Organizing for expropriation.
How a tenants campaign convinced Berliners to vote for expropriating big landlords

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Abstract

On 26 September 2021, 59% of Berliners eligible to vote decided in a referendum for the expropriation of big landlords and to socialize approximately 250.000 housing units. This article looks at how the campaign Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co was able to do so. The article begins by introducing conceptualizations of social movement impacts. It then expands on these conceptualizations with a thick description of the emergence and the organizational structure of the expropriation campaign, including the material basis of the campaign, the dire situation of Berlin's tenants, the organizational ecology of the tenant movement out of which the campaign grew, the political terrain and public discourse the campaign had to navigate, and at the organizational process of the campaign itself. Drawing on such thick description, we revisit and add nuance to the conceptualizations of social movement impact in social movement studies, and highlight the complex interplay between different factors and their effect on different stages of the political process.

Keywords

Socialization, democratization, Berlin, tenant movement, organizing

On 26 September 2021 59% of Berliners eligible to vote decided in a referendum for the expropriation of big landlords and to socialize approximately 250,000 housing units. The referendum was put on the ballot by the campaign Expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co

(Deutsche Wohnen & Co enteignen, DWE). Deutsche Wohnen,[1] a global corporate landlord and the biggest landlord in Berlin, has become a symbol of aggressive valourization strategies and tenant grievances. The campaign invoked two legal mechanisms to push for their demand. It used a referendum as an instrument of direct democracy allowed at the state level.[2] Further, the campaign based its demand on Article 15 of the German constitution, which states that the socialization of 'land, natural resources and means of production' is allowed, albeit it has never been invoked. The DWE-campaign combined a strategy of 'legal engineering' (Kusiak, 2021) including a conventional form of political action – collecting signatures – to put a referendum on the ballot with a radical demand constituting a serious step towards decommodifying housing provision. The challenge was to convince enough eligible voters to vote in favor of expropriation in a public debate that associates expropriation with either communism or the dispossession of Jewish citizens under Nazi regime (e.g. Deutschlandfunk Kultur, 2021).

This article examines DWE's ability to do so. We first conceptualize social movement impacts. Subsequently, we expand on these conceptualizations through a thick description of the emergence and organizational structure of the expropriation campaign. The second section assesses the material basis of the campaign, the dire situation faced by Berlin's tenants given sharp rent increases in a short time period. In the third section we analyze the organizational ecology out of which the campaign grew—a strong and diverse tenant movement emerging in the late 2000s. The fourth section examines the political terrain and public discourse the campaign had to navigate, namely the unsuccessful attempts by a progressive city government since 2016 to address the severe housing crisis, raising public expectations for the state to act in favor of a social housing provision. The fifth section underscores the organizational process of the campaign itself. Instead of having a centralized or decentralized organizational structure, the campaign developed a distributed organizational structure that allowed for both strong coordination and autonomy to incentivize a directed diversity of tactics. The development of an organizing approach towards movement building resulted in the creation of a decentralized apparatus geared at capacity building and the intentional development of structures that lowered participation barriers, contributing to a broad multiplication of forces that allowed many without previous political experience to step into new roles and take on leadership functions. In the concluding section we come back to the conceptualization of social movement successes.

This article draws on extensive participatory observation in the tenant movement and the DWE campaign, numerous (and uncounted) talks with housing activists in Berlin, and one formal group interview with members of the different branches of the campaign,[3] where we asked them to reflect on their organizational structure and the relevance of organizing

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[1] During the campaign the company was bought by Vonovia, the biggest landlord in Germany. Since the campaign kept its original name the article will follow to avoid confusion.

[2] Berlin is a city-state and one of the 16 states of the Federal Republic of Germany. Its 12 districts mostly fulfill the functions of municipalities.

[3] One member of the Collection working group, one member of the Jump Start working group, one member from an inner-city Neighborhood group (Lichtenberg), one member of an outskirts Neighborhood group (Marzahn-Hellersdorf), and two members of the Right to the City working group. The functions of the different branches are explained below.

techniques for the success of the campaign. Both authors are not only observers of the movement but also active members. This influences the research by granting access to, and knowledge of, the movement which could not be obtained in the same way by distanced researchers. Yet an objective distance from the researchers to their object of study cannot be claimed.

Social movement impacts

Recently social movement studies rediscovered the political outcomes of social movements as a field of study, not least in the field of housing (Martínez &Wissink, 2022; Card, 2022; Holm, 2021). Social movement outcomes are discussed under a variety of terms, among them success, impact, consequences or ability to affect policies. Particularly the term 'success' has been scrutinized given the difficulty in establishing a framework to measure if a movement is successful or not (Kolb, 2008).[4] We thus use the more neutral term social movement impacts. Felix Kolb provides a helpful overview of the different attempts to conceptualize social movement impacts in social movement studies (Kolb, 2008).

These conceptualizations share the notion of policy-making as a process and therefore visualize different stages for social movements to impact this process. Paul Schumaker (1975), using the term 'policy responsiveness,' differentiates between access responsiveness (i.e., political institutions are willing to hear social movements), agenda responsiveness (i.e., issues are included on political agendas), policy responsiveness (i.e., adaptation of legislations or regulations in line with social movement demands), output responsiveness (i.e., implementation of legislations or regulations in line with social movement demands) and impact responsiveness (i.e., success in addressing social movement grievance).

