

# **Housing Data Politics**

## **Inequitable Open Data, Informal Networks, and Strategic Neutrality in the Pursuit of Justice**

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Data Politics of Housing & Planning  
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# Background

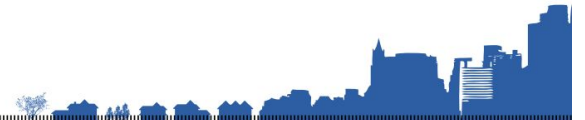
- Rise of open data movement and expanded open government data policies across scales
- In the U.S. rental housing market, activists and advocates use housing data to inform organizing and policy-making

October 2021

## Report to Congress on the Feasibility of Creating a National Evictions Database



PD&R



# Literature review

## The politics of housing data

Housing data facilitates dispossessive real estate practices (McElroy 2023) while also opening a new terrain for activists and actors to politicize housing in pursuit of housing justice (Hatch et al. 2023)

## Critical data studies & data activism

“Data assemblages”: Technical infrastructures embedded in social, political, economic context (Kitchin & Lauriault 2014; Dalton & Thatcher 2014)

Data activism as citizen practice to alter power distribution (Milan 2016)

## Datafication among government & corporate actors

Information-forcing policies and open government data have contributed to increased volumes of housing data (HMDA 1975, Attard et al. 2015)

Data as capital for corporations and landlords (e.g. tenant screening) (Sadowski 2019, McElroy 2023)

# Research Questions

What are the personal and organizational motivations behind housing data projects?

What technical, social, political, and ethical challenges do actors face throughout the data processing pipeline?

What improvements can actors suggest for housing data infrastructures?

# Methods & Data

## Field scan of housing data actors (originally “housing data activists”)

**Identified 79 groups:** grassroots, nonprofits, private companies, journalists, individual scholars, academic centers, and government initiatives

**Working on:** evictions, landlord ratings, rental assistance and housing affordability, housing code violations, displacement, zoning, and housing speculation

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## Semi-structured interviews with 19 groups

Interviews focused on

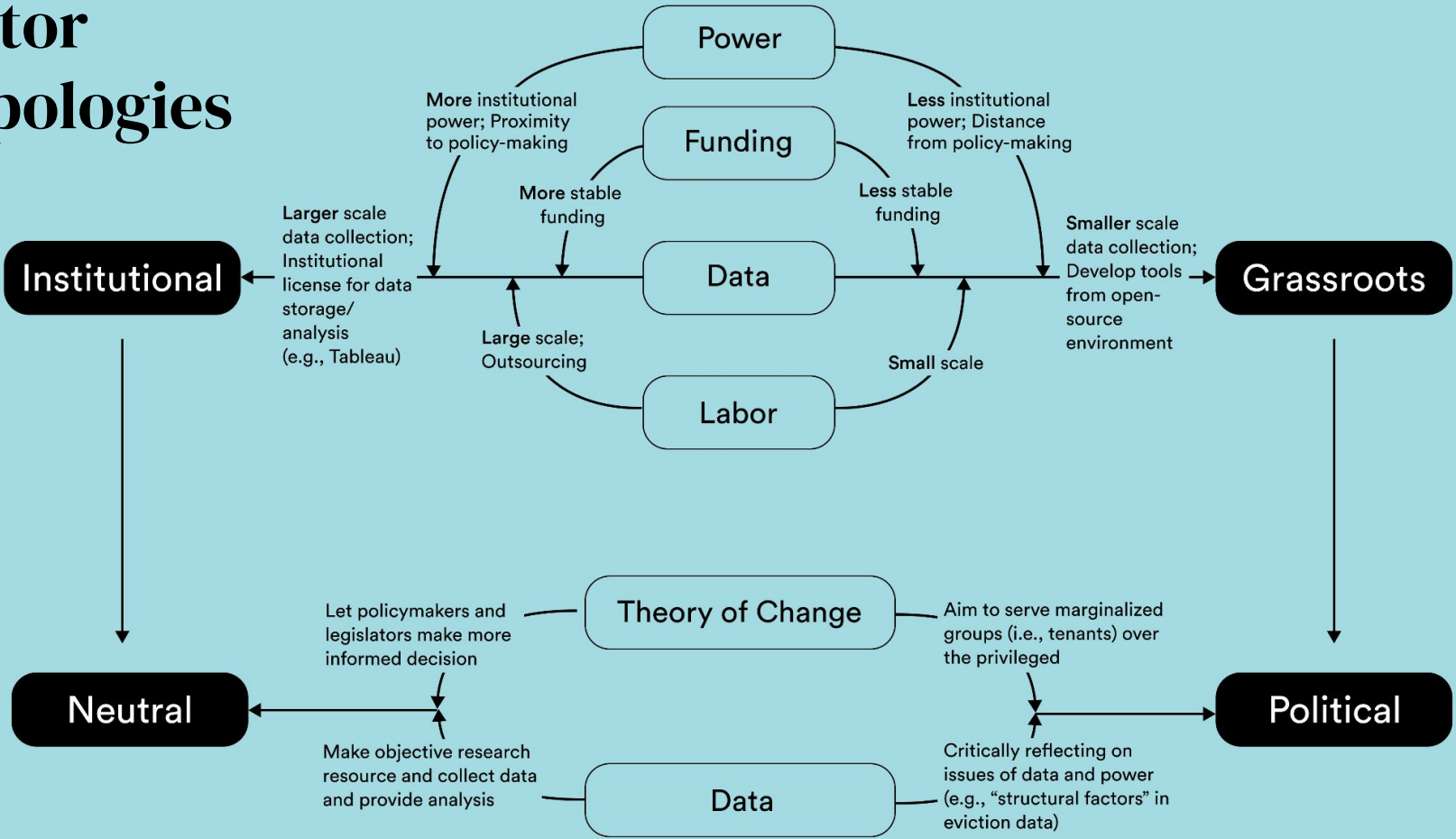
- Motivation & theory of change
- Processes of data collection, management, maintenance
- Challenges, risks, and desires for housing data

