Hope VI	6,678
Rent control	1,241,352	LITHC	89,233	STATE RENTAL TOTAL	2,468,999
Rent stabilization	84,156	Subsidized housing	271,697		
Rent cap	68,889	Housing trust fund	51957		
Rent relief	868,002	Inclusionary zoning	10548		
Rent freeze	471,508	inclusion	15,718		
Just cause eviction	13,992	SUBSIDIZED RENTAL TOTAL	1,868,286		
Good cause eviction	46,917				
Anti-displacement	25,651				
Eviction freeze	26,798				
Rent moratorium	69,786				
Eviction moratorium	1,439,447				
PRIVATE RENTAL TOTAL	4,225,990				
FAIR HOUSING		PRO-SUPPLY		ANTI-DEVELOPMENT	
Fair housing	754,802	Yes in my back yard	16,818	Not in my backyard	107,570
AFFH	577,921	YIMBY	559,029	NIMBY	922,314
Affirmatively furthering fair housing	25,785	New urbanism	114,528	Exclusionary zoning	78,945
Housing discrimination	74,8472	Missing middle	168,009	Anti-gentrification	59,190
Landlord harassment, cockroach, rats, mold	375,274	Housing supply	73,302	McMansion	295,138
FAIR HOUSING TOTAL	2,357,499	Zoning reform/deregulation	453,551	McMansions	110,554
		Housing reform/ deregulation	44,988	Neighborhood change	6,065
		PRO-SUPPLY TOTAL	1,430,225	ANTI-DEVELOPMENT TOTAL	1,431,595

Note: keywords like zoning reform/deregulation were run as separate pair and combined here for simplicity. The API routine removes all punctuation and capitalization. Tweets can reference multiple policy areas. The total number of mentions surpasses the total number of tweets.

Figure 1. STAMPP Chart: Mass Speech Clusters around State-Protectionist Policy\*

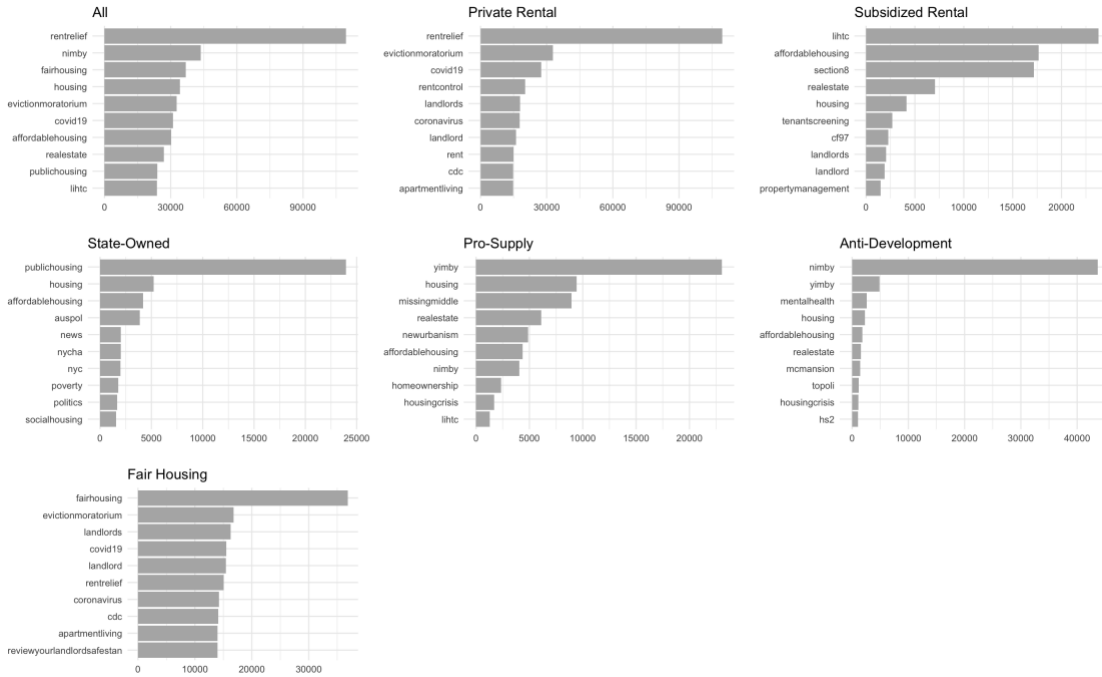


\*In millions of Tweets.

Figure 2. Tweets Rental Housing



Figure 3. Most Common Hashtags by Policy Area, 2015-2023



## Chapter Two

Contradictions of housing commons: Between middle-class and anarchist models in Berlin<sup>20</sup>

### **Housing precarity and socioeconomic class responses**

In Berlin and across Germany, people have simultaneously experienced new economic opportunities and new socio-spatial divisions since the 1990s reunification and subsequent neoliberal restructuring. The city of Berlin began to roll back social programs, roll out its own brand of creative urban development projects, facilitating the widespread privatization of urban assets. People began mobilizing in response. The housing shortage has uniquely impacted different socioeconomic groups, which has triggered distinct responses. This chapter investigates how different classes theorize and materialize projects—i.e. “actually existing options” (Marcuse and Madden 2016, 210)—to address the housing shortage, and the tensions involved in conceptualizing the projects as actually existing urban commons. Urban commons are resources reclaimed, produced, used, and maintained over time through solidarity-based action for the collective.

Below I compare and contrast two housing models that address the contemporary housing shortage in Berlin outside conventional paradigms of real estate market development or state provision. First, Building Group (in German, Baugruppe; hereafter BG) is a housing model wherein middle-class people pool their financial assets, collectively design and (to some degree) build projects,<sup>2</sup> resulting in subdivided, owner-occupied buildings.<sup>21</sup> Second, Mietshäuser Syndikat (in English, Tenant Syndicate; hereafter MS) is an association of over 120 buildings

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<sup>20</sup> Previously published as Card, Kenton. 2020. “Contradictions of Housing Commons: Between Middle Class and Anarchist Models in Berlin.” In *Commoning the City: Empirical Perspectives on Urban Ecology, Economics, and Ethics*, edited by Derya Ozkan and Guldem Baykal. Routledge.

<sup>21</sup> While people consider BGs “design-built,” and sometimes members indeed do support construction, for the most part wage labour is hired.

throughout Germany that create a decentralized network of independently governed, but interconnectedly owned, communal buildings that attempt to create affordable rental housing in perpetuity outside the capitalist housing market.

Methodologically I employ ethnographic snapshots of two case studies to contribute to our understanding of the everyday life of collective housing (Bruun 2015, 167; LaFond and Tsvetkova 2017), gathered through mixed fieldwork (participant observation, interviews, documentary film, and direct action) over a year, viewed through a historical lens. Thirty-five filmed interviews, many in-depth, with residents, activists, professionals, and academics inform the analysis, especially through juxtaposed and inter-woven perspectives. Most identities have been omitted. Documentary film generates not only a tool for multi-media presentation, but also audio-visual transcripts from the field for retrospective reflection and analysis.

BG and MS distinctly employ progressive rhetoric and engage in forms of participatory democracy and sustainable design. This chapter interrogates the visions and practices of the models as actually existing urban commons, and whether they address the housing shortage. Following Brenner and Theodore's (2002) analysis of the inherent embeddedness of neoliberalism beyond ideology in specific geographical contexts, herein I attempt to problematize the ideology behind urban commons and reconstruct the embeddedness of urban commons within actually existing housing models. While progressive housing and architectural praxis is often full of tensions and contradictions (Card 2011; P. Jones and Card 2011), my question inquires into the degree to which resolving the housing shortage with housing commons is viable, how distinct socioeconomic classes attempt to do so, what major differences emerge between the models, and what ongoing limitations remain to addressing the more widespread housing problem. The following case studies illustrate how attempts to separate housing from states and markets—what

protagonists call decommodification—through processes of collective production, maintenance, and spaces, remain entangled in capitalist urbanization.

### **Late urban neoliberalization in Berlin**

Since 1989 Berlin has undergone a phase of reunification that has led to various forms of neoliberal urban restructuring, the intellectual foundations of which will be outlined below. The city government aspired to attract international business and financial investors and tourists to establish Berlin as a creative and global city, and capital of Germany. This was broadly manifested through two neoliberal trends: a roll back of the state's role in many social programs, especially social housing and entitlements, and a roll out of new forms of privatization (Peck and Tickell 2002). Thinking historically through space, I reconstruct the dynamics of neoliberalization at different scales: the master plan (city wide), mega-project (neighborhood), and housing block (building). Brenner and Theodore (2002, 349) argued that cities are “strategically crucial geographical arenas” for analyzing the distinction between *ideology* and *embeddedness* of urban neoliberalization. In brief, the intellectual zeitgeist of the new liberal philosophy emerged notably from von Hayek who reacted to the “horror” of centralized planning (1944, 43) because “planning leads to dictatorship” (1944, 44), and it was expanded by Friedman who saw “economic freedom as a means toward political freedom” (1962, 11). Ideologically, neoliberalism has always been an “open ended, plural, and adaptable project” (Peck 2010, 3). Harvey (2007, 20) reiterated the “tension between the theory” and “implementation” and revealed how neoliberalism is a class project, wherein economic and political elites deregulate markets to maximize profits and growth.

After the Berlin Wall fell and the dissolving of the German Democratic Republic, the 1990s brought in rapid transformation because formerly West and East Berlin had been heavily



subsidized by welfare and socialist states respectively. The new era was a phase of classic neoliberal restructuring, including the elimination of state provisions and expansion of marketization. The promises of privatization—such as levelling of debt and growing the economy—did not panned out, and Berlin’s debt continued growing to nearly €60 billion, resulting in ratcheting up austerity practices, financialization, and a “crisis-driven restructuring” (Lebuhn 2015, 101).

In 1999, after the rapid 1990s’ deindustrialization due to decommissioning of East German industry in particular, the city of Berlin developed a master plan, Planwerk Innenstadt (Inner City Plan), which began to set an agenda of prioritizing the market dynamics over state control in order to broadly facilitate a “growth-oriented entrepreneurial policy agenda” (Novy and Colomb 2013, 5). Planwerk transformed the state ownership of lands by creating incentives for the purchase of lands, leading to increased land prices (Hain 2001, 78). It also imposed a specific aesthetic regulation, 22-metre block height and stone façade, while setting in motion the eventual destruction of the former East Berlin cultural centre, the Palast der Republik, near Alexanderplatz for redevelopment (72). Into the 2000s, the Central Office for Public Properties (Liegenschaftsfonds) sold government landed property to the highest bidder, transforming the calculated value of city assets from use to exchange values. This led to a phase of what Harvey (2007, 33, 10) referred to as the “financialization of everything” or “privatis[ing] profits and socialis[ing] risks.”

Berlin also rolled out mega-projects, in which “elites in search for economic growth and competitiveness” try to lure businesses into a regional cluster (Swyngedouw, Moulaert, and Rodriguez 2002, 551). Mega-projects often increase nearby property values, displace communities, and sometimes dismantle local democratic procedures in the “freezing of

conventional planning tools” (ibid. 2002, 548). For example, Mediaspree, in luring tech companies to Berlin along the Spree river, “was planned and orchestrated from above, but it was subsequently challenged from below” (Scharenberg and Bader 2009, 331). A broad coalition called Sink Media Spree (Mediaspree Versenken) coalesced and passed a (non-binding) referendum in which 87% voted to restrict the height, distance from water, and public passage along the water. However, after the vote, none of the recommendations were integrated, as an appointed mediation board labelled the project “non-negotiable” (Novy and Colomb 2013, 11), illustrating how neoliberal restructuring sometimes usurps even the most local, participatory, and direct forms of urban democratic politics.

The restructuring of housing markets is another typical instance of urban neoliberalization (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 370; Aalbers 2016), and in Berlin this meant cutting away at welfare subsidies in the former West, privatizing social housing in the former East, and eliminating rent controls (Busch-Geertsema 2004, 16). A significant transformation was the sale of municipal housing companies between 1993 and 1999, which privatized around 281,000 housing units, suspended new public housing subsidies in 2002, and demolished approximately 350,000 units in East Berlin between 2002 and 2009 (20–21). City policy shifted from general housing support to “lowest level support for homeless” (17), paralleling how Simmel (1972, 155) described social forms to “mitigate certain extreme manifestations of social differentiations.” One problem with privatization in Berlin is that 85% of the population rent their apartments and in many cases cannot afford to purchase property. Removing public housing subsidies, privatizing units, and eliminating rent controls led to increased rental prices, residential displacement, and neighborhood gentrification, which has now spread throughout Berlin (A. Holm, interview).

Strom and Mayer argue for “completely abandoning speculation over land and real estate” or the city could lead toward deeper polarization and “civil war” (1998, 82). However, in the first years of the 21st century, the Central Office for Public Property’s (Liegenschaftsfond) “main task” “[was] to sell out all the public grounds for the highest price” (Holm interview). In part, this extreme privatization of public assets took place because the office is managed by the city’s financial administration rather than the administration on urban development. “Financialisation,” Fields and Uffer (2016, 1498) argued, entails “heightened inequality and often worsened housing conditions in [New York and Berlin].” By reconstructing the spatial scales (master plan, mega-project, housing block) of Berlin’s urban transformation since 1989, the city reaffirms how “cities have become increasingly central to the reproduction, mutation, and continual reconstitution of neoliberalism itself” (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 375). If urban scholars find it important to interrogate the gap between *ideology* and *embeddedness* of neoliberalism, then I would suggest we also apply this analytical approach—which has overlap with considering the gap between theory and practice—to the incipient framework of urban commons, and especially its relation to the complex conundrum and shifting terrain of the housing shortage.

### **Urban commons**

Since 1990, the commons have re-emerged on the left as one way to conceptualize various counter-neoliberal projects (Midnight Notes Collective 1990; Klein 2001; Card 2019). Some theorists claim that commons constitute a third sector, outside states or markets (De Angelis 2007; Caffentzis and Federici 2014), while others acknowledge that “commoners must participate in capitalist processes” (Huron 2018, 86), suggesting that while commoners may aspire to survive independently from state or market forces, often in practice they remain *enmeshed* in processes

such as exchange, regulation, and property regimes.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, urban commons are an intriguing framework to revisit the classical formula of socialist social change: proletariat, political party, and socialist state. Herein, the *commoner* is the contemporary agent of social change; *commoning* is the practice of social transformation; and *urban commons* are the space and institution: collectively held resources necessary to sustain urban life (Blomley 2007; Chatterton 2010; De Angelis and Stavrides 2010; Esteva 2014; Linebaugh 2014; Balmer and Bernet 2015; Bollier and Helfrich 2015). Scholars in this tradition argue that urban common resources include not only natural resources in urban environments, but also the human-made infrastructures of the city: parks, greenways, streets, sidewalks, gardens, schools, theatres, housing, offices, etc. These resources must be appropriated or stripped away from free market procedures, private or state ownership; and then they must be collectively maintained over time. In comparing and contrasting the housing models, I will unpack the degree to which, at what scales, for how long, and in which distinct ways, BGs and MS manifest actually existing urban commons.

### **Building group**

BG is a model of cohousing in which people pool their financial assets, collectively engage in a design processes, subdivide the projects into (most often) owner-occupied, market rate units, and create an owners' association to manage collective spaces and maintenance. Herein, I draw on interviews conducted between 2011 and 2012 at a high point of BG's popularity in the media, city politics, and among the architectural community, in which they were perceived to be a progressive strategy for addressing Berlin's housing shortage. BG members are broadly motivated to address their housing insecurity by protecting themselves from rising prices in the rental market, the

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<sup>22</sup> Conversations with Paul Ong advanced my thinking on this point.

dwindling of former social safety net programs, shifting demographics of the city, and pressures of neighborhood gentrification and residential displacement. Even while 85% of Berlin residents rent their apartments, BGs proliferated, partly because the city helped develop a network agency to promote BGs (Droste 2015, 86) and provided access to inexpensive land and low interest loans for new, owner-occupied housing; and this contributed to people viewing BGs as a viable strategy to address Berlin's housing shortage.

Building Groups follow a typical formula. First, participants pool their private resources to purchase land and develop a temporary development company. Second, they undergo a (sometimes extensive) community design process, including programming, aesthetics, environmental sustainability, collective management, shared spaces, etc. Architects often participate and live in BGs, facilitating the process, interfacing with contractors, and lowering costs.<sup>23</sup> The socioeconomic makeup of the participants—often families, friends, and colleagues—is predominantly well educated, asset-rich, middle- and upper-middle-class professionals. Third, after the project is built, BG participants subdivide the property into private units and create an association of owners to govern the shared costs and spaces: creating privately owned units and collectively owned shared spaces.

BGs' collective design-build processes, along with material outcomes, relate to claims and practices of urban commons. I analyze these claims and practices through interviews with key cultural leaders in the Berlin architectural community—architects, academics, publishers, and cultural institution leaders—and their critics. While my interviewees did not explicitly label BGs as commons, their claims and practices (i.e. independence from the state and conventional real estate market) have been labelled elsewhere as such (Tummers 2016, 2027). First, the cultural

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<sup>23</sup> BGs usually hire contractors to build the project.

leaders describe BGs as an innovative model where residents “self-organize” with the “ideology” of an “alternative way of life,” in which the BGs, one architectural leader argued, “define how the bottom-up method of development can actually work within a city.”<sup>24</sup> The design-build process is a form of collaborative production (hereafter co-production) and ongoing collaborative maintenance (hereafter co-maintenance) occurring over time, strengthening collective bonds and the reproduction of social life.

The material outcomes of BGs sometimes include semi-open spaces, environmentally sustainable materials, progressive aesthetics, dense development, and mixed-use. Semi-open spaces include green spaces, common rooms, roof balconies, art galleries, vegetable gardens, playgrounds, etc. For instance, one project has an open park with benches on the ground floor that the architects claim is a “clear concrete contribution, by providing a planted urban space ... [that] can be used by the public without restrictions.” The green space is privately owned by the BG association, but it is not treated as typically exclusive private property, for the park is unfenced and accessible to anyone. Another project follows the philosophy of designing less in order to lower costs, require fewer materials, and create flexible or “unfinished spaces”—especially the shared and semi-open spaces—to facilitate “imagination, debate, and conflict.” The architects’ intended to predetermine fewer spaces in the project, and to allow the use of those spaces to “reconstitute a collective and its borders.” Therefore, not only did the co-productive process constitute forms of collective action, but also the ongoing co-maintenance of shared spaces demands forms of collaboration, negotiation, conflict, and ambivalent engagements to inclusiveness and exclusiveness. However, co-production and co-maintenance of spaces is by no means ubiquitous, as BGs predominantly hire wage labor for production and upkeep of spaces.

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<sup>24</sup> Uncited double quotation marks hereafter are from anonymous sources.

The ways in which Building Group figureheads conceptualize their relation to private property—a key variable in analyzing commons—is perhaps the most striking. The figurehead interviewed about the project with flexible design and ongoing co-maintenance argued their project was “use oriented,” as opposed to exchange oriented, in which participating residents “want to live, not to make money.” However, some BG participants claim explicitly to be motivated by private ownership of their units, whether or not their association manages shared spaces. For instance, one tenant and cultural leader drew connections between the BGs and the creative class, suggesting that “the dream of the new creative class: to own an urban flat.”<sup>25</sup> They claimed home ownership was “a vital element of life planning to everyone under 40” to “upkeep their living standards,” irrespective of the fact that many of Berliners do not have access to sufficient assets. Another cultural leader advocated for the explicit benefits of private home ownership in BGs in order to accumulate value over time: “around 87% [of residents] rent their apartments,” so they claimed, “that means it is a very transient city. It is a city of people who ... don’t take the initiative of keeping it nice.” Not only did this cultural leader posit class-based prejudices and misconceptions about the status and behavior of renters, they also reiterated common misunderstandings around gentrification and rental protections in Berlin (e.g. see Bernt and Holm 2009), assuming that “in Germany there are quite a lot of safeguards against being able to raise the rent.” Such arguments by architects for “responsible” ownership rather than “lazy” renting is consistent with broader trends in the profession in which architects inflate the potential influence of their projects, as they are limited in their professional training to address such issues (Card 2011). While BG processes and spatial outcomes share similarities in their ideological construction to those of urban commons, their embeddedness in the spatial-historical context problematizes these claims in at

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<sup>25</sup> While the creative class was popularized by Florida (2004), for more critical accounts see Peck (2005) or on Berlin, Novy and Colomb (2013).

least three ways: (1) they remain exclusively a distinct socioeconomic class strategy, (2) the semi-open spaces are ultimately contingent on member whim and private ownership, and (3) they have distracted the public from more comprehensively addressing the housing shortage.

Activists, professionals, and academics criticized BGs for a variety of reasons. They are not accessible to all, but remain an “exit strategy” from the precarity of the housing market for a certain group of “people who have already some capital” to “rescue themselves a good place,” a critique we shall revisit with the *Mietshäuser Syndikat* below. One activist reflected on this as exclusive socialization, BG members are “surrounded by middle-class people who make money and distanced from working-class and poor people.” However, “of course,” one activist and scholar explained, “poor people do not see ownership as a possibility.” While the middle class do experience the housing shortage, Bernt and Holm argue that “displacement has itself been displaced as an intellectual and political concept” (2009, 322) in Berlin, so it is unsurprising that BG projects largely ignore their impact on neighborhood transformation. Whereas commons often have lower barriers to entry, thus being more inclusive and open to all, BGs are not. Instead we can understand BGs through Polanyi’s concept of a movement of capital (1944) into new markets, going along with roll-out neoliberalism, wherein BG owners extend, refine, and stylize privatization to the scale of the housing unit.

### **Bourgeois benevolence of privatized semi-open spaces**

Aside from benevolent intentions, the shared and semi-open spaces in Building Groups remain components that expose of members’ middle- and upper-middle- class status. Criticism of BGs, of which I shall try to briefly recount from interviews here, has taken the form of not only verbal analysis, but also physical attacks by activists. The shared and semi-open spaces (e.g. an open



access playground), while comprising of a “social framework,” are criticized for resembling a “fig leaf,” “somehow a charity model,” or broadly “life sustainable blah blah blah.” One scholar pointed out how “design and their possible impacts are at times greatly exaggerated.” Instead the projects are “full of contradictions:” rather than questioning why the system has a housing shortage, BGs are critiqued for being a “retreat to the local, the micro, and the private life.” If we think with Polanyi (1944) about these dynamics, aside from co-production, co-maintenance, and momentary access to open spaces, BGs seem incongruent with conceptualizations of commons. It is rather a form of housing-scale neoliberalism: self-help housing. Activist-scholar Andrej Holm argued, the “aesthetic,” “ecological,” “better materials,” and “social commitment” variables ultimately do not reconcile that the BG is a model to “build property” and leads to “social exclusion.”

The semi-open social spaces in BGs disguise the class strategy of private property in capitalism. Residents are sometimes progressive, as one academic explained, “people who are arguably critical of the private housing market [who] nonetheless go along with it.” Because of their access to start-up capital, “they can ignore the model of ownership,” as an activist explained, therein “accepting capitalism as long as they profit.” BGs create market-rate, owner-occupied units. The social spaces are not enough to fool many activists, some of whom protested, antagonized, and vandalized BG structures.