Following this differentiation, this analysis of DWE centers on two types of responsiveness: the broader tenant movement, of which DWE is a part, was able to gain policy responsiveness and the DWE campaign was, until now, able to gain agenda responsiveness for its specific demand. Whether DWE will also succeed in gaining policy responsiveness-the translation of the referendum to concrete legislation to expropriate big landlords-remains to be seen and is beyond the scope of this paper, which is limited to the time leading up to the ballot. The result of the referendum is not legally binding, the government merely received the assignment to draft a law for expropriation and implement it but could decide not to.

Defining the impacts of social movements or the policy responsiveness they could gain is one thing. Another is to conceptualize the factors influencing the ability of social movements to impact the different stages of the policy process. There are different attempts to do so in social movement studies. Broadly, they distinguish between endogenous and exogenous factors. Endogenous factors can be influences by activist, such as the choice of a

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[4] Benchmarks of success from within the movement, such as the fulfilment of demands, might change over time, might not be shared by all movement participants equally or might be voiced high or low for strategical reasons. Benchmarks of success from outside the movement might be arbitrary and influenced by the expectations of the researcher.

strategy or demands. Exogenous factors result from the context the movement has to navigate. Endogenous and exogenous factors are not independent from each other. The political opportunity perspective of social movement studies (e.g. Tilly, 1978; Krisie et al., 1995) has already theorized that the choice of a specific strategy, the opportunity for mobilization or the ability to form alliances, is dependent on the political and institutional context and factors such as the openness or closedness of institutional politics to other forms of participation.

Recent studies on the impacts of housing movements on institutional politics employ a range of explanatory factors. Kenton Card (2022), analyzing housing protests in Los Angeles and Berlin, distinguishes five such factors: making demands, forming coalitions, promoting popular referendums, engaging government officials in dialogue, and transferring agents into government. A similar typology of strategies is developed by Amanda Tattersall and Kurt Iveson (2022) while analyzing housing struggles in Cape Town, Barcelona, Sydney and Moscow. They distinguish between what they call different people power strategies: 'playing by the rules' (i.e. using established ways of participation), mobilizing, organizing, prefiguring and forming parties. Miguel Martínez and Bart Wissink attribute the success of social housing movements in Spain to 'the alliances between activists and local councilors who were activists just a few months before the municipal elections' (2022. p. 4). All these articles mostly focus on endogenous or protester-controlled factors to explain movements' abilities to be politically impactful. Card (2022) mentions exogenous factors, such as landlord opposing actions, but without much detail. Martínez and Wissink give more attention to structural constraints as exogenous factors hindering further social movements impact, such as the limitations of municipal legislative responsibilities and the influence of the capitalist class. Sebastian Schipper (2021), in examining housing struggles in Germany, centers solely on these constraints and argues that decades of neoliberal rationality have established an institutional terrain that social movements must navigate and which limits social movement impacts.

Such works provide a useful list of factors influencing social movement impact and possibilities. Yet they could be expanded upon, particularly to examine the interplay between different factors and the mechanisms through which they work. Schumaker (1975) develops a model which assumes that the endogenous protester-controlled variables such as organizational form, type of demand, strategy etc. influence the degree of social support from different groups such as politicians/parties, elected official, public servants, the media, other civil society actors or the public in general and that both determine the degree of policy responsiveness.

We employ this model when analyzing the DWE campaign in the following section. As the victory at the ballot shows, DWE was successful in winning public support for its demands and thereby gained agenda responsiveness, putting housing back on the political agenda, and providing a concrete solution to the grievances of tenants. In the following thick description of the emergence and organizational process of the campaign, we describe two exogenous factors—the material basis of the tenant movement and the political terrain the DWE campaign had to navigate—and two endogenous factors—the organizational ecology

and the organizational process of the campaign—explaining why and how the campaign was able to win public support. The thick description of the process up to the referendum in 2021 provides further nuance to the existing conceptualizations of social movement impact, the interdependent relationship between endogenous and exogenous factors and their influence on public support for social movement demands.

The material basis of DWE: neoliberalization of housing politics, the influx of global capital and swift rent hikes

The degree of public support for social movement demands is based—but not solely dependent – on how much the grievances articulated by the movement is shared by others. In that sense, the success of the Berlin tenant movement in the September 2021 referendum to expropriate large financialized landlords in Berlin has a very real material basis: the dire situation of Berlin's tenants facing sharp rent hikes.

Berlin is a city of tenants. More than 80 percent of housing units are rental ones (IBB 2020, p. 44), which is not unusual for a big city in Germany. Accordingly, people from different strata of society are renters. In the early 2000s, Berlin was still characterized by low rent levels compared to other cities in Germany, though median household income was—and still is—also lower. But from 2009 to 2019, the average rent increased by 40 percent (IBB 2020, p. 70), and asking rents exploded by more than 80 percent (own calculation based on IBB 2020, p. 77 and IBB 2010, p. 49). All of the city's districts experienced rent hikes, albeit unevenly. Inner-city districts – particularly those along former borderlands between East and West—saw the sharpest increases (IBB 2020, p. 77ff). Nonetheless, outer-city districts were also affected, making housing unaffordability a problem in the whole city.

Forty percent of the population is overburdened by rent, meaning they have to pay more than 30 percent of their household income on housing costs (IBB, p. 81). Given the sharp difference between rents in older rental contracts (rent increases are limited in running contracts by German rental law) and asking rents on the market, people move less and less (IBB 2020, p. 21). Accordingly, the capacity of housing to satisfy changing life circumstances increasingly diminishes. When forced to move by displacement, people often have to leave their neighborhoods and their social networks behind. In a housing market under pressure, mechanisms of racist exclusion gain prominence. Studies show that having a 'non-German' surname drastically reduces the chance to succeed in the application process for an apartment (Auspurg et al., p. 2017). Increasing commercial rents displace local businesses and providers of social infrastructures, like preschools in gentrifying neighborhoods. Overburdened households, the fear of loss of home and the displacement of local infrastructures all lead to a severe crisis of housing as a sphere of reproduction.