# Respondent typologies

Actor Type	Description	Total Count*	Interviewed Count*
Scholar	Individuals conducting research within academic institutions	8	2
Volunteer Initiative	Small or medium-sized operations driven by personal or collective political commitments of participants. Volunteer-based; occasionally funded by donations.	19	3
Academic Center	Medium-sized research entities embedded within academic institutions. Stable funding from institutional and grant-based sources; often maintain formal relationships with policy think tanks and governments.	11	8
Nonprofit Organization	Medium-sized or large organizations funded by grants and private contributions. Often founded with specific missions.	23	3
Government Initiative	Medium-sized or large organizations established by government bodies to address public needs, with funding from government.	7	1
Journalism Investigation	Small, usually short-term assembled team for an investigative project. May undertake housing data projects as part of data journalism efforts, typically as one-time projects before moving on to other assignments.	2	1
Private Company	Medium-sized or large organization, funded by venture capital or other private investors. Funding structure is often opaque. These groups are sometimes engaged by others to do data work.	6	1

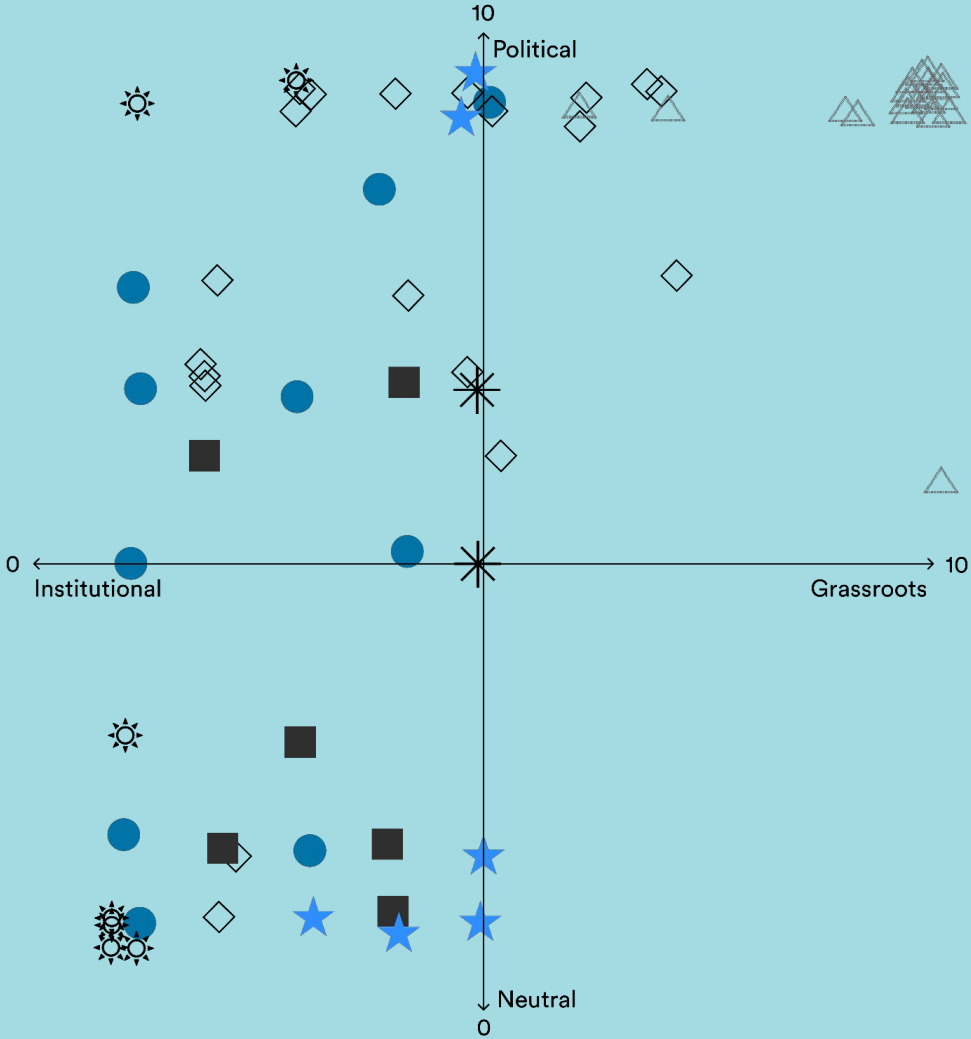
# Findings

# Actor typologies





# Mapping actors



# Accessing data & making it usable

## Making data useful

*“Court data is by far the messiest data I have ever come across.”*

- Interviewee G3

## Informal relationships in accessing data

*“The relationships with the people that have control over the data are really the most important thing to us.”*

