

Insurgent Policymaking:

How the housing justice movement challenges neoliberal policy in the United States

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Abstract

Urban social movements engage centrally in defensive claims and actions at the municipal and state levels in the United States. This paper illustrates the case of tenants as insurgent policy actors mobilizing an offensive government-interventionist agenda that targeted federal institutions. A process-based framework of *insurgent policymaking* is proposed, which is comprised of two multi-scalar social processes: bottom-up policy agenda formation and movement-to-party impact, each of which contains a sequence of causal mechanisms. A case study reconstructs the Homes Guarantee campaign and the variety of innovative tactics employed to influence five federal electoral-representative institutions: the caucus, the presidential campaign, the party platform, the party leadership agenda, and legislation. The campaign moved the Democratic Party's housing policy agenda left, driving the inclusion of \$65 billion to sustainably retrofit public housing units in the Build Back Better Act, which passed in the House of Representatives. Urban movements scaled-up to challenge neoliberal federal policy.

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Introduction

On 19 November 2021, speaking from the Speaker’s Rostrum of the US House of Representatives, Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced: “On this vote: the Yeas are 220. The Nays are 213. The Build Back Better Bill is passed,” referring to a 2.2 trillion-dollar piece of social and climate legislation. The act contained \$151 billions of housing investments, including the unprecedented \$65 billion toward public housing for sustainability retrofits. Before the vote, Congressmember Maxine Waters said from the floor, “Housing is infrastructure” and this bill “provides the largest investment in America's housing infrastructure in history.”¹ This paper explains how a grassroots coalition played a key role in securing this allocation of federal funds toward public housing – an often-neglected and -denigrated urban policy area.

Below, I retrace an episode of contentious urban politics and consider its significance. For decades, social scientists have called for a nuanced analysis of the interaction between social movements and electoral-representative political institutions (Piven 2006; McAdam and Tarrow 2010; 2013; Pasotti 2013; Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini 2018; Hacker et al. 2022). Housing movements as multi-scalar urban social movements provide key insights into this gap, and an urban theory of political change more broadly. I introduce a framework of *insurgent policymaking* – which occurs when *a combination of social processes results in ordinary people challenging elites to transform entrenched electoral-representative political institutions* – to illustrate how tenants and urban grievances can influence politicians, campaigns, elections, political parties, policy agendas, courts, and legislation (Piven 2006, 2; Dahl 2005, 188). In this case, change

occurred despite housing's status as a regressive policy domain where a vast majority of federal expenditures go to the middle- and upper-income households through the mortgage interest deduction.² Tenants by definition lack ownership rights where they live, and are overwhelmingly lower class, racially diverse, indebted, and overrepresent those with vulnerable immigration status. Thus, tenants have limited resources to influence elites and policymakers. Insurgent policymaking is, in a word, the antithetical practice to elite policymaking. The case below presents how urban movements may disrupt the mainstream consensus of neoliberal federal policy in the United States.

Before the 2020 presidential election, a nationwide tenant coalition called People's Action developed a broad and progressive campaign. The coalition drew on a network of 40 urban organizations nationwide and collectively wrote an innovative platform called the *Homes Guarantee* with an intersectional vision linking housing, climate, health, racial justice, and reparations policy areas. People's Action then mobilized a still broader alliance that leveraged urban protests, branding, allies, and polling to activate elected officials as strategic partners. The campaign impacted five electoral-representative institutions: (1) the caucus, (2) the presidential campaign, (3) the party platform, (4) the party leadership agenda, and (5) legislation (see Table 1). In the end, by way of the Build Back Better Bill, \$65 billion to sustainably retrofit public housing units passed in the House before failing in the Senate.

Conventional participation in liberal democracies consists of joining parties and casting votes, and practices that challenge conventional participation have been labeled social mobilization (Piven and Cloward 1977; Friedmann 1987) or more recently insurgent practices (Holston 1995; Friedmann 2002; Miraftab 2009; Bazurli and Kaufmann 2023). Holston argued that localized "spaces of an insurgent citizenship ... embody possible alternative futures" (Holston 1995, 39), which Miraftab (2009, 46, 33) extended to three dimensions of insurgent planning:

counter-hegemonic acts that “destabilize the normalized order of things,” *transgressive* acts that overcome “false dichotomies ... [of] invited/invented spaces of citizenship practice,” and *imaginative* by “promoting the concept of a different world.” Building on these place-based concepts, I introduce *insurgent policymaking* as a broad range of *bottom-up practices by coordinated non-elite groups that successfully redirect the dominant policy ideology, agendas, and law*.

Progressive policy “needs this very, very intricate pathway” to advance because its champions are “super minority” in Congress, said a consultant in an interview. To navigate this intricate pathway and achieve insurgent policymaking, the *Homes Guarantee* coalition developed a range of novel offensive claims and tactics in coordination with allies and media attention. I argue that this urban movement’s success foreshadows continued disruptive practices and likely further accommodation by political regimes of more progressive policy across scales, impacting cities and the housing system more broadly.

I proceed in three parts. First, I introduce gaps in the literature, the analytical framework, and the methods. Second, I contextualize the perceived need among progressive political actors in the 2010s for a new policy agenda on housing along with the new electoral politics of the left. The remainder of the paper retraces the political episode. I conclude by reflecting on how insurgent policymaking by the housing justice movement drove the ascendance of transformative urban policy visions to the core of the Democratic Party, illustrating new multi-scalar avenues of influence from municipal to federal politics.

Literature review and contribution

Housing movements have recently received growing attention (Lees and Ferreri 2016; Lichterman 2020; Rodriguez 2021; Michener and SoRelle 2022; Messamore 2024), nested in the broader category of urban social movements (Castells 1983, xvi), which Nicholls and Jain (2023, 157) define as: “broad and sustained forms of collective action that are motivated by urbanized inequalities and conflicts and that are mediated by urban networks, cultures, and state institutions.” While Marcuse (1999) argued that no housing justice movement had mobilized and succeeded at the federal level in US history, the findings differ in this case of a multi-scalar campaign.