From the political and economic view, Building Groups are only a middle class strategy to access housing market in our cities and in this context it is part of gentrification dynamics that we observe in all the inner city neighborhoods. And this is the reason tenants groups and neighborhood organizations attacked the Building Groups: not as a crucial point of urban development, but as a visible

symbol of this changing policy, as a visible symbol of the dismissal of tenant cities into a more property led ownership city. (Holm interview)

BG project participants isolate themselves from housing insecurities, an example of what Hodson and Marvin (2010, 313) label “privileged enclaves” of “bounded security,” accessible only “for premium users that ignore wider distributional questions about uneven access to resource politics.” While social spaces are semi-open, the accessibility to those spaces remains contingent on the BG members’ whim, as they can close off access or sell off the space without restrictions. As the owner’s association retains the power to exclude the public’s access to the semi-open spaces, in a sense they re-enclose the temporary commons. When BG residents sell their units on the real estate market, they will contribute to rising housing prices across the city. All in all, the major concern of Building Group projects is that even with some benevolent intentions, they can perpetuate islands of privilege or “closed internal communities” (Droste 2015, 89), and in so doing they may result in “group-build becoming an exclusionary path to housing delivery” (Hamiduddin and Gallent 2016, 381).

As BGs’ cultural leaders claimed to manifest actually existing alternatives to the status quo of housing provision, their popularity and exposure grew, creating problems for the more widespread provision of housing in Berlin. BGs were perceived by the public, architect Arno Brandlhuber said (interview), to have “taken over the responsibility of the public domain:” i.e. individuals can house themselves. The presence of only a few hundred BG projects in a city of 3.5 million inhabitants, Brandlhuber said, distracts the public’s awareness of Berlin’s 30,000 housing unit supply deficit (ibid).<sup>26</sup> Therefore, a few hundred BGs are “acting counter productively” because people are “losing the awareness that we have to force our political representatives to

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<sup>26</sup> Architect Arno Brandlhuber’s estimate, which has only grown since 2012.

come up with different models” (ibid). However, not all BG participants or figureheads interpreted them as a viable widespread solution to the housing shortage. For instance, LaFond, Honeck, and Suckow (2012) argued that such projects “depending on ownership structures ... can indeed feed gentrification” (ibid., 17). In other words, well-intended community projects, Rosol (2012, 251) warns, if “not combined with mechanisms that prevent displacement of residents and keep housing affordable, ... can become the engine of gentrification.”

Not only did the discourse of BGs stagnate public discussion on the housing shortage, but also legitimized the restructuring of housing provision, such as the removal of subsidies for social housing and cooperatives, and the expansion financialization of housing and its impacts across the city (see Bernt, Grell, and Holm 2014). The BG, as Holm argued, “is really a housing model in neoliberal style ... a way of individually dealing with your housing problem. This means that the BG silences political discussion about the housing question.” BG participants and figureheads, intentionally or not, manifest new private enclaves, while promoting their projects as idealistic solutions to capitalist crises. In this case, the projects “reify” the “existing situation” of neoliberal urban restructuring and “divert attention from the real issues to issues which are irrelevant or of minor significance” (Harvey 1973, 146–47). BGs direct attention away from the housing shortage and funnel it toward creative, sustainable, and shared spaces. While co-production and co-management of semi-open or shared spaces may, in some spatio-temporalities constitute urban commons, those commons can be stripped away and re-enclosed at any moment, due to the power and deployment of individual property rights by the members. Members may also individually profit through the sale of their unit. Therefore, semi-open or shared spaces in BGs constitute at best a fleeting commons, surely not an anti-capitalist commons, and perhaps more appropriately a form of self-help neoliberal housing.

## **Mietshäuser Syndikat**

Founded in 1999, Mietshäuser Syndikat is an association of approximately 3,000 tenants organized into 128 projects, ranging from a few to dozens of units per project. The model emerged out of the squatting movement in Freiburg, Germany, in response to housing insecurity. The founders witnessed squats legalize their status, acquire property rights, and in the long run sell their units (see Horlitz 2012, 4), contributing to wider trends of housing privatization, rising rents, and residential displacement. The founders created MS to formalize property relations, but not through individual, but collective property rights. Collective property rights serve as a formal protection for residents against landlord or state-driven evictions (Vey 2016, 70). One MS member recounted how their house had been confronted by gangsters, hired by the property owner of their then squatted building, whom intimidated, harassed, and attempted to violently remove them. Tenants “become owners to make themselves safe,” as Brandlhuber explained, “to use ownership as a weapon against being thrown out.” MS extends the culture of squatting into a larger institutionalized housing framework—an anarchist housing model—of (1) decentralized governance, (2) dual ownership, (3) pooling funding, and (4) affordable housing.

The Mietshäuser Syndikat is organized through *decentralized governance*: each individual project is able to define its own rules, rituals, and practices, but the larger syndicate defines purchase, sale, and cross-scale issues and initiatives. MS links these numerous projects through *dual ownership* (Horlitz 2012, 5): (1) local projects develop a limited liability company and own 49% of their building (microstructure), and (2) the broader syndicate of 128 buildings is also constituted as a separate limited liability company owning the remaining 51% of each building (macro-structure). Buchholz calls this a “restrictive re-sale formula” (2016, 200), wherein the

macro-structure serves as a checks-and-balances against the microstructure or individual inhabitants selling their building or units, and tenants can only withdraw their initial investment without appreciation. MS's restrictions on resale go beyond Limited Equity Housing Cooperatives (LEHCs). In the LEHC, the board of directors is usually comprised entirely of residents of a single building, and in some cases alter governing charters and sell off their units (Huron 2018, 125–132). In contrast, MS houses or individual units can only be sold if the whole syndicate (macro-structure) votes to approve the sale, which hasn't happened in the first 20 years of existence. Another distinction between LEHC and MS is the scale; the former commonly comprises of a single building, the latter a syndicate of interconnected buildings.

Two important components to understanding the Mietshäuser Syndikat is the way in which they *pool funding* and create *affordable housing* in perpetuity. Members of MS are permanent tenants below market rate, not owners (e.g. BG) or part owners (e.g. LEHC). In other words, members accumulate zero personal equity, but contribute to the accumulation of syndicated equity. Projects are financed through conventional mortgages and rent contributes to paying off the mortgage, in addition to a 10€/m<sup>2</sup> monthly contribution to a solidarity fund that supports new projects. When a mortgage is paid off, the rent contributes to maintenance costs and property taxes, with the remaining going into MS solidarity fund. While the rent may increase, it will never increase beyond 80% of the neighborhood rental market, an attempt to make the units affordable in perpetuity. When new groups want to join MS they go through an application process. First, MS provides resources for prospective houses, such as financial and organizational strategies, including how to acquire a low-interest loan from the German bank GLS (investors receive 2–3%

returns), which has financed 93 of the syndicate projects (figure cited in Buchholz 2016, 204). Then, prospective tenants must pool together 20% of the loan, most of which comes from family and friends.

“The Mietshäuser Syndikat is the third way,” one tenant organizer claimed, “you don’t have the state, you don’t have privatization, you have something like a commons.” They argued that the “thesis of MS is houses to the people” (i.e. for use), which is explicitly a project “against normal neoliberal privatization” (i.e. for exchange). Many MS tenants distrust state and market housing in Berlin as the Central Office for Public Properties sold off hundreds of thousands of public housing units, which along with increasing market development, has resulted in increased rental prices.

Co-production and co-management manifest at the micro- and macro-scales. First, one MS project that I visited (the first built ground-up) was only partially complete so the tenants had to finish the floors and other minor details themselves. This lowered construction costs and required co-production to make the space livable. Tenants co-produced more than just designs, as in the case of BGs, by completing various forms of construction. Second, MS projects often have significantly more shared than private spaces, creating opportunities for social interaction: socializing, cooking, leisure, child play, etc. For instance, individual units typically do not have kitchens or living rooms, but such spaces are part of the shared programming. Whereas in BGs the majority of space is devoted to private units, in MS projects the majority of space is devoted to shared usage, with minimal private living space. One project was intentionally designed, architect Oliver Clemens explained, to discourage and complicate future subdivision (if the tenants tried to sell). Third, the internal governance practices of the buildings are “non-hierarchical” among tenants and, as in one case, organized through a consensus decision-making process, a tenant

explained—meant “not to silence” “different opinions”—with a four-step participatory voting process that includes the possibility of a veto. Such processes “democratize the provision as well as the management,” Horlitz argues, through “resident participation” and “community control” (2012, 5).

The spirit of Mietshäuser Syndikat is to create housing for use, rather than for exchange (e.g. Marcuse and Madden 2016), wherein members create the projects “for the people living in them,” given that there is a “conception [of] no opportunity to sell the property again.” A few members that I spoke to even claimed that projects cost less than developing a conventional cooperative (Genossenschaft), as the higher “down payment [would be] the first step of excluding people from the process.” Therefore, MS attempts to be as inclusive as possible, so the broader structure sometimes subsidizes those who cannot contribute, yet the degree of success is unclear. “MS wanted to do things independently from the state,” Clemens said, “to live together, to finance, to take land out of the market...[and] prevent speculation in land.” Again, tenants also repeated this sentiment, in which they hoped “to get independent from the market and from the landlord.” Members of Mietshäuser Syndikat explicitly claim that MS creates urban commons. First, MS envisions itself transcending conventional ways of dealing with housing, either in the market or through state distribution, as a “key element” (Horlitz 2012, 4). Yet, imagining MS as a third way beyond markets and states, as does some urban commons theory, is limited conceptually, as MS remains enmeshed and embedded in both. (1) Entering MS requires start-up and ongoing financial and social capital. One activist-scholar, for instance, criticized how even cooperatives remain largely “only for capital holders,” making it limited in its ability to actually address the broader housing shortage. Others dispute this, as some MS members are on welfare. (2) Banks fund projects via loans for a profit, not to mention ongoing renter–syndicate rent exchange relations.

Loan payments and interest rates contribute to capital accumulation. (3) Households pay utility bills and occasionally hire wage labor. (4) State law regulates the limited liability company structure that secures dual-ownership and creates the experimental enclave that distances it from competing property claims. (5) Projects must conform to city zoning.

The five aforementioned examples are not meant to minimize the project, but instead to enlarge our understanding of how urban commons and their anti-capitalist practices operate *enmeshed in even if situated against* markets and states. Rather than understanding Mietshäuser Syndikat as a third way, “activists show,” as Vey points out, “that within the capitalist system a variety of economies can co-exist with the capitalist one” (2016, 69). While other manifestations of urban commons may differ significantly, investigating projects as housing commons poses specific challenges that I view as productive challenges. The processes of co-production and co-maintenance are demanding, and so they contribute to high turnover, as with similar practices in BGs.<sup>27</sup> These activities, I would argue, constitute forms of urban commoning, as they are collective actions to produce and sustain common resources that individuals cannot benefit from financially, only in use and access.

The primary vision of Mietshäuser Syndikat is to create affordable housing in perpetuity, via more sophisticated checks-and-balances than that of LEHCs, but through a block, stoppage, or dam to the flow of invested collective labor and currency capitals leaving the syndicate. In contrast to BGs which remain embedded in the real estate market, MS intends to “permanently” (Horlitz 2012, 4) remove housing from the conventional market, or as Balmer and Bernet explain about cooperatives, “prevent the house from ever being resold” by creating “strictly decommodified

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<sup>27</sup> While each distinct MS or BG project creates unique customs and governing charters, it is difficult to generalize, but largely MS projects would have more regular meetings and ongoing co-maintenance, whereas BG projects would require less ongoing community engagement.



common resources” (2015, 190). Residents claimed the syndicate constitutes a “model of non-speculative ownership.” However, they remain tangled in market and state dynamics, trends, and regulations.

Imagine commoners as water and the process of commoning as streams flowing into a pond. Water only remains in the pond, sustaining life, because of the intricately constructed beaver dam. In this case, dual ownership serves to dam in place the accumulation of collective labor and capital. Without the dam, the water would flow back out, draining the pond. Yet, the dam does not change the composition of water, nor the fact that dams can break or be sabotaged. Thus, *Mietshäuser Syndikat* manifests a form of accountability to regulate the commodity transaction, limiting its transferability, rather than pure decommodification.<sup>28</sup>

As the material shared spaces are occupied and secured through dual-ownership, they remain places of collective use and access. However, spaces in and around housing projects—whether in some common ownership regime, such as LEHCs, co-housing, Community Land Trusts (CLTs), syndicates, or even squats—still produce forms of enclosure: i.e. excluding outsiders from access and use. They are at most semi-open, semi-enclosures, leading the spaces to be urban commons when used as such, collectively, whereas spaces or contracts as static objects are not commons.

*Mietshäuser Syndikat* “engaged with and in the meso and micro level of politics” (Vey 2016, 70), which one scholar pointed out as an innovation from being a separate project, because it “combines local projects with a broader political ambition.” Horlitz argued this was a “means of protection against gentrification and rising rents” (Horlitz 2012, 4). However, if syndicates, BGs, LEHCs, co-housing, or CLTs do not combine their projects with broader coalitions and social

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<sup>28</sup> For more, see Huron (2018, 8).

movements (see Card 2018), they will be, as Horlitz importantly pointed out, “privately doing the job” of the state, in terms of developing strategies for the provision of housing, and will “cushion, legitimize, or even indirectly strengthen current neoliberal politics” (2012, 5). While MS typifies what Polanyi (1944) labelled counter-revolutions of people mobilizing against privatizations to decommodify or expand social controls, the BG typifies merely a progressive form of privatization, aside from collectivist claims, feeding the individualist process of capital accumulation.

## **Conclusion**

Building Groups and Mietshäuser Syndikat both involve commoning in that they require collective creation and management of housing. While both models incorporate co-production and co-maintenance of semi-open or shared space, one fundamental difference exists between BGs and MS. The energy and equity invested into co-production and co-maintenance of shared spaces in BGs ultimately contributes to increases in economic value that allow for individual profit when individuals sell their units, whereas in MS co-production only translates into accumulated collective assets.

After unravelling the *ideology* and *embeddedness* of both models, contradictions and shortcomings with housing commons emerge. The semi-open and shared spaces in the BGs are the only materiality of urban commons in that model (ironically, it’s not even the “housing” itself), as the individual units are still market rate and perform as conventional commodities. Inhabitants may sell them for a profit. In MS, the individual units and shared spaces are both restricted commodities and housing commons. Therein, dual ownership through the syndicated housing structure prevents the possibility of individual accumulation. As one resident said:

We are not a Building Group, not privatizing, not building luxury property, but a collective housing project and building space, not only for us, but for the neighbourhood and other political initiatives ...[such as] the right to the city.

Building Groups, by contrast, remind us of the theoretical limits of concepts such as housing commons. BGs are housing commons during co-production, co-maintenance, and in open spaces. However, the embeddedness of BGs in capitalist cities, individualistic values, and private property simultaneously reinforces the neoliberalization of housing—i.e. forces of re-enclosure (Midnight Notes Collective 1990; Harvey 2005)—via individual self-help and privatization.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, no matter how collective or accessible spaces may be in processes of commoning or a moment, ultimately public accessibility to BGs' semi-open spaces is fleeting because of the inevitability of recapitalization through resale. While BGs remain complicit with capitalism through individual profiting off collective effort, both models also comply with legal and property regimes of residential enclosure: excluding non-residents or the general flow of bodies across the space, hinting to another limitation of current conceptualizations of housing commons.

While scale remains, to some degree, undertheorized and under-researched in the urban commons literature, thinking about urban commons and housing centers on this issue: how might actually existing urban commons expand to broadly address the housing shortage? Syndicated housing shifts housing provision from individual or state to a “collectively owned social good” (Horlitz 2012, 1). *How might we imagine scaling-up housing commons?* In one instance, if states funded syndicated housing, such a process would facilitate state redistribution, not to the

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<sup>29</sup> Engels's critique of forms of self-help housing in *The Housing Question* (1872) remains relevant here.

individual, but to networks of tenants, as a form of accountability at the local level and, in so doing, enhance direct democracy.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the best alternative to state and market conventional provision of housing would be to pressure state redistribution of capital that may be controlled by decentralized, syndicate-like federations of community groups that can guarantee the ongoing affordability, accessibility, and usage of those collective assets.<sup>31</sup>

Thinking about housing commons through the contradictions of housing in capitalist urbanization is insightful because it allows us to understand how sometimes commons, if not coupled with a broader project for social justice, can contribute to islands of privilege. “Commoning is not necessarily an anti- or post-capitalist process,” Stavrides argues; “Commoning may support the reproduction of existing communities and their struggle to defend their collective symbolic or legal ownership” (2016, 37). The BG demonstrates how co-production and co-maintenance can lead to individual profiteering, whereas MS contributes to collective assets. The benevolent intentions of BG members result in their only being, as one activist-scholar explained, a kind of “alternative bourgeoisie,” rather than commoners creating radical collective inclusion in perpetuity. However, housing commons aside, both BG and MS ultimately only resolved precarious housing conditions in Berlin for a limited population, therein remaining complicit in the ongoing privatization (that is to say a form of individual or collective self-help), rather than state investment in housing. BG and MS integrate components of what Marcuse and Madden advocate for: new “[a]lternative, decommodified models of residential development” (2016, 52). However, as I have demonstrated, housing commons contain social contradictions. The point

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<sup>30</sup> A new collaboration between a coalition of housing activists including Kotti & Co and that Mietshäuser Syndikat with City Councilman Florian Schmidt from Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg provides a glimpse into how the local city government may try to fund CLTs or other projects that will ultimately be held in decentralized, community control.

<sup>31</sup> As members of MS point out, the problem with pure state control is that new leadership can sell off social housing stock, as happened in Berlin since 1989.

herein has been to tease out those limitations. For instance, while the MS *does* capture the accumulated collective value in community control—in a sense regulating the commodity of housing<sup>32</sup>—it still remains limited in scale and impact. Therefore, to reconcile the question of scaling-up housing commons, we need to shift our frameworks from regulating the commodity of *units* to regulating *circuits of capital* and their subsequent impact on the state and market treatment of housing. Otherwise, projects like the MS at their best generate a form of decentralized, affordable housing provision, in which legacy renters subsidize new projects, rather than forcing state financing of housing (see Horlitz 2012). In the North Atlantic, housing commons may only serve as a viable strategy to address the more widespread housing shortage if coupled with the legal apparatus and redistributive functions of the state.

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<sup>32</sup> I refer to practices such as dual ownership as a “regulated commodity” rather than “decommodified” because no form of safeguard can, in an absolute sense, prevent possible privatization. I try to illustrate metaphorically above.

## Chapter Three

From the streets to the statehouse: how tenant movements affect housing policy in Los Angeles and Berlin<sup>33</sup>

### *Abstract*

How can tenants affect housing policy? This paper compares rental housing politics in Los Angeles (USA) and Berlin (Germany) between 2008-2020 by examining how political processes influenced policy. It serves as a case of the emergence, escalation, and impact of tenant power. Tenant movement organizations employed five mechanisms to affect policymaking: (1) making demands, (2) forming coalitions, (3) promoting referendums, (4) engaging government officials in dialogue, and (5) transferring agents to government. The paper draws on multiple data sources, including interviews and participant observation over ten years. The cities witnessed policy episodes with four parallel characteristics: (1) locally progressive and regionally moderate, (2) shifting from defensive to offensive, (3) shifting from particular to universal, and (4) signs of a breakthrough beyond neoliberal housing policymaking. The findings suggest that the rise of tenant movements and their allies help drive policy change via multiple channels, exhibiting both similarities and differences across cities, especially in terms of money power and people power.

### *Introduction*

Housing justice movements have exploded around the world since the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis, achieving some major wins, and expanding the political horizon of the possible.

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<sup>33</sup> Previously published as Card, Kenton. 2022. "From the Streets to the Statehouse: How Tenant Movements Affect Housing Policy in Los Angeles and Berlin." *Housing Studies* 0 (0): 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2022.2124236>.

Yet, the impact of housing movements on policy outcomes remains understudied (Martinez 2019, 1588). Housing politics in Los Angeles (USA) and Berlin (Germany) had not witnessed such influential tenant mobilizations for decades. I compare each city's episode of contentious politics between 2008 and 2020, their structural similarities and differences, and what political processes contributed to policy outcomes. The article presents a pair of case studies, each linking key mechanisms endogenous and exogenous to tenant movements to policy episodes. My comparison intentionally caps the time period before the health and economic crisis of COVID-19, to paint a picture of the trajectory of tenant movements and housing politics leading up to 2020.

This article is structured around two questions. (1) How did rental housing policy trajectories shift in Los Angeles and Berlin between 2008 and 2020? (2) To what extent did tenant movements influence these policy shifts? The episodes of housing politics analyzed below have typological parallels across other rich capitalist economies and spillover into and from other social movements. Housing movements have rarely, if ever, risen to the national level in the United States (Marcuse 1999); and in Germany, they were marginalized during reunification (Marcuse 1991). Yet, increasing housing financialization, ownership consolidation by financial institutions, rising precarious tenancies, exacerbated by racial and migrant inequalities, have situated housing as one of the major political fault lines of our time.

My research reveals two multilayered findings. First, despite different historical and political economic contexts, Los Angeles and Berlin witnessed parallel episodes of rapid change in rental housing policies, exhibiting four strikingly similar characteristics. (1) Local policies leaned progressive, whereas regional policies leaned moderate. (2) Policies shifted from defensive (e.g. anti-gentrification) to offensive (e.g. price controls). (3) Policies shifted from particular (e.g. affordable housing funding, anti-development) to universal (e.g. expanded tenants' rights). (4)

Cumulatively these developments illustrated a breakthrough beyond neoliberal treatment of housing markets.

Second, my findings suggest that new organizations helped drive policy change through five mechanisms endogenous to the movement: (1) making demands, (2) forming coalitions, (3) promoting people's referendums, (4) engaging government officials in dialogue, and (5) transferring agents into government. Three other factors exogenous to tenant movements also played an important role: (1) allied interest group resource deployment, (2) policy competition and transfer, and (3) landlord opposition actions. In some cases, the first two assist tenant-friendly reforms, and the third sets it back. Los Angeles's and Berlin's patterns were similar, but with some important differences: notably, the resource power of the movements and their allies varied.

### *Comparative logic*

Political economists compare the United States and Germany as paradigmatically distinct welfare-capitalist regimes (P. A. Hall and Soskice 2001), respectively liberal and coordinated market economies. Housing scholars have extended such analyses predominantly to national housing regime types (e.g., Kettunen and Ruonavaara 2021): United States as 'dualist rental system' and Germany as 'integrated rental market' (Kemeny 2006, 3). This study conducts a subnational comparison that shows striking parallels in cities across distinct regimes. The analysis fits in the tradition of 'divergence comparison' (Kemeny and Lowe 1998) – wherein Los Angeles and Berlin represent a more general family of cities: large, left-leaning, majority renter, with rich activism histories – illustrating what may be seen in analogous rich capitalist cities.