This was the consequence of 40 years of deregulation and privatization of the housing market and the influx of global capital into German real estate after the global financial crisis in 2007. Since the 1970s, housing politics in West-Germany were neoliberalized (Schönig & Vollmer, 2018), a development copied and fast tracked in East Germany and East Berlin after reunification (Holm, 2006; Bernt, 2017). In Berlin, like in other German cities, publicly

owned housing was privatized and municipal housing companies were restructured to produce profit and thereby subsidize the city's budget. The state-led gentrification and rehabilitation of inner-city districts and destruction of unprofitable housing units in post-war modernist housing estates in outer districts, particularly in East Berlin, completed the turn to neoliberal urbanism (Holm, 2013).

The deregulation of financial markets in Germany since the 1990s opened the door for global capital to enter the German rental markets right when large portfolios of publicly owned housing companies were privatized. The specific form of Housing financialization in Germany (Wijburg & Aalbers, 2017) was made possible through large purchases and the merging of different companies led to the emergence of a couple of 'super-landlords' owning several tens or hundreds of thousand housing units across Germany, among them Deutsche Wohnen with 110,000 housing units in Berlin alone (Unger, 2016). This market power allowed for valorization strategies, such as rationalization of management, limited maintenance or large-scale rehabilitation (e.g., energy efficiency retrofits) that led to a loss in quality of services and to massive rent increases, respectively (Fields & Uffer, 2013). After the 2007 financial crisis, global capital discovered the German real estate market, and the rental market in particular, as a safe haven and a lucrative investment opportunity in a time defined by market turbulence, fueling the financialization of housing provision in Berlin further. All these developments resulted in the fast and severe rent hikes described above, when the city started to grow in population around 2010 after more than a decade of shrinkage (IBB 2020, p. 14).

While the material basis of severe rent increases and the resulting crisis of home and reproduction is a necessary reason to explain the popular support of the campaign, it is not a sufficient one. The campaign must be seen as part of a broader tenant movement.

The organizational ecology of DWE: The tenant movement and emerging practices of organizing

Since 2010, a tenant movement started to form and gain the public support that would ultimately secure the ballot win of DWE (Vollmer, 2019, 2020). In this section, we highlight the experiences and strategies developed in this movement leading to the formation of the expropriation campaign. We argue that the emergence and success of DWE can only be understood when looking at the organizational ecology (Nunes, 2021), out of which the campaign emerged. We use the concept of ecology to denote the organizational entanglement social movements operate within and the common resources they grow from. To understand the campaign's success, we must not only take the immediate layer of organizational ecology, the tenant movement, into consideration, but also the broader auxiliary infrastructures that this organizational ecology is nested in.

The tenant movement started with the mushrooming of dozens of local initiatives in housing complexes affected by rent increases due to a variety of 'commodification gaps' (Bernt, 2022) in the German housing regime, such as modernizations (e.g., energy efficiency retrofits), the termination of social housing status, forced evictions, conversion into

condominiums, displacement of social infrastructure or otherwise aggressive valorization strategies by landlords. The campaign against the 'Mediaspree' redevelopment project on Berlin's Spree riverside in the late 2000s (Dohnke, 2013) set the stage for a shift in Berlin's tenant movement by successfully reframing the struggle as one against gentrification.

The highly localized initiatives that followed the anti-Mediaspree campaign were as diverse as the residents of the housing complex and accordingly did not share a political ideology to start with. At the same time, several neighborhood initiatives against gentrification were founded by a more 'traditional left milieu' largely composed of individuals and political organizations with academic backgrounds or university educations and rooted in existing leftist organizations. This organizational process resulted in the development of a plurality of organizations and initiatives, including affected tenants politically active for the first time in their lives and leftist activists turning towards housing as a field of struggle.

Around the 2011 city elections, the new plurality of initiatives became visible as a coherent movement with a demonstration joined by several thousand people and a catalog of grievances and demands presented to the newly elected social-democrat and conservative coalition government. In the following years, the movement consolidated with more and more local initiatives emerging, some quickly disappearing, and others successful in establishing more permanent initiatives. These were not only concerned with the immediate grievances that sparked their individual foundation but aimed to identify the systemic processes behind seemingly individual situations.

The tactical repertoire that came to define this movement was just as diverse as its organizational form and social composition. Demonstrations, sit-ins, direct lobbying with politicians, legal strategies with the help of tenant unions, blockades against evictions; the movement experimented with a variety of tactics against gentrification - used in unexpected ways: While a group of retirees squatted their seniors' centers to prevent displacement, members of radical leftist groups collected signatures for a variety of referendums initiated by the tenant movement. The knowledge gathered in these different initiatives became essential in carrying out the DWE campaign.

After plebiscites to re-municipalize water and electricity infrastructure, a referendum against the development of the decommissioned Tempelhof airfield in the inner city started in 2014 (Hilbrandt, 2016). The government planned to allow private luxury housing to be built on the beloved open space. The success of the referendum against this plan was a bombshell, unexpected by the press and the reigning parties. The media, more alert to the issue of housing by now, reported frequently on housing grievances and landlord misbehavior. Without the dozens of media representations of tenants losing their decades-long-homes to the greed of individuals or the system of capitalist valorization, the success of the campaign of expropriation would have been unthinkable. Together, the anti-Mediaspree and Tempelhof campaigns marked the ascending acceptance of the problem of gentrification and the organizational learning required to successfully operate a referendum.

