The Privatization of Political Representation: Community-Based Organizations as Nonelected Neighborhood Representatives

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Abstract
In an era of public-private partnerships, what role do nonprofit community-based organizations (CBOs) play in urban governance? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Boston, this article presents a new way to understand CBOs’ political role in poor neighborhoods: CBOs as nonelected neighborhood representatives. Over the course of four years, I followed nine CBOs in six Boston neighborhoods as they planned community development projects. The CBOs in my study superseded elected politicians as the legitimate representatives of poor urban neighborhoods. Private funders and government agencies legitimated CBO leaders’ claims and treated them as the preferred representatives of neighborhoods’ interests. Elected district representatives, by contrast, exhibited limited influence over resources and were rarely involved in community development decision-making. By reconsidering CBOs’ political role in urban neighborhoods, this study uncovers a consequential realignment of urban political representation. It also identifies an important tradeoff between the urban poor’s access to resources and the ability to hold their leaders democratically accountable—a tradeoff that will remain so long as governments continue to rely on private actors in public governance.

Keywords
nonprofit organizations, urban neighborhoods, political representation, governance, inequality

What role do nonprofit community-based organizations (CBOs) play in urban governance, and how does their place in politics affect the distribution of resources to poor neighborhoods? Since the War on Poverty in the 1960s, the federal government has pursued a public-private partnership model of social policy, often relying on nonprofit CBOs to manage affordable housing, plan economic development projects, and provide social service programming. Policies of privatization and devolution in the 1970s and 1980s only heightened local governments’ reliance on CBOs as resource brokers in poor neighborhoods. New responsibilities opened up new political roles—in particular, the contemporary expectation that CBOs will, in some way, represent the interests of the
urban poor. In this article, I present a new conceptualization of CBOs, one that is absent in existing scholarship but critical for understanding political representation and the presence (or absence) of resources in disadvantaged neighborhoods: CBOs as nonelected neighborhood representatives.¹

Over the course of four years, I observed nine organizations as they planned community development projects in six Boston neighborhoods. One would expect district-based politicians, like state representatives or city councilors, to control community development in their districts. However, the CBOs in my study actually superseded elected officials as the legitimate representatives of poor neighborhoods. CBO leaders appropriated the language of electoral representation as they circumvented elected politicians and negotiated directly with bureaucrats and funders. Other actors in the community development field—namely, government administrators and private funders—legitimated CBOs’ claims and treated them as the preferred representatives of neighborhoods’ interests. District-based elected officials, by contrast, attended ribbon cuttings and groundbreakings but were largely absent from substantive discussions of redevelopment planning. CBO leaders leveraged neighborhood representation into additional resources for community development.

I compare these general findings to the case of Mattapan, a neighborhood where, halfway through my fieldwork, the lone development CBO filed for bankruptcy protection. Following the CBO’s demise, two elected officials took over as the neighborhood’s representatives in community development politics. As a result, community development projects stalled and resources earmarked for the neighborhood were left unspent. In this study, it was not the case that elected representatives were seen as illegitimate per se, but that CBOs were seen as more authentic representatives in the broader community development field. And given the contemporary reliance on public-private partnerships for community development, the shift in representation directly affected resource availability.

This study changes how we understand the political role of CBOs in cities, and shows how political and organizational processes affect the distribution of resources to disadvantaged neighborhoods. That CBOs adopt political strategies should not come as a surprise; their replacement of district-based politicians as neighborhood representatives, however, reveals a consequential realignment of urban politics—a transformation that alters how we understand the political representation of the urban poor. The findings of this study also point to an important tradeoff between resource allocation and democratic accountability: neighborhoods represented by CBOs gain greater access to resources, but they may sacrifice the ability to hold their leaders democratically accountable.

THE POLITICAL ROLE OF CBOs IN URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS

Sociological research depicts CBOs as meso-level resource brokers in poor neighborhoods. Formal organizations structure the conditions of urban poverty by providing “the only access point to resources . . . that other populations obtain through social ties” (Small 2006:289). Organizations are not islands unto themselves, but rather operate within economic and political fields. Marwell’s (2004, 2007) influential work alerted sociologists to the political dimension of CBO activity—in particular, how CBOs’ relationship to politics affects the allocation of resources.

Three models of CBOs’ political role dominate the literature. First, some scholars argue that CBOs represent third-party arms of the state, solving service delivery problems for bureaucrats (Frasure and Jones-Correa 2010; de Grauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad 2013; Salamon 1987; Smith and Lipsky 1993). According to this perspective, governments assume managerial authority over public funds, but they engage in contractual relationships with nonprofits to efficiently and flexibly implement social service delivery. Government is the key actor in these theories. Nonprofits’ political role
is understood as a political function and consequence of government discretion. In privileging the view from government, however, the third-party government perspective largely ignores CBOs’ agency in cultivating their political roles. CBOs are depicted as directed by state agents and unable to define their own political identity.

A second perspective focuses almost exclusively on CBO agency, drawing parallels between CBOs and interest groups that lobby the government for resources and privileges (Berry and Arons 2005; Kelleher and Yackee 2009; Mosley 2011). Berry and Arons (2005:30) argue that CBOs fit the standard definition of interest groups: they “‘speak for,’ ‘act for,’ and ‘look after the interests’ of those they are concerned about” when interacting with government. Similar to lobbying groups trying to affect legislation in line with their constituents’ interests, CBOs lobby governments to influence the distribution of public resources in their favor. And, like lobbying organizations, CBOs’ political activity is heavily regulated due to their tax-exempt nonprofit status.2

Yet the interest group perspective, focused on CBOs’ political strategies and behaviors, undersells how integrated CBOs and governments have become in the modern welfare state. Governments can continue to govern in the absence of lobbying groups. By contrast, governments have increasingly relied on CBOs to deliver social services and implement community development over time (Grønbjerg 2001; Marwell 2004; Smith and Lipsky 1993). The current scale of contracting is extensive: a 2012 nationally representative survey found that governments entered into 350,000 contract or grant relationships with 56,000 nonprofits (Pettijohn et al. 2013).

A third perspective depicts CBOs as political machines exchanging votes for government contracts (Marwell 2004, 2007). Marwell’s triadic exchange theory suggests that CBOs provide elected officials with reliable voting constituencies in exchange for service contracts. The theory rests on an assumption that district-based elected officials control the flow of resources to urban neighborhoods. “Government controls public resource allocation,” Marwell (2004:269) writes, “and elected officials are the decision-makers within government.”3 Some CBOs therefore play the role once filled by political party organizations, (informally) helping local politicians win elections in exchange for their influence over bureaucratically controlled resource allocations.

Structural shifts suggest an alternative political role for CBOs that is, on the one hand, fundamental to governance functions, but on the other hand, somewhat autonomous from bureaucratic or electoral control (cf. Chaves, Stephens, and Galaskiewicz 2004). First, governments still rely heavily on CBOs. According to a national nonprofit survey, community development organizations received, on average, six government contracts in 2009 (Boris et al. 2010). The magnitude of government support for CBOs has declined, however. The community development block grant (CDBG) program, the primary source of federal funds for urban communities, has declined 79 percent since 1978—from $12.7 billion to $3 billion in inflation-adjusted dollars (de Graauw et al. 2013; Rohe and Galster 2014). Governments are consequently unable to fully support program costs. Of the nonprofits in Pettijohn and colleagues’ (2013) 2012 survey, 54 percent reported that government contracts and grants alone were insufficient, 23 percent reported decreasing payments for the same expectations of service delivery, and 52 percent were awarded contracts or grants that required additional “matching” contributions from nongovernmental sources.4

Existing theories focus narrowly on public funding, but CBOs also receive grants from private funders—an arena where elected officials have little oversight or influence. Indeed, 40 percent of human service nonprofits receive the majority of their funding from nongovernmental sources (Boris et al. 2010). National intermediaries like Enterprise Community Partners and Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) exist with the sole purpose of repackaging funding to support neighborhood development (McQuarrie and...
According to a survey of 23 cities, LISC and Enterprise doubled their funding between 1990 and 2000 (Walker 2002); LISC awarded $1.1 billion in grants in 2010 alone (von Hoffman 2013). Community foundations, a major source of philanthropic funding for CBOs, awarded $4.3 billion in grants in 2011—up 79 percent ($2.4 billion) since 2001 (Foundation Center 2012). And as Reckhow (2013) illustrates in her study of education politics in New York City and Los Angeles, foundations’ contributions afford them significant influence in urban affairs. Theoretical models of CBOs and urban governance are incomplete if they do not account for the increased presence of private funding in cities.

