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Advocacy in Action: Understanding the Influence of Advocacy Organizations on Local Affordable Housing Policy in the U.S.

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Advocacy in Action: Understanding the Influence of Advocacy Organizations on Local Affordable Housing Policy in the U.S.

by Anaid Yereña

Planning and Policy Implications

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The primary purpose of the research is to increase our understanding of the influence of advocacy organizations (AOs) on local governmental budgetary decisions.

This research examined the factors affecting city support for affordable housing. Specifically, it sought to better understand the influence of advocacy organizations (AOs) on city affordable housing spending decisions (using HCD expenditures as the dependent variable).

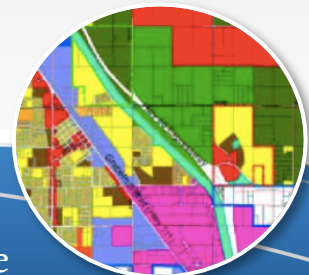
Theories related to urban governance, including hypotheses about interest group effects, suggest that AOs, as stakeholders in local decision-making processes, will use their resources and experience to influence local policymakers, and that their age and strength will predict their degree of influence on city decision-making. The quantitative analysis in this dissertation provides support for these perspectives. This study suggests that older AOs in a given city and in the larger region tend to exert more influence on local public policy, compared to younger, similar organizations. This finding is likely due to older AOs having longstanding and more mature networks of relationships in the community.

Key terms:

Advocacy Organization	Group that makes public interest claims to influence the course of social change. This involves lobbying, educating, and mobilizing, to democratize unequal power relations.
Strategic Action	Any premeditated and concerted mobilization effort an AO develops and undertakes to promote the creation, maintenance, and/or preservation of affordable housing.

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Findings

The research provides evidence that AOs are important players in affordable housing policymaking within U.S. cities. AOs are agents that make claims and take action (in the public interest) to influence policymaking. Ultimately, these organizations seek to achieve lasting social change. In addition to establishing and organizing themselves, other factors must be present for AOs to wield influence. They must possess personal contacts and political knowledge and skill, as well as understand the current political environment and other intangible factors, all of which may be achieved through the age/experience of the organization. The finding, therefore, that the mean age of AOs both within cities and within the larger region influenced HCD expenditures per capita is consistent with the literature. The finding that the strength (assets and revenues) of AOs within the city impacted per capita HCD spending in the city also resonates with the literature. The finding that the mean age of AOs in the surrounding county has a negative effect on the HCD expenditures per capita in the city in question lends support to previous work that prescribes regional collaboration to deal with the need for affordable housing. Finally, open political systems were conducive to proactive AO approaches and more AO resources allowed a greater diversity of AOs' strategic actions.



If federal, state, and local governments committed substantial and consistent flows of funds for affordable housing programs, AOs would strengthen their capacity to participate in the planning process.

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Combined, these results may be due to the existence of AOs as long standing institutions *in* the community. This *embeddedness* may allow urban AOs to better navigate a city's political and institutional structure as well as placing them in more direct contact with their constituents.

Quantitative Results

The regression results confirm the initial expectation that the age (political maturity) of the organizations doing advocacy work in a city (measured as mean age) has a statistically significant association to per capita housing and community development (HCD) expenditures. Specifically, on average, one extra year in AO mean age within the city is associated with a 4.2 percent increase in HCD spending per capita, all else being equal. The AO strength index for city based AOs was also statistically significant; on average, every 10 percent increase in the city based AOs' financial strength index, is associated with a 2.25 percent increase in per capita HCD expenditures.

Planning and Policy Implications

AOs are central to informing elected officials and the public about the need for affordable housing and potential ways to meet this need.

Planners working for the city, therefore, should be *advocates for the advocates*.

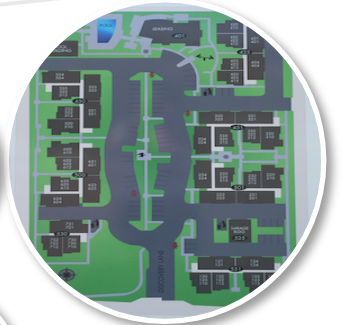
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The results presented in this dissertation have several planning and policy implications. First, planning and delivering affordable housing in communities involves a process with multiple actors who are negotiating a complex political environment. Within this environment, AOs are central to informing elected officials and the public about the need for affordable housing and potential ways to meet the need. Cities should open the process by inviting AOs to participate in meaningful ways to plan for affordable housing. Planners working for the city, therefore, should be *advocates for the advocates*. In other words, planners should encourage an open environment for idea exchange and dialogue on affordable housing issues. In these open political systems, AOs can take on a more proactive role with the promise of a more innovative and progressive housing policy agenda.