Strengthened by the experience of self-organization and disillusioned by the lacking responsiveness of the social democrat-conservative government, the next referendum

initiative geared at housing was organized in 2015 (Diesselhorst, 2018). This time, municipal housing companies became the focus. What was left of municipally owned housing after privatization was restructured to generate profit for the city's budget. Rising rents and a high rate of forced evictions were the result. The referendum proposed to restructure the six municipal housing companies— limited liability and stock companies—into a single public corporation. It was understood that this would expand political control of housing, promote the construction of new affordable housing, keep rents of the existing stock at levels accessible to low-income households and—crucially—expand tenant control. The first stage of the referendum—collecting more than 20,000 signatures—was successful. Fearing another defeat at the ballot, however, the government started negotiations with the campaign. Threatening them with legal flaws in the drafted law, the government succeeded in forcing a compromise. A new law was drafted, leaving the structure of the six companies untouched, but forcing them to provide more affordable housing, construct new municipal housing and introduce rudimentary tenant co-determination.

While the political result was ambivalent, the organizational experience developed through the experiment with direct democracy was critical to the emergence of DWE. At the same time, the 2015 referendum on municipal housing was criticized from within the movement for lacking a democratic structure and having neglected building organizing structures with affected tenants.

Organizing was developed as a strategy in other parts of the movement at the same time and became another direct predecessor of DWE. By 'organizing' we denote a political strategy that focuses on moving those who do not yet agree with the goals of the initiative and on developing structures and practices to build the capacities of others to take on leadership functions in the organizational process. The newfound attention for organizing techniques by housing activist have been described for different cities in Germany (Reichle & Bescherer, 2021; Hurlin et al., 2021).

The organizing tendency within the Berlin tenant movement understood that tenants had to be moved to engage and actively participate in political action, regardless of pre-existing political positions. Just as important, rather than assuming an equal organizational capacity, their capacities to organize themselves and others had to be actively cultivated and developed and not left to chance.

The experiences of two tenant initiatives proved elemental in experimenting with such an organizational strategy: Kotti & Co (Hamann & Vollmer, 2019) and the tenant initiative in the Otto-Suhr-housing development (Strobel, 2020). Located at Kottbusser Tor in the inner-city district of Kreuzberg mostly composed of Turkish immigrants, Kotti & Co started in 201,1 protesting rising rents due to the loss of the social housing status of their homes. Their focus on this policy raised their demands against the government of Berlin. Directly attacking the landlord was not part of their political strategy. That did not change when after a couple of years into the protest Deutsche Wohnen bought their homes. Meanwhile, in 2016, the Otto-Suhr-tenant initiative developed as an attempt to organize in former municipal housing now owned by Deutsche Wohnen. Unlike Kotti & Co this initiative was buttressed by activists from a radical leftist group (Interventionistische Linke) who had

garnered knowledge in organizing techniques and practices from their involvement in unions and labor struggles.

Kotti & Co and the Otto-Suhr-initative started an effort to connect tenant initiatives across housing owned by Deutsche Wohnen around the city in 2016, prior to the DWE campaign. The grievances were in fact similar in all of them: lack of maintenance and repair, and rent hikes through modernization where the company saw potential for tenant turnover. Out of this network of tenant initiatives in housing developments of Deutsche Wohnen a group of activists founded the Jump Start working group (Starthilfe AG), focusing on helping new tenant initiatives off the ground by employing organizing techniques in housing estates owned by Deutsche Wohnen and other big landlords.

This organizing core saw a particular need to support organizing efforts through skill-sharing, using a brochure reflecting on the experiences of Kotti & Co and the Otto-Suhr-initiative and workshops, and organizing interventions borrowed from the repertoire of trade union organizing practices. After a tenant of a Deutsche Wohnen estate declares interest to start a tenant initiative, the organizing core calls for support and mobilizes dozens of people to knock on every door of the estate to invite tenants to an initial meeting. Just as importantly, they also give trainings on how to hold such meetings and how to encourage people to actively participate with the intention to make the 'outside' organizer no longer necessary. The working group later became a key organizing core of the DWE campaign.

The network of initiatives of Deutsche Wohnen tenants, partly brought into life by the Jump Start working group, focused their efforts on preventing modernizations or reducing their costs for tenants. In Kreuzberg, they were able to negotiate a deal with Deutsche Wohnen with the help of the local councilor of housing, Florian Schmidt (Green party), a housing activist himself before joining parliament. But this partial victory could not be reproduced in other districts of the city. Since rent increases after modernization are legal, the network had little leverage to advance their demands. A change of strategy was necessary.

The tenant movement emerging in the 2010s, the dozens of local tenant initiatives, the various referenda on housing related issues and the experiments with techniques of organizing within the tenant movement can be all described as the immediate organizational ecology out of which the DWE campaign emerged. This immediate organizational ecology is nested in broader auxiliary infrastructures of think tanks (e.g., the Rosa Luxemburg foundation), movement schools (e.g., Bewegungschule and Werkstatt für Bewegungsbildung), community spaces (e.g., Schule für Erwachsenenbilung, Aquarium, Mahalla, and Bigilsaray) and political organizations (e.g., Interventionistische Linke or local branches of the left party).

The housing movement is entangled in a web of interdependencies with these organizations and infrastructures. The different organizations fulfill a variety of political functions and provide different resources (see figure 1). Together they co-define the field of organizational and political possibility. The tenant movement and its wider auxiliary infrastructures resulted in the development and circulation of new strategic and combat-organizational knowledge that were foundational to DWE's creation and growth.