Shifts in funding coincide with larger political changes in U.S. cities. As Pacewicz (2015) argues in his study of “River City,” Iowa, macro economic conditions in the 1970s initiated a shift from partisanship to “partnership” in urban politics. Economic decline dismantled institutions with ties to partisan politics, like labor unions and large, locally owned firms. In their place emerged economic development organizations and civic groups committed to consensus rather than conflict. These institutions abandoned divisive politicians in favor of technocratic “partnerships”—a shift some geographers describe as the rise of “post-political” cities (Swyngedouw 2009).

These structural arrangements present a distinct context for scholars to understand CBOs’ role in urban governance. Governments still rely on CBOs to perform many functions of the welfare state, yet public resources for community development have shrunk over time. Private funders help CBOs offset budget deficits, thus reducing their reliance on public funding and also increasing funders’ influence. Economic shifts carry additional political consequences as new actors (funding organizations and their nonprofit grantees) cement their place as “partners” in urban governance, while traditional actors (like elected politicians) can fall out of favor. These conditions structurally position CBOs to assume new political roles in urban neighborhoods, moving beyond the literature’s identification of third-party bureaucracies, interest groups, and political machines. In the remainder of this article, I draw on my fieldwork to propose a new conceptualization and outline its theoretical implications for the availability of resources in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODS

Field Site: The Fairmount Corridor

Between January 2010 and May 2014, I followed community development efforts in Boston’s Fairmount Corridor. The Corridor is a 9.2-mile rail corridor that includes eight neighborhoods within the larger neighborhood areas of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, and Hyde Park. Significant portions of the endpoints—Newmarket and Readville—are industrial. The six remaining neighborhoods—Upham’s Corner, Grove Hall, Four Corners, Codman Square, Mattapan, and Logan Square—are primarily residential and are the focus of redevelopment efforts. According to the 2010 Census, the 88,698 Corridor residents are 61 percent black, 21 percent Latino, 9 percent white, and 1 percent Asian. Thirty-five percent are foreign-born. The Corridor includes 14 percent of Boston’s total population, 39 percent of the city’s African American population, and 50 percent of the city’s population with Caribbean ancestry. Nearly half of all households earn less than $40,000, and according to 2006 to 2010 American Community Survey estimates, the Corridor’s 14.9 percent unemployment rate is significantly higher than the citywide rate of 9.3 percent.

In the early 2000s, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority studied the feasibility of new stations along the Fairmount Line, responding to pressure from local nonprofits. Four community development corporations (CDCs) located in the Corridor—private nonprofits that mix real estate development with community organizing—created a development coalition in 2004 to leverage the potential transit investment into additional...
affordable housing and economic development. In 2005, the state committed to the construction of four new stations. The Corridor CDCs then joined a fluctuating collection of between five and eight nonprofit organizations in two additional coalitions: one focused on improving the transit service and the other planning a “greenway”—a collection of parks, bike paths, and community gardens alongside the rail line. In 2009, the Fairmount Corridor became a national priority when the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Federal Transportation Administration (FTA) named it a pilot project for a newly coordinated inter-agency partnership. By 2011, the Corridor had become a national model of integrated urban planning and community development.

CBOs of the Fairmount Corridor

Nine CBOs plan and implement community development projects in the Corridor’s six residential neighborhoods. Each organization is “community-based,” claiming to serve the neighborhood in which it is located. Five are community development corporations (CDCs), organizations that primarily develop real estate projects but also implement social programming like youth organizing or violence prevention. Three focus on community empowerment (e.g., promoting safety, arts and culture, job training) and organizing. A final organization engages in community organizing and other programming specifically related to the health and wellness of residents in Mattapan. These organizations are committed to community development in the Fairmount Corridor, although they also engage in other, non-Corridor related work. For instance, one of the nine CBOs in the Corridor, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, received a Promise Neighborhoods grant in 2012 from the federal Department of Education to open and operate a charter school in Roxbury. Table 1 lists each CBO included in this study, their coalition memberships in the Fairmount Corridor, and information about staff size and operating budget.

These organizations are members of three overlapping coalitions in the Corridor: one focused on housing and commercial development, a second dedicated to improving transit service and reducing fares, and a third that designed a network of integrated parks and recreational space alongside the rail line. Over the course of my fieldwork, the development coalition planned 18 real estate projects, the transit coalition successfully pressured the state to reduce fares on the rail line, and the greenway coalition designed a bike path and other green spaces—most notably, a new community garden in Mattapan that opened in September 2014.

A cadre of consultants assists CBO staff with redevelopment planning. During my fieldwork, the Corridor coalitions employed five regular consultants who coordinated meetings, created budgets, applied for grants, and offered advice on political strategy. These were professionals who functioned as CBO staff. Additional technical consultants were also contracted on a project-by-project basis.

The CBOs in the Fairmount Corridor adopted what one local leader described as a “both/and” strategy: they focused on both their own local neighborhoods and a coordinated Corridor strategy. Funders find the idea of a “corridor” appealing; a grant for corridor redevelopment, they believe, will have more impact than grants to individual neighborhoods. Each CBO coalition thus pursued collective grants that they would divvy up among members who, in turn, would implement neighborhood-specific projects. Fairmount Corridor CBOs essentially engaged in a game of clever accounting: each organization was responsible for projects in a local neighborhood, yet they could claim a much larger impact by linking their efforts to other CBOs doing the same thing throughout the Corridor.

Fieldwork

I gained access to these organizations’ private meetings where they discussed their political strategy and negotiated community development projects with government officials and funders. In total, I observed 214 private
meetings involving nonprofit CBOs. Of these, 164 involved only CBO actors, of which 105 were in-person meetings and 59 were conference calls. Fifty meetings (46 in-person and four conference calls) involved CBO representatives meeting with government officials or private funders. In addition to meetings, I gained access to e-mails between coalition members (over 2,000) and strategy documents prepared and discussed by organizational leaders.

Government agencies’ and funders’ perceptions of CBOs can yield important insights about CBOs’ political role (see de Graauw et al. 2013), and so for 10 months in 2010 and 2011 I worked part-time and full-time in Boston City Hall, and for 12 months in 2012 and 2013 I worked as a part-time consultant for a foundation funding redevelopment projects in the Corridor. Fieldwork with these organizations allowed me to incorporate the perspective of other actors in the community development field into my analysis.

Supplementing this focus on private political negotiations, I also observed 76 public meetings where residents vetted community

### Table 1. CBOs in the Fairmount Corridor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Neighborhood Location</th>
<th>Organizational Focus</th>
<th>Focus in Corridor</th>
<th>Annual Revenue</th>
<th>Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upham’s Corner CDC</td>
<td>Upham’s Corner</td>
<td>Community Development Corporation</td>
<td>Development, Transit, Greenway Coalition</td>
<td>$3,553,814</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative</td>
<td>Upham’s Corner&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Community Organizing</td>
<td>Transit and Greenway Coalition</td>
<td>$1,140,943</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grove Hall CDC</td>
<td>Grove Hall</td>
<td>Community Development Corporation</td>
<td>Greenway Coalition</td>
<td>$371,390</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grove Hall Together</td>
<td>Grove Hall</td>
<td>Community Organizing</td>
<td>Greenway Coalition</td>
<td>$1,115,529</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Corners United</td>
<td>Four Corners</td>
<td>Community Organizing</td>
<td>Transit and Greenway Coalition</td>
<td>$369,842</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codman Square CDC</td>
<td>Codman Square</td>
<td>Community Development Corporation</td>
<td>Development, Transit, Greenway Coalition</td>
<td>$5,210,506</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mattapan CDC</td>
<td>Mattapan</td>
<td>Community Development Corporation</td>
<td>Development, Transit, Greenway Coalition</td>
<td>$666,476</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy Mattapan For All</td>
<td>Mattapan</td>
<td>Community Organizing and Health Promotion</td>
<td>Greenway Coalition</td>
<td>$55,000</td>
<td>6 (part time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyde Park CDC</td>
<td>Hyde Park</td>
<td>Community Development Corporation</td>
<td>Development, Transit, Greenway Coalitions</td>
<td>$283,536</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Data come from 2012 IRS tax returns, except for Mattapan CDC and Healthy Mattapan For All. The latest data for Mattapan CDC come from 2009. Data for Healthy Mattapan For All come from the organization’s chairperson.

<sup>b</sup>Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative is located in the Dudley Triangle, which extends beyond the boundaries of the Fairmount Corridor. However, their service area includes Upham’s Corner, and so their Corridor involvement is limited to that neighborhood.
development plans. Fieldwork during these meetings made it possible to follow the interactions between CBOs, government bureaucrats, and elected officials from backroom conversations to public forums, where residents observed, reacted to, and dialectically reinforced each group’s subtle performance of political identity.