I focus on new regulations of the private rental housing (PRH) market: rental housing owned by private landlords and not receiving government subsidies. Why? PRH encompasses the



largest quantity of units occupied by low-income residents, in comparison to subsidized or state-owned units. Yet, neoliberal economics – the dominant framework for generating governance strategies around the world for the last four decades – universally discourages PRH price controls: esp. those that freeze rents or allow for vacancy control (Slater 2021).<sup>34</sup> Rental housing has also globally become a site of financial investment by institutional landlords (Fields and Uffer 2016; Wijburg, Aalbers, and Heeg 2018), leading scholars link inequality (e.g., Piketty 2014) to housing in a new asset-based class taxonomy (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2019). Rents continue rising in Berlin (Holm 2021; Kadi, Vollmer, and Stein 2021) and Los Angeles (Nelson et al. 2021) with negative spillover effects for tenants (e.g., banishment, White and Card 2016; Roy 2017).

Los Angeles and Berlin (a city and state) exhibit a number of similarities, serving as the largest and most politically active cities within respective political contexts pertaining to PRH – California and Germany – regions of significant economic power. California serves as the capital of tech (headquarters to Google, Apple, and Facebook), and Los Angeles has for years ranked among the most unaffordable housing in the United States (Ray, Ong, and González 2014). Meanwhile, Germany has undergone the largest privatization of public housing in world history since the early 1990s (3 million units; Aalbers 2019), with Berlin emerging as a leading European city for tech start-ups, and the site of the greatest real estate investment across Europe (over €40 billion between 2007 and 2020), exceeding London, Paris, and Amsterdam (Calatayud et al. 2021).

In the majority renter cities (Los Angeles 62% and Berlin 85%), governing coalitions have politically shifted slightly to the left in the past decade. The Los Angeles City Council has fourteen Democrats, one Independent, and zero Republicans. Between 2016 and 2021 in Berlin, a so-called

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Vacancy control’ constitutes a type of restriction on rental prices, whereby when a unit is ‘vacated’ it retains some form of price adjustment restraints. Thus, ‘vacancy decontrol’ allows landlords to increase rental prices, without restriction, upon vacancy.

Red–Red–Green coalition came into power, with left-wing candidates and allies in the tenant movement. More idiosyncratically, both cities have people’s referendum processes (i.e. initiatives), allowing citizens, following a petition period, to directly vote for/ against the creation of laws, a type of bottom-up policymaking (‘direct’ democracy), in contrast to conventional top-down policymaking by elected officials (‘indirect’ democracy). Bottom-up policymaking remains susceptible to interest group influence via political advertisements to sway voters, whereas top-down policymaking remains susceptible to backdoor pressure via lobbying and campaign contributions.

This article takes an analytically dynamic, rather than static, approach, drawing on a comparative tradition well-traveled in sociology: social movement studies. My research design is intentionally not a typical matched comparison, but meant to complement such approaches. The article considers the ‘paired comparison of uncommon cases’ approach in order ‘to discover whether similar mechanisms and processes drive changes in substantially divergent periods, places, and regimes’ (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 82–83). Finally, Giugni argues for the importance of comparing ‘similar movements in different contexts’ to understand movement outcomes (1999, xxiv).

***Framework: linking tenant movements and housing policy***

I compare two episodes of contentious housing politics, Los Angeles and Berlin from 2008 to 2020, to illustrate how similar political processes help explain, despite contextual differences, analogous policy changes. The timeline between 2008 and 2020 is intentional: to identify and interpret the possible connections between *growing tenant movement activities* and *policymaking outcomes* prior to the 2020 health and economic crisis of COVID-19. The episodes serve as an

arena for observing emergence and escalation of political activity. Episodes of contentious politics capture a spatial-historical sequence of mesolevel phenomenon: relationships between agents, institutions, and structures over time and space, in contrast to micro- (single site or policy) and macro- (large-n or national comparative) approaches. As opposed to static variables, processes and mechanisms characterize change, to capture causal dynamics that can be abstracted and observed across space and time.

The article draws on a number of theoretical and empirical currents in housing studies. Clapham calls for breaking down the crude dichotomy in housing studies between ‘positivist’ policy research and ‘theoretical’ critical work by researching ‘the housing policy making process’ as one viable option to transparently link theory and evidence (2018, 176). Rental market regulation often entails conflict between tenants and landlord organizations, which Teitz (1998) suggests can be studied through policy adoption, implementation, and termination. Herein I focus on adoption, termination, and add agenda setting. Urban movement scholars have also created generative findings on how place, identity, and claims like ‘the right to the city’ play out in movements, yet often focus on single case studies, creating another opportunity for exploring the messiness of governance across regimes and legal contexts. Finally, this article also builds on past work on the two cities under study, for instance, in Berlin the transition ‘from protest to program’ (Holm 2021), and in Los Angeles from local community struggles to mass coalitions ‘with *positive* as well as *defensive* orientations’ (my emphasis, Haas and Heskin 1981, 562). Policies serve as the starting point. I profile two subnational configurations of political actors and actions to capture the breadth of contentious politics, albeit admittedly, at the expense of depth. Political scientists have recently advocated for more subnational, policy-centered research on interest groups (Anzia 2019).

This article contributes to our understanding of how movements and interest groups impact housing policy. I begin downstream with policy outcomes, and then link those policies back to movement actions upstream. Tenant movements constitute a type of social movement, which I define as large groups of ordinary people systematically challenging elites and forms of entrenched power. They are ‘sustained campaigns of claims-making’, Tilly writes, employing a range of strategies, and ‘displaying supporters’ worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (WUNC)’ (2010, 182). Tenants leverage worthiness (widespread housing unaffordability), unity (organizations and coalitions), numbers (volunteers and large protests), and commitment (consistent action). Key ‘elements of a modern tenant movement’, Heskin suggests, are ‘mass organization, a rent strike, and confrontations over evictions, political action and litigation’ (1981, 186).

Tenant movement organizations (TMOs) are defined as tenant-led and issue-focused ‘movement organizations,’ as explained by Zald and Ash: purpose motivated groups with ‘bureaucratic features’ that both ‘have goals ... [and] aim to restructure society or individuals, not to provide it or them with a regular service’ (1966, 329).<sup>35</sup>

Zald and Ash also state that a ‘coalition pools resources and coordinates plans, while keeping distinct organizational identities’ (1966, 335). Recent work on coalitions and networks focusing on housing issues suggest that such formations foster trust building, mutual learning, and strategy sharing (Howell 2018; Lira and March 2023), even when including non-housing organizations (Lima 2021). However, this does not make all such coalition partners TMOs. For instance, in the California case analyzed here, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation acts as an external

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<sup>35</sup> For recent developments on how tenant movement organizations impact urban life see Michener & SoRelle (2022).

ally to the California tenant movement, as it is neither tenant-run, grassroots, nor primarily housing focused.

‘Little work on social movements’, Burstein suggests, ‘tries to gauge their impact in the context of theories of electoral competition and legislative action’ (1999, 19). The classic model evaluating movement ‘success’ from Gamson (1975) suggests scholars identify movement goals, whether they were achieved, or whether opposition acknowledged challenger groups. Tilly challenges Gamsonian ‘scorecard’ approach because it focusing exclusively on intended outcomes. Tilly suggests linking upstream (movements) to downstream (outcomes) and to ‘work midstream by examining whether the internal links of the causal chain operated as the theory required’ (1999, 270). Similarly, I follow three steps suggested by Giugni (1999, xxvi): (1) ‘specify the types of consequences to be studied’ (policies); (2) ‘search for plausible relevant causes’ (mechanisms); and (3) ‘reconstruct causal patterns and histories’ (spatial-historical sequence of events). In the two cases, below I identify five mechanisms endogenous and three mechanisms exogenous to tenant movements that link movements to policy outcomes, although sometimes these dynamics interact.

### ***Methods***

Methodologically the findings emerge from the analysis of multiple data sources: participant observations, one-on-one interviews and dialogues, and content analysis (newspapers, social media, and government records). I draw on over 1000 h of discontinuous, embedded participant observation and over 70 one-on-one conversations.<sup>36</sup> This article draws on 10 years of

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<sup>36</sup> Participant observation included paid and unpaid work with housing rights organizations and co-teaching community engaged projects on housing.

discontinuous primary and secondary research conducted over four periods of time across Berlin and California. Part 1 began between 2011 and 2013 by launching participant observation and conducting 35 interviews with experts and activists on strategies to address the housing crisis in Berlin. This early project focused on alternative housing models (e.g. Baugruppen and Mietshäuser Syndikat, see Card 2020), and the birth of the current tenant movement, in which I focused on the Kotti & Co tenant initiative. Part 2 included professional participation and observation while working in housing and environmental planning advocacy organizations in Sacramento, California between 2014 and 2015, supporting in the coordination of the Residents United Network, and observing meetings with lobbyists, affordable housing developers, and government officials. I conducted no research interviews during this period, but a dozen informational interviews on advocacy and planning. Part 3 began in 2017–2018 with direct participation with LA-based tenant activists, and 10 new interviews with tenant organizers and intellectuals across the United States and Germany documenting movement continuity and theories of social change; in this phase, I began comparing the cities (Card 2018). Finally, Part 4 began since 2020 when I relocated to Berlin, renewing participant observation and interviews with 25 tenant activists, experts, landlord advocates, bureaucrats, and politicians across Los Angeles and Berlin, as well as a fellowship at the Abgeordnetenhaus (State Parliament) of Berlin. I also drew on a few other sources to complement and verify my findings, such as newspaper reports, policy documents, social media posts (Twitter), and campaign contribution disclosures (California Secretary of State and State Election Commissioner for Berlin).

## *Findings*

The findings make up the last five sections: (1) TMO emergence and escalation, (2) shifting public awareness of rental housing, (3) eight causal mechanisms, (4) tracing policy trajectories, and (5) comparing the policy episodes.

### *TMO emergence and escalation*

‘No account of the housing system is complete’, suggest Marcuse and Madden without an understanding of the collective power of inhabitants’ (2016, 83). In Los Angeles and Berlin, tenant movement organizations (TMOs) played a central role to shift public consciousness, party platforms, and policymaker positions on housing policy.<sup>37</sup>

### *Scale and scope*

In both cities, tenant organizations and coalitions burgeoned in the years preceding and encompassing the policy episodes. As shown in Table 7, TMO names signaled to the public that groups organized in response to both direct neighborhood displacement (e.g. Defend Boyle Heights or Bizim Kiez) and wider ranging visions (e.g. Tenants Together and Mietenwahnsinn Bündnis). The quantity of new groups and online followers also escalated over time leading up to 2020. The lists in Table 7 just represent the tip of the iceberg. Holm (2021) estimated that 150 new tenant organizations emerged during the past decade in Berlin, and the referendum Expropriate DW & Co. reports 350 organizational endorsements; newly emerging tenants’ rights coalitions in California also report large numbers: the LA Right to Counsel Coalition reports 56 groups and the

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<sup>37</sup> TMOs here could be either legal entities or not, but groups with an established and long-running collective identity, vision for change, and action.

statewide Tenants Together reports 60 organizational members and partners. Large coalitions also include support from allied organizations.

The scale and scope of tenant movements illustrate how large and what kind of activities get deployed. A selection of influential groups and quantity of online followers provide one measurement of how many people express interest in a political group's claims and activities. TMOs often leveraged new media across a range of social media platforms, especially Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. In some cases, they also developed deeper reporting and analysis on blogs (Gentrification Blog and Knock LA), podcasts (Renter Power Hour and Von Menschen und Mieten), educational videos (Cancel Rent & Mortgage: Policy Platform), and numerous online workshops, complementing traditional organizing modes, such as newsletters or op-eds.<sup>38</sup> TMOs leverage social media to promote actions and pro-tenant demands like 'Housing is a Human Right' or 'Wir bleiben Alle!'

Tenant movements also expanded the scope of their activities. In both cities, tenant movements responded to inequality, leveraged negative public sentiment about that inequality for mass recruitment, and bridged between educating, providing care and support for tenants-in-crisis, and direct-action targeting landlords or state actors. Housing justice coalitions practiced both intensive and extensive dynamics: intensive by linking multiclass, multiracial, and multilingual base-building, and extensive by connecting labor, refugee, Black Lives Matter, environmental, socialist movements, among others. Intersectional organizing in Berlin included practices of Turkish women-led Kotti & Co. and the Right to the City international working group of

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<sup>38</sup> For example, in Berlin 'Gentrification Blog', <https://gentrificationblog.wordpress.com/> and 'Knock LA' in Los Angeles <https://knock-la.com/>. Podcasts in California include 'Renter Power Hour', <https://soundcloud.com/renterpowerhour>; in Berlin 'From People and Rents' ('Von Menschen und Mieten') by Expropriate DW & Co, <https://podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/von-menschen-und-mieten/id1555028798>. Educational video 'Cancel Rent & Mortgage Policy Platform' from Healthy LA, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaIvmwf6RFE&t=3s&ab\\_channel=LAFowardAction](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaIvmwf6RFE&t=3s&ab_channel=LAFowardAction). All Accessed on 5 November 2021.



Expropriate DW & Co. to spotlight the inclusion/exclusion of non-citizens: included in the unaffordable housing market and excluded from voting to reform it. Kotti & Co. challenged public narratives around social housing in Berlin, and with the coalition Initiative Stadtneuenken, organized a conference to reformulate solutions to the housing crisis across the city (Hamann & Türkmen, 2020). In Los Angeles, LA Tenants Union (LATU) and Democratic Socialists of America Los Angeles (DSA-LA) both represented emergent, multiracial, organizations fusing tenant solidarity, education and resource deployment, access to tenant legal assistance, and a variety of neighborhood and thematic working group (Card 2018). ‘We see tenants,’ one LA organizer said, ‘as the revolutionary subject’. TMOs aim to change policy, and their scale and scope suggests that they have the potential to do so.

### *Shifting public awareness of rental housing*

Housing politicization also contributed to advancing public awareness of housing issues, which incentivizes action by elected officials. Numerous polls suggested that housing dominates as the most important political issue for the public in these cities. In 2019, 95% of polled Angelinos identified homelessness as greatest threat to the city (Oreskes, Smith, and Lauter 2019), in 2020, 81% of Angelinos said ‘protecting tenants’ is ‘extremely important’ or a ‘major’ priority for the city (Los Angeles City Planning 2020). In 2019, 51% of polled Berliners worried about not being able to afford rents and displacement (Paul 2019), and in 2021, 47% of Berliners said rising rents was their biggest worry (Fahrun 2021).

### *Eight causal mechanisms*

TMOs deployed a range of repertoires of contention that included both contained (speaking at hearings, registering voters) and transgressive political action (spontaneous mass demonstrations, rent strikes, eviction blockades, hosting phone hotlines, aiding tenants-in-crisis, squatting abandoned buildings, etc.).<sup>39</sup> The article suggests that eight causal mechanisms influenced policy change. While I have provided snapshots of the mechanisms at play in the narrative below, see TABLE 8 for a comprehensive list of all policies, causal mechanisms, and evidentiary linkages.

Five mechanisms operate endogenously to TMOs. (1) *Making demands* constitutes tenants collectively formulating general or specific action-oriented claims – reverberating from the streets to the statehouse – that address grievances, alter the political climate, and sometimes win concessions. (2) *Forming coalitions* amounts to TMOs bringing organizations of different constituencies, places, and practices together to struggle for common goals. (3) *Promoting people’s referendums* comprises of bottom-up policymaking that begins by defining a policy goal, followed by gathering signatures to advance the initiative onto the ballot. (4) *Engaging government officials in dialogue* occurs when activists develop active working relationships with elected politicians, political parties, agency officials, and judges to exchange ideas, broker compromise, and address policy solutions. And (5) *transferring agents into government* means getting activists elected, appointed, or hired into formal government positions. The first four are closely linked and come up frequently: movements continuously made demands, and to advance those demands they continuously built coalitions, pursued referendums, and foster dialogue. Transferring agents is more episodic and more ambiguously central to moving the policy agenda.

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<sup>39</sup> For more on contained versus transgressive dynamics, see McAdam et al. (2001, 6).

Three mechanisms exogenous to the tenant movement also influenced policy change. (1) *Allied interest group resource deployment* constitutes outside groups – in direct collaboration or not – furthering the general agenda of the tenant movement independent of the tenant movement. Whereas forging coalitions is driven by TMOs, this point is about external (non-tenant) organizations as the driving force. Next, building on policy transfer literature – which Soaita et al. suggest addresses ‘policy-(regime) change; ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of housing policies to transfer or lessons to be learned; potential for transferability; and the role of institutional actors that are seen as drivers of change’ (2021, 7) – (2) *policy competition and transfer* amounts to the sequential dynamic of policy agendas influencing, albeit without attributing direct causation, the introduction of policies elsewhere, irrespective of success. And finally (3) *landlord opposition actions* comprise of individual or landlord association activities and resource deployment that influenced policy change. Whereas the first two may assist tenant-friendly reforms, the third usually sets it back.

### *Tracing policy trajectories*

Slum lords! Slum lords! [...] I’m pissed off about it. I’m taking care of three grandkids and I’m older than you might think I am. It’s hard. I’m on disability. And it’s rough. These landlords want you to have three times the rent. They want you to have a credit score of 650 or 620 for everyone that is over 18 years old. They’re going to do a background check on you. Then when you move into their property and you tell them that you’ve got problems, they want to come up with every line in the book of why they don’t have to fix it. Or it’s your fault. Or it’s your kid’s fault. And then when your lease is up, instead of them being decent — and it costs

a lot to move — they say: “we don’t want to renew your lease.” Why? Because you have complained just for your basic rights. [...]

What brought me out today is that I hope [the California Assemblymembers] do something about this stupidity, that they repeal this Costa-Hawkins law because it’s hurting poor people.

—Barbara Ramsey-Clark, Sacramento Renter (January 11 2018)<sup>40</sup>

Housing policies in Los Angeles and Berlin have evolved in strikingly similar ways in the years since 2008. As Los Angeles and Berlin represent the largest cities within their parent jurisdictions (California and Germany), the cities account for a disproportionately large share of social movements, resources spent by interest groups, media attention, and political activity. Thus, I will trace policy trajectories first at the state and national levels, and then, at the city level for each case, and identify the mechanisms at play. As we will see, the tenant movements had less relative power at the state- and federal-levels and the reforms were more moderate, and vice versa for the city-level, suggesting the importance of understanding movements and their outcomes across jurisdictional scales.

### *State- and national-level rental reforms: California and Germany*

This section highlights the reforms in California at greater length, in contrast to Germany, for two reasons: (1) California saw more numerous policy fights during the period than the federal level of Germany, and (2) the California policy disputes had more substantial impact on the Los

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<sup>40</sup> January 11 2018, Outside Sacramento Capitol (Smith 2018).

Angeles-level policy fights (via transfer). In California the ‘moderate’ Democrats and in Germany even left-leaning parties had promoted neoliberalization of PRH throughout the 1990s–2000s. As the political climate shifted, the same parties (and even center-right parties in Germany under Chancellor Angela Merkel) passed modest rent regulations.

The California push to regulate PRH began in 2017 and can be captured in two bottom-up and two top-down policies. In 2017, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) – a billion-dollar nonprofit of extraordinary wealth due to its worldwide healthcare services and pharmacies – began pouring money into pro-renter advocacy. The tenant movement had already been growing across the state, with a new statewide coalition Tenants Together founded in 2008, new tenant unions across cities (e.g. LATU), and even rent strikes emerging. As a new ally organization to the tenant movement, AHF founded a front-group called Housing Is a Human Right in Los Angeles, recruited leading grassroots organizers as paid staff, and launched a coalition to advance a pro-renter referendum. In California, statewide referendums must gather signatures from 5% of the registered voting population, which in 2018 amounted to 623,212 signatures.<sup>41</sup> AHF funded signature gatherers across the state to advance a referendum called Proposition 10 (2018) to repeal a law called the Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act (1995). While technically not overturning local ordinances, Costa-Hawkins neutralizes some local rent controls and limits local government from expanding them: prohibiting (1) vacancy control, (2) rent controls on housing built after 1995, (3) rent control on single-family homes, and (4) changes in the dates for which controls can apply, limiting cities to those previously established (e.g. 1978 for Los Angeles).<sup>42</sup> Prop 10 would not

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<sup>41</sup> See California Secretary of State info on Referendums: <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/ballot-measures/referendum> last accessed on 19 June 2021.

<sup>42</sup> California has allowed local rent regulation since the state Supreme Court ruled in the case *Birkenfeld v. City of Berkeley* (1976). 17 Cal 3rd 129 that the state did not occupy the field of rent regulation and that local jurisdictions can adopt rent control.

have expanded rent control in itself, but the political opportunity for local jurisdictions to enact and expand controls. The referendum would have allowed cities and counties to implement vacancy control, apply rent controls to younger or new buildings and single-family homes. In a 2017 tenant meeting, one organizer said that Prop 10 was the single most important policy for tenants across the state. Even though 60% of polled Californians generally supported rent controls in 2017 (DiCamillo 2017), after a fierce campaign that saw campaign contributions over \$76 million in opposition and \$24 million in support, Prop 10 was defeated 59.4% to 40.6% by voters.

In 2020, the AHF led a near repeat referendum to repeal Costa-Hawkins called Prop 21, amending the previous referendum by exempting new and recently constructed buildings, only applying to buildings over 15-year old. Landlord coalitions contributed \$59 million in opposition and AHF \$40 million in support, with a nearly identical outcome: defeat 59.9% to 40.1%. Both Prop 10 and 21 failed, despite being endorsed by the Democratic Party, numerous prominent California politicians, and supported by TMOs across the state. However, multiple longstanding California housing advocates privately disdained AHF's leadership and strategy on Prop 10 and 21. The referendums were 'guaranteed to lose', one told me, claiming that AHF lacked a broad enough coalition or sufficient pre-referendum public support to withstand a negative advertising blizzard. Political advertising allows opposition to sow doubt and reject change. The director of Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies, Mark DiCamillo, explained the opposition's strategy: '[i]t's a formula. You confuse, and you befuddle and you whatever. You raise enough doubts with voters and you win' (cited in Dillon 2020).

Two top-down policies also contributed to the statewide episode. While signatures were being gathered for Prop 10 in 2017, California State Assemblymembers Bloom, Chiu, and Bonta proposed a one-line law called AB 1506: 'This bill would repeal [the Costa-Hawkins] act'. On

January 11 2018, hundreds of tenant and landlord activists clashed in protest during a committee hearing in the California statehouse. The hearing garnered around a thousand public comments and heated debate (see quote above by Ramsey-Clark), but AB 1506 did not receive enough votes and died in committee.

Despite failing, Prop 10 received nationwide media attention, and other states picked up the momentum; New York and Oregon passed statewide rental restraints. Following other states and as a new referendum emerged on the horizon (Prop 21), California Governor Newsom wanted to boost the state's progressive image and needed a win on housing, so advocates brokered a compromise on an anti-rent gouging policy.<sup>43</sup> AB 1482 proposed to limit landlord's ability to implement yearly rent increases by more than 5% plus Consumer Price Index (CPI) or 10%, whichever is lower. Along with this weak price control, the legislation included 'just cause' eviction protections for tenants, narrowing the conditions wherein landlords can indiscriminately evict tenants unless in violation of a lease or other exemptions. AB 1482 applied to properties over 15-year-old, exempting single-family home rentals (unless owned by real estate trusts, corporations, or LLCs with one corporate member), and will sunset in 2029. AB 1482 passed and became law on January 1 2020. Institutional landlords supported the anti-rent gouging legislation and AHF opposed it, both for the same reason: the high price ceiling. Institutional landlords felt they could still yield sufficient long-term returns, whereas some local landlords groups opposed.