Figure 1

The organizational
ecology of DWE
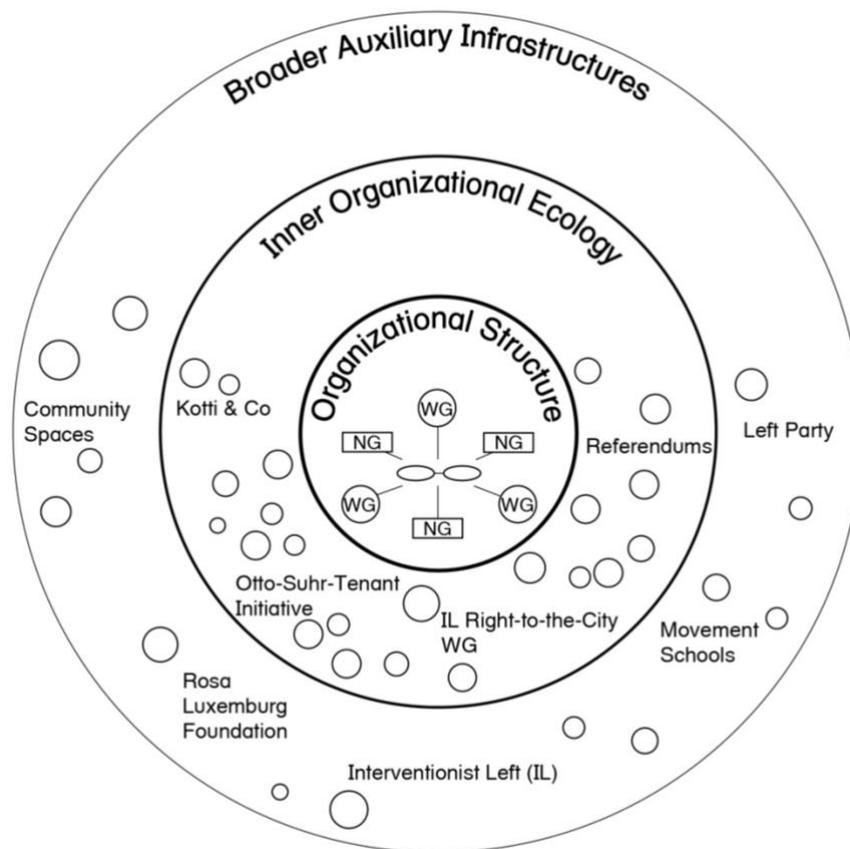
Instead of understanding this knowledge to be organic or given, we want to highlight that this knowledge needed to be developed within the movement, either intrinsically or extrinsically (Gutiérrez, 2020). The former requires an individual initiative to learn to organize itself more rewardingly and effectively through adaptive experiments in organization. The latter would mean to draw on resources external to the individual initiative but still within the organizational ecology, thus allowing people to learn more quickly without the experimental process of trial, error, and adaptation. Indeed, the turn to 'organizing' of the tenant movement can be read as an ascending understanding that such know-how must be intentionally developed and circulated.

Not only the emergence of DWE, but also the popular support and the successful referendum can only be understood when situating the campaign in the immediate organizational ecology of the tenant movement, the broader auxiliary infrastructures, and the development and circulation of knowledge in and between both.

The political terrain: windows of hope and disappointed of expectations

The campaign to expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co emerged from a strong and diverse tenant movement capable of aligning lower and middle-income interests and shaping the public discourse on a housing state of emergency. Well before the referendum, this movement was able to pressure the city to restrain from deepening the neoliberalization of

housing policy (Kadi et al., 2021). The shift in parliamentary housing politics and the policy responsiveness before the campaign is another important component explaining its success.

Berlin's tenant movement succeeded in shaping the public discourse on housing and forcing the government to take measures against rising rents and the displacement of poor people. Already under the social-democratic and conservative coalition (2011-2016), first steps were taken. The pace of change increased after a social-democrat, left and green coalition took over in 2016. With the 2016 election the department of urban development and housing was taken over by the left party, after 25 years of social-democratic rule. Further, other social movement-oriented representatives joined city and district parliaments.

Kadi et al. (2021) define neoliberal housing politics as decreasing affordability for low- and middle-income households, the commodification of housing, and a high influence of real estate interests on politics. Thus, departure from neoliberal housing politics would entail increasing housing affordability, decommodifying housing and expanding tenant control through democratization.

Steps towards this direction can be traced in Berlin's most recent housing policies (Kadi et al., 2021; Holm, 2021). The municipal housing sector is growing due to new construction and purchases of private rental housing, thereby decommodifying further parts of housing provision. The internal commodification of public housing companies has also been contained by redirecting them to provide social housing instead of generating profit for the city's budget. Profit seeking by private housing actors is being curtailed by attempts to regulate the private market through instruments of urban planning, such as bans on the conversion of rental apartments into condominiums or on vacancies of rental apartments. Small steps towards housing democratization were further made by introducing tenant councils in the municipal housing companies, by drafting new guidelines for expanded citizen participation in urban planning procedures, and by including delegates of the tenant movement into political decision-making processes.

Housing affordability in the public sector increased by stopping rent increases in the municipally owned segment, forcing the housing companies to rent out more than 60 percent of their units to people eligible for social housing and raising affordable social housing units in new constructions from 30 percent to 60 percent. In the private sector, the most radical measure to increase affordability was the rent cap, which set absolute maximums of rent levels and allowed tenants to lower their rents accordingly. However, the rent cap was abolished after some months; the federal constitutional court found that Berlin lacked the jurisdiction for such a measure, as rental law falls under federal jurisdiction. Despite a nationwide tenant movement's campaign to introduce a rent cap at the federal level, the federal government has shown no sign of introducing a federal rent cap thus far, in line with their general abandonment of social housing policy.