Multi-sited ethnography—“being there . . . and there . . . and there!” (Hannerz 2003:202)—is an ideal method to analyze CBOs’ political role in urban neighborhoods. The construction of a CBO’s role does not begin and end with the CBO itself; it emerges out of relations between multiple actors occupying different spaces within the field and bound together in a relationship of mutual dependence (Desmond 2014). Fieldwork during the Corridor CBOs’ private meetings reveals their own understanding of their role. Expanding to interactions between CBOs, elected officials, government agencies, and funders adds the perspective of the broader community development field. Observations of community meetings illustrate the public actualization of private political strategizing. The totality of observations, from multiple vantage points, paints a rich picture of CBO political activity and their role in contemporary cities. Indeed, incorporating multiple perspectives into a single analysis is the hallmark of ethnography (see, e.g., Duneier 1999; Klinenberg 2002).

The Fairmount Corridor is, additionally, a strategic site to answer theoretical questions about CBOs’ political role. First, the Corridor reflects structural shifts in urban policy and community development funding. As evidenced by grants and contracts, government relies on CBOs in the Fairmount Corridor just as they rely on CBOs in other U.S. cities.14 Many private funders and foundations also support Corridor CBOs; one of LISC’s 30 regional offices, for example, is located in Boston and helps fund Corridor development. Second, community development in the Corridor spans multiple issue areas (public transit, affordable housing, arts and culture, environmental sustainability, and economic development) and multiple levels of government (city, state, and federal). Finally, the Fairmount Corridor has been promoted as a “best practice” across multiple settings. CBOs from the Corridor presented their work at national urban planning conferences across the country. Local foundations hosted other funders to pass on lessons about grant-giving in the Corridor. And in October 2012, federal officials brought grantees from Connecticut to go on a bus tour of the Corridor and meet with the Corridor CBOs. The message was clear: this is the governance arrangement the federal government sees as legitimate and successful.

Some aspects of Boston’s political context may be unique, however. For example, my fieldwork coincided with Thomas Menino’s fifth term as Boston’s mayor, suggesting a political machine similar to Chicago under Daley, but unlike New York City’s pluralist city politics.15 The CBOs I studied were also involved in organized coalitions and membership organizations spanning the city and state, and these coalitions may look different in other cities. In the Discussion section, I note how these and other conditions can generate additional hypotheses for future research.

THE POLITICAL ROLE OF CBOs IN THE FAIRMOUNT CORRIDOR

The nine CBOs in my study adopted the language of elected politicians—even comparing themselves to members of Congress—and claimed authority as gatekeepers over local neighborhood development. CBO leaders spoke like elected representatives, and they acted liked them through a political strategy focused on influencing the allocation of resources held by government bureaucrats and private foundation funders. In fact, CBO directors preferred to avoid negotiations with elected officials altogether; their limited involvement in electoral politics was either haphazard or misdirected, and they relied on regional associations and membership organizations to pursue legislative advocacy.
CBOs Assuming Representation over Their Districts

During my fieldwork, Fairmount Corridor CBOs invoked a language insinuating ownership over the neighborhoods in which they were located. They referred to neighborhoods in the possessive—as in, “my neighborhood” or “our neighborhood”—even if they were not actual residents. Neighborhood names became shorthand for organizations; Codman Square Community Development Corporation (CSCDC) became simply “Codman Square” in the local vernacular. Individual staff embodied both the organization and the neighborhood. If, for example, one asked if “Codman” attended a meeting, they meant a particular person working for a specific CBO located in the Codman Square neighborhood.

Claims of ownership mirrored a language of electoral politics. Coalitions became “caucuses,” organizational goals became “campaigns,” and residents became “constituents.” Nonprofit leaders not only presided over neighborhoods, they also spoke as formal political representatives when interacting within the broader community development field.

CBO leaders also acted as gatekeepers over development projects. In February 2013, representatives of the Corridor CBOs met with city bureaucrats to talk about parks and gardens along the rail line. They learned that another developer had expressed interest in a vacant lot in Grove Hall. But Charles, the African American director of Grove Hall Together, already had plans to develop the lot as open, recreational space. At the meeting, city officials could not remember the developer’s name, but said they would get back to Charles at a later date.

The following month, in March, the CBO leaders met and debriefed from the meeting. Hector, a Latino community organizer at Hyde Park CDC, asked Charles if he had followed up with officials from City Hall about the unknown developer:

“I know about it, yeah. They’re going to be working with us,” Charles confidently replied.

“When I heard it at the meeting [with City Hall], I was like, ‘Wait, what? I don’t think so!’ . . . Because I know not much goes underneath Charles’s nose. He’s pretty much on top of everything,” Hector observed with a knowing smile.

Everyone in the room chuckled.

“Yeah,” Charles responded, dragging out the word. “It’s gonna be hard for anyone to get anything there without coming to us and getting our blessing.”

When Charles said “our blessing,” he was implying that he was speaking on behalf of the neighborhood. But he really meant his blessing—which he did not give. Instead, Charles moved forward with his organization’s original plan. As the neighborhood’s representative, Charles retained ultimate authority over the planning process and eventually co-opted the previously unknown developer as an unpaid consultant on the project.

CBO leaders’ sense of ownership over neighborhoods affected how they negotiated for resources. In February 2012, the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) initiated a planning process for the Fairmount Corridor. The agency selected a 20-member advisory group, including board members from Upham’s Corner CDC, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, Codman Square CDC, Four Corners United, and Hyde Park CDC. Other members included landowners, for-profit developers, architects, bike advocates, and historic preservationists. In December, the BRA announced that it had additional—but limited—funds for neighborhood-specific planning. City officials designated some of the funds for Upham’s Corner, since they had promised residents a neighborhood planning process the previous year. The money left over could support planning in just two of the remaining seven Corridor neighborhoods.

Three CBOs—Upham’s Corner CDC, Codman Square CDC, and Hyde Park CDC—formed what they called a “caucus” and discussed how to persuade redevelopment officials to allocate the remaining resources
to Codman Square and Hyde Park. During one caucus meeting at a Dorchester diner, David, the African American executive director of Upham’s Corner CDC, suggested recruiting members of the advisory group as potential allies. “This is like being on the Senate,” he told his CBO colleagues, “where you got people in the room who may not be your friends, but if you build relationships with them . . . you end up with allies.”

At David’s recommendation, the CBO caucus conducted a “power analysis,” one of Saul Alinsky’s well-known community organizing techniques. On large pieces of paper, they wrote the names of each advisory group member and listed relationships of work, family, religion, and politics. The CBO leaders believed these relationships revealed each person’s “self-interests.” Self-interests, in turn, could be exploited to form alliances with advisory group members and influence their decisions. Each director used this knowledge in the following months as they met one-on-one with BRA officials, members of the advisory group, and other supporters.18

It is important to recognize that the money under discussion was for outside consultant-led neighborhood planning. These were resources for the neighborhoods, not the organizations; none of the funding supported CBO programming or operations. Nevertheless, the leaders campaigned on behalf of each neighborhood, assuming the role of political representative.

Indeed, CBOs consistently leveraged their role as representatives into additional neighborhood resources. For example, Mary, the white executive director of Codman Square CDC (CSCDC), engaged in four years of backroom negotiations with city bureaucrats to acquire 20,000 square feet of city-owned vacant land in Codman Square. City planners intended to use the site for urban agriculture, but CSCDC staff successfully blocked their plans by claiming to represent the neighborhood’s interests. The organization proposed an alternative plan—a project including small-scale food production, gardens, and a playground—and was designated developer in March 2014. The localized project spawned additional recognition and resources. CSCDC linked the site to a larger Eco-Innovation District plan, which received funding to reduce energy costs in the neighborhood. In July 2014, the organization was one of nine in the United States to receive funding from a national organization to update existing buildings with eco-friendly upgrades. At each stage, representatives from Codman Square CDC met privately with funders or officials, acting as Codman Square’s representative while negotiating for neighborhood resources.

CBOs’ Political Strategy

Reflecting structural changes to community development funding, CBO leaders viewed government executives and private funders as the key holders of resources, not state legislators or city councilors (cf. Marwell 2004). Accordingly, their political strategy focused not on persuading district-based elected officials, but on engaging directly with appointed government officials and foundation program officers. Indeed, similar to state representatives attempting to secure public resources for their district, CBO leaders attempted to directly affect the allocation of service contracts and foundation grants that bring resources to neighborhoods. These were not one-off, superficial hearings, but ongoing relationships cemented through meetings, phone calls, e-mails, neighborhood tours, and ribbon cuttings.

I observed the Fairmount Corridor nonprofits meet with government officials 33 times during my fieldwork, in addition to receiving second-hand reports about project-specific meetings and one-on-one communication. They discussed transit fare reductions with state transportation officials, real estate development with the city’s property disposition department, streetscape improvements with the Boston Transportation Department and Department of Public Works, redevelopment planning and zoning with the Boston Redevelopment Authority, and easing restrictive federal grant requirements with regional administrators. On February 14, 2013, the Fairmount Corridor nonprofits attended four
consecutive meetings with officials from nine city and state departments. The meetings lasted from 11:30 a.m. until 5:45 p.m., without a single break. The back-to-back-to-back-to-back meetings did not leave enough time for a discussion of recreational development, and so the nonprofits were back in City Hall for another meeting the very next week.