I identify three gaps in the literature across urban studies: (1) little work systematically analyzes the interaction between contentious and electoral politics, (2) the tendency to prioritize local and state over federal politics, and (3) the common interpretation of urban mobilizations as defensive. First, scholars have advocated for deeper work at the intersection of social movements, pressure groups, and electoral politics (Piven 2006; McAdam and Tarrow 2010; Hacker et al. 2022). “The relations between social movements and elections,” McAdam and Tarrow (2010, 532) wrote, “have seldom been specified in a systematic way.” Second, social movements directed at the local and state levels of government have received greater attention among urban movement researchers than the federal level (Castells 1983; Fisher 1984; Goetz 1993; Lichterman 2020; Pasotti 2020), and under banners or frameworks such as municipalism and right to the city (Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer 2011; Oakley and Fraser 2016; Thompson 2021). For example, housing movement gains in Latin America around autonomy and increased participation are locally concentrated “but pose problems for aggregation of interests and decision-making at a larger scale” (Chris Tilly and Kennedy 2014, 559–60). Fincher and McQuillen (1989, 612) argued that linking local cases to “organizations and institutions of larger scope warrants study.” Third, sociologists and urbanists have found forms of community resistance to be often defensive or

reactive (Dreier 1984, 273; Lawson 1986, 2; Marcuse and Madden 2016; Pasotti 2020). In summarizing the history of housing justice movements in the US, Marcuse (1999, 84) emphasized “a single interest that they have in common: the defense ... of the personal lifeworld against the pressures of a profit-oriented economic system.”

These research gaps are not universal. Urbanists have found that urban regimes respond to contentious politics (N. I. Fainstein and Fainstein 1983, 257), more multi-scalar analysis of movements is necessary (Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto 2008; Okechukwu 2019) beyond the neighborhood level (Heathcott 2005; Taylor 2021), and that the direction of housing movements can contain both defensive and offensive tactics (Haas and Heskin 1981; Mironova 2019). Fincher and McQuillen (1989, 612) wrote:

Rather than dismissing urban social movements as unlikely to be other than defensive and co-opted because of their local agendas, we need to know how a viable local-national relationship may be developed and preserved.

Multi-scalar tenant coalitions provide a useful window on the multi-scalar social mechanisms of urban movements in action influencing federal electoral-representative institutions.

When considering a broader range of social movements, historical sociologists have certainly grappled with the tactics and relationship of movements to the state, direction of contention, and scale. First, tactical innovation – “the creativity of insurgents in devising new tactical forms” (McAdam 1983, 736) that impact the state – has continued to receive attention among an interdisciplinary cohort of scholars (McAdam and Tarrow 2010; Lees and Ferreri 2016; Pasotti 2020). Second, Tilly’s (1976) typology of contentious action between 1500-1975 claimed that changes, for example, from *locally-reactive* to *nationally-proactive* mobilizations in the past 200 years occurred concurrently with state transformation (e.g., consolidation) and the formation of collective associations (e.g., labor unions). Thus, in analyzing the housing justice movement

and its reaction to neoliberal policymaking, I will be particularly attentive to the transformation of state forces (e.g., deregulation, social spending cuts, party change, etc.) and collective associations (e.g., tenant unions, coalitions, and digital connectivity). “The local housing movement in the United States,” Goetz (1993, 75) wrote, “is one of the political by products of the Raegan federalism reforms.”

Analytical framework: a process-based framework of insurgent policymaking

Insurgent policymaking entails non-elites shifting ideological foundations of a given policy area, transforming public agendas and debates, and proposing or passing new laws. This paper introduces a process-based framework of insurgent policymaking by breaking this form of multi-scalar urban contestation into a series of parts: context, challengers, targets, and electoral representative political institutions. Mechanisms “are the events that link effects to causes,” reoccurring similarly across cases (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2008, 309).

“Social *processes* ... consist of sequences and combinations of causal *mechanisms*. To explain contentious politics is to identify its recurrent causal mechanisms, the ways they combine, in what sequences they recur, and why different combinations and sequences, starting from different initial conditions, produce varying effects on the large scale” (original emphasis, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 12–13)

Mechanisms and processes have explanatory power because they can be observed, isolated, sequenced, and generalized across space and time. The framework aims to create generalizable findings, complementing quantitative large sample-based research that relies on static snapshots of variables or qualitative cases that shy away from generalizations. In this case, insurgent policymaking comprises of two social processes: bottom-up policy agenda formation and movement-to-party impact (*see* Figure 1). Each process contains multiple mechanisms, many of which have been observed across other cases, providing future scholars the opportunity to identify

and then verify or invalidate whether these mechanisms operate – similarly or distinctively – in other sequences, times, and places.

The two social processes highlighted in this case build on and provide additional analytical precision to the well documented process of *upward scale shift*: “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; also 332–35). The mechanisms of *diffusion* and *brokerage* allow the pivot beyond the local. Diffusion consists of the dissemination of ideas and practices across preexisting connections, and brokerage occurs by linking previously disconnected entities. Both can lead to an increase in effectiveness – causing scale shift – when the first mover and follower share similar qualities, and when the claims are framed effectively. And, finally, contentious activity spreads across space by followers emulating these dynamics. While the mechanisms diffusion and brokerage occur throughout this case, and I flag them in passing, the mechanisms that I introduce capture with more specificity insurgent policymaking.

Bottom-up policy agenda formation consists of three mechanisms: grassroots policy innovation, self-presentation, and coalition formation. *Grassroots policy innovation* occurs through people developing a critique and proposition for a new broad policy vision that transcends conventions. *Self-presentation* constitutes a challenger group presenting itself as powerful through a series of practices, such as listing large membership networks, demonstrations, press releases, and framing claims to multiple targets – “choosing language that highlights agreed upon ideational elements, while downplaying differences” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2008, 319) – and generating polling to demonstrate the popularity of agendas. Finally, *coalition formation* is the

dynamic of bringing together multiple groups or agents for an agreed upon goal, in which the brokering of new relationships occurs, and the diffusion of strategy.