While tenant movements influenced the statewide episode through demands, coalitions, and referendums, the exogenous mechanisms accelerated the statewide activity. AHF poured over \$64 million into gathering signatures, advertising, and coalition building for Prop 10 and 21. The financial infusion – exogenous to the movements themselves – expanded the media impact and

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<sup>43</sup> Many of my interviewees (including lobbyists and government officials) interpreted Newsom's leadership on the issue directly in response to other states' policy adoption.

drew attention to TMO coalitions like Tenants Together. AHF's money initiated the referendums; landlord money killed them. Yet interviewees believed that the referendum threat contributed to the ultimate adoption of AB 1482.

Policy agenda setting contributed to policy transfer. Prop 10 failed, but motivated assembly members to introduce AB 1506, led to mass protests, triggered local and national news attention, and educated the public and politicians on Costa-Hawkins. After similar policies passed in New York and Oregon, Governor Newsom threw his weight behind AB 1482 and pushed to reduce the ceiling on rent increases from 7% to 5% plus CPI.

In 2006, German federal restructuring distributed some powers to the sixteen states (Länder), including housing ('housing system' was deleted from Article 70.1 of the German Basic Law) (Burkhart, Manow, and Ziblatt 2008). Article 30 declares that states have power unless otherwise specified. Between 2014 and 2020 legal experts disagreed whether states had distinct or mixed control (competing competencies) over the housing system, which created a legal opening for new housing policy in Berlin.

On April 21 2015, a center-right coalition (so-called Grand Coalition led by Merkel) passed a five-year Rent Price Brake (RPB), with the opposition parties abstaining.<sup>44</sup> With tenant mobilizations growing in large cities, landlord advocates and politicians acted to compete with this pressure from below by passing RPB from above. Therein states could designate tight housing markets (based on rents, population, vacancy rates) to implement an anti-rent gouging law. RPB limits price increases to 10% above local Rent Price Index (i.e. local comparative rents), taking into account building age and amenities of the neighborhood. In 2019, amendments to the RPB strengthened the law by limiting renovation price increases to 8%. In 2020, the RPB was extended

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<sup>44</sup> Center-right national coalition included the Christian Democratic Union, Christian Social Union, and Social Democratic Party.



to sunset in 2025, streamlining some tenant-landlord relations, such as rent disclosure and challenging rent increases, exempting new construction (after October 1 2014) or major renovations including energy or sustainability retrofits. On June 1 2015, Berlin was declared a tight rental market under RPB, whereas other eligible states have not, yet researchers found it ineffective at slowing rising rents (Kholodilin, Mense, and Michelsen 2016).

Thus, in both California and Germany, centrist politicians passed reforms to PRH markets (anti-rent gouging and increased rights for tenants), yet these concessions seem to have neither slowed rising rents and the resulting precarious housing conditions, nor, as we shall see below, quelled the growth of tenant movements.

### *City-level rental reforms: Los Angeles and Berlin*

Los Angeles and Berlin witnessed important shifts in local policy episodes post-2008. In Los Angeles, activists and advocates escalated their contentious politics around housing unaffordability and homelessness. Voters in Los Angeles took up numerous referendums, some beyond the scope of housing: to expand mass transportation (2008, 2012, 2016), increase minimum wage to \$15/h (2015), and fund services and shelters for the unhoused (2016) (see Table 10). Three iterations of rental housing policy reforms followed: (1) rent stabilization, (2) short-term rentals, (3) eminent domain, and other proactive regulations of rental housing.

#### *Los Angeles*

First, Los Angeles saw some successful and unsuccessful reforms to its Rent Stabilization Ordinance (RSO) that had been passed in 1978. RSO limits yearly rent increases to 3–8% (depending on CPI) on multifamily units built on or prior to October 1 1978. In 2010, after legacy

TMO Coalition for Economic Survival pushed for expanded rental regulations, the Economic Roundtable generated a city-funded report on the hardships tenants were facing (Flaming et al. 2009), resulting in the Housing Committee introduced a ‘Suspension of Rent Increases’ for four months. This bill attempted to lower the 3% price floor, especially when CPI is lower, yet it died in committee. In 2016, the City Council passed a ‘Tenant Buyout Ordinance’, requiring landlords to disclose to tenants their rights and document actions with the city if they attempt to ‘buyout tenants’: in other words, pay tenants ‘cash for keys’ to voluntarily vacate their rent stabilized unit.

Following AB 1482, the LA City Council passed a Temporary Eviction Moratorium and emergency renters relief program to shield renters living in a regulatory grey zone: units that would soon be covered by the new state law, but were not covered by LA’s RSO. The measures prevented landlords from rent-gouging or evicting prior to AB 1482s effective date. Next, in June 2018, the Renters’ Right to Counsel Coalition-LA formed to exert pressure on city officials, and by August 17 City Council leveraged the housing unit to investigate the prospects of providing legal aid to all tenants in crisis. Yet, the government coalition reduced the scope of the program following negotiations, devolving into an Eviction Defense Program citing insufficient funds. The program has only allocated \$2,937,000 in assistance, far shy of New York City’s \$100–200 million.

At the local level, agenda setting also influenced policy transfer, which illustrates that policymakers associate lower risks with proven models, especially when compounded by TMO pressure, and to avoid appearing retrograde in comparison with competing jurisdictions.

Second, in 2018 Los Angeles passed regulations on short-term rentals facilitated by online platforms, which remove units that may otherwise be on the PRH market, yet the regulations lacked sufficient implementation resources, which led to follow-up amendments. Thousands of hosts continued renting units even when a \$500 fine went into place, which was perceived as a

marginal cost for repeat hosts. The city negotiated a special agreement with AirBnB to remove ineligible hosts, but shielded the company from some liabilities. While these reforms did not altogether curtail expansion of new short-term rentals, the reforms nonetheless, at a minimum, signaled some action by local government and discouraged some hosts. Some tenant activists criticized the reforms as grossly insufficient, leading to ongoing coalition pressure in 2022.

Third, since 2019 city councilors explored employing Eminent Domain to purchase housing units and advancing a vision of more proactive government intervention into the housing system. Tenants facing eviction – due to their inability to pay rents doubling and tripling after affordability covenants expired – formed a group called the Hillside Villa Tenants Association and began exerting pressure. In response to protest and demands made by the group, City Councilmember Cedillo advanced a motion on January 31 2020, later passing City Council, for the city to employ Eminent Domain to acquire the 124 units of Hillside Villa. The bill advanced following pressure from tenants, and the landlord pulling out of a handshake deal made with Cedillo to keep the units affordable over 10 years in exchange for \$12.7 million. My sources suggest that the both landlord backing out, along with tenant pressure, impacted Cedillo. For months the bill stalled in the Budget and Finance Committee. Yet, tenants remained persistent, organizing protests to target councilmembers one-by-one, shifting between contained and transgressive tactics.

We called. We emailed. We've done all the things we were supposed to do to ask nicely. We showed up and [LA Councilwoman Monica Rodriguez] still wouldn't talk to us. She called the cops. We just wanted to talk to her for five minutes.

–@hillside\_villa Tweet on 9/24/21<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Tweet by 'Asociación de Inquilinos de Hillside Villa' 山景園租戶協會, @hillside\_villa, on September 24 2021: [https://twitter.com/hillside\\_villa/status/1441244908954669061](https://twitter.com/hillside_villa/status/1441244908954669061) Accessed on 6 November 2021.

On Friday May 27 2022 scores of tenant activists flooded City Hall for a hearing on the eminent domain funding, ultimately resulting in City Council unanimously approving the loan to Eminent Domain Hillside Villa.

Citing a shortfall of 516,946 affordable units, on February 12 2020 Councilmember Bonin – introduced a Homes Guarantee LA platform, following active collaboration with local TMOs, notably People Organized for Westside Renewal and Ground Game LA, groups that had been involved in the nationwide People’s Action coalition.<sup>46</sup> Homes Guarantee LA advanced a number of reforms: (1) amending the RSO rent floor of 3% by instead restricting rent increases to 60% of inflation, (2) requiring landlords to disclose ownership, (3) supporting the repeal of federal limits on new public housing (i.e. Faircloth Amendment) to allow such construction in Los Angeles, among others. Yet, the policy slate largely remains in the agenda setting phase and stalled, with only some partial approvals and bills in process.<sup>47</sup>

Over the past decade, former tenant activists have been appointed into government positions (e.g. housing and planning departments, and councilmember offices), wherein they support the tenant-friendly political climate through policy analysis, facilitate community planning processes, and share strategies with TMOs (and progressive councilmembers) on leveraging formal political channels. In 2020, one sign of continued escalation was the election to Los Angeles City Council of an insurgent, activist candidate Nithya Raman, whom had been recruited by a TMO organizer to run for office, and endorsed by DSA-LA and other left organizations. Activists

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<sup>46</sup> ‘Bonin pushes ‘Homes Guarantee LA,’ <https://11thdistrict.com/news/bonin-pushes-homes-guarantee-la/> accessed on 16 October 2021.

<sup>47</sup> List of legislation ‘approved,’ ‘previously introduced and in process,’ and ‘being introduced’ on Mike Bonin’s Homes Guarantee LA website: <https://11thdistrict.com/HomesGuaranteeLA/> Accessed on 6 November 2021.

inside government create direct channels of communication and can attempt reforms from-the-inside.

### *Berlin*

Post-2008 Berlin also witnessed a sequence of urban and housing market reforms. Berlin's urban restructuring since reunification can be summarized in three policy phases: (1) neoliberal restructuring between 1990 and 2000s (Bernt, Grell, and Holm 2014) (2) the rise of people's referendums and tenant power beginning in 2009 (Vollmer 2015; Rink and Vollmer 2019), and (3) active collaboration between tenant movements and the governing coalition between 2016 and 2021 (Vollmer 2017). Prior to the fall of the Berlin wall and unification, East Berlin implemented a rent freeze, and West Berlin rent controls until 1987. Thus, 1990 signaled an expanded exposure of Berlin's housing stock to international markets. Below addresses the second two phases.

The referendum has become a regular and active tool of ordinary people's power and bottom-up policy change in Berlin. In 2009, a number of neighborhood initiatives mobilized a district referendum called *Mediaspree Versenken* (Sink Mediaspree) to challenge a tech company cluster development (branded Mediaspree) along the Spree River in a site dense with subcultural uses since unification. In 2014, activists formed another city referendum to contest redeveloping the former Tempelhof airport (100% Tempelhof Field) succeeded in securing the former airport as a green space for the public.

You can scream abolish high rent or even abolish capitalism, but there is no button to press. You have to do everything yourself. You have to understand what your rights are and then you have to dig into the laws. You have to figure out who are the owners. Then you have to go through the bureaucracy.

–Berlin tenant organizer, Kotti & Co.

In 2015, as a direct outgrowth of new TMOs like Kotti & Co., the Mietenvolksentscheid (Rent Referendum) launched to reform social housing in the city – later held up in court by litigation from landlords – and withdrawn after the governing coalition agreed to concessions. One scholar pointed to the 2015 referendum as an example of movements working to deneoliberalize housing (Diesselhorst 2018). Lawmakers introduced the Gesetz über die Neuausrichtung der sozialen Wohnraumversorgung (Law on Realignment of Social Housing) (2015) in response, reforming the management of social housing and appointing a few activists to agency positions (e.g. to the social housing management board). In 2019, the Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co. referendum launched to expropriate landlords owning over 3000 units in Berlin and transfer ownership to the city, essentially an attempt to nationalize institutional landlords that own as many as 240,000 units across Berlin.<sup>48</sup> The initiative built a widespread grassroots network, with thousands of volunteers organized on the neighborhood level. In July 2021, over 349,658 signatures were submitted, the most in Berlin history, advancing the referendum to the voting booth, which passed on September 26 2021, with 56% in support; a fight over implementation continues.

Between 2016 and 2021, the governing coalition in Berlin combined the Social Democrats, the Left, and the Green parties, called the Red-Red-Green (R2G). Three additional policies that emerged top-down from the R2G coalition, in response to escalating tenant power, were regulations of (1) Short-Term Rentals, (2) Mieu Protections, (3) Right to First Refusal, and (4) the Rent Cap. In 2016, Berlin led the way internationally by imposing strict regulations and high fines on Short-Term Rentals, which eased in 2018 after a court ruling, even though fines increased

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<sup>48</sup> Deutsche Wohnen is one of the largest private institutional landlords in Berlin.

(Beck 2018). Second, co-founder of tenant coalition Initiative Stadtneuenken (2011) Florian Schmidt won an election for Councilor for Construction in the Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg in 2016, resulting in leveraging his political office to advance tenant-friendly projects, build stronger relationships with activist groups, and help establish the city's first community land trust (Stadtbodenstiftung). He played a central role advancing the local implementation of federal Milieuschutz (Milieu Protections) conservation law to preserve population characteristics of specifically zoned neighborhoods. In 2017, Berlin passed a Vorkaufsrechten (Right of First Refusal), in which district councils may require the first offer of a building's sale to a foundation, cooperative, or non-profit housing organization in designated social preservation areas (~65 designated), yet later overturned by the court. Finally, in 2020 a five-year Mietendeckel (Rent Cap or freeze) became law, which Senate Secretary for Housing Wenke Christoph acknowledged catalyzed by R2G following pressure 'from the streets' and dialogue over how to 'take over landlords'.<sup>49</sup> However the German Federal Constitutional Court ruled it unconstitutional on March 25 2021, leading to a spontaneous mass protest of over 20,000 mostly young people and hundreds of thousands of residents owing backpay on their rents to landlords. While Expropriate DW & Co. on the horizon seems to have pressured the R2G coalition to pass the Rent Cap, the unpopular nature of the court's overturning the law appears to have accelerated momentum for the successful passage of the referendum.

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<sup>49</sup> During conference 'For a Right to Housing from New York to Berlin,' hosted by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, April 28 2021.

### *Comparing the policy episodes*

Explaining why the policy episodes turned out similar is beyond the scope of this article. Rather I observe similar policy patterns and identify a number of causal mechanisms at play (see TABLE 8). The policy episodes composed of four characteristics: (1) progressive local versus moderate regional reforms, (2) shifting from defensive to offensive policies, (3) shifting from particular to universal market regulations, and (4) new policy breakthroughs.

First, progressive reforms have been proposed or passed at the city level (rent freeze, expropriation/ eminent domain, new public housing agenda, eviction defense program), whereas moderate reforms have passed at the state and regional levels in California (AB 1482) and Germany (RPB). The difference in outcomes across scales corresponds to differing levels of TMO influence and institutional barriers at the two scales. Whereas the three mechanisms exogenous to TMOs played a significant role in moderate reforms at the state- and national-levels, endogenous mechanisms also influenced these fights. At the city-level, endogenous mechanisms drove progressive city-level reforms.

Second, policies shifted from defensive (e.g. anti-gentrification, funding homeless shelters) toward offensive policies (e.g. new rent controls, expropriation tools) (see TABLE 9). Critical urbanists have long explored the normative implications of movements and advocates (Castells 1983; Dreier 1984; Pickvance 1985), distinguishing housing struggles as ‘defensive’ and ‘expansionist’ (Mironova 2019), offensive or defensive commoning (Joubert and Hodkinson 2018, 8), among others. Even in these cities, scholars distinguish movements in Berlin as ‘defending social needs’ and ‘re-produce the city by DIY-activists’ (Holm 2021, 49), or in Los Angeles on housing advocates ‘proactive’ or ‘reactive’ policy strategies (Yerena 2019, 11). My analysis attempts to build on these insights.



Offense and defense imply relationality, as offensive for one is defensive for another. This article centers tenants and tenant movements, so I apply offensive vis-à-vis tenants. I define defensive policy strategies as those addressing symptoms of housing precarity for tenants and conforming to rules of the rental housing market status quo. Whereas, offensive policy strategies address root causes and systematic operations of the housing system. Defensive policies tend to be more particularistic, softening the blow of dominant actors and inequalities, whereas offensive policies tend to be more universalistic and intervening generally in market controls, rights, or widespread redistribution.

The cases differ when and why the policies changed. In California, 2010–2017 represented defensive policymaking until money power by AHF entered the scene, thus, 2017–2020 shifted to offensive. In Berlin, 2009–2014 constituted defensive policymaking until people power of grassroots mobilization in the 2015 Rent Referendum, thus, 2015–2020 shifted to offensive. Of course, these pivots could be contested by different actors. As a landlord lobbyist said: ‘We are on the defense. At least in the last 10 years, we rarely proactively sponsor legislation’. The explosion of money and people power distinguish the shifts.

Third, policies pivoted away from particularistic or single-project programs (affordable housing funding, anti-development) toward more universal regulations of rental housing markets. Policymakers implemented new anti-rent gouging laws and explored additional tools (rent freeze, expropriation, public housing).

Forth, policy breakthroughs in cities include agenda setting, adoption, implementation, and termination of tenant-friendly policies. While recent scholarship has shed light on ongoing extensions to neoliberal governance in housing policymaking around the world (Fields and Hodkinson 2018; Kadi, Vollmer, and Stein 2021), my cases tell a different story. Some housing

policymaking appears to be, in response to growing movements and their allies, shifting away from neoliberal economic frameworks, which has long consisted of deregulating rental markets, defunding and privatizing public housing, and providing tax breaks for large new development projects. The findings appear consistent with others (Diesselhorst 2018; Möller 2021). These policy episodes demonstrate a breakthrough to new regulations of rental markets, tenant services, legal representation, expropriation, and refunding public housing.

### *Comparing TMOs and their resources advantages*

The TMOs across Los Angeles and Berlin had distinct resource advantages – money power and people power – driving referendum formation. ‘Measuring mobilization’, Tilly suggests, includes assembling ‘union membership’ and to ‘prepare comparable series of those indicators of the set of groups under study’ (1978, 79). People power can be approximated in (1) volunteer networks (interview and group chatroom), (2) membership numbers (organizational websites), (3) street protest numbers (newspaper reporting), and to a lesser degree (4) online followers.<sup>50</sup> I measure money power primarily through ally organizational campaign contributions.

In Berlin, tenant movements had a greater resource advantage in terms of people power, having large tenant union membership, huge networks of volunteers for canvassing, and annual large-scale protests (performing WUNC). In California, TMOs had AHF as an organizational ally, funneling money into referendums to expand rent control.<sup>51</sup> Whereas AHF leveraged over \$64

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<sup>50</sup> The measurement of people power here differs from a broader model laid out by Tattersall & Iveson (2021).

<sup>51</sup> California Secretary of State, Ballot Measure Total Contributions, Proposition 10, <https://www.sos.ca.gov/campaign-lobbying/cal-access-resources/measure-contributions/2018-ballot-measure-contribution-totals/17-0041-expands-local-governments-authority-enact-rentcontrol-residential-property-initiative-statute> and Proposition 21 <https://www.sos.ca.gov/campaign-lobbying/cal-access-resources/measure-contributions/2020-ballot-measure-contribution-totals/proposition-21-expands-local-governments-authority-enact-rent-control-residential-property-initiative-statute>.

million in California to fund the gathering of 595,096 (Prop 10) and 987,991 (Prop 21) signatures to advance the referendums, in Berlin the campaign Expropriate DW & Co. only reported €45 thousand in contributions to gather 350,000 signatures.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, Housing Is a Human Right (AHF's front group) only had 6790 Twitter followers, whereas Berlin-based Expropriate DW & Co. has 27,300. Large housing justice demonstrations in Los Angeles amounted to a few hundred participants, whereas in Berlin they amounted to over 20,000. Membership numbers also differ substantially in the two cities. The Berlin Renters Association (est. 1888) has 180,000 members and Tenant Protection Association (est. 1953) has 37,000 members, among others. Whereas in LA the Coalition for Economic Survival (est. 1973) or Los Angeles Tenants Union (est. 2015) only a few thousand members.

Money power and people power influenced policy – alongside confounding factors – distinctively across the cases. In Los Angeles, money power drove policy episodes by funding referendums, which transferred into other states (New York and Oregon), and then, back to California, especially Los Angeles. In Berlin, people power – the ability to mobilize 2000 volunteers to canvas door-to-door for the Expropriate DW & Co. referendum, and semiregular mass protests of over 20,000 – fueled influence.

### *Conclusion*

This article addresses the gap in our understanding of how tenant movements impact housing policy, with two central findings. First, despite different contexts, Los Angeles and Berlin exhibited surprisingly similar housing policy episodes between 2008 and 2020. New rental housing

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<sup>52</sup> State Election Commissioner for Berlin (Landeswahlleiterin für Berlin): <https://www.berlin.de/wahlen/spenden/deutsche-wohnen-und-co-enteignen/> accessed on 12 October 2022hf

policies had specific characteristics: (1) locally progressive and regionally moderate, (2) shifting from defensive to offensive, and (3) shifting from particular to universal. (4) The policies collectively demonstrate fractures forming, perhaps only preliminary, in the dominance of neoliberal economic theory in governing housing markets. The aim of the article has not been to explain why significantly different cities witnessed parallel policy changes, but rather explore the patterns of movement mechanisms transforming housing policy.

Second, the rise of tenant movements, new organizations, and coalitions, served as central political processes influencing these policy shifts. Tenant movements have advanced policy changes by (1) making demands, (2) forming coalitions, (3) promoting people's referendums, (4) engaging government officials in dialogue, and (5) transferring agents into government. However, the movements leveraged and benefited from resources in different ways: people power in Berlin and money power in California. To not overstate the case, three mechanisms exogenous to the tenant movement also played a central role in the episodes: (1) allied interest group resource deployment, (2) policy competition and transfer, and (3) landlord opposition actions. The escalation of tenant movements and ally resources shifted policy agendas to advance breakthroughs in more tenant-friendly policies, which may suggest fractures in the domination of neoliberal policymaking, and warrants further investigation in linking movements to policy.