CBO leaders were explicit about this strategy. When the city’s redevelopment authority launched a planning initiative for the Corridor, for example, the organizations strategized a way to access the agency’s resources and attention—and, perhaps, even collaborate on grant applications. During a meeting of Corridor CDC directors in December 2012, Mary suggested targeting the person who “really is in charge”: the redevelopment authority’s chief planner, Kairos Shen. She explained to her developer colleagues:

If our goal is to see if we can get them to . . . work with us and actually think about getting some things off the ground and writing some joint proposals and not passing up opportunities, then it feels like to me it’s a meeting that needs to happen with someone like Kairos, or someone who really is in charge of this whole planning process. Not the mayor, but Kairos.

Charles reiterated Mary’s suggestion the following month. He recommended a strategy aimed at “who really has the power at the [redevelopment authority], besides the mayor”: the agency’s director, Peter Meade, and its chief planner, Kairos Shen. Both of these men were appointed city executives.

Private funders were also targets of CBO political action. The existing literature rarely considers CBOs’ relations with private funders as “political,” but like government bureaucrats, private funders are critical players in contemporary urban governance (McQuarrie and Krumholz 2011; Reckhow 2013). More importantly, insofar as politics involves the ability to influence the allocation of resources—that is, decisions about who gets what—CBO-funder interactions are key sites of political negotiation. For example, in November 2010, Upham’s Corner CDC, Codman Square CDC, Mattapan CDC, and Hyde Park CDC received a $7,500 grant from a national bank for foreclosure assistance. Claudia, the white executive director of Hyde Park CDC, was upset with the small amount. She suggested “a political power meeting” to explain to bank officials how little can be accomplished with that sum. The strategy worked: ongoing conversations with bank officials resulted in a $100,000 grant in August 2012, and another $100,000 awarded in November 2013.

Throughout my fieldwork, Claudia repeatedly encouraged the organization’s white fundraising consultant, Robert, to “be more political” with fundraising. Claudia referred to this general fundraising strategy as “relational politics.” It involved targeted calls with trustees and board members of national banks and foundations. She was particularly interested in major national foundations—sources of huge sums of money that had, at this point, invested only minimally in the Fairmount Corridor (e.g., Surdna Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Barr Foundation). During a meeting of CDC directors and consultants in December 2012, Claudia compared the fundraising strategy to warfare, declaring, “We need a political organizing strategy—not just Robert looking for grants on the Internet. We need a war room strategy.”

After the meeting, Robert gave another white consultant, George, a ride to the nearby train station. I sat in the back seat of Robert’s car as the two discussed Claudia’s instructions to initiate a “political” fundraising strategy:

“When she says be more political, does she mean with the funders? Or the politicians?” George asked Robert.

“She means with the funders,” Robert replied. “But by going and sitting down. Going to New York, and talking to [the major foundation].”

Lists of political targets are tangible illustrations of nonprofits’ political priorities. On
seven occasions I observed Fairmount Corridor organizations develop these strategic documents. In each instance, district-based elected representatives (city councilors and state representatives) were either the last noted or completely ignored. In May 2011, the CDC directors developed “an integrated, coordinated strategy targeting multiple city officials and departments.” The document focused on six administration officials and executives, referred to as “allies” and “power players.” In October 2012, the CDC directors created an invitation list for the announcement of a major grant. The first invitees were city redevelopment departments, followed by other nonprofit organizational allies. The group listed four funding organizations next. An “e-mail to all of the elected officials” came last; they did not even bother to specify specific officeholders. In December 2012, the Corridor nonprofits developed a strategy for transit advocacy. On a handout, they listed the state transportation authority board as “decision maker,” and referred to the governor, secretary of transportation, and general manager of the transportation authority as “key players.” Elected officials were listed at the bottom of the page as “potential supporters”; they were not seen as necessary advocates. In July 2013, a consultant for the CDC directors prepared a list of people to send an announcement regarding the nonprofits’ new website. Her list first included seven funders, followed by organizational allies, staff and board members of the organizations, and two city agencies. She did not list a single elected official.

**CBOs and Electoral Politics**

For the nonprofits in the Fairmount Corridor, elections themselves can be an afterthought. When Hurricane Sandy ravaged the east coast in October 2012, the Corridor CDCs had to reschedule the public announcement of a grant from a national bank. The announcement would be a major public relations event for the CDCs. During a conference call between the CDC directors and their consultants, Mary inexplicably suggested holding the event on Tuesday, November 6th—Election Day. Four state representatives and two state senators of the Fairmount Corridor were up for reelection on that day. Five of the candidates ran unopposed, but Mary’s organization was located in the district that featured the only contested race.

“Mary, that’s Election Day,” a consultant on the call reminded her, with a frustrated tone.


Another consultant explained that the day after an election is a terrible time to get press attention; the press, of course, will be more concerned with election results than a grant to local nonprofits. Mary, ambivalent about the election but seeking as much press coverage as possible, eventually conceded that the consultants had a point. When CBOs did engage in electoral politics, their efforts were ill-timed or misdirected. Consider the 2013 mayoral election, marking the end of Thomas Menino’s 20-year control of City Hall. Tax-exempt nonprofits cannot endorse specific candidates for office, but they can increase local political power by encouraging residents to participate in the political process (see, e.g., Marwell 2004). Yet the Fairmount Corridor nonprofits, as a collective, had little interest in mobilizing residents of their neighborhoods. In fact, it was not until January 2014—two months after the 2013 mayoral election—that the Corridor nonprofits asked a representative from a nonpartisan voting rights organization to train their staff on voter registration and turnout.

Consultants for the nonprofits were surprised at the CBOs’ hands-off approach with elected officials. In May 2013, I observed two white consultants, Elena and George, discuss their employers’ political strategy as they waited for a bus after a meeting. Elena was recently hired, and she asked George about the CBOs’ history of working with elected
representatives. “There is no history!” George nearly shouted, his eyes wide. Elena was incredulous.

George had plenty of experience working with elected officials, as he explained to Elena and me. In the early 1980s, George served as executive director of a Boston CDC. In his words, “we basically ran one of our former directors to be on the city council.” When a development project faced resistance from City Hall, George called his councilor who, in turn, called the appropriate agency directors and the project was reconsidered. “That’s how it works!” George exclaimed. “That’s how it works! And these guys [the Fairmount Corridor CBOs] don’t get it!” His experience mirrors Marwell’s (2004) discussion of CBOs’ strategic alliances with elected officials. Yet the Corridor CBOs operated in a very different structural context. With less control over resources, elected officials became less valuable as partners.

Instead of direct involvement in electoral politics, the CBOs indirectly channeled their legislative interests through regional associations and intermediary organizations. These associations propose legislative reform or new policy agendas, and solicit support from their member organizations. They are regional associations, though, so their efforts benefited larger geographic areas than just the Fairmount Corridor.

For example, the Corridor CBOs relied on Transportation for Massachusetts (T4MA), a regional coalition, to pressure state legislators on transportation issues. In 2013, Governor Patrick proposed a transportation bond bill, and T4MA advocated members of the House to vote the bill down in favor of a larger budget. The Corridor CBOs symbolically “signed on” to the effort. But they did not send representatives to a T4MA-sponsored public demonstration in April. Nor did they send representatives to any public demonstration, for that matter. When the Corridor CBOs engaged with transportation issues, they met privately with executives—something I observed 18 times during my fieldwork. Legislative politics was left to the regional association.

To be sure, CBO leaders expressed reverence for their elected representatives. They frequently listed them alongside other “allies” or “supporters” of their work, and they invited them to speak during ribbon cuttings as signals of deference. Even though elected officials played little role in planning or proposing projects, support was nevertheless useful because their last-minute obstruction could impede implementation. Still, some CBO leaders worried elected representatives were more interested in public recognition than in accomplishing tangible development goals. While discussing invitations to an event in May 2013, for instance, one CBO director dismissively joked, “As I say, elected officials will go to an opening of an envelope.”

THE MARGINALIZED ROLE OF ELECTED OFFICIALS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT POLITICS

We can better understand this organizational behavior by turning to elected representatives, the actors whose official titles suggest political representation of neighborhood districts. During my fieldwork, elected officials rarely attended private meetings between redevelopment elites. Instead, they were fixtures at public meetings, where they stood in the back of the room or sat among residents in the audience. District-based elected officials did not have access to proprietary resources, lacked alliances with resource-holding government agencies, and had little influence over grants to exchange for votes.