- Interviewee G8

## Challenges in maintaining and sustaining housing data projects

*“Funders are typically eager to fund new projects but not at all eager to spend money on maintaining them. So sometimes we just maintain that stuff out of our own pocket”*

- Interviewee G19

# Ethical entanglements of housing data

Privacy concerns: when to disclose vs. obscure

- “Differential privacy” as shaping what to make public and what to obscure
- Aggregation to highlight structural roots & obscure individuals

*“I am of the opinion that defendant names should never appear in that database. [...] I think it's really **important that we know who's doing the evicting. [...] it is an important matter of public record when you have property owners behaving manifestly nefarious[ly]** ”*

*- Interviewee G6*

# Shared desires for data infrastructure

Across typologies, actors overlapped in the changes they desired to housing data systems

- Standardized, national-level open government data
- Interoperability and streamlining within data system
- More accessible and usable data

***“the whole process isn't built towards this kind of analysis. It's built towards courts managing their systems. And in that sense, we have to work based [on] that, which is very difficult.”***

*- Interviewee G7*

# Duplicated efforts

*“I bet with all the people you're talking to, it's probably pretty evident how much we're all doing the same things ultimately. [...] And the amount of duplication that's happening that is distracting us or keeping us from then moving on to work on the next element of these actual intellectual and practical problems.”*

- Interviewee G11

Across political ideologies:

On “activist” as descriptor:

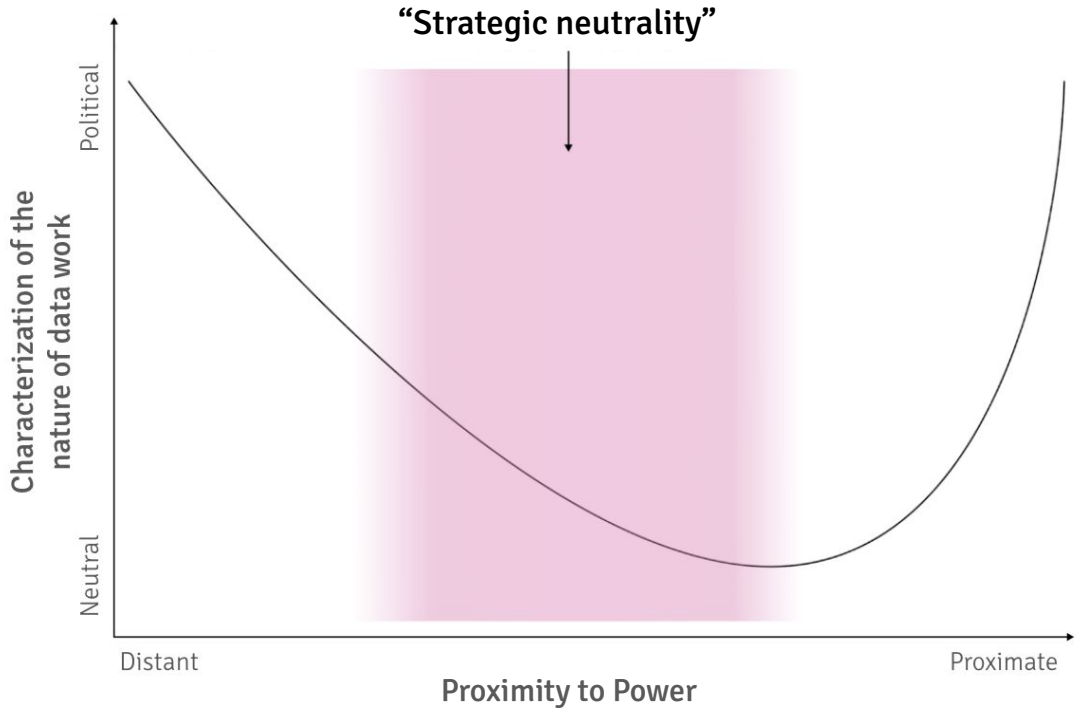
*“We kind of steer away from those kinds of labels. [...] [O]ur goal is to just view unbiased, objective research, and then put that out for the entire spectrum of folks to interact with.”*

- Interviewee G14

# Implications

# De/politicization of housing data work

Some actors employ “**strategic neutrality**,” to maintain legitimacy with the data producers, policymakers, and legislative bodies that they rely on for funding and access



# Toward more equitable and justice-oriented housing data infrastructures

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# Thank you!

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