Despite all the measures taken by Berlin's government, none could cool down the overheated rental market of Berlin. They did, however, raise popular expectations. Neoliberal ideology made state interference into the market unthinkable for decades. The tenant movement's referendums, their other successes, and the attempts by the local government

to curtail at least the most extreme excesses of capitalist housing provision served to expand the popular imagination of the state's capability to act on behalf of tenants. A state of despair and learned helplessness was partly being overcome by the tenant movement's successes in gaining actual, material advances for poor and middle-income tenants. The reaction to the constitutional court's abolition of the rent cap clearly demonstrated this shift: on the same day approximately 15,000 people spontaneously took to the streets to declare their discontent with the ruling. Instead of feeling defeated, signs read 'now more than ever,' 'rent cap at the federal level,' and the like.

The rent cap and its abolition play an important function in explaining the success of the campaign to expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co. For years, the tenant movement demanded a rent moratorium while the city relinquished its responsibility. Only after the campaign for expropriation emerged, the government started to develop the rent cap. This was celebrated as the first impact of the campaign. After the rent cap abolition, the campaign reported an influx of new supporters and activists. The sentiment among them seemed to be, if we are not allowed to regulate private landlords, we must socialize their apartments.

The political terrain the tenant movement had created and the campaign to expropriate Deutsche Wohnen & Co could elaborate on was favorable, because it opened windows of hope and raised popular expectations for the government to act. At the same time the insufficiencies of the measures taken and the abolishing of the rent cap prevented a retreat from housing activism. After looking at the material basis, the organizational ecology and the already achieved political gains as factors explaining the emergence and the success at the ballot of DWE we now turn to the organizational process of the campaign itself as another endogenous factor for its success.

The organizational process: distributed structure and capacity building

As we explained earlier in our analysis of the tenant movement, the acquired organizational knowledge of door-to-door tenant organizing developed through the Kotti & Co and Otto-Suhr-initiative and the Deutsche Wohnen tenant network. Similarly, the different referendum campaigns were critical for incubating the strategic capacity of the DWE campaign. DWE combined these experiences into a unified strategic offensive geared at expanding public control of housing provision through a referendum.

To accomplish this, the campaign developed a distributed organizational structure that combined centralized and decentralized elements to execute an organizing-based approach to movement building (Nunes, 2021). The distributed organizational structure allowed the strengths of coordination and autonomy to play out in ways that provided direction while allowing space for autonomous execution to accomplish goals. The organizing approach towards movement building, on the other hand, meant that a good deal of organizational resources was deployed to create structures for capacity-building. This lowered participation barriers and, in turn, expanded the base of active supporters, as those who lacked political experience were provided means to step into leadership roles.

To get their demand on the 2021 ballot, the DWE campaign needed to pass a series of hurdles, each one requiring greater degrees of organization. The first was the collection of 20,000 valid signatures in 2019. Then, the government of Berlin had to deem the proposal permissible, which it used to delay the process until 2021. The second hurdle demanded the collection of 175,000 valid signatures, 7 percent of the eligible electorate, within four months (from February to June) in 2021. The third and final hurdle necessitated an organizational pivot to get out the vote by September of that same year.

A series of structures were developed to pass these hurdles and develop expanding bases of support. The working groups developed were:

- The Socialization working group (*Vergesellschaftungs AG*) developed the concept of socialization and worked on its public presentation and diffusion.

- The Action working group (*Aktions AG*) oversaw the organization of rallies and demos.

- The PR working group (*Öffentlichkeits AG*) coordinated and executed press and social media strategies.

- The Jump start working group (*Starthilfe AG*) continued its seed-and-support work as well as the development and execution of much of the capacity-building structures.

- The Collection working group (*Sammel AG*) coordinated signature collection and the get-out-the-vote phase and was behind developing the organizational structure of the campaign.

- The Right to the City working group helped expand migrant support for the initiative and underscore the democratic deficit reflected in the referendum itself as approximately 25 percent of tenants were barred from participation in a referendum that directly affected them for not holding the German citizenship,

Besides these topical working groups (WG), 13 neighborhood[5] groups (*Kiezteams*, NG) were founded to autonomously execute signature collection goals, who coordinated their work in a neighborhood group council (*Kiezteamrat*). To coordinate the activities of all these moving parts, delegates from each working-group and the local neighborhood groups were elected to form a steering committee (*Koordinierungs-Kreis*). This more centralized body prepares the bi-weekly plenum (*Gesamtplenum*), where major decisions are decided by popular vote, and which is open to members of all working and neighborhood groups and all supporting individuals.

With this structure (see figure 2), the DWE campaign established a democratic and accountable formalized structure for a large group of people—at times several hundred joined the plenum and approximately 2000 people were active at some point or another in the different working groups or collecting signatures. This was a novelty in the tenant

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[5] Even though entitled neighborhood groups, the geographical reference of the local branches rather mirrored the districts of Berlin and thus much bigger entities.