Elected officials’ spatial position during public meetings revealed their peripheral role in community development politics. At a September 2013 meeting about the redevelopment of an abandoned factory in Upham’s Corner, State Representative Carlos Henriquez entered an hour late and stood by himself in the back of the room. He was not introduced and did not introduce himself—although he did make his presence known on social media, where he posted photos of the
meeting. At a January 2011 meeting about transportation improvements in Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, State Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz stood against a wall in the back left corner of the room. At a May 2012 meeting about parks development in Mattapan, State Representative Russell Holmes sat in the right corner of the room and read his mail. At a February 2013 meeting about public realm improvements in Upham’s Corner, then-State Representative Linda Dorcena Forry sat in the back left corner for 15 minutes before leaving for another event. City Councilor Charles Yancey joined Dorcena Forry, Holmes, and Chang-Diaz at a November 2012 meeting about transportation access in Mattapan, and all four elected officials leaned against a wall on the right side of the room. They offered generic, clichéd remarks at the end of the meeting, once substantive conversations had ended.19

Elected officials can have their role as neighborhood representative undermined—sometimes, very publicly. In 2011, the City of Boston announced an urban agriculture initiative focused on the development of four urban farms in the Dorchester and Mattapan neighborhood districts. In September, city officials co-sponsored a public meeting at a local housing project with Four Corners United (FCU), a Four Corners nonprofit, and City Growers, a for-profit agriculture company. City Growers was the only bidder on a Request for Proposals to develop two adjacent parcels on Glenway Street into an urban farm. Representatives from the company attended the meeting to answer questions, and afterward, local residents were expected to discuss and vote on the project.

Officials from City Hall sat at the front of the room. Marvin Martin, FCU’s African American executive director, moderated. About 30 people—mostly African American or Caribbean—attended. The meeting started at 6 p.m.; City Councilor Yancey, a 15-term African American city councilor, entered at 6:45 and sat in the audience.

Councilor Yancey was the first to speak when the question-and-answer period began.

He stood up from his seat and moved to the front of the room, facing the audience. He expressed two concerns about the project: first, the soil might be contaminated, and second, “the project is not from the community. It was imposed on the community, top-down.” In an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the entire public process, he asked who in attendance lives in the neighborhood. Only three individuals raised their hands.

Councilor Yancey randomly called on meeting participants, asking them how they heard about the meeting and priming them to agree with his concerns regarding contamination. After a few minutes, Marvin, the nonprofit director moderating the meeting, walked up toward Yancey from behind. He tapped the city councilor on his shoulder and started whispering in his ear. When he finished, Councilor Yancey abruptly sat down:

“I’ve been informed that I’ve overstayed my welcome,” Councilor Yancey announced with a smirk. “In my own district.”

Marvin resumed his position at the front of the room. “We need to have a process, and you can’t just ask 10 questions,” he said to the group, speaking in general terms but implicitly chastising Councilor Yancey.

“Thank you!” an exasperated African American city official muttered under his breath. He had been making pained faces as the city councilor spoke.

Marvin then addressed Councilor Yancey directly. “You will never overstay your welcome, Councilor Yancey. But at the beginning of the meeting, we set rules for a process.”

“I was just trying to forward it along!” Councilor Yancey called out from his seat in the audience, attempting to save face as he let out an embarrassed chuckle.

The meeting continued with routine questions about pollution from idling trucks and
the process for hiring local residents to farm. Earnest, Councilor Yancey’s African American manager of constituent services, asked the final question of the evening:

“At what point has the community told you that they want this? From my understanding—and I’ve been at just about every single meeting—we’ve had members of the community tell you that they don’t want it. So at what point has a majority of the community, from each of these parcels that you’re proposing this for, stated to you, ‘Yes, this is something I want’? Because we just continuously hear otherwise.”

A white city official asked Marvin to respond, but Councilor Yancey’s assistant interrupted. “I’m asking the City. I’m not asking Mr. Martin, with all due respect.”

“Mr. Martin is part of the conversation, though,” an African American city official quickly responded, “because he runs the community group—the local community group in the area.”

“Excuse me,” Councilor Yancey interjected. “But I represent the community. And am elected. And I think that question should be answered.” He added that he supports urban farming in principle, but remained concerned that the project lacked sufficient soil testing and “community support.” He asked rhetorically, “How can I be a responsible elected representative from this area if that’s not [addressed]?”

“I have to be forthcoming, and say that we also spoke to people,” Marvin responded, “and the majority of people we talked to were in favor of this project.” However, he agreed to conduct more outreach and organize a second meeting. “It’s not unusual for us to have more than one community meeting to resolve an issue.”

Ralph, an African American community organizer with FCU who was standing in the back of the room, indicated that the organization would submit a letter to city officials regarding soil testing and other issues discussed at the meeting. “Let us do our jobs,” he implored. The meeting dispersed at 8:35.

Councilor Yancey was an elected representative—a 15-term incumbent, in fact. And yet he was hardly treated as the district’s representative as he interacted with government officials, community organizers, and residents of Four Corners. Instead, staff from FCU took control of the meeting and acted as the neighborhood’s representatives. Yancey may have been able to assert more authority in a different era, when elected officials were central to resource allocation and divisive partisanship was valued (see Pacewicz 2015). That is no longer the case. When Ralph said, “Let us do our jobs,” he ostensibly meant, “Let us represent the neighborhood.” Councilor Yancey attempted to assert his legitimacy as an elected representative, but this was not enough to overrule Marvin and other staff from FCU.20

**THE PERSPECTIVE OF GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRATS AND PRIVATE FUNDERS**

The taken-for-granted actions of other actors in the community development field—specifically, government executives and private funders—can also shed light on CBOs’ political representation of disadvantaged neighborhoods. These bureaucratic agencies and funding organizations rely on CBOs to act as liaisons for local neighborhoods, enlisting their help to engage poor urban residents. Funders, in particular, help structurally induce a role for CBOs as representatives through their grant-giving practices.

When government agencies plan redevelopment projects, they depend on local nonprofits to act as conduits for neighborhood concerns. This is particularly evident when officials plan outreach strategies to encourage resident participation. In January 2011, for
instance, the state department of transportation hired consultants to conduct a transit needs study for Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. Between January and May, the consultant group enlisted 6 churches and 11 nonprofit organizations to administer surveys and act as liaisons to local residents. During a public meeting in January, one consultant lauded the nonprofits as “the real connection to the community.” “Thank God we have relationships with these groups,” another consultant declared in May, after the nonprofits produced 752 completed surveys and the outreach process concluded.

City bureaucrats behave similarly. Consider the Fairmount Corridor Planning Process, managed by the city’s redevelopment authority. The agency relied on a mayor-appointed committee of Corridor stakeholders to relay information from local residents. The group, dominated by CBO leaders, was officially called the Corridor Advisory Group. But during a September 2013 meeting, a white city planner, Richard, referred to it as the “Community Advisory Group”—a Freudian slip implying that the CBO leaders were, in fact, stand-ins for “community” oversight. He called them “a much better conduit to the people and neighborhoods than I can [be].” At another meeting later that month, he noted, “While you are the advisory group and the focal point, it’s really . . . the community. But you guys are my point folks to these stakeholder groups. . . . I look to you first, as conduits.” In other words, for city officials to know what a community needs, they need a CBO to act as a conduit.

When a private funder wants to provide a grant to a neighborhood, it needs a CBO to accept the money and manage the funds. This grant-giving practice prompts funders to defer to nonprofit leaders as community representatives. For example, in 2010, Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), a community development intermediary, launched a $400,000 neighborhood development planning initiative in two Corridor neighborhoods.21 They selected a CBO “partner” in each neighborhood that would act as a local liaison for resource allocation. Importantly, LISC staff referred to these CBOs not as organizations, but as “communities”—as in, they used each CBO’s name and “the community” interchangeably, as if one was a stand-in for the other. Another funder, The Boston Foundation, hosted three symposia for Fairmount Corridor stakeholders during my fieldwork. At each meeting, CBO grantees reported on the progress of development projects in “their” neighborhoods. To these funders, support for CBOs was indistinguishable from support for neighborhoods.

This is an expectation of representation—an expectation that foundation officers and public officials convey explicitly when meeting with CBO leaders. In November 2012, Tom Tinlin, head of the Boston Transportation Department, told representatives from three Corridor CBOs,22 “you know the neighborhoods better than we will,” and asked for guidance when redeveloping city streets. In August 2012, Lorraine, a program officer at a local foundation, succinctly told three CDC directors23: “You are the holders of community. You’re the community presence.”

Officials also communicate this expectation to residents. In January 2012, for example, city officials hosted a public meeting to discuss the development of parks and other types of recreational space in Codman Square. The meeting began at 6 p.m.; by 7, approximately 50 people were in attendance. The officials stood at the front of the room with aerial photographs of empty lots. When residents asked about models of “community” ownership, an official equated “the community” with “an organization like a nonprofit.” From my field notes:

An older white woman with grey hair from the audience asks, “So if the community wants open space, would they need a nonprofit to buy it [the land parcel]?” A city official—white, female, in her 50s—replies yes; if a nonprofit is interested, City Hall could sell it for as little as $100. . . . A middle-aged black woman says she wants to be sure that a plot can remain recreational
space “if the community wants to keep it that way.” Another city official—black, male, early 30s—explains, “It’s ok for it to stay in the community, but the community needs to be an organization like a nonprofit that has the capacity to manage the plots.”