Table 7. Tenant Movement Organizations and Allies

SCALE	FOUNDED*	TYPE	NAME	TWITTER HANDLE	ONLINE FOLLOWERS**
GLOBAL	1987	Ally	Aids Healthcare Foundation (AHF)	@AIDSHealthcare	49.2K
	2008	TMO	Tenants Together	@TenantsTogether	10.2K
CALIFORNIA	2010	TMO	Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE)	@CalOrganize	11.2K
	2015	TMO	Residents United Network	@ResidentsUnited	536
	2017	TMO	Housing Now!	@HousingNowCA	2,344
	1973	LTMO	Coalition for Economic Survival	@CESinAction	568
	1985	Ally	Southern California Association of Non-Profit Housing (SCANPH)	@SCANPH	2,488
	1994	Ally	Thai Community Development Center	NA	NA
	2011	TMO	Crenshaw Subway Coalition	@CrenshawSubway	751
LOS ANGELES	2012	TMO	TMO Chinatown Community for Equitable Development 華埠公平發展會	@ccdLA	3,473
	2012	TMO	Democratic Socialists of America: Los Angeles	@DSA_LosAngeles	29.3K
	2012	TMO	People Organized for Westside Renewal (POWER)	@PeopleOrganized	1,271
	2015	TMO	Los Angeles Tenants Union	@LATenantsUnion	16.5K
	2015-21	TMO	Defend Boyle Heights	@DefendBoyleHts	2,016
	2017	TMO	Ground Game Los Angeles	@GroundGameLA	18.9K
	2017	Ally	Housing Is A Human Right	@HousingHumanRt	6,798
	2018	TMO	Hillside Villa Tenants Association	@hillside_villa	1,066
	2018	TMO	Right to Counsel Los Angeles Coalition	@RTCLosAngeles	1,271
	2020	TMO	Better Neighbors LA	@better_la	2,266
	2021	TMO	Healthy Los Angeles	@HealthyLA_Coa	761
GERMANY	1999	Ally	Interventionistische Linke (Interventionist Left)	@inter_linke	21.1K
	2018	TMO	#Mietenwahnsinn-Bündnis (Rent Madness Alliance)	@MietenwahnsinnB	6,478
	2019	TMO	Housing Action Day	@HDay2021	1,174
	2021	TMO	Rent Freeze in Germany	@MietenstoppDE	2,671
BERLIN	1888	LMTO	Berliner Mieterverein (Berlin Tenant Association)	@BMieterverein	3,839
	2006-2009	TMO	Mediaspree versenken (Sink mediaspree)	NA	NA
	2012	TMO	100% Tempelhof Field	@thf100	1,383
	2010	TMO	Karla Pappel	NA	NA
	2012	TMO	Kotti & Co	@KottiU	2,331
	2011	TMO	Haben und Brauchen (To Have and to Need)	NA	NA
2012	TMO	Initiative Stadtneuenken (To Think the City Anew Initiative)	NA	NA	

2014	TMO	Stadt von Unten (City from Under)	@stadtvonunten	4,616
2015	TMO	Mietenvolksentscheid Berlin (Rent Referendum Berlin)	NA	NA
2015	TMO	AirBnB v. Berlin	NA	NA
2015	TMO	Bizim Kiez (Bizim Neighborhood)	@bizimkiez	6,238
2018	TMO	Deutsche Wohnen & Co Enteignen (Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co.)	@dwenteignen	31.2K
2019	TMO	Stadtbodenstiftung Berlin (City Soil Foundation)	@Stadtbodenstift	900

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**TYPE:** TMO (New Tenant Movement Organization); LTMO (Legacy Tenant Movement Organization; Ally (Ally Organizations). The size of TMOs range from a few residents in a house project to hundreds of tenants in a neighborhood. \*When founding dates could not be located, social media page registration (e.g. Twitter) or website birth were used (via Wayback Machine); \*\*Represented via Twitter followers as of 16 June 2022.

Table 8. Linking Policies, Mechanisms, and Evidence

YEAR	POLICY OUTCOME	STATUS	D/O	MECHANISM: <i>Endogenous (Ex) or Exogenous (EN) to TMO?</i>	EVIDENTIARY LINKAGE	POLICY SOURCE
<b>CALIFORNIA</b>						
2017	AB 1506: Residential rent control: Costa-Hawkins Rental Housing Act	-	O	Ex: Allied interest group resource deployment; landlord opposition actions EN: Demand making	Ex: Bloom, Chiu & Bonta responding to AHF funded Prop 10 (government records) EN: pro-Prop 10 coalition mobilization (ACCE; see government records)	<a href="https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180AB1506">https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180AB1506</a>
2018	Proposition 10: Local Rent Control Initiative	-	O	Ex: Allied interest group resource deployment; landlord opposition actions EN: Referendum formation	Ex: AHF spent \$26 million in support (government records) EN: ACCE & EDN support & mobilization (policy documents)	<a href="https://www.oag.ca.gov/system/files/initiatives/pdfs/17-0041%20%28Affordable%20Housing%29_0.pdf">https://www.oag.ca.gov/system/files/initiatives/pdfs/17-0041%20%28Affordable%20Housing%29_0.pdf</a>
2019	AB 1482 Tenant Protection Act of 2019: tenancy: rent caps	+	O	Ex: Policy competition & transfer; landlord opposition actions EN: Demand making	Ex: OR & NY passing statewide rental market reforms; Governor Newsom needing housing win (public reporting; interview) EN: TMO written endorsement (e.g. POWER; government records)	<a href="https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB1482">https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB1482</a>
2020	Proposition 21	-	O	Ex: Allied interest group resource deployment; landlord opposition actions	AHF spent \$40 million in support (government records)	<a href="https://lao.ca.gov/BallotAnalysis/Proposition?number=21&amp;year=2020">https://lao.ca.gov/BallotAnalysis/Proposition?number=21&amp;year=2020</a>
<b>LOS ANGELES</b>						
2010	Suspension of Rent Increases	-	D	EN: Demand making	Coalition for Economic Survival demanded reforms (government records)	<a href="https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=cfi.viewrecord&amp;cfnumber=10-0613">https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=cfi.viewrecord&amp;cfnumber=10-0613</a>
2016	Tenant Buyout Ordinance	+	O	EN: Demand making; dialogue with government officials.	Coalition for Economic Survival claimed victory (TMO website)	<a href="https://www.lamayor.org/mayor-garretti-signs-tenant-buyout-ordinance">https://www.lamayor.org/mayor-garretti-signs-tenant-buyout-ordinance</a>
2017	Affordable Housing Linkage Fee	+	O	Ex: Allied interest group resource deployment	Affordable housing advocacy coalition leading campaign to build LA Housing Trust Fund (SCANPH)	<a href="https://planning.lacity.org/odocument/74d99ba-f4e2-4dcd-8625-1cee7dac991b/ImplementationMemo.pdf">https://planning.lacity.org/odocument/74d99ba-f4e2-4dcd-8625-1cee7dac991b/ImplementationMemo.pdf</a>
2018	Short-Term Rental	+	O	Ex: Allied interest group resource deployment EN: Demand making	Ex: Thai Community Development Center (LA Times reporting) EN: New Coalition formation; Better Neighbors LA (TMO website)	<a href="https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=cfi.viewrecord&amp;cfnumber=14-1635-S2">https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=cfi.viewrecord&amp;cfnumber=14-1635-S2</a>
2018	Temporary Eviction Moratorium	+	D	Ex: Policy competition & transfer	Following statewide AB 1482 passage (government records)	<a href="http://clkrep.lacity.org/onlineocs/2019/19-1232_ord_draft_10-17-2019.pdf">http://clkrep.lacity.org/onlineocs/2019/19-1232_ord_draft_10-17-2019.pdf</a>

2018	Eviction Defense Program	+/-	O	EN: Coalition formation; demand making; dialogue with government agents; agent transfer	Right to Council Los Angeles (website); consist public campaign with demands (social media and government records); conversations with allies and sympathizers in government (interviews)	<a href="https://housing.lacity.org/residents/eviction-defense-program">https://housing.lacity.org/residents/eviction-defense-program</a>
2019-2022	Eminent Domain of Hillside Villa Apartment Building	+	O	Ex: Landlord opposition actions EN: Demand making; fostering dialogue with government officials	Ex: Landlord renegeing on handshake deal with Councilmember Cedillo (government records) EN: Hillside Villa Tenants Union demanded eminent domain and funding (newspaper reporting, participant observation)	<a href="https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=c.cfi.viewrecord&amp;cfnumber=20-0148">https://cityclerk.lacity.org/lacityclerkconnect/index.cfm?fa=c.cfi.viewrecord&amp;cfnumber=20-0148</a>
2020	Homes Guarantee LA	+/-	O	EN: Demand making; dialogue with government officials	LA-based TMOs co-wrote nationwide People's Action 'Homes Guarantee' and pressured and collaborated with Councilmember Mike Bonin to adapt it for LA (interviews and government records)	<a href="https://11thdistrict.com/homes-guaranteela/">https://11thdistrict.com/homes-guaranteela/</a>

## GERMANY

2015, 2019, 2020	Rent Price Brake: Tenancy Law Adjustment Act; (Mietpreisbremse or Mietrechtsnovellierungsgesetz)	+	O	Ex: Policy competition & transfer; allied interest group pressure Ex: Demand making (indirect)	Coalition formed in reaction to growing housing activism including interest groups representing landlords such as the Verband Berlin-Brandenburgischer Wohnungsunternehmen E.V. (interview) Ex: Berlin tenant movement growing (interview)	<a href="https://www.bundesgerichtshof.de/DE/Bibliothek/GesMat/WP18/M/MietNovG.html">https://www.bundesgerichtshof.de/DE/Bibliothek/GesMat/WP18/M/MietNovG.html</a>
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## BERLIN

2009	Sink Media Spree (Mediaspree Versenken)	+/-	D	EN: Referendum formation	Referendum countered 'Mediaspree' development along the Spree River (government records)	<a href="https://ms-versenken.org/">https://ms-versenken.org/</a>
2014	100% Tempelhof Field	+	D	EN: Referendum formation	Referendum to stop development at Tempelhof Field after closure of airport (government records)	<a href="https://www.berlin.de/wahlen/historie/volksbegehren-und-volksentscheide/tempelhof-feld-2014/artikel.770335.php">https://www.berlin.de/wahlen/historie/volksbegehren-und-volksentscheide/tempelhof-feld-2014/artikel.770335.php</a>
2015	Berlin Rent Referendum (Mietenvolksentscheid Berlin)	+/-	O	EN: Referendum formation; coalition formation	Referendum to reform rental housing system including new TMOs (e.g. Kotti & Co) (interview)	<a href="https://www.dw.com/en/grassroots-push-law-to-ease-berlin-housing-crisis/a-18520497">https://www.dw.com/en/grassroots-push-law-to-ease-berlin-housing-crisis/a-18520497</a> <a href="https://mietenvolksentscheidberlin.de/druck-wirkt-der-kampf-geht-weiter/">https://mietenvolksentscheidberlin.de/druck-wirkt-der-kampf-geht-weiter/</a>
2015	Law on Realignment of Social Housing (Gesetz)	+	O	EN: Demand-concession; fostering dialogue	In reaction to Berliner Mietenvolksentscheid (interviews)	<a href="https://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/wohnen/wohnraumversorgung/download/VorlageB">https://www.stadtentwicklung.berlin.de/wohnen/wohnraumversorgung/download/VorlageB</a>



	über die Neuausrichtung der sozialen Wohnraumversorgung in Berlin)					<a href="#">eschlussfassung_WoVG_Bln.pdf</a>
2015	Short-term rental: Zweckentfremdungsverbot-Gesetz (Misappropriation Prohibition Act)	+	O	EN: Demand making	Activists formed coalition to counter new short-term rentals, e.g. AirBnB v. Berlin (organizational data and newspaper reporting)	<a href="https://www.berliner-mieterverein.de/recht/infoblaetter/info-115-zweckentfremdung-von-wohnraum-zweckentfremdungsverbot-gesetz.htm">https://www.berliner-mieterverein.de/recht/infoblaetter/info-115-zweckentfremdung-von-wohnraum-zweckentfremdungsverbot-gesetz.htm</a>
2016	Milieuschutz (Milieu Protections)	+	O	EN: Dialogue with government agents; agent transfer	New Red-Red-Green coalition allies (e.g. Florian Schmidt) advocated for implementing (interview)	
2017	Right of First Refusal (Vorkaufsrechten)	+	O	EN: Dialogue with government agents; agent transfer	New Red-Red-Green coalition allies (e.g. Florian Schmidt) advocated for implementing (interview)	<a href="https://www.stadtenwicklung.berlin.de/staedtebau/foerderprogramm/stadterneuerung/soziale_erhaltungsgebiete/download/VZK-Konzept_Vorkaufsrechte.pdf">https://www.stadtenwicklung.berlin.de/staedtebau/foerderprogramm/stadterneuerung/soziale_erhaltungsgebiete/download/VZK-Konzept_Vorkaufsrechte.pdf</a>
2019	Expropriate DW & Co. (Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen)	+	O	EN: Coalition formation; referendum formation	Coalition formed to expropriate institutional landlords (participant observation and interviews)	<a href="https://www.berlin.de/wahlen/abstimmungen/deutsche-wohnen-und-co-enteignen/artikel.1040424.php">https://www.berlin.de/wahlen/abstimmungen/deutsche-wohnen-und-co-enteignen/artikel.1040424.php</a>
2020	Rent Cap (Mietendeckel)	+	O	EN: Demand making; dialogue with government agents; agent transfer	Red-red-green coalition capped rents in response to DWE campaign on horizon (interviews)	<a href="https://mietendeckel.berlin.de/">https://mietendeckel.berlin.de/</a>

↳ STATUS: + passed, - died, +/- mixed outcome. **D/O**: Defensive/Offensive

Table 9. Interpreting Policy Episodes

	<b>DEFENSIVE (PARTICULAR)</b>	<b>→</b>	<b>OFFENSIVE (UNIVERSAL)</b>
	CONVENTIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING	<b>→</b>	REGULATING PRIVATE RENTAL HOUSING
<b>LOS ANGELES</b>	Tenant Buyout Ordinance (2016) Measure HHH (2016) Measure JJJ (2016) Affordable Housing Linkage Fee (2017)		Right to Counsel (2017) Eviction Defense Program (2018) Short-Term Rental (2018) Temporary Eviction Moratorium (2018) Eviction Defense Program (2018) Eminent Domain (2019) Homes Guarantee LA (2020) United to House LA (2021-2022)
	ANTI-GENTRIFICATION AND ANTI-DEVELOPMENT	<b>→</b>	REGULATING PRIVATE RENTAL HOUSING
<b>BERLIN</b>	Sink Media Spree (2009) 100% Tempelhof Field (2014)		Housing Supply Act: Rent Referendum (2015) Law on Realignment of Social Housing (2015) Short-term Rental (2015) Mileu Protections (2016) Right of First Refusal (2017) Rent Cap (2020) Expropriate DW & Co. (2019-2021)
	<b>PROPOSED POLICIES (PROGRESSIVE)</b>		<b>PASSED POLICIES (MODERATE)</b>
<b>CALIFORNIA</b>	AB 1506 (2017) Prop 10 (2018) Prop 21 (2020)		AB 1482 (2019)
<b>GERMANY</b>	National Rent Freeze (ongoing)		Rent Price Brake (2020)

Table 10. Index of Supplementary Referendums in Los Angeles

	<b>LOS ANGELES</b>	<b>STATUS</b>	<b>POLICY SOURCE</b>
2008	Measure R: Los Angeles County Sales Tax	+	<a href="https://www.metro.net/about/measure-r/">https://www.metro.net/about/measure-r/</a>
2012	Measure J: Los Angeles County Sales Tax for Transportation,	+	<a href="https://ceo.lacounty.gov/measure-j-background/#:~:text=On%20November%203%2C%202020%2C%20the,development%2C%20job%20training%2C%20small%20business">https://ceo.lacounty.gov/measure-j-background/#:~:text=On%20November%203%2C%202020%2C%20the,development%2C%20job%20training%2C%20small%20business</a>
2015	\$15 per Hour Minimum Wage Initiative	+/-	<a href="http://ens.lacity.org/clk/elections/clkelections52490036_09102014.pdf">http://ens.lacity.org/clk/elections/clkelections52490036_09102014.pdf</a>

2016	Measure M: California, Sales Tax	+	<a href="https://www.lavote.net/Documents/Election_Info/11082016-Measures-Appearing-on-Ballot.pdf">https://www.lavote.net/Documents/Election_Info/11082016-Measures-Appearing-on-Ballot.pdf</a>
2016	Measure HHH: Homelessness Reduction and Prevention Housing, and Facilities	+	<a href="https://www.lamayor.org/HomelessnessTrackingHHH">https://www.lamayor.org/HomelessnessTrackingHHH</a>
2016	Measure JJJ: Affordable Housing and Labor Standards Initiative	+	<a href="https://bca.lacity.org/measure-JJJ#:~:text=Passed%20by%20the%20voters%20on,fees%20into%20the%20City's%20Affordable">https://bca.lacity.org/measure-JJJ#:~:text=Passed%20by%20the%20voters%20on,fees%20into%20the%20City's%20Affordable</a>

**Type:** TD-P: Top-down policy; BU-R: Bottom-up referendum; AS: Agenda Setting. **Status:** + passed, - died, +/- mixed outcome.

## Chapter Four

### The Intricate Path to Progressive Policy: How tenants, Sanders, and AOC influenced the Democratic party

We need a comprehensive [housing] legislative package that is going to really make up for the folks who have been marginalized and oppressed since beginning of this nation.

—Tenant organizer, Los Angeles in 2020

We need a homes guarantee.

—Bernie Sanders<sup>53</sup> in 2020

Democrats commit to forging a new social and economic contract with the American people—a contract that invests in the people and promotes shared prosperity, not one that benefits only big corporations and the wealthiest few. One that affirms housing is a right and not a privilege, and which makes a commitment that no one will be homeless or go hungry in the richest country on earth. ...

Guaranteeing Safe Housing for Every American.

—2020 Democratic Party Platform<sup>54</sup> (2020)

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<sup>53</sup> Berniesanders.com, “Issue: Housing for All,” <https://berniesanders.com/issues/housing-all/>, accessed 5/13/23.

<sup>54</sup> The American Presidency Project, UCSB, “2020 Democratic Party Platform,” August 17, 2020. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2020-democratic-party-platform>, accessed 5/16/23.

## ***Introduction***

*How would a network of tenant activists influence the agenda on housing policy in Washington DC?* This paper is a case of how a tenant movement developed a powerful and innovative vision of national housing policy in the United States, shifted scales from local-to-national, and built key alliances, and how their allies advanced policy in Congress. It draws on research at the intersection of housing, social movements, and political science. A tenant network based in Chicago developed a national coalition that identified openings and navigated a series of institutional barriers to advance an agenda that changed the conversation about housing policy within the Democratic Party (Democratic Party) in the area of housing. The coalition of tenant groups and partners wrote a policy vision called the Homes Guarantee, parts of which linked housing with climate policy by decarbonizing the public housing stock, which Democrats passed in the US House of Representatives as part of President Biden’s flagship legislation, called the Build Back Better Plan. As progressive policymakers are a “super minority” in Congress, one political consultant for Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez that I interviewed said that progressives “need this very, very intricate pathway” to advance legislation, combining, for example, an innovative policy platform, showing its popularity in polling, and exerting pressure on Democratic Party leadership. This paper reconstructs the intricate path to progressive policy.

I investigate how a housing movement affected federal politics in the United States, posing two questions. First, how did an emergent housing coalition win over progressive policymakers? Second, how did progressive policymakers bargain with Democratic Party leadership and win concessions? The intricate path from the grassroots to federal policy entailed: founding a network of 40 organizations, launching a national housing campaign, developing a radical housing policy platform that linked to the Green New Deal (see Aronoff et al. 2019; Meaney 2022), forging key

alliances with strategic partners (including progressive politicians), identifying channels of influence in the presidential primary, advancing the coalition's agenda in Congress, expanding alliances, and negotiating with opposition. Activists and progressive politicians collaborated with unusual bedfellows, creating interconnected and mutually beneficial relationships to pressure Democratic Party leadership and gain concessions. The coalition's efforts resulted in passing legislation in the US House of Representatives that would have been (had it not been one vote short in the Senate) one of the most intensive infusions of funding for public housing in US history, a departure from decades of market-oriented housing policymaking.

In this paper, I first present the methods used – interviews, participant observations, and draw on various documents – before moving onto a discussion of relevant research on housing policy, and housing, urban, and social movement theory. Then the paper sets the stage by briefly identifying the perceived need among progressive political actors for a new policy agenda in housing. For the remainder of the paper, I track the sequence from tenants to federal legislation. I introduce the grassroots tenant network, campaign, policy platform, and how it developed a coalition. Progressive politicians were recruited and shifted from being sympathetic to strategic partners. Finally, I present the context of President Biden's federal legislative proposals and how progressives identified key channels of influence to advance their agenda. I conclude by reflecting on how this intricate path to progressive change demonstrates the ascendance of transformative policy visions at the core of the Democratic Party and national politics in the United States.

### ***Methods***

This paper develops a case study of a specific coalition within the tenant movement, and its impact on federal politics. Between 2019 and 2022, I conducted nine formal interviews, numerous

additional unstructured and follow-up conversations, and observations of a number of public events involving the tenant movement. A summer fellowship in Washington DC provided multiple points of access to sources, which I expanded via snowballing. The interviews were conducted with people associated with local grassroots organizations, national networks, non-profits, political consultancies, academia, congressional offices, and a federal agency. Most of the interview subjects occupied multiple of the aforementioned vocations at some point during their careers, for example, in one case a professor took a sabbatical to work as a political staffer. Interviews included people working with Senator Sanders, Representative Ocasio-Cortez, People's Action, the National Housing Law Project, Data for Progress, Harvard Joint Center on Housing Policy, Tides Foundation, Ground Game LA, and People Organized for Westside Renewal (Los Angeles), among others. The case below recounts negotiations between then Vice President Biden and Sanders, as well as Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Schumer, and so I obtained interviews with participants in these discussions.

I sympathize with the concern among sociologists that research overly dependent on interviews may capture individuals' attitudes, rather than their behavior (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Thus, in order to recount this political sequence, I triangulate data sources wherever possible – interviews, observations, other primary and secondary sources – to strengthen the validity of my claims (Yin 1984). I engaged in participant observations of tenant rights trainings and demonstrations, politician campaign rallies, and committee hearings. Interviews and observations were supplemented with policy documents, organizational websites, and news reporting. Policy documents entailed White House and Congressional policy briefs, committee meeting video recordings and transcripts, as well as legislation drafts and vote counts at congress.gov. The websites of organizations involved in the coalition were also examined, and

documents, photos, and press releases provided details on the episode. At times I also cited secondary sources such as newspapers.

### ***Literature Review***

This paper addresses the need for research at the intersection of social movements and electoral politics (McAdam and Tarrow 2010, 529), especially among housing movements demanding to restructure the system and influencing policymaking in Congress. The review is structured by introducing (1) public policy on housing, (2) urban and housing movements in particular, and (3) useful concepts from the broader social movement literature.

Agendas that have dominated recent *rental housing policy* in the Democratic Party rely on liberal economic mechanisms, for example tax credits, vouchers, and subsidies (Marcuse 2001). Between the 1990s and 2000s, Democrats were often hostile to public housing. For example, in 1992 Hope VI's revitalization of public housing led to some privatization of the stock (Arena 2012; Hackworth 2006), and in 1999 President Clinton signed into law the Faircloth Amendment, prohibiting any net expansion of public housing units by municipalities. Soon after taking office, the Obama administration's Secretary Donovan attempted to pass the PETRA Act, which critics like Representative Maxine Waters warned could lead to further privatization (Shelterforce 2010). PETRA did not pass the House, but a similar reform, the RAD program, did, and has reduced the quantity of public units. Yet, in 2020 with the election of President Biden, new nationwide networks like People's Action and players like the Congressional Progressive Caucus provided avenues of pressure on the Democratic Party establishment from the left. Progressives are increasingly reengaging in electoral politics, especially following the 2016 presidential primary of Senator Bernie Sanders, drawing legions of new people, especially young, into politics (Moody 2022). One watershed moment came with the 2018 election of Ocasio-Cortez, which led Senator



Sanders to observe that ideas “once considered to be radical are now part of the mainstream” (quoted in Wallace-Wells 2018).