Figure 2

The organizational
structure of DWE
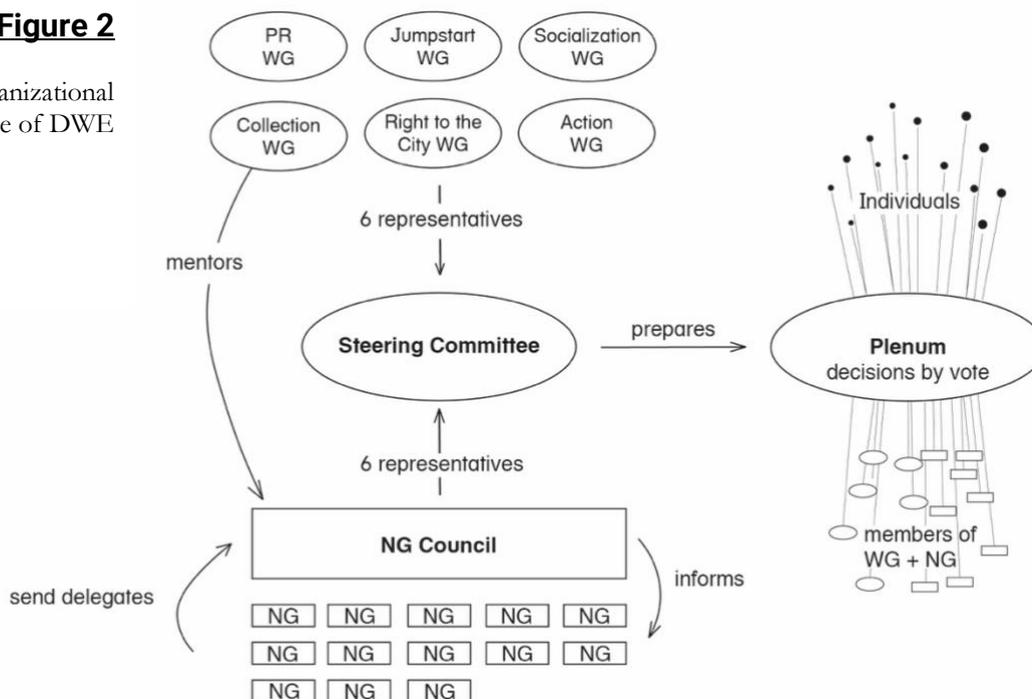
movement, which so far consisted of mostly small, rather informal groups of five to 20
people.

While the campaign was large in terms of active participants, the social composition of
the campaign was less representative of Berlin's population than the smaller tenant initiatives.
People under 40 with a middle class or academic background made up most of the activists
and organizing core. Another, smaller layer was composed of older men and women with a
long history of left activism, but with similar middle-class background. The campaign did
not succeed in including many working-class tenants, more active in the broader tenant
movement. The reasons for this failure were object of debate within the campaign
(Schwerdtner, 2021; Bähr & Müller, 2022; Kunkel, 2022). Despite the rather homogenous
social composition of the campaign, it was able to convince 59 percent of Berliners to vote
for their demands.[6]

The organizational structure was not developed from scratch but evolved according to
the changing demands of the campaign. The Collection working group formed in 2019 to
organize the first phase of signature collection and was composed of only ten to fifteen
people at the beginning. This small core was able to quickly generate signatures by drifting
off existing political networks across the organizational ecology and using mass events where
previously existing support was likely. Demos and rallies functioned as prime events to
expand support, express solidarity, and gain exposure. Thousands of signatures were
collected in April 2019 at the 'Stop the Rent Madness' action day alone.

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[6] The lack of a broader bases might be more problematic for the phase after the referendum, when organizing
concrete tenant struggles becomes more important (again) to put pressure on the government to implement
the referendums demand.

However, when the time came to pass the second hurdle, more complex structures needed to be developed. To get on the September 2021 ballot, DWE campaigners needed to collect 175,000 signatures within four months. To accomplish this, the network of passive and active supporters developed over the campaign's lifetime was invited to formally organize in Neighborhood groups to coordinate signature collection and outreach at the district and neighborhood level. While the Collection working group was tasked with setting objectives, developing infrastructures that buttressed signature collection, and coordinating between other working groups of the campaign, the Neighborhood groups were tasked with autonomously achieving goals as they saw fit. To help further coordinate actions, an app was developed to announce actions and signature collection events by individuals, neighborhood groups, and the campaign's steering committee. The use of social media and digital tools was born out of necessity in the pandemic situation with strict contact restrictions but turned out to be a useful technique to coordinate the many individuals involved in the campaign.

The Right to the City working group developed in December 2020 after members of the Jump Start working group saw an urgent need to further use the campaign to develop articulations with migrant organizations and communities. This was accomplished by underscoring the previously mentioned democratic deficit in accordance with ideas of urban citizenship (Islar & Irgil, 2018) and organizing migrant support for the initiative. The English-language based working-group saw a new influx of active supporters, tapping into the pool of politicized migrants lacking sufficient German language skills to join existing groups. Some had a great deal of political and organizational experiences and moved quickly to develop onboarding and upskilling structures allowing others with little or no campaign experience to step easily into new roles.

The development of capacity-building structures was carried out mostly by the Jump Start working group, Right to the City working group and external resources such as movement schools and foundations. Throughout the campaign, several workshops were developed to upskill the capacities of active supporters across the entire organization: Press trainings, workshops on how to door-knock, how to have one-on-ones, how to facilitate meetings, argumentation training, introductions to organizing, and many more.