Here, the officials were explicit: residents are dependent on CBOs to bring resources to their neighborhood, and as far as city government was concerned, a CBO moving forward with a project was no different than the community moving forward with a project.

In favoring CBOs as representatives, government bureaucrats sometimes explicitly avoided local elected politicians. In July 2011, for example, Theresa McMillan, the Deputy Administrator for the Federal Transportation Administration (FTA), requested a tour of the Corridor and a meeting with the Corridor CBOs to discuss transportation development. A July 6 e-mail from an FTA official deferred to the directors as neighborhood “stakeholders” in charge of representing “your community/communities” at the meeting. The official also noted that elected representatives were barred from participating:

As indicated, this is a meeting between FTA and you, Fairmount/Indigo Line stakeholders—there will be nobody from the [state transportation authority], the State, the City; no elected officials & no press. The intent is a frank discussion of what went well and is going well with respect to meeting the needs of your community/communities (e.g. the capital investments), as well as what might not be living up to your expectations (e.g. a commitment to provide rapid transit-type service levels or fares), and what is still a work in progress.

The tour and meeting occurred on July 11. No elected officials attended.

In addition to avoiding district representatives, many public officials were not personally familiar with the politicians elected to represent the Fairmount Corridor neighborhoods. For example, in December 2011, Lieutenant Governor Timothy Murray toured one of the Fairmount Corridor’s new transit stations. City and state bureaucrats joined nonprofit leaders and local elected representatives on a cold, rainy morning to discuss their redevelopment efforts with the Lt. Governor. After the event, I rode in a car with three city officials on their way back to City Hall. A white urban planner with the redevelopment authority—and, at the time, aid to City Hall’s Fairmount Corridor Planning Process—did not recognize one of the state representatives. “Who was that young black man that spoke?” she asked the other officials as we exited the car. We explained that he was the local state representative, elected the previous year. “Huh,” she shrugged, unfazed at her lack of familiarity with the politician.

Conversely, some elected officials of the Fairmount Corridor were not personally familiar with resource-controlling government officials. In February 2013, the redevelopment authority hosted a large public forum to plan redevelopment projects in Upham’s Corner. The forum followed six months of planning meetings between redevelopment bureaucrats and a mayor-appointed advisory group. For the first time during the entire planning process, two elected officials attended—State Representative Carlos Henriquez and at-large City Councilor Ayanna Pressley. Neither politician knew the Latino city official managing the process. In fact, I watched as he introduced himself and handed out his business card. The bureaucrat recognized the politicians, but the politicians—in office for two and four years, respectively, and elected to represent their constituents—did not even know the officials responsible for allocating community development resources.

**POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION IN THE ABSENCE OF A CBO**

Halfway through my fieldwork, a Corridor CBO became defunct, providing a unique opportunity to analyze political representation and resource allocation in the wake of a CBO’s demise. The predominantly black
neighborhood of Mattapan contained just one nonprofit CBO dedicated to real estate redevelopment and community organizing: Mattapan CDC. The organization filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in 2012. In the absence of a community development organization, other actors in the community development field turned to local elected officials to represent the neighborhood’s interests. But, as a result, community development projects in the neighborhood stalled and resources to the neighborhood were effectively cut off.

In 2010, Mattapan CDC employed only five staff members and faced considerable financial difficulties; their 2009 tax return indicated a $221,000 budget shortfall and a negative net worth of $781,445. The organization’s African American executive director, a former director of strategic business development for Texas Instruments, abruptly left the organization in April 2011. An interim director had little experience leading an organization. By May 2012, the organization owed nearly $30,000 in taxes on six properties and had filed for bankruptcy protection. City officials were deflated. “In Mattapan, the big problem we have is that they are the only game in town,” the city’s chief of housing told a reporter at the time. “It’s a big loss” (Rosso 2012).

When Mattapan CDC’s impending demise became apparent in November 2011, three sets of actors expressed concern: City Hall, which relied on the CDC to implement community development in the neighborhood; private funders, who partially funded the organization’s work; and the CBOs of the Fairmount Corridor coalitions, which depended on the organization to fulfill their collective grants. These groups searched for alternative representatives to advance the neighborhood’s interests, and they quickly settled on two elected officials, State Representatives Linda Dorcena Forry and Russell Holmes.

The elected officials’ ascent was swift. City officials called Representative Holmes in the first week of November, seeking his advice and leadership in the neighborhood. A month later, Holmes and Dorcena Forry brokered a meeting in City Hall between housing officials and outside developers in an effort to continue unfinished real estate projects. With this information, the Fairmount Corridor coalition members assumed Holmes was City Hall’s new “point person” for Mattapan.24

The Fairmount Corridor CBOs began taking their cues from the two elected officials. In December, Holmes asked the coalition members to cancel all meetings regarding ongoing development projects in Mattapan, and to consult with him and Representative Dorcena Forry before holding any future meeting in the neighborhood. The nonprofits complied. Although they had brainstormed a potential replacement CBO to fulfill their grant obligations in Mattapan, they put all efforts on hold until the elected officials could vet the candidate. It was not until October 2013—two full years later—that the nonprofits finally asked the Mattapan branch of a citywide social service organization to join their coalition, after getting the officials’ approval.

Private funders also consulted the two elected officials before moving forward with community development projects in Mattapan. In April 2012, representatives from LISC met with the two state representatives to discuss the future of development in Mattapan. LISC had recently committed more than $200,000 for community development planning in the neighborhood, and the organization was a longtime funder of Mattapan CDC. LISC’s executive director met with the elected officials throughout the summer of 2012 to, as he later explained, “make sure they understand where the funders are coming from in relation to the demise of Mattapan CDC and the future . . . of this work in Mattapan.” The officials were the assumed representatives of the neighborhood’s interests.

Although the neighborhood’s political representation stabilized, Mattapan CDC’s bankruptcy caused a number of development projects to stall or falter. In 2011, the organization had received funding from the Environmental Protection Agency for a mixed-use project that included 33 units of affordable housing and 7,000 square feet of commercial
space. The project never materialized. In 2010, Mattapan CDC initiated a joint venture with another CDC to develop 24 units of affordable housing across three buildings; that project also stalled. Other CDCs in Boston avoided pursuing development projects in Mattapan for fear of being labeled “interlopers” or “carpetbaggers.” In 2013, the state fulfilled a previously negotiated commitment and opened new transit stations in Newmarket, Four Corners, and Codman Square—neighborhoods where CBOs actively advocated for the stations. But in Mattapan, $25.2 million for a new station was left on the table as design lagged for three years. And while CBOs in the other Corridor neighborhoods continued to seek out and apply for new resources, Mattapan residents lacked the required organization to pursue and accept grants on their behalf.

In Mattapan, elected officials took over representation of the neighborhood. The officials were not uniquely powerful individuals; Representative Holmes’ district also included Codman Square, where nonprofit CBOs were seen as neighborhood representatives. Nevertheless, following Mattapan CDC’s demise, other actors in the community development field unanimously interpreted the politicians as legitimate representatives of the neighborhood’s interests. The funding structure, however, required CBOs to implement community development projects, and so the two state representatives were unable to take advantage of resources earmarked for Mattapan. The flow of resources to the neighborhood stalled.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The CBOs in my study did not simply coexist or partner with government; they superseded elected politicians as the legitimate representatives of urban neighborhoods. They were, in short, nonelected neighborhood representatives. They adopted the language of political representation while eschewing electoral politics; they claimed to represent neighborhoods’ interests and were expected to do so by funders and government officials; and they negotiated directly with government executives rather than through elected intermediaries. District-based elected officials exhibited limited influence over community development, and in fact, were largely absent from substantive discussions of community development planning. The case of Mattapan links dynamics of representation with processes of resource allocation: in the absence of a local CBO, district politicians took over as the neighborhood’s representatives, but as a result, resources to the neighborhood were effectively cut off.

Each of the preceding empirical findings varied slightly across the nine CBOs, as illustrated in Tables 2 and 3. Some organizations, like Four Corners United and Codman Square CDC, exhibited more traits of nonelected neighborhood representatives than did others, like Grove Hall CDC or Healthy Mattapan for All. However, each finding applies to at least a majority of the nine organizations, and each organization exhibited at least a majority of the factors I identify as characterizing the nonelected neighborhood representative role. Exploring this variation is one potential avenue for future research.