In the last years, numerous scholars have studied *housing activism and movements* (see, for example, Bradley 2014; Huron 2018; Card 2018; Martínez 2019; Hamann and Türkmen 2020; Vollmer 2020; Anti-Eviction Mapping Project 2021; Tattersall and Iveson 2021). Understanding housing movements means drawing on an eclectic range of work across social, urban, housing, and tenant movements. Three influential lines of inquiry that have shaped much subsequent work were (1) Castells on urban social movements, (2) Marcuse on housing movements, and (3) Fainstein and Fainstein urban movements and political parties.

In *The City and the Grassroots* (1983), Castells defined *urban social movements* as mobilizations by a group with shared identity, within a given territory, demanding a new form of collective consumption (such as housing provision), that result in some structural reorganization of the local state. The book provides encyclopedic engagement of the topic, yet was criticized primarily for its definition’s fourth point, requiring structural transformation to define a mobilization as a movement (Lowe 1986; Zukin 1987; McKeown 1987; Katznelson 1992; Molotch 1984). If movements did not succeed, they were labeled struggles. Marcuse applied this definition to investigate housing movements, arguing that they have been primarily defensive, without demands or transformations transcending the capitalist system. Thus, he argued, no housing movement has risen to national politics in the United States history, unless one includes reforms as a product of allied movements (like the civil rights movement, where housing wins were a derivative) (Marcuse 1999).

In 1983, Fainstein and Fainstein identified that one of the great political fault lines persisting since the 1950s emerged over the state subsidizing “*capital accumulation versus social*

*consumption*” (original emphasis 1983, 255); for example, subsidizing privately owned rental housing versus public housing. Since their writing in 1983, policymaking has prioritized the former (Marcuse 2001), that is, until the 2008 global financial crisis and the rise of tenant movements examined in the episode below. Fainstein and Fainstein situate popular contestation with urban regimes in a national political context. “[R]egimes significantly advance lower- and working-class interests in redevelopment,” they wrote, “only when compelled to do so by political movements, protest, and social disorder,” a circumstance they call “concessionary regimes” (Fainstein and Fainstein 1983, 257). Finally, like Marcuse, they delineate most urban movement activity as defensive, falling short of influencing policy: “[Left parties],” they wrote, “will never be the formulators of state policy but can only react to it” (1983, 274). In part, this was due to the two party system in the United States, whereas scholars have for a longer period of time tracked interactions between movements and parties in Europe, wherein parties display “openness to reform politics” (Della Porta and Diani 2006, 216; della Porta 2022, 3).

I join other students of movements in relinking urban and social movement theory (Martínez 2019; G. Guzmán and Ill-Raga 2023), which had more overlap at their inceptions (Walton 1981). I draw on Tilly (2008, 121), who defines social movements comprising of three elements: campaigns, repertoires of contention, and displays of WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitments). Of course, scholarship of housing movements engages these elements, but rarely in an integrated framework.

The analytical framework herein draws on four dimensions of *social movement theory*, explained below: (1) relational mechanisms, (2) opportunities and threats, (3) scale shift, and (4) framing theory. First, “[m]echanisms,” as Tilly defines, “form a delimited class of events that change relations among specific sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety

of situations. For example, brokerage—the joining of two or more previously less connected social sites through the intervention of third parties—constitutes a political mechanism of extremely general scope.” (Charles Tilly 2001, 25–26). Mechanism-based analysis attempts to avoid the pitfalls of large sample-based research that relies on static snapshots of variables and qualitative case studies that steer away from generalizations. By assembling the relationship and sequencing of mechanisms playing out between challengers and targets, we can identify key processes in a given episode of contention. Mechanisms have explanatory power of mechanisms because they can be isolated, sequenced, and then generalized and observed across space and time.

Second, in order to understand the incentives and constraints for tenants and politicians working together to reform the housing system, I draw on political opportunity structure (POS) analysis (Charles Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 20; della Porta 2022). The classical approach explains movement interactions with four variables (Tarrow 1988, 429; Miller 2000, 149; Charles Tilly 2008, 12): (1) *regime openness*: degree of access, openness/closedness of organizations, institutions, or regimes, (2) *alignment stability*: strength/weakness of relationships within the regime, (3) *elite vulnerability*: degree of weakness among privileged actors, and (4) *ally availability*: whether friends with resources are present.<sup>55</sup> POS is not without its criticisms or ambiguities (della Porta 2022). One example is that scholars often overlook *threats* in relationship to *opportunities*, despite Tilly conjoining the two at the inception of the framework (Charles Tilly 1978, 133). Threats are not “the flip side of opportunity,” as Goldstone and Tilly write, but rather “‘threat’ is an independent factor whose dynamics greatly influence how popular groups and the state act in a variety of circumstances (2001, 181). The interaction between opportunity and threat typically unfolds as follows: when an opening (opportunity) arises and challengers try to disrupt

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<sup>55</sup> In this case, I’ll consider state as structure, but the framework can be related to other types.

the regime, threats occur when elites repress the challengers. The possibility and indeed likelihood of threats suggests that the four aforementioned dimensions of opportunity are not passive hoops for movement actors to jump through, but rather like mousetraps that may snap at any moment. Excessive repression of protesters can prove counterproductive to regime interests, triggering larger crowds (Charles Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 60). Thus, contrary to colloquial use, scholars employing an interactive approach to opportunity/threat dynamics define “opportunities” *for* movements and “threats” *by* elites. “[I]ncreased opportunity predicts to [*sic*] greater extensiveness and effectiveness of contention, increased threat to declining extensiveness and effectiveness of contention” (Charles Tilly 2008, 91).

Third, as social movements grow, they experience “scale shift,” defined as “a change in the number and level of coordinated contentious actions leading to broader contention involving a wider range of actors and bridging their claims and identities” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 331). To observe the shift from local to supra-local, scholars analyze two pathways or trigger mechanisms: diffusion or brokerage (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 332). *Diffusion* consists of dissemination of ideas, strategies, and practices across preexisting connections, and the second pathway, *brokerage*, occurs by linking previously disconnected entities. Both can lead to increase in effectiveness (causing scale shift) when the first mover and follower share similar *qualities* (e.g. tenants, immigrants, low-wage workers), and when the claims are *framed* effectively (2001, 334). And, finally, the contentious activity spreads across space as followers *emulate* the dynamics (2001, 334–35). Among the two trigger mechanisms of scale shift – diffusion and brokerage – in the former, preexisting relationships sometimes become stagnant or face conflict. Therefore, scholars find that the pathway of brokerage, in particular, shows the most significant movement acceleration and scale jumping.

Finally, framing plays an important role in movements and policy. Not only for scale shift, but for movements more generally, collective action frames can transfer ideas among people, and help create group identity and meaning, allowing movements to help create and capture new possibilities (Benford and Snow 2000). On the latter point, in policy analysis, pundits speak of the Overton Window changing when the horizon of the possible is expanding or narrowing (Astor 2019).

### *A need for a progressive housing policy agenda*

Two political consultants that I interviewed explained that progressive policymakers needed a housing policy platform to complement and connect with other progressive agendas, like the Green New Deal, jobs programs, reparations, anti-discrimination, and immigration reforms. The rise of a new cohort of progressive elected officials, following Senator Sanders's 2016 presidential campaign, was not accompanied by a complementary rise in institutional resources, like policy agendas, think tanks, donors, and academics, one consultant pointed out. Sanders (1997, 3) has long emphasized this as a challenge to gain power in Congress. Someone working for Ocasio-Cortez stressed how underresourced congressional offices were. In short, no comprehensive platform of housing policies existed for members of the so-called Squad (a group of newly elected young, progressive House members of color, now numbering eight). Meanwhile, advocates felt that the dominant Democratic Party establishment think tanks like Demos, Roosevelt Institute, and the Center for American Progress were positioned more center-left, and thus their reports played a peripheral role for insurgent progressives. As housing and climate crises simultaneously became existential threats and gained attention on the national political stage, the dominant think tanks provided little innovative insight to transform the system. Meanwhile the

dominant interest groups lobbying policymakers on housing policy had taken a particular form, with pro-market lobbyists (developers, relators, landlords) on one side, and affordable housing advocates on the other (Jacobs 2015). As a consultant put it, housing policy operates “a bit different, as there is an entire nonprofit-industrial-complex around housing.”

### *How tenant unions scaled-up to federal politics*

In contrast with the dominant policy discourses, the Homes Guarantee platform generated by the People’s Action coalition created a tenant-informed, concrete policy proposal meant to generate a new political imagination that challenged neoliberal housing policy. This case demonstrates how a band of tenant unions and organizations across the country created a multiracial tenant network – building on collaborations and legacies in a broader housing movement – and influenced Congressmembers via four mechanisms: (1) writing an innovative policy vision, (2) framing and disseminating it in a compelling way, (3) self-representing as a powerful player, and (4) building a coalition with strategic partners.

### *Writing an innovative policy vision*

A new vision of housing emerged from the leadership of a national network founded in 2016 called People’s Action (PA), which merged four preexisting organizations and their local networks. Through a network of 40 member organizations working with communities across the country, PA claimed in their materials to advocate on behalf of one million people across the country, leveraging insight from over 100,000 conversations.<sup>56</sup> The network employed horizontal

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<sup>56</sup> People’s Action, ealease, 17 November, 2022, “‘HOMES GUARANTEE WRAPS TENANT RECKONING WITH WHITE HOUSE MEETING, RALLY, AND CONGRESSIONAL BRIEFING,’”

organizing and participatory processes that centers tenants: “[t]he people closest to the problems are closest to the solutions” (People’s Action 2019, 2). PA aimed to advance big ideas, create progressive infrastructure, capture political power, and “build a multi-racial populism.”<sup>57</sup>

In 2017, PA launched a national housing campaign in Washington DC, and went on to convene a 2018 summit in New York State with 50 professional organizers and tenant leaders “public housing residents, tenants of corporate landlords, people experiencing homelessness,” an organizer said. The summit aimed to advance the national housing campaign before the 2020 presidential election, a demonstration of commitment over three years. Reflecting on conversations at the summit, an activist said, they agreed that “housing is a human right, but what that actually would look like in practice?” Out of the participatory process, PA opted not to propose incremental reforms to the current housing policy status quo, but rather, as one participant said, “propose the system change that we need.” Over the next year, PA wrote “a comprehensive legislative package” released in September 2019 in a Homes Guarantee Briefing Book. The program was “movement led,” an organizer said, “both the policy but also the process.” Rose Fenandez of Community Voices Heard in New York said: “Bankers, developers, and landlords ... created a system to maximize their profit above all else, so our solution is equally simple: change the whole system. Put people first.”<sup>58</sup>

The innovations in PA’s policy vision were its comprehensive reimagination of the housing system (described below), structural links to climate policy, integration of vulnerable homeowners,

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<https://peoplesaction.org/2022/11/homes-guarantee-wraps-tenant-reckoning-with-white-house-meeting-rally-and-congressional-briefing/>, accessed 5/15/23.

<sup>57</sup> People’s Action, “Long-Term Agenda,” page 5, 5/2018, <https://peoplesaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/LTA-BACKGROUND-PUBLIC1.pdf>, Accessed on 6/1/23.

<sup>58</sup> People’s Action, Press Release, 8/5/19, “PEOPLE’S ACTION UNVEILS PLAN TO WIN A NATIONAL HOMES GUARANTEE,” <https://peoplesaction.org/2019/09/breaking-peoples-action-unveils-plan-to-win-a-national-homes-guarantee/>, Accessed on 6/2/23.

and elements aiming to correct the country’s history of racial and colonial violence (e.g. expanding fair housing protections). The platform channeled “a project of radical imagination,” one campaign leader said, with explicit links to the Green New Deal. The Homes Guarantee program entailed: (1) building 12 million green social housing units, (2) investing in decarbonizing public housing, (3) creating a National Tenants’ Bill of Rights, (4) paying reparations, (5) curtailing real estate speculation and implementing universal zoning reforms, (6) assembling a People’s Housing Commission, and (7) linking the Green New Deal to our housing system (People’s Action 2019, 12, 7). Multiple dimensions of the program aimed to steer away from market-based policy tools, rather increasing state intervention, community control, and decommodifying housing.

*Framing the vision in a compelling way*

The campaign published its vision in a briefing book as a clear and powerful message in jargon free prose. The message – an affirmative, inclusive, restorative, sustainable, housing justice policy – became the title: a Homes Guarantee. Expanding past general frames – such as, ‘the rent is too damn high,’ ‘the right to stay put,’ or ‘the right to housing’ – Homes Guarantee emulated other affirmative claims, such as Medicare for All or Jobs Guarantee, and avoided juridical claims to ‘rights’ that can be ambiguous to implement and coopted by establishment characters.<sup>59</sup> In stressing a larger role of government funding in social and public green housing, the vision also advocated for a “a public option for housing” (People’s Action 2019, 19). By combining an

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<sup>59</sup> The criticism of the ‘right to housing’ is well-founded, as the phrase has also been appropriated. For example, the year prior at the Summit of Los Angeles Business Council a handful of mayors threw around the “right to housing” nine times, mostly without substantial reforms of the housing system. See 2019 Los Angeles Business Council Summit on Housing, Transportation and Jobs: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKET4Jdukvk>, accessed on 6/30/23.



innovative agenda and compelling messaging, the new frame accelerated the campaign's growth and scale shift, as previous research shows (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 332).

### *Presenting itself as an influential player*

The campaign effectively presented itself as a large, coordinated, and sustained group of individuals and organizations that could be mobilized. This occurred across three channels: (1) continuing to grow their ground game, (2) disseminating the message, and (3) gathering commitments from elected officials. First, the campaign's partner organizations ran workshops in local communities, "building [their] base through popular education trainings on racial capitalism and housing policy" (People's Action, 2019, p. 2). Second, PA disseminated it via short educational, animated videos, writings, and press releases on events, including quotes and photos, and significant news coverage of the campaign (57 articles linked on homepage), illustrating scope and resonance.<sup>60</sup> Previous work has suggested that online technologies contribute to networked growth of movements (Schulz 1998; Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto 2008; Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Leaders also wrote analysis of housing in history, arguing that "Housing is the infrastructure of American racial capitalism" (Raghuveer and Washington 2023). Third, PA created a Homes Guarantee Pledge that over a hundred elected officials signed in 2020.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> People's Action, "We need a #HomesGuarantee," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wni9X6ydN0Y&ab\\_channel=People%27sAction](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wni9X6ydN0Y&ab_channel=People%27sAction), Accessed on 7/4/23.

<sup>61</sup> Figures drawn from spokesperson at Los Angeles based Homes Guarantee training. An up to date endorsement list can be found online: People's Action, "Homes Guarantee Candidate Pledge," <https://homesguarantee.com/pledge/> Accessed on 6/6/23.

### *Building a housing-climate coalition*

Between 2018-2019, the campaign assembled a group of additional partners to create a coalition, which I refer to throughout as the *housing-climate coalition*, due to a fusion of housing justice and the Green New Deal visions and constituencies. Creating such relationships serves two purposes. First, new ties disseminate the agenda to new spaces, which strengthens the potential for shifting scales (brokerage). Second, the building of *allies* also tends to create new political opportunities, for instance, bypassing gatekeepers, such as adversarial politicians, consultants, and think tanks embedded in establishment politics. “The depth and breadth of the [housing] crisis,” an organizer said, “is at a level now that is impossible to ignore.”

In February 2019, newly elected Representative Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey introduced the “Green New Deal Resolution” (GND), with only a passing mention to housing: “guaranteeing that all members of society can have ... affordable, safe, and adequate housing.”<sup>62</sup> The GND focused more on jobs to transition our economy away from fossil fuels. The day after the resolution was introduced, *Jacobin* published a response by Daniel Aldana Cohen that argued housing should be more central: a “low-carbon housing guarantee” (2019a, 9).<sup>63</sup> Cohen, then a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania, hit a nerve, capturing how “[h]ousing fits awkwardly into left climate debates” (2019a, 2), resulting in additional news coverage (Noor 2019), and circulation among the left. The coalition and Ocasio-Cortez’s office independently recruited Cohen in the following weeks. Cohen ran a tenant outreach workshop with Ocasio-

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<sup>62</sup> Ed Markey Senate Homepage, “SENATOR MARKEY AND REP. Ocasio-Cortez INTRODUCE GREEN NEW DEAL RESOLUTION,” 2/7/23, <https://www.markey.senate.gov/news/press-releases/senator-markey-and-rep-ocasio-cortez-introduce-green-new-deal-resolution>, Accessed on 6/12/23.

<sup>63</sup> Cohen had previously also published on the intersection of housing, transit, and climate – whether or not groups identified explicitly as ‘low-carbon protagonists’ (Cohen 2017). In *A Planet to Win*, along with collages, Cohen introduce a “Homes Guarantee” in the Green New Deal with the following “banner: 10 million beautiful, public, no-carbon homes over the next 10 years, in cities, suburbs, reservations, and towns, in the most transit-rich and walkable areas” (Aronoff et al. 2019, 84–90).

Cortez's staff in the Bronx, later becoming a policy advisor to the office. A bit later he also joined calls with PA and co-authored their Homes Guarantee Briefing Book. As PA recruited Cohen, he also became a key *broker* in this episode, introducing People's Action to Ocasio-Cortez's team: a channel of communication between the tenant campaign and Ocasio-Cortez, the Squad, and later other members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. "For the first time ever," an organizer said, "we have candidates and elected leaders who are willing to break with the dominant neoliberal narrative and ideas. They got there because of movements building power for years and battling in the sphere of big ideas."

Cohen's status served politicians that could cite research by an Ivy league professor supporting Green New Deal and housing reforms. Despite his *Jacobin* article, Cohen attributed the strategic vision to PA organizers. "It's Tara [Raghuveer, leader of KC tenants Union], I think, who understood correctly that linking the Green New Deal and housing was good." The credit is well grounded. One PA member organization, for example, PUSH Buffalo had a legacy of linking housing justice, tenants' rights, structural racism, and climate change. The *coalition* saw a strategic necessity and opportunity to evolve the housing movement at this juncture. Historically many tenant groups haven't organized at the intersection of tenant's rights and climate retrofits that reduce carbon dependency, lowering utility costs, instead they prioritize rent controls, eviction protections, and landlord harassment. "Most of the tenant groups are structurally amenable to and would benefit from a Green New Deal," a consultant said, "but most aren't actually organized around it."

As the *housing-climate coalition* grew, keeping partners accountable remained a priority. Tenant organizers knew that they had helped elect the new cohort of progressive candidates, so organizers reminded and pressured allies to continue advancing movement goals now elected. This

applied even to the most progressive politicians. “People's Action is basically going to AOC,” someone working with her said, “and saying if you want credibility as a houser, you need to work with us.” The tenant movement also exerted pressure on Senators Warren and Sanders to collaborate. In July 2017, Senator Warren spoke at a Washington DC tenant march to “Stop Trump’s War on the Poor” that demanded #NoCuts in to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, and that November Senator Sanders spoke at the launch of PA’s national housing campaign.

While Ocasio-Cortez, Sanders, and Warren constitute some of the most left politicians in Congress, their collaboration began as what I refer to as a *sympathetic partnership*, meaning they generally believed in the ideas of the Homes Guarantee and would show up occasionally to rallies or share some of the platform. A shift occurred from *sympathetic* to *strategic partnership* in the coalition through the process of active dialogue, strategy development, and mutual dependency. When the *housing-climate coalition* became a *strategic partner* with politicians in Congress, it strengthened both elements of jumping scales from local tenant unions into federal politics.

### ***Measuring the popularity of a green homes guarantee***

As it continued to grow, the *housing-climate coalition* integrated another partner, Data for Progress (DFP) that could serve an important process in scale shift by demonstrating that the ideas were popular among the voting public, facilitating emulation by other tenant organizations, networks, or elected officials. DFP is a progressive think tank founded in 2018 by former think tank researcher Sean McElwee that innovated in the space of polling by creating low-cost (around \$8,000 for a national sample) surveys via text messages, sometimes offering services free of

charge.<sup>64</sup> In such cases, a reciprocal relationship is established: DFP offers free polling, politicians get survey results and visualization for media exposure, and elected officials cite DFP in the media.<sup>65</sup> “For Data for Progress,” *New York Times* reported, “the strategy is Politics 101: Politicians like policies that are popular” (Lerer 2021). As a self-identified “Overton Window Mover,” McElwee said: “What is success? It’s power, it’s having a vision of the world that’s different from the status quo and enacting that vision” (quoted in Malone 2019).<sup>66</sup> DFP grew in popularity. Biden reportedly mentioned their data to aides, and “Schumer, the majority leader, teams up with its leaders for news conferences, blog posts and legislation” (quoted in Lerer 2021).

In August 2019, DFP ran their first survey on a Green Homes Guarantee, showing “compelling evidence that a majority of Americans wants to do big things to tackle housing” (2019b). In September, People’s Action released the Homes Guarantee Briefing Book, and DFP then ran a follow-up poll. Multiple coalition partners coauthored the ensuing report: Cohen, Raghuvver, McElwee, Jack Nicol and John Ray (both of YouGov, another polling group). The poll found that among voters 60% favored \$100 billion annual funding to retrofit public housing, 58% supported a Tenants Bill of Rights, and 57% supported a Homes Guarantee (Cohen, Raghuvver, et al. 2019, 4) (*see* Figure 4). Voters registered as Democrats polled especially favorably: 80% for Homes Guarantee, 80% for a Tenant Bill of Rights, 81% for a \$50 billion annual investment to renovate public housing, among others, and 84% for green investments in sustainable housing and transit (Cohen, Raghuvver, et al. 2019, 5) (*see* Figure 5). The polling showed how green retrofits,

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<sup>64</sup> See Data for Progress, “Our Methodology,” <https://www.dataforprogress.org/our-methodology>, Accessed on /14/23.

<sup>65</sup> One early example, Ocasio-Cortez tweeted “...and we have [#GreenNewDeal](https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1073685921156005888) lift-off!” accompanied by a DFP visualization. <https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1073685921156005888>, Accessed on 6/14/23. It was also reported McElwee “was on regular calls with Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer’s staff” (Terris 2023).

<sup>66</sup> Sean McElwee would later resign DFP for leveraging his non-profit polling for his personal betting and consulting for crypto and Republican clients (Terris 2023).

public housing, and a Tenants Bill of Rights, performed well among all and especially Democratic voters, influencing and informing the *housing-climate coalition's* forthcoming legislative priorities. As the *coalition* honed its agenda and strategy, combining sustainability technologies with state intervention to improve housing for the most vulnerable, social scientists around the same time began investigating the association between climate policy and other policy areas. For example, when climate policy gets bundled with “affordable housing,” it sees an increase in its popularity by 11%, suggesting intersectional movements and policy demands resonate among the public (Bergquist, Mildenerger, and Stokes 2020, 4). Cohen reflected on his role in brokering connections between PA and DFP. “Our utility [as academics],” he said, “is to provide cultural capital backing research.”