The campaign was able to increase organizational capacity as it expanded labor-power dedicated to the reproduction of the organization. The organizational capacity of the campaign itself was also broadened by alliances with actors in the vicinity of the tenant movement. The Berliner Mieterverein, a tenant union with more than 180,000 members, supported the campaign by sharing its demands in public statements and in their magazine, sent to every member. Tenant unions have a long tradition as legal service providers and traditionally have close connections to institutional politics. Borrowing their legitimacy was important to represent expropriation as a mainstream demand. The same is true for the support of labor unions, that DWE could gain. Tenant and labor unions support were also important in collecting signatures. The left party Die Linke was the only party supporting the goals of the campaign without constraint, while the Green party was more hesitant with

support and the Social Democrats opposed it (as did the Conservative and the Liberal Party).[7] The leftist party started a signature collection effort on their own mobilizing their local members and proudly handed over more than 30,000 signatures to the campaign.

By late-June 2021, the combined efforts of not just the campaign, but the much broader organizational ecology resulted in the collection of 343,591 signatures—far surpassing the 175,000 required signatures to get on the ballot.

In July and early August, a quasi-respite was taken. There was a de facto break taken by many active supporters as people rushed to take holidays given the dramatically diminished corona infection rates over the summer of 2021. On the other hand, much of the campaign's labor-power resources were exhausted to address a conflict within the campaign that developed around the sexual assault of a woman supporter by a male housing-activist veteran. This meant that critical time and labor-power—time and labor that could have been used to upskill and repurpose the neighborhood groups to get-out-the-vote—were necessarily exhausted to address the internal crisis and support women (who played a critical organizational function throughout the campaign) such that they felt safe to stay in the campaign.

The final two months before the vote were defined by a variety of initiatives ranging from door-knocking (largely focused on periphery neighborhoods), events, rallies, media events, parties, and the like. Reemploying the door-knocking interventions the Jump Start working group had developed in the tenant movement trainings were organized. However, this was met with hesitancy by many members of the neighborhood groups, because, in general, many of their members lacked experience in outreach, and because door-knocking is still a largely unfamiliar practice in German political organizing. Hence, it was one thing to get supporters to ask for signatures. It was something else entirely to ask supporters to go to their neighbors' doors and hold sustained one-on-one conversations.

As we have shown, the DWE campaign's organizational structure is quite complex, has changed over time and can neither be characterized as centralized or decentralized or vertical or horizontal. It can rather be characterized as distributed organizational process, in which centralizing and decentralizing structures and practices are recomposed over time and according to the flux of political processes. In this way the campaign could react to changing demands and broaden its public support step by step.

Conclusion

In this paper we looked at two exogenous factors—the material basis of the tenant movement and the political terrain the DWE campaign had to navigate—and two endogenous factors—the organizational ecology and the organizational process of the

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[7] The members of the Social Democrats have changed their minds after the referendum and voted in favor of expropriation at a party assembly, while the government officials of the Social Democrats stay opposed to it until today

campaign—to explain how the DWE campaign could win public support for its demand and, through this public support, gain agenda responsiveness.

Different from what Schumacker (1975) suggested in his model introduced above, it is not only endogenous protester-controlled factors that influence a movement's ability to gain public support, but also exogenous ones. The success of the campaign can only be understood when considering the material basis of sharply rising rents as a wide felt grievance that made support for the campaign and its demands possible, though not inevitable. By building on this grievance, articulating it, and developing solutions, the tenant movement was able to pressure Berlin's government to adapt housing policies to the housing crisis. This stimulated Berliners' political expectations in light of institutional politics half-willing but hardly able to mediate the pending housing crisis. The tenant movement's ability to gain policy responsiveness—and the lacking impact responsiveness in forms of a decrease in rent levels—were preconditions for the DWE campaign to gain public support for more far-reaching radical demands and solutions to the housing crisis. In contrast to what is discussed in much of the social movement literature (for an overview, see Coy, 2013), we argue that the willingness of institutional politics to partially succumb to social movements demands does not necessarily lead to its co-optation and weakening but can also strengthen them. We also note that the stages of responsiveness are not linear but interdependent: influence at one stage might make influence at another stage easier.

The two external factors influencing the success of DWE to gain public support interact with two internal factors. In the nested organizational ecology of the tenant movement and the broader auxiliary infrastructures the DWE campaign developed its strategy and its demands. It could build on the learnings of the tenant movement on how to gain public support. Additionally, DWE could use the organizational ecology during the campaign to reach specific goals, such as the collection of signatures. The success of the campaign also depended largely on its distributed and adaptive organizational structure and its focus on capacity-building and upskilling. The campaign's ability to expand resources was based on an organizing approach that built enough structures and capacities to move enough of the population to ultimately win the vote.

Drawing on a thick description of the emergence and organizational process of the DWE campaign, we revisit the conceptualizations of social movement impact. When assessing the possibilities of social movements to influence housing politics it is important to distinguish between different stages of possible impact in the political process and between endogenous and exogenous factors. What became apparent is the complex interplay between different factors and their effect on different stages of the political process.

In the Schumaker model, public support is portrayed as the ultimate factor explaining why governments adopt social movement demands through policy responsiveness. The DWE campaign is a good example to scrutinize this assumption (see Vollmer, forthcoming). While it was able to quantify its degree of public support quite impressively, this success in no way guarantees that the expropriation will actually be implemented. The current government externalized the political debate in an expert commission until mid-2023, mostly staffed with lawyers. The ability of the DWE campaign to counter this *juridification* and re-

politicize the topic will depend both on endogenous factors, such as the ability to adapt the campaign's organizational structure once again, but also on exogenous factors, such as the traditionally close ties of the real estate industry to the local government and the ability of the former to utilize those ties to prevent expropriation.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the two editors of this journal and the two anonymous reviewers for their support in crafting this paper. We would also like to thank the six members of DWE who participated in the group interview and everyone else who shared insights and knowledge about the campaign in the last years.

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