Theorizing CBOs as nonelected neighborhood representatives introduces an alternative understanding of CBOs’ political role in urban governance. In Table 4, I contrast this typology with existing theoretical perspectives. Similar to third-party bureaucracy, interest group, or machine politics theories, nonelected neighborhood representatives fulfill service provision in urban neighborhoods and advocate for resources. But they do so on behalf of disadvantaged neighborhoods, not just particular groups. Instead of influencing resource allocation through lobbying or the mobilization of elected officials, these CBOs negotiate directly with bureaucrats and private funders. In fact, as my fieldwork uncovered, government executives and private funders tacitly expect and require CBOs to serve as neighborhood representatives—a clear illustration of these groups’ interdependence. Also departing from existing theories, nonelected neighborhood representatives are respectfully ambivalent toward elected
Levine

Table 2. Fairmount Corridor CBOs and Nonelected Neighborhood Representative Traits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Number of CBOs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Talk of Being a Representative</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claimed to represent geographic district</td>
<td>9/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used language insinuating ownership over neighborhood</td>
<td>9/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used language of electoral politics</td>
<td>7/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavior of Being a Representative</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acted or was referenced as a “gatekeeper”</td>
<td>6/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met with bureaucrats and funders in capacity as neighborhood representative</td>
<td>9/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted private funders for resources</td>
<td>9/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Created lists of political targets that emphasized bureaucrats and private funders over elected officials</td>
<td>9/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Approach to Electoral Politics</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed reverence for elected officials</td>
<td>9/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referred to elected officials as a distraction</td>
<td>6/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignored elections or engaged in haphazard electoral strategiesa</td>
<td>5/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outsourced legislative advocacy to regional associationsb</td>
<td>6/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legitimation from Other Actors in the Field</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told by officials or funders that they represent neighborhood</td>
<td>9/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relied on by government officials to be conduit for neighborhood</td>
<td>7/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received grants from private funders to serve as neighborhood representatives</td>
<td>8/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leveraged representative role into additional resources</td>
<td>5/9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aMattapan CDC filed for bankruptcy before the 2013 mayoral election. DSNI’s director ran for mayor in 2013, finishing third in the primary. I did not observe Grove Hall CDC, Grove Hall Together, or Healthy Mattapan For All engage in any electoral activity, but I cannot say for sure if they actively avoided elections.
bIn addition to outsourcing most legislative advocacy, Upham’s CDC, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, and Four Corners United did join larger efforts to influence legislation and would periodically participate in marches to the State House. I did not observe Grove Hall Together or Healthy Mattapan For All engage in any legislative advocacy.

Table 3. Variation among Fairmount Corridor CBOs as Nonelected Neighborhood Representatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CBO</th>
<th>Number of Nonelected Neighborhood Representative Traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upham’s Corner CDC</td>
<td>15/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codman Square CDC</td>
<td>15/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Corners United</td>
<td>14/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grove Hall Together</td>
<td>13/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative</td>
<td>12/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyde Park CDC</td>
<td>12/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grove Hall CDC</td>
<td>10/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy Mattapan For All</td>
<td>11/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mattapan CDC</td>
<td>10/15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

district-based politicians, rather than dependent on their support. Finally, I introduce CBOs’ relationship with private funders into the theoretical discussion—a relationship largely ignored in the existing literature.

We can understand CBOs as nonelected neighborhood representatives in light of the previously discussed structural changes. Shifts in community development funding affect how political actors relate to each other.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outsourced Service Providers</th>
<th>Interest Groups</th>
<th>Machine Politics CBOs</th>
<th>Nonelected Neighborhood Representatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who Do They Claim to Represent?</td>
<td>Vulnerable or marginal populations</td>
<td>Populations with particular interests</td>
<td>Disadvantaged populations in urban neighborhoods (the poor, the elderly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic Dimension of Representation</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Implicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities</td>
<td>1. Fulfill service delivery obligations for state agencies. 2. Apply for available resources on behalf of represented population.</td>
<td>1. Lobby government (both elected and appointed officials) on behalf of represented group.</td>
<td>1. Provide services. 2. Incorporate population into organization and build community. 3. Offer incorporated population to elected officials as voting constituency in exchange for influence over service contracts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to Elected Politicians</td>
<td>Interdependent: rely on each other to deliver services and share credit</td>
<td>Regulated advocacy</td>
<td>Interdependent: rely on each other for organizational survival and winning elections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to Bureaucrats</td>
<td>Interdependent: rely on each other to deliver services and share credit</td>
<td>Advocacy through co-production of policy</td>
<td>Detached: relationship is mediated by elected officials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to Private Funders</td>
<td>Not theorized</td>
<td>Not theorized</td>
<td>Not theorized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Increased private funding, for example, elevates CBOs’ role as representatives, because private funders’ grant-giving practices require CBOs to serve as neighborhood liaisons. Shrinking public funding marginalizes elected politicians, whose official influence is limited to bureaucratically controlled grants and contracts. Larger political changes, like the move from partisanship to “partnership” in urban politics, strengthen nonpartisan CBOs while also undermining divisive elected politicians (Pacewicz 2015). These structural shifts—government’s continued reliance on CBOs amid declines in public funding, the growth of private funders, and the move toward partnership—rearange the puzzle pieces of governance, creating the space for CBOs to wedge out district-based politicians as the assumed representatives of disadvantaged neighborhoods.

When we reorient our thinking this way, it complicates how we understand the political representation of the urban poor. It forces us to look beyond elected officials or formal bureaucracies and consider the private forms of representation in cities. In policy areas requiring legislative action—such as municipal minimum wage laws or ID cards for undocumented immigrants—CBOs might share representation duties with politicians rather than replace them (see, e.g., Gleeson 2009; de Graauw 2014). This, too, reflects the privatization of political representation, albeit with greater subtlety. The sociology of urban neighborhoods and local political life would grow more complex and comprehensive if researchers devoted more attention to the role of private organizations in public governance. This study is one step in that direction.

The evidence presented here also points to a tradeoff between the urban poor’s access to resources and the ability to hold their leaders democratically accountable. Enabled by the current policy context of privatization and devolution, CBOs have become necessary to bring resources to poor neighborhoods. But nonprofit leaders are not elected. They can remain in their positions for decades and are not subject to term limits. Informal de-legitimation is possible; residents can, for example, undermine a CBO in the press or in front of funders, but these challenges are not the product of elections, petitions, majority approval, or sustained collective action. When CBOs operate as neighborhood representatives, poor neighborhoods gain access to resources but sacrifice the ability to elect, appoint, or impeach their representative in community development politics—something I see as a challenge to the tenets of a representative democracy.

Do poor urban neighborhoods benefit more, or less, when represented by nonelected CBO leaders? Our normative instinct might be to assume the latter. Democratic checks and balances can hold representatives’ feet to the fire, providing swift, low-cost repercussions if they fail to meet residents’ needs. Limited research also suggests that CBOs, operating outside electoral accountability, can facilitate gentrification and contribute to affordable housing crises when they adopt market-based logics (Arena 2012; McQuarrie 2013).

But we should be careful not to fetishize democratic accountability. Stable CBO leadership may be more desirable than the uncertainty of administrative and electoral turnover, a form of political destabilization that often undermines equitable development (see Patillo 2007). We can also hypothesize CBOs as important intermediaries in contexts of gentrification. Structural inertia may make them harder to displace than local elected officials or neighborhood association leaders (cf. Hyra 2015). As such, CBOs may be critical organizations willing to maintain affordable housing and advocate for the urban poor in gentrifying neighborhoods. Finally, we should be careful not to assume uniform resident interests. Popular opinion in disadvantaged neighborhoods is diverse and often contradictory. Indeed, defining benefits for the urban poor is a political project in and of itself. CBOs, as nonelected neighborhood representatives, are not subject to the same system of accountability as elected politicians. It remains an open empirical question, however, if the lack of democratic accountability actually harms, or helps, poor neighborhoods.
Is this political role common among CBOs in U.S. cities? It is difficult to tell from ethnographic data—although their prominence in my study, and the tacit acceptance from philanthropic foundations, national intermediaries, and city, state, and federal officials is telling. Recent research is also suggestive. Stone and Stoker’s (2015:28) edited volume, comparing case studies of Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and Toronto, indicates similar patterns of urban governance—namely, the growing influence of CBOs and a “new mix of elite policy players” in neighborhood politics.

However, some aspects of the Boston case warrant further discussion. For example, Mayor Thomas M. Menino’s political machine might explain the erosion of councilors’ and state representatives’ influence. In contexts like Chicago, where district-based aldermen historically wielded considerable power, CBOs’ influence has increased but “electoral politics and patronage . . . now operate alongside rather than being displaced by the ‘civic arena’ of nongovernmental actors” (Betancur, Mossberger, and Zhang 2015:82). Some local journalists question the measurable successes of Menino’s machine (McMorrow 2014), but the structure of mayoral regimes may, more generally, mediate CBOs’ political roles in urban governance.