Movement-to-party impact explains how coordinated challengers impact political party actors and dynamics (McAdam and Tarrow 2010, 533). Referring to the social movement left in the United States, Mayer (2023) suggested: "Only by participating in elections can one mobilize and become politically visible."³ Three mechanisms make up this final process: coalitions challenging elected officials, intra-party polarization, and certification. *Coalitions challenging elected officials* occurs when coalitions engage in targeted actions that can result in elite defection (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2008, 319), even if temporarily, or the activation of strategic allies that can advance campaign objectives inside the political establishment. *Intra-party polarization* follows, wherein formerly stable relations in the political alignment become unstable or are reconfigured. The two-party system in the US has long been recognized to discourage outsiders or challengers; thus "intra-party mobilization" has become one of the only avenues for moving parties in new directions, and is especially possible during times of crisis (Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini 2018, 329). Finally, *policy certification* builds on the general mechanism of certification (Charles Tilly 2003, 223), wherein authorities validate the claims, performances, and existence of challengers in the policymaking process via impact on debate, introduction, passage, or failure.

Methods

Scholars have advocated for deploying qualitative methods like participant observation and interviews to capture the mechanisms involved in the formation and impact of social movements and coalitions (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2008, 317). I constructed a case study (Yin 1984) of the meso-level phenomenon of the political campaign. Between 2019 and 2023, fifteen in-depth

interviews were undertaken that serve as the bedrock of this paper, supported by three dozen supplementary interviews and scores of open-ended and follow-up conversations. I also participated in and observed public events, for example, a fellowship in Washington DC, providing access and aiding snowballing. Interviewees worked with local organizations and non-profits, universities, foundations, advocacy organizations, national networks, congressional offices, federal agencies, and often operated in multiple vocational silos. I spoke with people working with Senator Bernie Sanders, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, People's Action, the National Housing Law Project, Data for Progress, Harvard Joint Center on Housing Policy, Tides Foundation, Ground Game LA, People Organized for Westside Renewal (Los Angeles), and PUSH Buffalo, among others.

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). Scholars of case studies and social movements advocate for layering and triangulating data to strengthen the validity (Yin 1984; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2008, 324–26; Ayoub, Wallace, and Zepeda-Millán 2014). To this end, I participated in multiple tenant rights trainings and demonstrations, campaign rallies featuring politician speakers, and committee hearings. I primarily observed the campaign and activities, and only occasionally actively participated or led activities. Interviews and observations were supplemented with policy documents, organizational websites, and news reporting. Policy documents included White House and Congressional policy briefs, congressional committee meeting video recordings and transcripts, legislation drafts, and vote counts at congress.gov. Organizational documents, photos, press releases, and newspaper interviews provided additional details.

The current conjuncture of housing politics

The current conjuncture of housing politics in the United States is punctuated by decades rental housing policy neoliberalization and the new electoral politics of the left.

Neoliberal rental housing

In the United States, policy mechanisms informed by neoliberal economics, such as tax credits and subsidies to developers and vouchers to qualifying individuals, have dominated political agendas on rental housing for decades (Marcuse 2001; Oakley and Fraser 2016). These shallow subsidy programs replaced former deep subsidy programs, such as public housing (Goetz 2013, 4–5), as one element of dismantling welfare state programs (Goetz 1993; Pierson 1994, 74–99). While the Republican Party and notably Presidents Nixon and Raegan may be responsible for the first wave of rollbacks, Democratic Party leaders were also hostile to public housing between the 1990s and 2000s. For example, in 1993, Hope VI’s revitalization of public housing led to the privatization of part of the stock (Arena 2012; Hackworth 2006), in 1999 President Clinton signed 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 Preservation, Enhancement, and Transformation of Rental Assistance Act (PETRA), which Representative Maxine Waters warned could lead to further privatization (Shelterforce 2010). PETRA died in the House of Representatives, but a related reform (the Rental Assistance Demonstration program) passed Congress becoming law, and has continued to reduce the quantity of publicly owned units. As deep subsidy programs saw cuts, local and state officials attempted to address needs in this area.

The new electoral politics of the left

The past decade has seen a surge in new progressive actors participating in electoral politics in the United States. The 2016 Sanders presidential campaign galvanized many new participants through unprecedented volunteer networks and small donations (Moody 2022; Mayer and Hitschler 2023). Despite his progressive legacy in Burlington, VT, including launching arguably one of the country's most successful Community Land Trusts, and leadership passing the National Housing Trust Fund in 2008, his 2016 presidential campaign engaged housing with caution. A Sanders staffer interviewed stated that Sanders's 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. In 2016, Sanders's insider staffers minimized the progressive edge of the policy agenda in the name of broader public appeal. Nonetheless, his campaign galvanized a new generation to become involved in electoral and representative politics (Gautney 2018). For example, one watershed moment came with the 2018 election of Ocasio-Cortez, leading Sanders to say ideas "once considered to be radical are now part of the mainstream" (Wallace-Wells 2018).

However, despite the electoral surge since 2018, no housing agenda existed for the newly expanded Congressional Progressive Caucus. Progressive policymakers needed – two political consultants reported in interviews – a housing policy platform to complement other progressive agendas, such as climate justice, universal healthcare, immigrant rights, and worker power.⁴ They also added, mirroring Sanders's (1997, 3) earlier statement, that limited resources remained a challenge to exerting power in Congress. An interviewee working for Ocasio-Cortez stressed that congressmembers only had a few policy staff to cover a massive range of topics. Advocates also

felt that the dominant Democratic Party establishment think tanks like Demos, the Roosevelt Institute, and the Center for American Progress were peripheral for insurgent progressives and lacked a new housing vision. For decades, the major interest groups lobbying policymakers on housing had taken a particular form: pro-market lobbyists (developers, relators, landlords) versus nonprofit affordable housing developers (Jacobs 2015). An interviewee said, “there is an entire nonprofit-industrial-complex around housing” that eclipses more insurgent perspectives.

Bottom-up policy agenda formation

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

—Tenant organizer, Los Angeles in 2020

To challenge mainstream policy agendas, tenants formed a new coalition, wrote a legislative package called the *Homes Guarantee*, and in-so-doing sparked a new political imagination. As noted above, this national federation of tenant organizations influenced federal political institutions via two multi-scalar social processes: bottom-up policy agenda formation and movement-to-party impact. First, I will present bottom-up policy agenda formation, which consists of (1) grassroots policy innovation, (2) self-presentation, and (3) coalition formation.