### ***Progressive politicians escalate influence in D.C.***

Next, we explore how progressive politicians bargained and won concessions from Democratic Party leadership in Washington DC. This occurred across four levels: (1) the presidential primary, (2) the party platform, (3) a new bill to advance the left flank of the Overton Window, and (4) exerting additional pressure on leadership. The insurgent presidential candidacy of Sanders provided an opportunity for ideas in the tenant movement to penetrate national politics across three types of opportunity structure (regime, openness, elite vulnerability, and ally availability).

### ***A presidential candidate advancing tenant demands***

The Democratic nominee should be able to answer the question: what will your climate plan do for the housing crisis? ... One truly radical and intersectional

approach? Tackle the United States' housing and climate crises at the same time –  
with a Green New Deal for housing. (Cohen 2019c)

Sanders began as a sympathetic partner to the *housing-climate coalition*. Despite his progressive legacy in Burlington, including launching arguably one of the country's most successful Community Land Trusts, and his leading role in legislation to pass the National Housing Trust Fund in 2008, his 2016 presidential campaign engaged housing with caution. A Sanders staffer stated that his team can be divided into “Washington insiders” and “movement people.” In 2016, an “insider staffer” tried “to temper [Sanders] and keep him within the mainstream as much as possible.” Whereas, the self-identified “movement staffer” said, “Bernie should have been talking about public housing as the status quo... as the way of the middle class” all along. The ability of Sanders's insider staffers to dull the progressive edge of his policy agenda in the name of broader public appeal suggests that in 2020 increased movement pressure, vision, and popular appeal helped move Sanders to produce an aggressive take on housing. PA staff described him as a target, not collaborator at that time. An organizer said that an early campaign goal was “to get Bernie to say, ‘I want to have a Homes Guarantee.’” The shift from *sympathetic* to *strategic partnership* occurred after the *housing-climate coalition* released its Homes Guarantee Briefing Book, brokered new partnerships, and released favorable polling.

Sanders's 2020 campaign explicitly promoted a Homes Guarantee and adopted major tenets in his *Housing for All* platform, advocating for a \$2.5 trillion investment to create 10 million housing units, national rent control, eviction protections, right to counsel, Section 8 for all qualifying families, zoning reforms, fair housing expansions, and a \$70 billion dollar investments in decarbonize public housing, among other provisions.<sup>67</sup> “Line-by-line,” an organizer said, “you

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<sup>67</sup> Berniesanders.com, “Housing for all,” <https://berniesanders.com/issues/housing-all/>, Accessed on 6/14/23.

can see our grassroots vision for a Homes Guarantee in Senator Sanders’s plan.”<sup>68</sup> A consultant said, “His campaign feels like Tara [Raghuveer of PA] is a pro.” A relationship of mutual dependency grew, wherein coalition partners would stump at rallies for Sanders and antagonize opposition. “When his campaign goes to California, Tara shows up.” And he can say, “I’m here with my brothers and sisters and the housing movement.” In Los Angeles in December 2019, Sanders was accompanied by Ocasio-Cortez and LA City Councilmember Mike Bonin, a local politician who had signed the Homes Guarantee pledge. Bonin also proposed a Homes Guarantee LA package of policies, illustrating continued association between a national coalition and local policy goals (via *emulation*).

The quantitative success of Sanders’s 2020 presidential campaign is a major factor in his growing influence. He received close to 10 million votes in the primaries (Biden received 19 million), and reiterated his vision for a new housing system in stump speeches across the country. Reflecting on 2020, PA organizers were “shocked” by the “wildly different place than in 2016. None of [the candidates] had legit plans. And now every single candidate has a plan.” During the 2020 cycle, the coalition emerged among other Democratic Party candidates for president as a point of reference for the tenant movement. An organizer said the coalition was “basically in dialogue with every campaign.” Despite Sanders losing the 2020 primary to Biden, his becoming a strategic partner and ally to the coalition provided a new avenue of opportunity to advance Homes Guarantee among the Democratic Party through other channels.

In July 2018, Sanders and Biden released a joint statement of “Unity Task Force Recommendations” that would inform the convening of the 2020 Democratic National Convention

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<sup>68</sup> People’s Action, “SANDERS ADOPTS PEOPLE’S ACTION’S ‘HOMES GUARANTEE’ POLICIES IN NEWLY RELEASED HOUSING PLAN,” 9/18/19, <https://peoplesaction.org/2019/09/breaking-sanders-adopts-peoples-actions-homes-guarantee-policies-in-newly-released-housing-plan/>, Accessed on 6/14/23.



and Party Platform.<sup>69</sup> Sanders appointed Ocasio-Cortez to co-chair the task force on climate change, demonstrating progressive inclusion in drafting the party agenda. While neither the recommendations nor party platform itself explicitly mentioned flagship progressive programs – like a Green New Deal, Medicare for All, Housing for All (Astor et al. 2020; Oprysko 2020) – the platform did echo the coalition agenda: “Guaranteeing Safe Housing.”<sup>70</sup> Specifically the unity recommendations addressed rental housing by calling for “making energy-saving upgrades to up to two million low-income households and affordable and public housing units within five years,”<sup>71</sup> introducing a “Renter Bill of Rights,”<sup>72</sup> “supercharg[ing] investment through the Housing Trust Fund,”<sup>73</sup> and “support[ing] creation and expansion of ... community land trusts.”<sup>74</sup> It also mentioned Democrats would “combat gentrification,” “impose penalties for absentee homeowners,” and “Democrats will provide legal support to fight wrongful evictions.”<sup>75</sup> Reflecting on the Sanders’s proposals in the recommendations and Democratic Party platform, a staffer said:

Bernie actually has a seat at the table. He's not going to get a Bernie agenda. But something happened, I think, within the party, that it kind of partially woke up to

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<sup>69</sup> Joe Biden.com, “BIDEN-SANDERS UNITY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS,” <https://joebiden.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/UNITY-TASK-FORCE-RECOMMENDATIONS.pdf>, accessed 6/15/23. And The American Presidency Project, “2020 Democratic Party Platform,” <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2020-democratic-party-platform>, accessed 6/15/23.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., page 17.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., page 3.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., page 72.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., page 3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., page 71.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., page 71.

the fact that you're basically opening the door for Trump if you don't at least wink at your progressive wing.

Sanders advanced substantive dimensions of the HG campaign within the platform, yet platforms themselves, a consultant said, are “always left of the party politics.” Like Ocasio-Cortez, Sanders benefited from the *housing-climate coalition* vision and ability to mobilize people for public events. “If [Sanders] had tried to do it legislatively and through technocratic means,” his staffer said, “there's no way he would have gotten anywhere.” Despite Sanders’s loss, he drew on the coalition’s platform (ally availability), pressured Democratic Party with innovative policy linking housing and climate (Democratic Party lacking forward looking and popular policy; alignment stability), and benefited from Biden’s fear of a repeat of 2016, and losing to Trump (elite vulnerability). Organizers said that the attention to housing among 2020 presidential candidates also came from broader awareness of the housing crisis (regime openness). They said:

It’s not as though poor Black and brown communities were not being impacted by the housing crisis in 2016. But not one [candidate in the Democratic primary for President] had any platforms about it. Not a single question in any of the town halls. In 2020, it’s reaching closer and closer to the elites to determine what those conversations look like. And now, for better or for worse, because those folks are starting to be impacted, or their kids are starting to be impacted, we’re able to have a public dialogue about it.

Biden’s collaboration with Sanders served as an early precedent in the episode of Democratic Party leadership capitulating to progressive demands.

### ***Biden's infrastructure bills***

As Biden took office, the Covid-19 pandemic overshadowed the country. Crises provide a window of opportunity to advance big institutional changes, leading Biden to introduce an ambitious slate of bills while benefiting from majorities in both chambers of Congress. As outlined above, the fissures emerging provided new channels of influence for progressive politicians due to all four variables of political opportunity structure: (1) the Democratic Party presented openness, (2) the alignment of actors within the party presenting instability, (3) the elites (party leadership) showed vulnerability in that Biden could have lost to Trump, and (4) allies continued to grow and became more strategic. The critical juncture meant progressive politicians gained momentum in advancing their agenda. In order to influence one of Biden's signature bills, the *housing-climate coalition* identified specific legislative lanes, barriers to passage, and sought to exert pressure when possible. One policy tool had risen to the top after the polling in the last year and a half: "New funding for green housing retrofits polled the most strongly" (Cohen, Raghuveer, et al. 2019). A Tenant Bill of Rights was also popular. These ideas needed to be seeded in both chambers of Congress.

### ***American Jobs Plan***

On 31 March 2021, Biden introduced *The American Jobs Plan*, a major infrastructure investment bill that aimed to invest \$2.2 trillion across the economy (Parlapiano and Tankersley 2021; Tankersley 2021). The plan included \$40 billion for renovating and decarbonizing public housing, \$213 billion for renovating and producing a million affordable homes (deed restricted and tax credit), and removing exclusionary zoning. Funding for public housing would "address critical life-safety concerns, mitigate imminent hazards to residents, ... [which] will disproportionately

benefit women, people of color, and people with disabilities.”<sup>76</sup> While *American Jobs Plan* included \$40 billion for public housing, implementing some priorities established in the Democratic Party Platform, progressive politicians demanded more from the president.

### *Progressive response to Biden’s agenda*

To establish priorities for federal legislation, leadership in both chambers of Congress cull issues from committee chairs, debate potential bill elements, and then aggregate content into a draft bill. Lobbyists’ pressure and agendas compete to capture the attention of politicians. The most important congressional committees for advancing housing policy in particular are the House Committee on Financial Services and the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs. The Committee on Financial Services was at the time chaired by Representative Maxine Waters (a member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus) and stacked with three Squad members: Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley. Senator Sherrod Brown, one of the most progressive Senators (although not a member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus) chairs the Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee, and the progressive Senator Elizabeth Warren also serves on the committee.

The Waters committee was viewed as “a very friendly spot” by one consultant: “Not only is Maxine Waters the Chair, but she has been around for a long fucking time. She’s very important to Nancy Pelosi and to California.” The committee under Waters between 2019–2023 held 55 hearings on housing.<sup>77</sup> Progressive Congresswoman Premila Jayapal remarked, “Chairwoman

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<sup>76</sup> Whitehouse.gov, “Fact Sheet: The American Jobs Plan,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/31/fact-sheet-the-american-jobs-plan/>, accessed 6/17/23.

<sup>77</sup> CSpan.org, “Fair Housing Advocates Testify on Access and Affordability,” 0:04:02, 1 December 2022, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?524535-1/fair-housing-advocates-testify-access-affordability>, accessed 7/18/23.

Waters ... from the first day that I entered into Congress has said housing is infrastructure. And she reminds us of that every single day.”<sup>78</sup> Nonetheless progressives had to nudge her forward in upcoming negotiations. As an advocate explained, “the last thing Maxine Waters wants is for anybody to be to the left of her on her committee.” Members of the *housing-climate coalition* lobbied the Waters committee members, who went on to advance recommendations of \$150 billion dollars in housing funding for Build Back Better, including \$80 billion in decarbonizing public housing. The Senate would be a different story.

In the Senate, the Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs committee was perceived not to have enough support to advance priorities. Rather, it was identified that Majority Leader Schumer would be the target of lobbying. Behind closed doors, Ocasio-Cortez cajoled Schumer to negotiate over making major progressive climate and housing policy concessions or she would run against him in the New York primary for Senate. It was a very fortuitous circumstance. Ocasio-Cortez had exploded onto the political scene only two years prior, listed as one of *Time 100*'s most influential people, in which Senator Warren (2019) wrote her blurb: “Her commitment to putting power in the hands of the people is forged in fire.” In YouGov's polls on most famous American politicians, Ocasio-Cortez ranks tenth, consistently beating Schumer.<sup>79</sup> In 2021, some newspapers also reported that Ocasio-Cortez was considering primarying Schumer. For instance, *POLITICO* (Otterbein 2021):

Multiple sources said [Ocasio-Cortez's] decision [to run for Senate] will be contingent on how Schumer wields power with his new Democratic majority in the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 3:13:25.

<sup>79</sup> YouGov, “The Most Popular Democrats (Q2 2023),” <https://today.yougov.com/ratings/politics/popularity/Democrats/all>, accessed 6/18/23.

upcoming months ... [W]ill he work to pass ambitious, progressive legislation favored by the left?

Schumer agreed to negotiate with Ocasio-Cortez's team. One piece of legislation under debate became decarbonizing public housing, which would both combat climate change (contributing toward Biden's carbon reduction goals), and improve the health and safety of conditions of millions of housing units. This would infuse money into a dramatically underfunded program targeting precarious tenants. It also directly served Schumer's and Ocasio-Cortez's constituents (NYC has the highest concentration of public housing among US cities). Representatives of both Schumer's team and Ocasio-Cortez's team discussed the numbers. Recall, the *American Jobs Plan* had \$40 billion allocated for decarbonizing public housing; Ocasio-Cortez's negotiator asked for at least \$117 billion. "What's the most you could cut it down to?" Schumer's team asked. "\$117 billion," answered Ocasio-Cortez's team. Schumer's people also attempted to figure out the dollar-to-carbon relationship in the calculations that Ocasio-Cortez's team had developed with a team of academics, in order to potentially cut funds while retaining maximum carbon reductions, as Ocasio-Cortez's negotiator recounted for me.

What's going on between the Biden Administration, the House, and the Senate is that they're really keyed in on the climate numbers. It's a big priority for them. And they need to show that they can get to a certain amount of emissions reduction.

What they were trying to get from me was basically not actually how can you avoid all this mold, but how can we get to our carbon targets.

Months later after these backdoor negotiations, when Ocasio-Cortez was asked whether she would challenge Schumer in the New York primary, she told CNN: "For what it's worth, Senator Schumer and I have been working very closely on a lot of legislation and that, to me, is

important” (Krieg 2021). Despite some newspapers reporting that Ocasio-Cortez may have been threatening Schumer, no journalists reported, to my knowledge, that she used her leverage to advance policy on greening public housing. Renovating preexisting housing, a consultant said, “doesn't have to be weighed against the climate plan, but can be counted as part of climate.” After Schumer agreed to work with Ocasio-Cortez in the Senate and Waters advanced priorities in the House: Ocasio-Cortez’s negotiator described the political opening, “suddenly you have like this lane, which is like really, really good.”

*Schumer demands at least \$80 billion for public housing*

Following negotiations with Ocasio-Cortez, on 17 April 2021, Schumer gathered with local housing advocates in New York City to respond to Biden’s *American Jobs Plan* (31 March). Schumer decried public housing being the target of “cutback after cutback: the Bush administration cutback ... the state cutback, the city cutback.”<sup>80</sup>

I am announcing as Majority Leader that one of my very top priorities in the *American Jobs Plan* is \$80 [billion] plus [to green public housing]. \$80 plus. Originally, we were at \$70. That was the capital needs. But we need to add in much more money for climate for resilience for sustainability. And that’s why we’re going higher. That’s the kind of investment that the *American Jobs Plan* stands for. Public housing shouldn’t be left out of that. It should be included and a centerpiece of it.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Youtube.com, “Rep. Espaillat se une al llamado del senador Schumer por \$80 mil millones para la vivienda pública,” 4/18/21, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4knmw-y148&ab\\_channel=CongresistaAdrianoEspaillatenIm%C3%A1genes](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4knmw-y148&ab_channel=CongresistaAdrianoEspaillatenIm%C3%A1genes), accessed on 6/18/23.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

He started the talk with a “salute” to the president’s inclusion of \$40 billion: “It’s a good start, but it ain’t enough. ... to deal with NYCHA’s backlog, but also make this housing resilient and make this housing able to meet the climate needs of the 21st century.”<sup>82</sup> Schumer said that he had a growing a list of pledges among Congressmembers to raise the investment in public housing. While Schumer had invited Ocasio-Cortez to join his press conference, she declined. Meanwhile, he didn’t make the rhetorical link between the greening housing and the GND. As leadership conceded to progressive demands, moving the Overton Window, Schumer and Biden stopped short of rhetorically mentioning the GND. If leadership wouldn’t link GND to the \$80b investment, Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez would further advance the left flank of the agenda setting window.

### *Reinforcing the left flank of the Democratic Party*

Two days later on 19 April 2021, Ocasio-Cortez reintroduced “Green New Deal for Public Housing Act,” this time co-sponsored by Sanders, as *the* flagship piece of GND legislation, asking for \$172 billion investments in green retrofits of units for over ten years. While Ocasio-Cortez had previously released the legislation in December 2019 with favorable polling results (Cohen, McElwee, et al. 2019), it was reintroduced during a time of intense debate over public housing and climate renovations (Nilsen 2019).<sup>83</sup> Reintroducing the legislation signaled to Biden that Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders wanted a larger investment beyond what was proposed by Biden (\$40 b), Waters (\$80 b), and Schumer (\$80 b). The new law would contribute to “weatherizing, electrifying and modernizing our public housing so that it may serve as a model of efficiency, sustainability

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Congress.gov, H.R.5185 - Green New Deal for Public Housing Act, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/5185/text?s=3&r=39>, accessed 6/18/23.



and resiliency for the rest of the nation.”<sup>84</sup> It would create 240,000 new jobs per year, a labor force that would transform all 950,000 units of public housing into zero-carbon buildings, reducing 5.6 million metric tons of carbon emission per year (analogous to removing 1.2 million cars off the road). Projected savings in water and energy bills were over \$700 million annually. It also repealed the Faircloth Amendment. Diane Yentel of the National Low Income Housing Coalition Housing said, “there really is an opportunity — a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity — to address this backlog and have Congress address the funding that’s needed... This may be the moment, at long last.”<sup>85</sup>

### *Build Back Better and a Tenant’s Bill of Rights*

On 11 March 2021 Biden signed the American Rescue Plan, a 1.9 trillion-dollar economic stimulus bill to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the economy, after which he attempted to advance a larger bill through congress that tackled infrastructure, social, and economic issues, costing between \$3.5 and \$6 trillion. “I’m going to fight as hard as I can,” said Waters, “to keep as much housing as I can in the reconciliation bill” (O’Donnell 2021a). A few months later, on June 24th, a bipartisan group of Senators met at the White House and agreed on key provisions of what would later be called the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). Biden said that “investment in our physical and human infrastructure are inextricably intertwined,” suggesting that he would “work closely with Speaker Pelosi and Leader Schumer to make sure that both moved through the legislative process promptly and in tandem. Let me emphasize that: and in tandem.”<sup>86</sup> By two bills,

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<sup>84</sup> Sander.senate.gov., “The Green New Deal for Public Housing Act,” <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/Green-New-Deal-for-Public-Housing-Summary.pdf>, accessed on 6/18/23.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in (Cochrane 2021).

<sup>86</sup> Whitehouse.gov, “Remarks by President Biden on the Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal,” June 24, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/24/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-bipartisan-infrastructure-deal/>, accessed on June 30.

Biden meant the IJJA and a second bill to address human infrastructure and climate, which later became known as Build Back Better Plan (BBB).

Schumer claimed that it was his idea to link both bills (ally availability), in order to prevent moderate democrats (e.g. Senators Manchin or Sinema) from voting against the second bill (Savage 2021) (a viable *threat*). In the House, the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC) also stated that they would withhold upwards of 60 votes to prevent the IJJA's passage if it wasn't linked to BBB (alignment stability). Ultimately, however, only three days after the White House agreement among the bipartisan group of Senators, Senator Romney requested that Biden clarify that the Senate could move forward and de-link the legislation, so as to maintain bipartisan support (Liptak 2021). CPC members met to discuss whether they would support IJJA if decoupled and, in the end, were pressured by Democratic Party leadership (especially Biden, Pelosi, Schumer and the Congressional Black Caucus) to support IJJA, so the Democrats could pass the bill before the midterm elections. In exchange, Biden assured the CPC that Manchin had committed to supporting a version of BBB in the reconciliation process. This broke the CPC holdout, first with CPC Chair Jayapal agreeing to the deal, leading most of the members to follow suit and support IJJA. Squad members Representatives Omar, Bush, Tlaib, Bowman, and Ocasio-Cortez refused and voted against IJJA. Pelosi made up the difference with a handful of Republican votes and IJJA passed both chambers to be signed by Biden on November 15th (Sirota and Grim 2021). Reflecting on the Squad and CPC members, an organizer said, "some of them we had more influence over and some of them less." Despite PA saying they had collaborated with CPC members, their influenced remained mixed, or sympathetic, often not strategic partnerships.

On October 28th, Biden released a revision of BBB at that aimed to significantly address climate and social policy. In this version, the White House increased funding to decarbonize public

housing to \$65 billion, claiming that it would be “the single largest and most comprehensive investment in affordable housing in history.”<sup>87</sup> Schumer and Waters insisted again on increasing the funding to at least \$80 billion. First, Schumer penned an op-ed (Schumer 2021; O’Donnell 2021b) and Waters stated publicly she was against “deep cuts in housing,” and confirmed hers and Senator Brown’s opposition to reducing housing funds if negotiations ensued with Senator Manchin (O’Donnell and Cassella 2021). Despite the public rebuke, the figure remained at \$65 billion for public housing, for the time being. On 11 November, the House passed BBB, the largest infusion of funds for public housing in modern history, a major accomplishment of the *housing-climate coalition* and their allies in Congress. However, Republican leadership didn’t surrender silently, with Minority Leader McCarthy delivering an eight hour speech in protest of the legislation, the longest delay in the history of the House (Cochrane and Weisman 2021). An interviewee at a national housing advocacy organization confirmed this sequence, saying:

The way progressive politics in Build Back Better, all the money for public housing doesn't happen without: (1) the organizing that's going out in New York to effect Schumer, and (2) without the work going on among the progressive members of the House.

Despite passage in the House, on 19 December Manchin stated he would not support BBB because of concerns over increasing the country’s debt, citing a report by the Congressional Budget Office scoring the bill at a higher price tag of \$4.5 trillion.<sup>88</sup> He withheld the 50<sup>th</sup> vote in the Senate, closing the window of opportunity, and only months later proposed a counteroffer at \$1.8 trillion

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<sup>87</sup> Whitehouse.gov, “The Build Back Better Framework,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/build-back-better/>, accessed on 6/13/23.

<sup>88</sup> Manchin.senate.gov, “MANCHIN STATEMENT ON BUILD BACK BETTER ACT,” DECEMBER 19, 2021, <https://www.manchin.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/manchin-statement-on-build-back-better-act>, accessed on 7/30/23; and cbo.gov, “Budgetary Effects of Making Specified Policies in the Build Back Better Act Permanent,” December 10, 2021, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/57673>, accessed on 6/30/23.

that excluded funds for housing and racial justice programs (Cassidy 2021; Stein 2022). Even though progressives advanced an effective strategy to shift the agenda on refinancing public housing and aggressively addressing the leadership’s goals to reduce carbon emissions, ultimately center-right Democrat Senator Manchin killed BBB. “What [a PA leader] has also realized is Homes Guarantee needs ten times the tenant base if they want to have sufficient like disruptive power,” a consultant said, “to have anything more than symbolic power on the Hill.”