The policy area may matter, too. Community development offers the opportunity to study a wide range of activities that affect neighborhoods, including expensive mixed-use development projects but also low-cost public art installations and job training programs. CBOs working in other policy areas—such as immigrant rights or social services for vulnerable populations—may be more reliant on elected officials for public funding, or less likely to represent geographically defined communities. And elected officials may still exert influence over bread-and-butter neighborhood issues, like trash collection or the placement of stop signs. Comparisons across multiple policy areas would extend the findings of this article and continue to push the study of urban governance forward.

The shift from partisanship to “partnership” represents a unique period in urban political history that contributes, in part, to the marginalization of elected politicians in contemporary community development politics (Pacewicz 2015). Many CBOs founded in the 1970s and 1980s now have decades of experience and expertise (McQuarrie 2013), and organizational sophistication may facilitate their role as neighborhood representatives. This, too, can vary by CBO and city.

Future research, drawing on representative samples, can explore where these CBOs are most prevalent, the particular historical or political conditions that produce them, and the specific consequences of their existence on the availability of resources in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Comparative studies can uncover contextual conditions to understand where, and when, CBOs resemble third-party bureaucracies, interest groups, political machines, or nonelected neighborhood representatives.

Future work can also connect this article to research on network forms of organization (e.g., Podolny 2001; Podolny and Page 1998; Powell 1990; Powell et al. 2005). Following McQuarrie and Marwell’s (2009) call for a more “organizational” urban sociology, we can think of urban governance as a public-private network of organizations. Exploring network variation may lead to new insights about nonprofits and urban governance.

Overall, my findings indicate that it is time to rethink the political role of CBOs in poor urban neighborhoods. Urban policy continues to privilege public-private partnerships. Community-based organizations, accordingly, continue to grow in the United States. If we are to fully grasp how the urban poor gain access to resources, and who represents them in politics, then future research must take into account the totality of CBOs’ political activity and their role as nonelected neighborhood representatives.

Acknowledgments

I thank William Julius Wilson, Chris Winship, Rob Sampson, Jocelyn Viterna, Ed Walker, Rourke O’Brien, Kristin Perkins, Eva Rosen, Monica Bell, and Jackie
Hwang for comments on previous drafts. I also thank four anonymous reviewers and the ASR editorial teams from Vanderbilt and Notre Dame for constructive feedback and guidance.

**Funding**

This research was supported by the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston, the Boston Area Research Initiative, and the Center for American Political Studies at Harvard University.

**Notes**

1. Following the political theorist Hanna Pitkin (1967:233), I define representation as “the making present of something absent.” Representatives act independently, ostensibly in the interest of the represented when those interests are expressed. “What makes it representation,” Pitkin argues, “is not any single action by one participant, but the over-all structure and functioning of the system, the patterns emerging from multiple activities of people” (pp. 221–22). This definition rejects formalistic definitions of representation as authorization (the giving of authority to act) or accountability (the holding to account of the representative for her actions). In the present study, urban residents are absent from private political negotiations over community development. Representatives negotiate with other political actors in their absence, ostensibly on behalf of their collective interests.

2. As 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations, nonprofit CBOs are prohibited from involvement in partisan electoral processes. Specifically, tax-exempt CBOs cannot lobby for or against legislation, and they cannot campaign for or against particular candidates in partisan elections. This does not preclude political activity related to lobbying administrative agencies or educating elected officials on policy matters. See Simon (2001) for additional information about the legal limits of CBOs’ political activity.

3. Marwell (2004:277) explicitly distinguishes between elected representatives, like city councilors and state senators, and “executives” who are elected, like mayors and governors. In her study, a Brooklyn CBO enlisted the assistance of a district-based elected official (state assemblyman) to affect an executive’s (governor) contract allocations.

4. Grants with matching requirements were common during my fieldwork. One of my informants in the federal government explained to me that matching requirements serve two purposes: practically, they allow governments to continue offering grants in the face of shrinking public funds, and theoretically, they create greater impact by giving grantees incentive to leverage private resources.

5. Redevelopment elites in Boston define the spatial boundaries of the Corridor as the area within a half-mile of the Fairmount Commuter rail line—the standard definition for smart growth redevelopment, a theory of urban planning that concentrates housing and commercial development within walking distance to public transit.

6. Newmarket contains approximately 5,000 residents, and 90.3 percent of the neighborhood’s land area is industrial, commercial, or tax-exempt; only 9 percent is residential. Readville contains approximately 3,000 residents, and 68.9 percent of the neighborhood’s land area is industrial, commercial, or tax-exempt; only 30.9 percent of its land is residential.

7. Upham’s Corner and Grove Hall straddle the Dorchester and Roxbury neighborhood districts. Four Corners and Codman Square are within the Dorchester district. Logan Square falls within Hyde Park.

8. Statistics are based on reports from consultant Tim Davis (prepared for The Boston Foundation) and the Boston Redevelopment Authority Research Division (prepared for the Fairmount Indigo Planning Initiative).

9. Three new stations have been completed. A fourth station, to be located in Mattapan, remains in design. It is scheduled to open in 2017.

10. On June 16, 2011, the official White House blog featured a six-minute YouTube video and accompanying text cataloguing federal support for the Corridor and plans for future redevelopment.

11. See McQuarrie (2013) and Kirkpatrick (2007) for discussions of CDCs and how they compare to other nonprofit organizations.

12. Thus, they are similar but distinct from the consultants Walker (2014) studied.

13. Thirty-one meetings included funders, 23 included municipal government officials, 15 included state government officials, and seven included federal government officials.

14. CBOs in the Corridor were recipients of the Obama administration’s highly touted Choice Neighborhoods and Promise Neighborhoods grants, for example.

15. Some local journalists, however, question the actual power of Menino’s “machine” (McMorrow 2014).

16. Names and organizational affiliations have been mixed and matched to quotes to preserve anonymity, except for individuals who identified themselves in public meetings.

17. This was a Greenway Coalition meeting, attended by representatives from Upham’s Corner CDC, Hyde Park CDC, Grove Hall Together, and Healthy Mattapan for All.

18. Representatives from Four Corners United engaged in similar behavior, without the strategic assistance of this particular CBO caucus.

19. State Senator Chang-Diaz, for example, spoke at length about her Costa Rican immigrant father and his career as “the first Latino in space.” She awkwardly related the size of space shuttle engines—an “engineering feat”—and her corresponding pride in being an American to building public transport in Mattapan.
20. These particular findings stand in contrast to earlier research on community development in the late 1990s and early 2000s. A Brooklyn CBO in Marlwell’s (2007) study relied on Assemblyman Vito Lopez to secure government contracts. In Philadelphia, Becher (2014) identifies the importance of Councilman Frank DiCicco, who convened meetings, formed an advisory group, and even created a nonprofit to control redevelopment in his district. And in Chicago, Pattillo (2007:6) suggests that Alderman Toni Preckwinkle’s “obvious role as the neighborhood’s elected representative [made] her a key figure” in neighborhood revitalization.

21. The initiative emerged out of LISC’s national office and has been implemented by LISC affiliates in 15 cities. It involves a model of community organizing to define neighborhood needs, an organizational structure to design solutions, and initial seed money for implementation.

22. Upham’s Corner CDC, Codman Square CDC, and Healthy Mattapan for All were present. Other coalition members from Grove Hall CDC, Grove Hall Together, Four Corners United, and Hyde Park CDC were acknowledged by Tinlin but could not attend the meeting due to scheduling conflicts.

23. This included Upham’s Corner CDC, Codman Square CDC, and Hyde Park CDC, although Lorraine’s sentiment applies to other CBOs in the Corridor as well.

24. I received second-hand reports from informants about the call to Representative Holmes and the meeting in City Hall.

25. In 2010, a funding intermediary selected Mattapan as one of three neighborhoods for a multiyear neighborhood planning initiative. Those efforts continued after Mattapan CDC’s demise; the Mattapan branch of a citywide social service agency with limited connections to the neighborhood served as lead agency. But tangible achievements were limited, and funders bemoaned the lack of stable institutions in the neighborhood—especially relative to other neighborhoods in the Corridor.

26. In October 2014, the governor finally announced an expected completion date of December 2017.

27. Table S1 in the online supplement (http://asr.sagepub.com/supplemental) includes a more detailed version of Table 2.

28. Existing research (e.g., de Graauw 2016) also references CBOs’ negotiations with bureaucrats, but in addition to negotiations with elected officials, not in place of them.

29. Appeals to CBOs’ funders cannot fully replace democratic accountability. As Simon (2001:128) argues, “There are many stories of funders who have continued to support evidently weak [organizations] because of inertia or parochial political considerations.”

30. However, Ferman’s (1996) comparative study of CBOs in Pittsburgh and Chicago suggests CBOs should also have less influence in machine contexts. The structure of mayoral regimes may be an important but insufficient context to explain the findings of this study.

References


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