Grassroots policy innovation

The new vision emerged from People’s Action, a national network founded in 2016 that linked 40 member organizations working with communities across the country and claimed to advocate on behalf of one million people across the country through insight from over 100,000 conversations.⁵

The network centered tenants: “The people closest to the problems are closest to the solutions”

(People’s Action 2019, 2). People’s Action aimed to “build a multi-racial populism,” to advance big ideas, to create progressive infrastructure, and to capture political power.⁶

In 2017, People’s Action launched a multiracial national housing campaign in Washington DC. And in 2018 it convened a summit in upstate New York with 50 professional organizers, tenant leaders, “public housing residents, tenants of corporate landlords, [and] people experiencing homelessness,” said a participant that I interviewed. The summit aimed to launch and advance a campaign before the 2020 presidential election. Reflecting on conversations at the summit, an activist said they agreed that “housing is a human right, but what would that look like in practice?” Out of the collective dialogue, the tenants opted not to propose incremental reforms to the status quo, but rather, as one participant said: “propose the system change that we need.” Over the next year, People’s Action wrote “a comprehensive legislative package” released in September 2019: *The Homes Guarantee Briefing Book*. The program was “movement-led,” an organizer said, “both the policy, but also the process.” Rose Fernandez of Community Voices Heard in New York summarized the message: “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.”⁷

Homes Guarantee innovated housing policy through its grassroots-informed, comprehensive reimagination of the housing system, structural links to climate and health policy, integration of vulnerable homeowners, and elements aiming to correct the country’s history of racial and colonial violence (e.g. expanding Fair Housing protections). It was “a project of radical imagination,” one campaign leader said. The program entailed: building 12 million green social housing units, investing in decarbonizing public housing, creating a National Tenants’ Bill of Rights, paying reparations, curtailing real estate speculation and implementing universal zoning

reforms, assembling a People’s Housing Commission, and applying the Green New Deal framework to our housing system (People’s Action 2019, 12, 7). Multiple dimensions of the program aimed to steer away from neoliberal policy tools, instead increasing state intervention, community control, and decommodifying housing (see Marcuse and Madden 2016). As Holston (1995, 53) suggests, insurgent citizens advance a “new social imagination.”

The campaign affirmatively framed this urban policy vision as a clear and powerful message in jargon-free prose to non-experts and ordinary people, which aimed at federal politics, but could be taken up in municipalities. The claim created a title – a *Homes Guarantee* – as a proactive, inclusive, restorative, sustainable housing justice vision. 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, stall in the courts, and be rhetorically coopted by elites. The program demanded extending new benefits and entitlement to “a public option for housing” (People’s Action 2019, 19). The new vision accelerated the campaign’s growth and scale shift through grassroots policy innovation, affirmative framing, and a succinct message for diffusion, consistent with previous research (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 332).

Self-presentation

The campaign effectively displayed itself – which I refer to as *self-presentation* – as a large, coordinated, and committed group of individuals and organizations that could be mobilized to advance a new policy vision. This occurred across three channels: (1) growing the bottom-up people power, (2) disseminating the message across digital channels, and (3) movement polling.

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). Locally rooted partners leveraged place-based relationships with the Homes Guarantee vision to bring new people into the movement, including through marches and protests. Second, the campaign disseminated Homes Guarantee via short educational and animated videos, writings, in-person and online events, and press releases with quotes and photos yielding significant news coverage of the campaign (57 articles linked on homepage), illustrating scope and resonance⁸ Online technologies facilitated accelerated connectivity for strategy development, promotion, events, trainings, and follow up – expanding diffusion, growth, and scale shift (Leitner, Sheppard, and Sziarto 2008; Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

Third, tenants also employed *movement polling* by recruiting a polling firm to measure the popularity of policy proposals among the US voting public, facilitating the diffusion of ideas and subsequent emulation of policy agendas by municipal organizations and elected officials. The coalition partnered with Data for Progress (DFP), a progressive think tank founded in 2018 by Sean McElwee that innovated polling by creating low-cost (around \$8,000 for a national sample) surveys via text messages, sometimes offering services free of charge.⁹ 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.¹⁰ “For Data for Progress, the strategy is Politics 101: Politicians like policies that are popular” (Lerer 2021). DFP rapidly grew in influence. Biden reportedly mentioned their data to aides, and “Schumer, the majority leader, teamed up with its leaders for news conferences, blog posts and legislation” (quoted in Lerer 2021).

In August 2019, DFP ran its first survey on a Green Homes Guarantee, showing “compelling evidence that a majority of Americans want 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 in which coalition partners co-authored the report. The results 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, Raghuv eer, et al. 2019, 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, Raghuv eer, et al. 2019, 5). The polling showed how green retrofits, public housing, and a Tenants Bill of Rights, performed well among all voters, especially Democratic, voters; among Republicans a majority supported green retrofits, half supported retrofitting public housing, and only a slim majority opposed a Tenants Bill of Rights.

Around the time that the coalition honed its strategic agenda around sustainable retrofits of public housing, survey researchers began investigating the impact of linking climate with other policy areas. For example, when climate policy gets bundled with “affordable housing,” it sees an increase in popularity by 11%, suggesting intersectional movements and policy demands resonate among the public (Bergquist, Mildemberger, and Stokes 2020, 4).

Coalition formation

Between 2018-2019, the campaign assembled a group of additional partners to create a coalition across housing and climate movements. Broadening the agenda to new grassroots spaces and recruiting allies through brokerage created new political opportunities for upward scale shift and to navigate representative channels and bypass gatekeepers, such as opposition, consultants, and think tanks peddling status quo policy tools. Concurrently, multiple exogenous forces were at play, including a widespread housing crisis and growing climate movement. “The depth and breadth of

the [housing] crisis,” an organizer said, “is at a level now that is impossible to ignore,” and environmental organizing by the Sunrise Movement grew in membership and influence, for example, famously occupying the office of Speaker Pelosi with then Representative-elect Ocasio-Cortez, a photo that later appeared on the cover of a *Homes Guarantee* campaign report trumpeting favorable polling.