Whereas the progressive wing of the Democratic Party had extracted major concessions from leadership, the right wing of the party thwarted passage. Nonetheless, Schumer, Waters, and Ocasio-Cortez each benefited somehow from shifting the Overton Window on green housing policy. A consultant explained, for Schumer, “the left provide[d] him with actually a good opportunity,” resulting in “coopt[ing] Ocasio-Cortez at no cost to himself,” standing publicly as the supporter of public housing. For Waters, in her last meeting as House committee chair, she said, “last year my committee fought to secure over \$150 billion dollars in fair and affordable housing,”<sup>89</sup> in so doing reiterating her leadership on housing. Finally, Ocasio-Cortez publicized on her website under the Green New Deal for Public Housing that provisions of the bill, specifically the \$65 billion – made it into BBB.<sup>90</sup> Reflecting on the sequence, a key player said:

The agenda setting matters, I think a lot. The role of Homes Guarantee matters. The movement matters. The role Data for Progress mattered. All these forces as multipliers had to intersect. And fundamentally, I think if you look at the \$65 billion for public housing in Build Back Better, I would argue is one of the most

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<sup>89</sup> CSpan.org, “Fair Housing Advocates Testify on Access and Affordability,” 0:04:02, 1 December 2022, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?524535-1/fair-housing-advocates-testify-access-affordability>, accessed 7/18/23.

<sup>90</sup> Ocasio-Cortez.house.gov, <https://Ocasio-Cortez.house.gov/media/press-releases/rep-aoc-celebrates-inclusion-civilian-climate-corps-green-new-deal-public#:~:text=The%20Faircloth%20Amendment%20was%20passed,the%20expansion%20of%20affordable%20housing>, accessed on 6/18/23.

surprising elements of the whole thing is that there's no sector of capital that would benefit. And the New York City public housing organizations are not that strong. But all these things pile up.

And when the *realpolitik* are sufficient, then you can get in. And Schumer clearly felt that it would really benefit his credibility in New York City to do this thing, which I think didn't hurt anybody. Now all that money is free.<sup>91</sup> Nobody's raising taxes for it anymore.

The strategy basically worked. Enough people made their thing indispensable to enough other people up the chain that it finally landed on Schumer's desk. And he's like: 'Fine, alright. Sure. Fuck it. Let's do it. \$80 billion for public housing. And then I'll be the Senator who saved public housing in New York.'

### ***Conclusion***

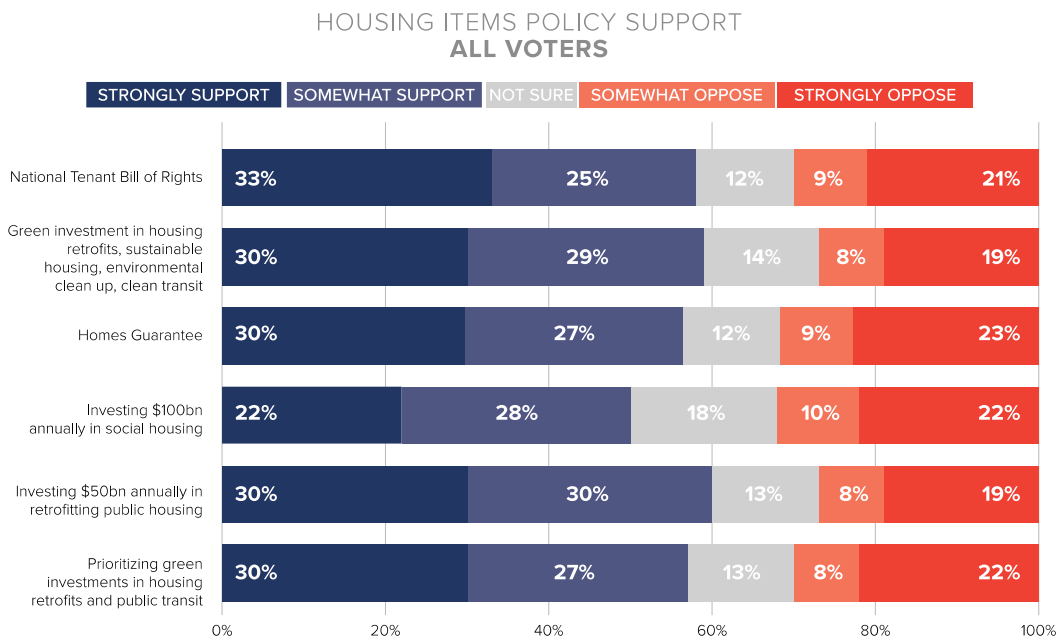
This paper advances our understanding of how grassroots movements promote offensive policy agendas at the federal level in the two-party system of the United States, despite the parties often being impermeable to progressive change. It is a case of how a social movement shifted scales from local-to-national, built key partnerships with academics, pollsters, and politicians, and how their allies pushed forward policy in Congress. The intricate path to progressive policy illustrates how the tenant movement not only built power, alliances, navigated threats, found opportunities, and advanced legislation to pass in the House, but introduced transformative policy visions into the core of the Democratic Party and national politics.

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<sup>91</sup> Referring to the rise of Modern Monetary Theory (MMT).

The tenant network demonstrated coherence as a group with innovative policy, framing and dissemination, powerful self-representation, and coalition building/brokerage. They formed a *housing-climate coalition* to combine housing and climate issues, thereby making decarbonizing public housing one of the flagship policy priorities of the Green New Deal. The campaign succeeded in jumping scales and accelerated movement growth via diffusion through preexisting relationships and via brokerage to new ones. The *housing-climate coalition* transformed relationships with progressive politicians from sympathetic to strategic partnerships. Social movement theory – specifically political opportunity structure – helped evaluate why and how the bill passed in the US House of Representatives. Though ultimately the bill fell short of passage in the Senate, the actors pursuing the intricate path to progressive policy change substantially shifted the Overton Window of housing policy to the left in the US Democratic Party.

## Figures



DATA FOR PROGRESS

Figure 4. Housing Items Policy Support: All Voters (Sept 2019).

Source: Data for Progress (Cohen, Raghuvver, et al. 2019, 4).

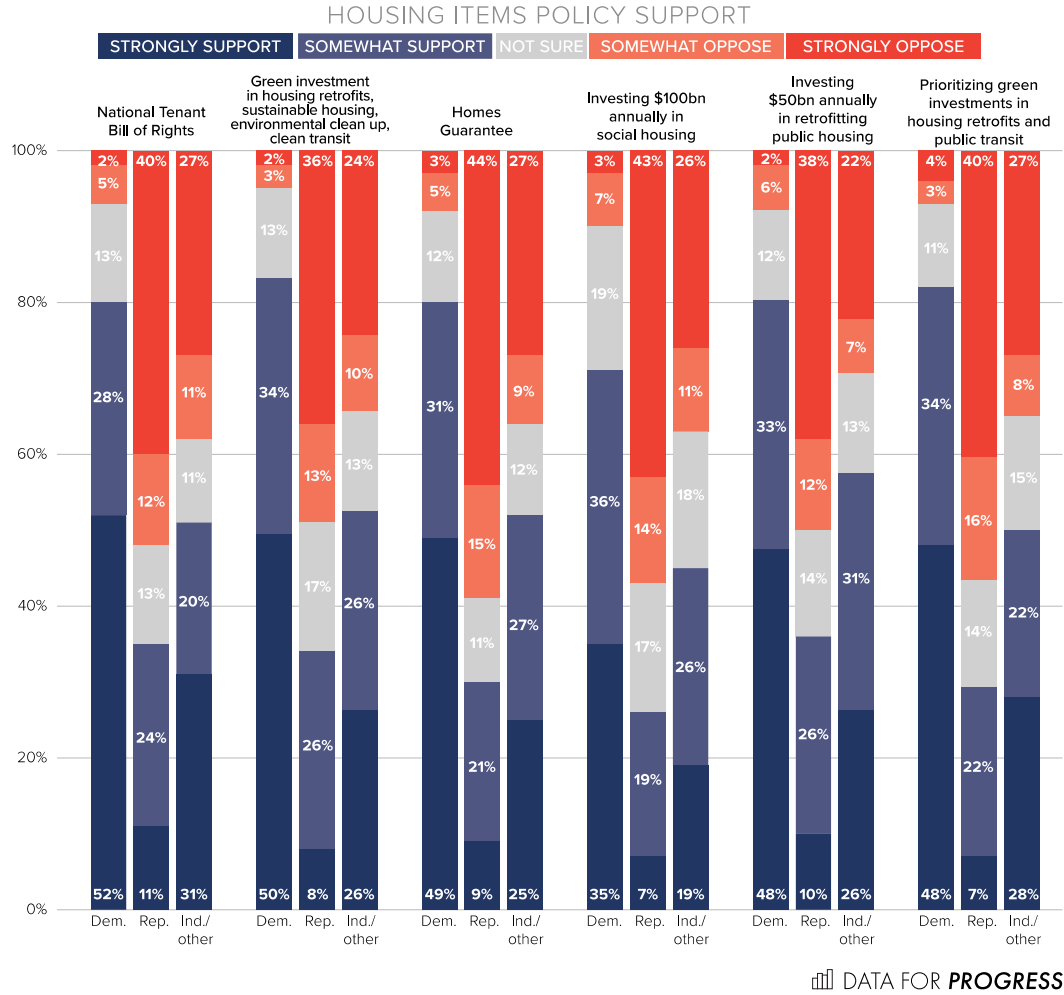


Figure 5. Housing Items Policy Support (Sept 2019).

Source: Data for Progress (Cohen, Raghuvver, et al. 2019, 5).

## Conclusion

### *New progressive currents*

This dissertation addresses the question: *What new progressive currents exist in the politics of housing?* I compare multiple housing struggles across the United States and Germany. Only one chapter is a direct comparison (Chapter 3) of the two countries, and the others examine a range of political processes. Chapter one examines *struggles over ideas*, or how mass public discourse on social media illustrates contrasts in types of policy under discussion before, during, and after peak-Covid-19. Chapter two analyzes *struggles to collaboratively build new housing models*, where people aspired to create broad participation, sustainable architecture, social spaces, in some cases decommodification: what some call urban commons. Chapter three directly compares *struggles to create offensive policy change* in Los Angeles and Berlin by tenant movement organizations, new housing coalitions, to enact rent controls, expropriation of landlord property, etc. Finally, chapter four addresses *struggles to take the policy offensive to the federal level*, profiling a tenant network that created an innovative housing vision and built strategic partnerships with politicians, whom challenged and advanced a new housing policy agenda in Washington DC.

### *Struggles over ideas*

The first chapter takes a comprehensive view of the housing policy debate – beyond the scope of progressive currents – to interpret the state of online discourse on rental housing across the United States. Online political debate is a political process whereby ordinary people make claims of approval or dismay, which can reshape political environments and agendas (alongside inputs like voter opinion and social movements) by influencing the circulation of ideas among the public, media, and politicians. While conventional news media have reported on the housing crisis and



policy responses, academics have not yet investigated the dominant trends in mass social media. A selection of 41 keywords serves as a proxy for housing debate across six policy areas and yields 13.5 million tweets. Colleagues Andre Comandon, Andrew Messamore, and I find an expansion and shifting structure of discourse on rental housing in which a macro-socioeconomic shock featured centrally, from a smaller discussion pre-Covid-19 (but post-global financial crisis) in which public and subsidized housing prevailed, toward an expansion during the pandemic of speech addressing tenant precarity: price controls, eviction protections, and anti-discrimination. I interpret these findings with a heuristic device, the two-by-two STAMPP (State, Market, Production, Protection) Chart. The three dominant clusters of policy discourse coalesced around public housing, private rental, and fair housing, which all fall in the state-protectionist quadrant. Thus, the Covid-19 crisis drove significant discursive shifts, involving an explosion of attention to policy mechanisms utilizing *strong-state* intervention and *protections-for-tenants*, as opposed to ones relying on the free market or production of new units.

The policy mechanisms receiving the greatest concentration of attention in mass discourse fell within typically progressive housing policies: increasing redistribution, regulating markets, and challenging discrimination. The limitations to these findings are twofold. First, my findings neither compare Twitter with other social media platforms like Facebook and Reddit, nor systematically with news reporting. Second, the findings do not include a sentiment analysis, so I cannot estimate the degree of positive or negative sentiment on policy in the debates. Nonetheless, a limited random sample of 1,000 tweets manually read and coded by the research team led us to estimate that over 70% of tweets reflected positive sentiment for the policy (despite this interpretation not tested statistically). My expectation is that online public discourse will continue to grow, shifting among media platforms, and influencing politics and policy in a variety of ways.

Further research is necessary in this area, especially to explore the causes and effects of discursive shifts.

### *Struggles to collaboratively build new housing models*

The second chapter investigates progressive currents in innovative models during the design-build process. The paper questions the theory and practice of urban commons with two new housing typologies in Berlin: Building Groups (*Baugruppen*) and Tenant Syndicate (*Mietshäuser Syndikat*). The chapter traces a few dimensions of urban commons: co-production of spaces, co-maintenances of spaces, and the degree of entanglement in capitalist urbanization. Despite sharing characteristics of urban commons, such as participatory processes and social spaces, the models differed in their ownership makeup and tenure status. Building Groups created private property of individual units, governed by an association of owners. The Tenant Syndicate created collective tenancy in perpetuity through decentralized ownership – split between the building’s members and the syndicate network – preventing individuals from selling their unit for profit and extracting value. While Building Groups began collectively with participatory processes, collective inputs led to privatized outputs. In other words, the collective practices served individual ends: individual wealth accumulation. One externality of BGs, theoretically, was on prices rising in the vicinity. As for the Tenant Syndicate, collective value creation through co-production and co-maintenance remained within the collective. When mortgages for buildings were paid off, tenants paid a compulsory, but below market, rent to a solidarity fund supporting new projects in the Tenant Syndicate. In addition, in theory syndicate projects would not contribute to the same neighborhood effect of rising home prices and rents as do the Building Groups. Neither of the presumed neighborhood effects were measured herein, an important area for future research.

People in both models engaged in active collaboration over time. They committed to acquiring housing outside the conventional real estate market's division of labor and consumption model—a model in which housing is typically purchased off the shelf in a single transaction, maximizing individual privacy, and comprised of disposable materials. Instead, people aspired to live together and produce sustainable spaces for their children to play to gather collectively. Nonetheless, I find that actually existing housing commons contain a range of contradictions. While the Building Groups emulate urban commons, only in their productive and spatial dimensions do they hold up to this ideal. Their privatization of the commons conforms to capitalist logics prioritizing exchange value over use value, encloses commons for individual ends, and exacerbates factors like rising rents, neighborhood gentrification, and class division. As for the syndicate, its processes, spaces, and collective value remain within the urban commons, or rather *an* urban commons: the network of tenants in the Tenant Syndicate. Yet, even the syndicate remained closed to some degree, excluding those who could not afford the upfront costs of joining. Despite differences in terms of the ability for participants to extract value from their units, both models remained largely inaccessible to the most marginalized, low-income, asset-poor tenants in Berlin, despite the Tenant Syndicate having a significantly lower barrier to entry and actively taking steps to include people on social welfare and from racial or migrant minorities.

The core contradiction of housing commons in cities remains that they struggle to emulate classical commons, such as open pastures or natural resources. They remain limited in overcoming the inequalities and exclusions generated through capitalist urbanization, states, and markets, despite their aspirations. Thus, progressive or radical housing models in the design-build process – despite seeking to produce ideal communal and sustainable utopias – reproduce exclusions in their entrenchment with capitalist systems. Further research is needed to understand a more

expansive range of housing commons typologies and their impact on the lives of tenants, housing markets, state redistribution, and tenant movements.

### *Struggles to create offensive policy change*

The third chapter examines progressive housing by comparing tenant movements in two cities, and how a broad set of political-economic actors, tenant movement organizations (TMOs, a much larger and more policy-focused category than the collectives studied in chapter two), affected housing policy between 2008-2020 in two RALLY (Renter, Activist, Large, and Left-leaning) cities, Los Angeles and Berlin. I began by identifying the formation of new TMOs and five mechanisms they employed to influence policymaking: (1) making demands, (2) forming coalitions, (3) promoting referendums, (4) engaging government officials in dialogue, and (5) transferring agents to government. Social movements do not act in isolation, but rather in relation to other political processes. Three additional mechanisms exogenous to the tenant movement are identified: (6) allied interest group resource deployment, (7) policy competition and transfer, and (8) landlord opposition actions. The mechanisms explain how various agents employ strategies to affect change. Both cases saw a pivot from defensive to offensive policymaking around 2015 in Berlin and 2016 in Los Angeles, in each case corresponding to the infusion of a critical resource. The tenant movement in California benefited from allied resources in the form of money power, and the Berlin movement benefited from growing grassroots mobilization of people power. The policies experienced striking transformation during the 2008-2020 episode. Policies displayed four parallel characteristics: (I) local progressive and regionally moderate, (II) shifting from defensive to offensive, (III) shifting from particular to universal, and (IV) signs of a breakthrough beyond neoliberal housing policymaking. The findings suggest that the rise of tenant movements and their

allies helped to drive policy change via multiple channels, exhibiting both similarities and differences across cities, with the contrast between money power and people power the most notable difference. The two cases present striking evidence of continued growth of tenant movements with little signs of de-escalation. Progressive housing policy agendas seem likely to expand. Nonetheless, the reforms witnessed herein have not materially overhauled the political economies of housing in these two cities, which remain unaffordable to many. Further research is needed to enrich our understanding of the causalities involved, as well as determine the extent to which these findings are generalizable

### *Struggles to develop new institutions in federal politics*

Finally, chapter four examines progressive housing politics through the example of how ordinary people advance new policy agendas in Washington DC. Scholars have long observed that housing movements at the national level engage in primarily defensive demands, actions, and wins (Fainstein and Fainstein 1983; Dreier 1984; Marcuse 1999). However, the Homes Guarantee platform created an offensive set of demands and affirmative policy vision that fused housing and climate policy. I employ a relational mechanism-based, social movement analysis of the episode. First, I identify four key mechanisms that made the *housing-climate coalition* so effective: (1) innovating policy (2) framing and dissemination, (3) powerful self-representation, and (4) coalition building. The coalition created an innovative policy framework that comprehensively tried to reconceptualize the housing system, framed as an affirmative Homes Guarantee, showed up persistently in large numbers, leveraged multiple media, and built strategic partners. On this latter point, People's Action transformed typical left allies – such as democratic socialists Sanders or Ocasio-Cortez – from *sympathetic* to *strategic* partners. In this, activists gained a seat at the table

and the coalition partners began to work across channels of influence. Two additional trigger mechanisms (diffusion and brokerage) illuminate how the tenant movement jumped scales to federal politics, and political opportunity structure demonstrates why these actions advanced so far in Congress. Ultimately, the coalition was able to gain concessions from the leadership of the Democratic Party, such as advocating for at least \$65 billion to decarbonize public housing. Decarbonizing public housing passed as part of the Build Back Better Act in the House of Representatives, yet was ultimately cut out of the bill in the Senate, blocked by Senator Manchin. This green housing agenda would have created a major infusion of funds into the long underfunded public housing sector, while simultaneously taking significant steps to tackle climate goals. The paper traces the intricate path to progressive policy change in Washington DC, and how the tenant movement built a network, innovative platform, and forged partnerships, all of which cumulatively shifted the Overton Window of housing policy to the left in the US Democratic Party. Further research should investigate these new channels of political influence by tenant movements in Washington DC, and how this scaling up has implications back down at the state and municipal levels across the country.

### *Demystifying the new politics of housing*

A new politics of housing has emerged. Between the 1980s and the early 2010s, housing policy was dominated by market-oriented tools in the United States and Germany. The new activity responds to decades of failure of markets and market-oriented-tools to provide affordable and fair conditions. The new progressive housing advocates challenge the assumptions, operations, and reproduction of the housing system in late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism. My aim has been

to demystify its agents, processes, and impacts, and to advance our understanding of this new politics.

The new progressive politics of housing resonated most with ordinary people like tenants. The new progressive housing politics fits within neither the last decades of market-oriented housing solutions (Glaeser 2012), nor older radical critiques in the Marxist tradition (Engels 1872). The visions, projects, and policies profiled here developed progressive – stepping forward within but pointing beyond the capitalist housing system – through more egalitarian, market-regulatory, and redistributive agendas. These struggles to decommodify housing are rooted in localized campaigns to fight rent increases, protect tenants from evictions, and houseless single mothers. Said another way, much of the politics of today build locally on micro- or infrapolitics, or the “struggle waged daily by subordinate groups ... beyond the visible” (Scott 1985, 183; Kelley 1996, 21) without a “defined idea of the ideal society” (Mayer and Boudreau 2012, 15), as the housing system has long been impenetrable to reforms. The recent upsurge of major currents like Occupy and the Sanders 2016 campaign strengthened movements (Smucker 2017; Gautney 2018) and leveled up action to the meso-level of new political institutional formation.

The papers tracked down four key takeaways about the new politics of housing at the meso level. Los Angeles and Berlin provided representative examples of the radically inclusive, escalating, and offensive influence of tenant power on policy. Shifting debate across the United States also concentrated increasingly on policy tools that intervene in markets and decommodify – especially in terms of rents, public ownership, and discrimination – which suggests that many of the trends of a new housing politics may have implications beyond RALLY cities. The case exploring the intricate path to U.S. national housing reform also signals the potential for broader change. In parallel with policy campaigns, on the community level groups developed alternative

housing projects to live out sustainable, participatory, and community-centric projects, illustrating a hands-on dimension to the new housing politics that involves building a parallel solidarity economy or commons, however imperfect. People committed their financial and sweat equity to stay in the city and build an alternative, collective place to call home. From city-to-state and from network-to-federal politics, tenants networked across new digital tools, leveraged outside and inside strategies, and worked with allies to challenge institutional alignments among parties, interest groups, and agendas. Tenant unions and coalitions in this new phase have mobilized offensively against the capitalist housing system.

### *In conclusion*

This dissertation tracked down the new progressive currents in housing politics since the GFC across the two largest, high-income countries of the North Atlantic. Understanding the new trends in politics and policy matters because housing remains the largest single lifetime expense for individuals, whether renting or owning. Housing remains a major financial burden for families, often resulting in displacement from loved ones and communities, and the burden has become ever more acute for majorities as inequality has grown. I focused on new political activity across multiple arenas: online political discourse, new housing models in the development process, local movements effecting policy change, and the varied networks and avenues of pressure progressives employed to shift housing policymaking at multiple scales. The four empirical essays make the case that from the circulation of ideas to national-level policy, new political actors and strategies are stirring.

In short, range of new political activity with progressive characteristics has emerged and gained momentum. The progressive actors studied here are, in one way or another, advocating for



transforming beyond a capitalist housing system. Their ideas, projects, activity, and policy are striving to curtail markets, increase downward redistribution, and advance both a defensive guarantee that people can stay in their homes, and an offensive strategy to create a more inclusive, just, and green housing system.

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