Second, when it comes to the issue of resources available to a given AO, it is challenging to discuss policy and planning prescriptions, especially because the primary sources of budgetary support for AOs are private (e.g., foundations, individual donors). Given that individual private donations to AOs are already deductible on federal and (most) state income taxes, it is difficult to conceive of additional public policies that would encourage such charitable giving to AOs. However, it is also clear that all levels of government

currently support AOs, directly in some cases, and often indirectly when an AO produces affordable housing and provides other housing or related services to the community. AOs use governmental funds for housing development, but also to support their own administrative and overhead expenses, thus giving them the capacity to advocate for affordable housing beyond the direct delivery of affordable housing units and services. If federal, state, and local governments committed substantial and consistent flows of funds for affordable housing programs, AOs would benefit from these resources and could strengthen their capacity to participate in policymaking, program development, and the production of affordable housing to meet the needs of communities.

The sustained participation of AOs in affordable housing service delivery will improve interaction between the organizations and local officials. These interactions may lead AOs to support local officials in the pursuit of broader state and federal legislation to secure more permanent sources of funding for affordable housing. Finally, the education campaigns AOs undertake will lead to more successful civic engagement efforts. These improved efforts may result in: 1) collective decision-making, 2) consensus-based policy adoption, and 3) broader support for affordable housing programs.



"...we [the AO] are just a tiny group, but I think all of us are incredibly passionate!"

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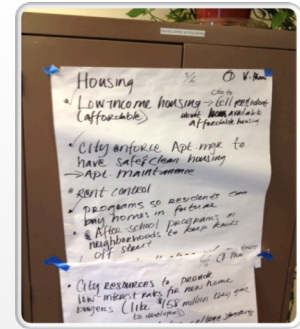
The study also showed that contextual factors are important to city spending decisions. Cities were more likely to exhibit increased spending on affordable housing in cities where housing was less affordable, and they were less likely to spend more when there was an ample supply (or higher vacancy rate) of housing. Thus, this finding shows a direct connection between needs and spending. This connection also may reflect the source of HCD funds. If the funding for HCD expenditures comes primarily from the federal government, then it may be calibrated to need by federal formula, and have use restrictions that direct the money to areas of HCD need.

The second phase of this research aimed to identify and explain the strategies AOs use to influence local affordable housing policymaking. To do so, I used a comparative case study methodology. Results from the case studies indicate that an AO's choice of strategic actions depends on the resources the organization possesses, and to a lesser extent on the political context in which the group acts. AOs with higher levels of aggregate resources within a city employ a wide range of insider and outsider strategic actions in their attempts to influence policy change. AOs in cities with fewer aggregate resources, on the other hand, focus on using insider strategies to shape policymakers' decisions.

AOs in closed political opportunity contexts are likely to be reactive to policymakers' affordable housing decisions. AOs in these settings focus their efforts on counteracting local decisions. In contrast, AOs in open political opportunity contexts use this opportunity to be proactive about the affordable housing policy changes they pursue. AOs in these settings look for new policies that will promote the preservation and creation of affordable housing and openly discuss them with policymakers. Through this process, AOs are able to build long-standing relationships with city leaders. These relationships more easily turn into partnerships that preserve and create affordable housing.

Acknowledgments:

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Qualitative Results

AOs working in cities with more political opportunities are more likely to see their strategic actions pay-off in the form of policy changes. These changes still require a lot of effort, coordination, and resources, but the willingness of the corresponding jurisdictions to have a conversation and to deliberate about the affordable housing policy/program in question lead to very different results.

The type of strategic actions AOs chose in both open and closed political opportunity environments were more closely linked to the resources available to the AOs. Cities with AOs that have higher levels of resources exhibit a far wider range of strategic actions. AOs in these cities have the necessary resources to diversify the types of strategic actions they use.

Moreover, cities where the AOs have lower levels of resources, are more likely to employ insider strategic actions regardless of the political opportunities available to them. In cities where AOs have higher levels of resources, the strategic actions the groups undertake include a much wider range of insider and outsider strategies.