An exogenous factor to the campaign, in February 2019 while tenants were drafting the *Homes Guarantee*, newly elected Representative Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey introduced the “Green New Deal [GND] Resolution,” containing only a passing mention of housing: “guaranteeing that all members of society can have ... affordable, safe, and adequate housing.”¹¹ The GND Resolution (2019) emphasized more jobs to transition our economy from fossil fuels. The day after the resolution was introduced, *Jacobin* published sociologist and scholar-activist Daniel Aldana Cohen's response that housing should be central: a “low-carbon housing guarantee” (2019a, 9). 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 *Homes Guarantee* coalition and Ocasio-Cortez’s staff independently recruited Cohen in the following weeks because his diagnosis resonated. Cohen participated in a tenant outreach workshop with Ocasio-Cortez’s team in the Bronx, later becoming a policy advisor to her office. Subsequently, he also joined calls with People’s Action and co-authored the *Homes Guarantee Briefing Book*.

Movement-to-party impact

Having built strength and influence, the movement and strategic allies bargained and won concessions from the Democratic Party leadership in Washington, DC. This occurred across five

institutions: (1) the caucus, (2) presidential campaign, (3) the party platform, (4) party leadership agendas, and (5) legislation. Ocasio-Cortez's leadership in the Congressional Progressive Caucus and Sanders's presidential campaign resulted in new opportunities for tenant movement demands to impact the electoral-representative system. Through their allyship, the regime opened to left populism, and then candidate Vice President Biden needed the support of progressives to beat President Trump.

Challenging politicians

Challenging politicians began through a sign-on pledge supporting the campaign, as well as through the caucus and the presidential campaign, followed by other dimensions. First, People's Action created a Homes Guarantee Pledge signed by over a hundred elected officials in 2020.¹²

The Caucus

Second, as People's Action recruited Cohen, he became a crucial broker in this episode, introducing People's Action to Ocasio-Cortez's team. The new communication channel linked the campaign to new networks involved in Congress. The connections then snowballed to the broader Squad and Congressional Progressive Caucus. "For the first time," an organizer said, "we have candidates and elected leaders 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."

Local knowledge and expert allies informed the housing-climate link, which historically has been ambiguous or at least uneven. "Most 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.” Cohen’s status as an Ivy League professor served progressive politicians who could cite research supporting their agenda, as he codeveloped research in direct collaboration with movements and progressives to advance a new agenda. Cohen attributed innovation to People’s Action’s national campaign director: “It’s Tara [Raghuveer, leader of Kansas City Tenants Union], I think, who understood correctly that linking the Green New Deal and housing was good.” On the ground, coalition partners had experimented with campaigns combining housing and climate advocacy. For example, PUSH Buffalo employed the slogan “No Bills! No Drills!” during educational outreach to encapsulate how alternatives to fossil fuel extraction, like expanding electric grids, could lower tenant utility bills.

The campaign also recruited politicians to advance their agenda. “People's Action is going to AOC and saying,” someone working with her said, “if you want credibility as a houser, you need to work with us.” The same went for Senators Warren and Sanders, building on past interactions. For example, in July 2017 Warren had spoken to a packed room of tenant activists during a day of action in Washington DC to “Stop Trump’s War on the Poor,” which demanded #NoCuts to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development; a few months later in November, Sanders had spoken at the launch of People’s Action national housing campaign.

When politicians speak in public space at rallies or share information with urban activists, it shows their general support of local campaigns. I refer to this limited stance as *sympathetic support*. However, a shift occurred from *sympathetic* to *strategic support*, in which the *Homes Guarantee* coalition and politicians from municipal to federal office engaged in active dialogue, tactical development, and mutual dependency. Tenant as insurgent policymakers oscillated between outside (urban protest) and inside (party lobbying and negotiating) tactics. This activated

strategic support from multiple elected officials, though the resulting partnerships remained fragile (see Table 2).

The Presidential Campaign

Cohen advocated for 2020 presidential candidates to link housing and climate.

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 but sometimes passive partner to the coalition. Early on, People's Action staff described him as a target, not collaborator. An organizer said, a goal was “to get Bernie to say, ‘I want to have a Homes Guarantee.’” Activating Sanders as a strategic ally occurred through multiple mechanisms underlying a bottom-up policy agenda: a perceived-to-be significant base of support and authenticity of the campaign, innovative policy vision and framing, and polling to show the popularity of the agenda.

Sanders's 2020 campaign adopted goals of the campaign 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.¹³ “Line-by-line,” an organizer said, “you can see our grassroots vision for a Homes Guarantee in Senator Sanders's plan.”¹⁴ A consultant said, “His campaign feels like Tara [Raghuveer] 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 signed the Homes Guarantee pledge. Bonin also proposed a Homes Guarantee LA package of policies, illustrating the continued multi-scalar association between a national coalition and local policy.

The broad resonance of Sanders’s 2020 campaign amplified his influence. He received nearly 10 million votes in the primaries (Biden received 19 million), reiterating his vision for a new housing system in speeches nationwide. Reflecting on 2020, PA organizers were “shocked” by the “wildly different place than in 2016. None of [the 2016 candidates] had legit plans. And now every single candidate has a plan.” During the 2020 campaign, the coalition served as a go-to point of reference for tenants for Democratic Party candidates. The coalition was “basically in dialogue with every campaign,” an organizer said. Despite Sanders losing the 2020 primary to Biden, his becoming a strategic partner and ally to the coalition provided a new lane of influence to advance *Homes Guarantee* in the Democratic Party.

Intra-party polarization and certification

The Party Platform

In July 2018, Sanders and Biden released joint *Unity Task Force Recommendations* to inform the convening of the 2020 Democratic National Convention and Party Platform.¹⁵ Sanders had appointed Ocasio-Cortez as co-chair of the task force on climate change, demonstrating the inclusion of progressives in drafting the party agenda. While neither the recommendations nor the party platform explicitly mentioned flagship progressive policy slogans – like a Green New Deal, Medicare for All, Housing for All – the platform echoed coalition positions.¹⁶ 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,”¹⁷ introducing a “Renter Bill of Rights,”¹⁸ “supercharg[ing] investment through the Housing Trust Fund,”¹⁹ and “support[ing] creation and expansion of ... community land trusts.”²⁰ It also mentioned that Democrats would “combat gentrification,” “impose penalties for absentee homeowners,” and “provide legal support to fight wrongful evictions.”²¹ Reflecting on 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 the fact that you're basically opening the door for Trump if you don't at least wink at your progressive wing.

Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez advanced substantive dimensions of the Homes Guarantee campaign within the platform. Yet, platforms themselves, a consultant said, are “always [to the] left of the party politics.” Like Ocasio-Cortez, Sanders benefited from the coalition’s 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.” He needed to operate as a disruptive political actor, employing outside strategies from the inside, with the backing of the tenant movement. The structure of opportunities illustrates Sander’s influence on the platform: *Homes Guarantee* allies informed his *Homes for All* platform, in which housing had been an unstable policy area, and subsequently, Biden’s vulnerability to Sanders’s base required conceding to progressive demands. Including progressive housing demands in the Party Platform – a first step in policy certification – foreshadowed further dialogue around legislation.

Party leadership agendas

As Biden took office, the Covid-19 pandemic overshadowed the country. Crises provide a window of opportunity to advance significant institutional changes, and Biden introduced an ambitious

slate of bills with majorities in both chambers of Congress. On 11 March 2021 Biden signed the American Rescue Plan, a \$1.9 trillion 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.

To influence one of Biden’s signature bills, the 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). The proposal needed to be seeded in both chambers of Congress.

On 31 March 2021, Biden introduced *The American Jobs Plan*, a significant 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 eliminating 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.”²² While Biden’s *American Jobs Plan* included \$40 billion for public housing – following up on the Party Platform and conceding to general priorities of the *Homes Guarantee* – the campaign and allies demanded more from the president.

Legislation

To establish priorities for federal legislation, leadership in both chambers of Congress cull issues from committee chairs, debate components, and aggregate content into a draft bill. Lobbyists’

pressure and various agendas compete to capture the attention of politicians. The most important congressional committees for advancing housing policy 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 founding member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus) and stacked with three members of the Squad (a group of newly elected young, progressive House members of color, now numbering eight): Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, and Ayanna Pressley. Sherrod Brown, one of the most left-leaning Democratic 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 House

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 California.” The committee led by Waters between 2019–2023 held 55 hearings on housing.²³ “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 2021). Progressive Congresswoman Premila Jayapal remarked, “Chairwoman Waters ... from the first day that I entered into Congress has said housing is infrastructure. And she reminds us of that every single day.”²⁴ 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 coalition and advocates 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

In the Senate, the Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs committee lacked enough support to advance priorities. Thus, Majority Leader Schumer became a target of direct action and lobbying. On 20 April 2020, New York Communities for Change, with other grassroots organizations, marched from Representative Hakeem Jeffries's house to Senator Schumer's house demanding that the Senator advocate to cancel rent and fund the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). In addition, someone working for Ocasio-Cortez said that behind closed doors, she cajoled Schumer to negotiate over making major progressive climate and housing policy concessions, threatening she would otherwise run against him in the New York primary for Senate. In 2021, some newspapers also reported that Ocasio-Cortez was considering primarying Schumer:

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 upcoming months ... [W]ill he work to pass ambitious, progressive legislation favored by the left (Otterbein 2021)?

It was a very fortuitous circumstance: Ocasio-Cortez had exploded onto the political scene only two years prior. She had listed as one of *Time 100*'s most influential people, ranking tenth in popularity among US politicians. In *Time*'s profile, Warren (2019) wrote: "[Ocasio-Cortez's] commitment to putting power in the hands of the people is forged in fire."²⁵ Schumer agreed to negotiate with Ocasio-Cortez's team. A significant priority under debate became sustainably retrofitting, thus 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 capital into a dramatically underfunded program targeting precarious tenants. It also directly served Schumer's and Ocasio-Cortez's constituents (New York City 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 that the *American Jobs Plan* had \$40 billion allocated for decarbonizing public housing; Ocasio-Cortez's negotiator requested \$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 to potentially cut funds while retaining maximum carbon reductions, as Ocasio-Cortez's negotiator recounted in an interview:

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 how can you avoid all this mold, but how can we get to our carbon targets?

Months after these 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 limited reporting on the primary threat, no journalists reported, to my knowledge, that the primary threat leveraged Schumer to champion policy on decarbonizing public housing. Renovating preexisting housing in this legislation, a consultant said, "doesn't have to be weighed against the climate plan, but can be counted as part of climate." Once the Waters Committee in the House was on board and Schumer became a strategic actor as Senate Leader, "Suddenly you have like this lane, which is like really, really good," a consultant said.

Party leadership as a temporary strategic ally

Following negotiations with Ocasio-Cortez, on 17 April 2021 Schumer gathered with local housing advocates in New York City to publicly respond to Biden’s *American Jobs Plan*. He invited Ocasio-Cortez to join his press conference, but she declined. Schumer deplored the fact that public housing had been the target of “cutback after cutback: the Bush administration cutback ... the state cutback, the city cutback.”²⁶ Schumer said:

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.”²⁷

Schumer started the speech 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.”²⁸ Schumer said that he had a growing list of pledges among Congressmembers to raise the investment in public housing. However, he didn’t make the rhetorical link or deeper connections between decarbonizing housing and green jobs in the GND. As leadership conceded to progressive demands – certifying bottom-up policy demands – both Schumer and Biden stopped short of framing as the GND. If leadership wouldn’t, Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders would double-down.

Progressive allies employed a dual-legislative strategy

Two days after Schumer’s announcement on 19 April 2021, Ocasio-Cortez reintroduced the “Green New Deal for Public Housing Act,” this time co-sponsored by Sanders, as *the* flagship piece of GND legislation, asking for \$172 billion investment in green retrofits of units 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).²⁹ This signaled and demanded of Biden a more significant investment beyond what had been proposed by him (\$40 bn), Waters (\$80 bn), and Schumer (\$80 bn). The proposed law would contribute to “weatherizing, electrifying and modernizing our public housing so that it may serve as a model of efficiency, sustainability, and resiliency for the rest of the nation.”³⁰ It would create 240,000 new jobs per year, a labor force that would transform all 950,000 public housing units into zero-carbon buildings, reducing 5.6 million metric tons of carbon emissions 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 Clinton’s Faircloth Amendment. The monumental significance is illustrated in comments by Diane Yentel’s of the National Low Income Housing Coalition calling this “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!” (Cochrane 2021).

By reintroducing the GND for Public Housing, Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders further extended the left flank of the party’s housing policy. The coalition had constructed a dual legislative strategy: recruiting Democratic Party leaders in Congress through the activation of strategic allies to champion new policies while simultaneously pressuring the White House to invest more, thereby extending demands on the left flank of the party. While the second stage did not result in additional concessions from the White House, it nonetheless expanded public debate on the policy, and polarized the party from within, consistent with research (Hutter, Kriesi, and Lorenzini 2018).

Leadership broke the Congressional Progressive Caucus’s bargaining power

Following the passage of the American Rescue Plan in March and the ensuing pressure in the House and Senate, the agenda returned to the White House. On 24 June 2021, a bipartisan group of Senators met with Biden 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 ensure that both moved through the legislative process promptly and in tandem. Let me emphasize that: and in tandem.”³¹ By two bills, Biden meant the IIJA (which required a supermajority vote of 60 Senators to overcome the filibuster) and a second bill to address human infrastructure and climate, which later became known as Build Back Better Plan (BBB) (which required a simple majority of 50 votes to pass through the reconciliation process).

Schumer claimed that it was his idea to link both bills, evidence of his strategic partnership with progressives, to prevent moderate Democrats from breaking with the party and voting against the second bill (Savage 2021). In the House, the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC) stated that they would withhold upwards of 60 votes to prevent the IIJA’s passage if it was not linked to BBB, illustrating intra-party divisions. 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 to retain bipartisan support (Liptak 2021). CPC members met to discuss whether they would support IIJA if decoupled and, in the end, were pressured by Democratic Party leadership (especially Biden, Pelosi, Schumer and the Congressional Black Caucus) to support IIJA so that the Democrats could pass IIJA before the midterm elections. In exchange, Biden assured the CPC that center-right Senator Manchin had committed to supporting a version of BBB in the reconciliation process at a later date. The

leadership's pressure broke the CPC holdout, first with CPC Chair Jayapal agreeing to the deal, leading most members to follow suit and support IJJA. Core 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 15 November 2021 (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.” A consultant blamed the CPC's inability to bargain with the Party Leadership for a unified IJJA-BBB as CPC's inability to holdout as a collective voting block. Despite activating and multiplying working relationships with the Party Leadership, strategic partnership is often temporary and reverts to *fallback* to previous alignments. Thus, insurgent policymaking emerging from urban movements must confront complex, actually existing institutional barriers, which remain most substantial at the federal level (Hacker et al. 2022, 201).

The White House agenda included major investments in public housing

On 28 October 2023, Biden released a revision of BBB that aimed to significantly address climate and social policy, which increased funding to \$65 billion for decarbonizing public housing, claiming that it would be “the single largest and most comprehensive investment in affordable housing in history.”³² Schumer (2021) insisted again on increasing the funding to at least \$80 billion in an op-ed; Waters stated publicly that she was against “deep cuts in housing,” and both House and Senate housing committees opposed to reducing housing funds if negotiations ensued with Manchin (O'Donnell and Cassella 2021). Despite the public rebuke, the public housing money remained at \$65 billion. On 11 November 2021, the House passed the Build Back Better Act, the most significant infusion of funds for public housing in recent history, a major

accomplishment of the 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).

Opposition activated: Senator Manchin blocks

Despite passage in the House, on 19 December 2021, 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.³³ He withheld the 50th vote in the Senate, closing the window of opportunity, and only months later proposed a counteroffer at \$1.8 trillion that excluded funds for housing and racial justice programs (Cassidy 2021; Stein 2022). Even though progressives advanced an effective campaign strategy with outside and inside tactics to refinance public housing and reduce carbon emissions, Manchin ultimately killed BBB.

Policy certification

Policy certification occurred throughout the episode as various elected officials engaged directly with the *Homes Guarantee* coalition's demands: (1) allies advanced the agenda (Ocasio-Cortez, Sanders, Waters, Schumer), (2) neutral parties negotiated over how much money to include (Biden), and (3) opposition rejected the inclusion of money to decarbonize public housing in the Build Back Better Act (Manchin). Policy certification registers that urban movement grievances and actions impacted federal political officials.

The coalition partners look back

Reflections by the coalition partners themselves illuminate the lessons and takeaways of this episode. In reflecting on the rise of the campaign and death of the bill, partners attributed its success to various strategies. First, one organizational partner identified the dual inside-outside strategy of the campaign.

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

Second, multiple tenant organizers reiterated that the grassroots outside-pressure activated Schumer, and people power would need significantly growth – “ten times the tenant base” for the tenant movement “to have sufficient disruptive power,” a consultant said, rather than “symbolic power on the Hill.” And finally, a key partner in the sequence suggested success stemmed from a concoction of forces:

The agenda setting matters 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 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.³⁴ 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.”

Discussion

In this case, urban movement actors scaled up to federal politics by tenants making claims, building allies, innovating tactics, and mobilizing across multiple institutions (see Table 1). The significance of these accomplishments is illustrated in (1) benefits for political allies, (2) new legislative accomplishments, (3) new channels of communication, and (4) expanded democracy. First, each strategic partner benefited, despite policy failure, from the policy certification and shift on green housing policy. A consultant explained: for Schumer, “the left provide[d] him with actually a good opportunity, ...coopt[ing] Ocasio-Cortez at no cost to himself” and publicly supporting public housing. Waters, in her last meeting as House committee chair, was able to say, “last year my committee fought to secure over \$150 billion dollars in fair and affordable housing,”³⁵ reinforcing her leadership on housing. Finally, Ocasio-Cortez publicized on her website under the Green New Deal for Public Housing that provisions of the bill passed in BBB.³⁶

Second, the tenant movement put offensive, pro-tenant visions that transcended neoliberal policy tools on the federal legislative agenda for the first time in decades. Transforming policy conversations is especially significant in regressive policy areas like housing. Third, strategic relationships developed some durable channels of communication between local organizations, national networks, and federal policy actors. Fourth, insurgent policymaking challenged institutions of the Democratic Party machine, which increased the direct participation of tenants in the political system. When movements impact policy, a moment of heightened democracy occurs (Piven 2006, 2; Friedmann 2002, 77). Insurgent policymaking influences political institutions in ways that can have lasting implications, even if the claims and activities appear only to be temporary in the present (Friedmann 2002, 77; Piven 2006, 16; McAdam and Tarrow 2013, 329).

Conclusion

This paper introduces a process-based framework of insurgent policymaking comprised of two multi-scalar social processes: bottom-up policy agenda formation and movement-to-party impact. The paper links the sociology of social movements, institutional analysis, and recent work on insurgent citizenship, housing movements, and urban planning. Insurgent citizenship, for Friedman (2002, 77), is “a form of active participation in social movements ... that aim at either, or both, the *defense* of existing democratic principles and the *claiming* of new rights that, if enacted, would lead to an *expansion of the spaces of democracy*.”

In this case of tenants as insurgent policy actors, a grassroots coalition was able to scale up urban grievances through offensive demands to federal politics. The coalition successfully challenged five electoral-representative political institutions: the caucus, the presidential campaign, the party platform, party leadership agendas, and legislation. The intricate path to progressive change illustrates how the tenant movement not only built alliances, exploited opportunities, confronted threats, and ultimately advanced legislation to pass in the House of Representatives, but transformed the framing and policy discourse in an entrenched policy area of housing in Washington DC. Insurgent policymakers can elevate urban mobilizations to federal politics to capture new rights, resources, entitlements, and imaginations.

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FIGURES AND TABLES

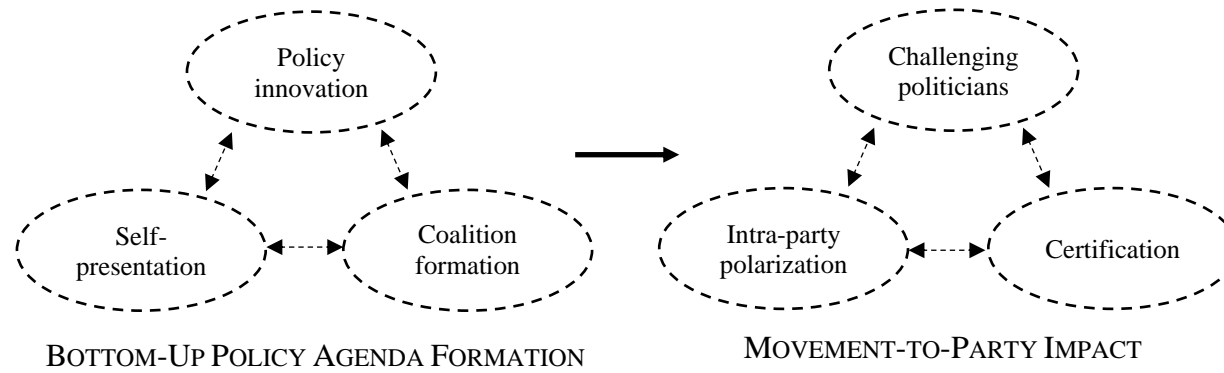


Figure 1. A process-based framework of insurgent policymaking

Table 1. Sequence of Impact on Electoral-Representative Political Institutions

	INSTITUTIONS	OBSERVATIONS	DURABILITY OF IMPACT*
STEP 1	CAUCUS	Congressional Progressive Caucus	Strong
STEP 2	PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN	Sanders 2020	Strong
STEP 3	PARTY PLATFORM	Biden-Sanders Unity Task Force Democratic Party Platform	Medium
STEP 4	PARTY LEADERSHIP AGENDAS	President Biden Sen. Schumer Cong. Waters	Weak
STEP 5	LEGISLATION	Build Back Better Act	Medium

*Degree to which the impact is durable to the specific institution in the case.

Table 2. Activating Politicians in Insurgent Policymaking

RELATIONSHIP TO CAMPAIGN	<u>OPPOSITION</u>	<u>AGNOSTIC</u>	<u>SYMPATHETIC SUPPORT</u>	<u>STRATEGIC SUPPORT</u>
RELATIONSHIP SHIFT	Sen. Manchin	Sen. Schumer	Sen. Sanders Cong. Waters Cong. Ocasio-Cortez	
STATUS	Passive or Active	Passive or Semi-active		Active

¹ BUILD BACK BETTER ACT; Congressional Record Vol. 167, No. 201, (House - November 18, 2021), Congress.Gov, accessed on 12/15/23, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/volume-167/issue-201/section/article/H6375-4>.

² Housing policy in the United States is widely recognized as politically regressive, as tax breaks for the middle and upper income far outweigh subsidies for low-income households (Schwartz 2016, 8; Pierson 1994, 77–99)

³ My translation from original German.

⁴ See Issue areas of Congressional Progressive Caucus for full list, Legislation, and Endorsed Bills. Accessed on 12/3/2023: <https://progressives.house.gov/what-we-stand-for>.

⁵ People’s Action, Press Release, 17 November, 2022, “HOMES GUARANTEE WRAPS TENANT RECKONING WITH WHITE HOUSE MEETING, RALLY, AND CONGRESSIONAL BRIEFING,” <https://peoplesaction.org/2022/11/homes-guarantee-wraps-tenant-reckoning-with-white-house-meeting-rally-and-congressional-briefing/>, accessed 5/15/23.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ People’s Action, “We need a #HomesGuarantee,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wni9X6ydN0Y&ab_channel=People%27sAction, Accessed on 7/4/23.

⁹ See Data for Progress, “Our Methodology,” <https://www.dataforprogress.org/our-methodology>, Accessed on /14/23.

¹⁰ One early example, Ocasio-Cortez tweeted “...and we have #GreenNewDeal 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).

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.

¹³ Berniesanders.com, “Housing for all,” <https://berniesanders.com/issues/housing-all/>, Accessed on 6/14/23.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Ibid., accessed 6/15/23, page 17.

¹⁷ Ibid., accessed 6/15/23, page 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., accessed 6/15/23, page 72.

¹⁹ Ibid., accessed 6/15/23, page 3.

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²² 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.

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²⁴ Ibid., accessed 7/18/23.

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