The housing crisis is desperate. So why don’t more politicians turn against the real estate capitalists? One key thing keeping them in line is what observers call the “political machine”: a system of relationships that politicians depend on for support, and which maintains an elite consensus about how the Bronx should be run. To fix the housing crisis, this machine will have to be destroyed.
SMASH THE MACHINE

Everybody in the Bronx knows the political system is corrupt. We’ve seen it with the housing crisis. Politicians invite luxury developers into our neighborhoods, and then give us a few crumbs of “affordable” housing that nobody can actually afford. They put band-aids on old rent regulations, but won’t create new ones. They introduce rezoning proposals to gentrify whole neighborhoods. One in ten public school students are now homeless,1 100,000 people are forced out of their homes each year,2 and most of us struggle to pay rent and eat.3 Sometimes it feels like they won’t let us live.

When the situation is this desperate, why don’t more politicians turn against the real estate capitalists? One key thing keeping them in line is what observers call the “political machine”: the system of relationships that politicians depend

on for support, and which maintains an elite consensus about how the Bronx should be run. To fix the housing crisis, this machine will have to be destroyed.

**A Brief History of Machines**

The phrase “political machine” arose in the late 1800s. Machines were groups of party leaders who monopolized power in booming cities by manipulating the electoral system. They distributed handouts (like access to jobs, doctors, or money for weddings, births and burials) in order to cultivate a base of passive supporters who would accept their rule, plus a few loyalists to vote for them on election day. They offered favors to local capitalists (like opening legal loopholes or giving away public lands) to forge a coalition of elite allies. Political machines bred corruption since the party bosses, insulated from public pressure, found it easy to line their pockets. They were also authoritarian, turning city administration into a deal-making process among elites in private meetings. Most poor and working class people had no control over the decisions shaping their lives, and were limited to collaborating with machine leaders in exchange for favors and resources.
recognize that machines are just a side effect of capitalism. A capitalist economy gives bosses the right to order us around, and landlords the right to evict us, while we can only find a new exploiter if we don’t like the one we have. Politicians have to maintain these exploitative relationships even as they find ways to win elections, and so they continually invent machine-like mechanisms to keep voters passive and loyal. Like black mold in a leaky apartment, if we sweep one machine away without solving its underlying conditions, something similar or worse will sprout in its place.

We ultimately have to clean out these capitalist relationships by taking control of our workplaces, schools and neighborhoods. This will only be possible if we have our own independent fighting organizations. With them, we can depend on each other instead of funding from foundations and favors from politicians. We can defend ourselves no matter who is in office, and impose reforms that weaken capitalist power. It won’t be easy. Whenever oppressed communities have won big gains throughout history, capitalists have always counter-attacked: by disinvesting and burning us out, funding right wing groups, supporting coups, or worse. But with our own organizations, we can protect ourselves from these attacks and take control of society as a whole. If we organize, the future can be ours.

The most infamous political machine in U.S. history was Tammany Hall, a nickname for the Manhattan Democratic Party. Tammany controlled New York City politics, with ups and downs, from the late 1800s to the 1950s. But its power declined after World War Two along with machines in other cities. Over time the federal government expanded its authority, regulating what local powers could do. The New Deal and other federal programs provided funding to cities, which undercut the patronage of local party bosses. Racist immigration laws from the 1920s-1970s also slowed the flow of immigrants who depended on party bosses for protection and resources.

Today New York City’s political machines are not as powerful as they once were, but they keep mutating along with capitalism. When the federal government began cutting programs and devolving authority to local levels in the 1970s, officials in many cities were able to start monopolizing resources and influence once more. Many journalists now observe that political machines are re-emerging in new forms. They take different shapes in different regions, as elites improvise ways to maintain their rule.

The Parts of the Machine

Political machines in New York City wield power through a web of political offices. The web is complex since so many levels of government operate in the city at once. City Council members supposedly represent us in city hall. State Assembly members and State Senators supposedly represent us in Albany. And federal Representatives and Senators supposedly represent us in D.C. There are also elected judicial offices, such as District Attorneys. All these offices are elected from districts of different shapes and sizes that overlap in confusing ways.

The Democratic party monopolizes these offices through county-level committees, which bring together all the Democratic officials in each borough, and decide which candidates will
run as Democrats in their respective turfs. These committees are what people mean when they refer to the “political machine.” Thus there is a Manhattan machine, a Queens machine, and so on.

The Bronx Democratic Committee (sometimes called the “Bronx Democratic Party” or just “the Bronx Democrats”) has about 2,500 on-paper members who run the Democratic party on behalf of all registered Democrats in the borough. Most are unpaid county committee members, who help pick candidates. (To become a county committee member you need to collect a few signatures in your election district, the several-block area around your voting site.) Above regular county committee members are several elected but unpaid positions. District leaders represent all the party members in a whole State Assembly district, and select the poll workers who run elections. There are also state committee members who liaise between the borough machines and party bodies at the

The Bronx Democratic Committee

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Executive Committee</th>
<th>Executive Committee Chairman</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County Committee Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, Vice Chairs, etc</td>
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<tr>
<td>District Leaders</td>
<td>Judicial Delegates</td>
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<td>County Committee Members</td>
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Toward Community Control

To stop gentrification, we have to cancel projects like neighborhood rezonings and luxury developments, and begin taking community control of land and housing. We have to build tenant unions, march on landlords, block evictions, and take over run-down or vacant buildings. With each step forward, we also have to secure protections such as expanding rent control, granting tenants ownership of slumlord properties, repairing NYCHA, and so on. The Bronx political machine will never embrace these measures, since its power depends on collaborating with capitalists rather than overthrowing them. And individual politicians will rarely defy the machine consensus, since their careers depend on securing favors, appointments and endorsements from party bosses. To win reforms, we will have to smash the machine entirely.

In the Bronx, this will require mobilizing a movement big enough to delegitimize the ruling clique, sow discord within the county committee, and make politicians break ranks and betray each other. If we turn up the heat, the pot will start to boil. Progressives will mount primary challenges. Loyalists will compete with one another to appear progressive. Ruben Diaz Jr. will pressure his subordinates to calm the storm and protect his mayoral ambitions. Party boss Marcos Crespo will struggle to manage conflicts within the ranks. Activists in the Bronx work on many different issues, but we can all target the machine in some way. If we shake its legitimacy, the ruling clique may offer concessions or collapse under the strain.

To make lasting change, we also have to do more than replace one clique of politicians with another and “hold them accountable.” We might oust one machine this way, but we would leave intact the capitalist relationships below it, and thereby guarantee that a new machine would spawn in its place. We have to

21 Take Back the Bronx has adopted the People’s Housing Plan put forward by a network of groups in late 2016: https://nycnot4sale.org/peoples-housing-plan/
tee, and has managed to maintain unity in a party that stretches from young progressive Richie Torres to evangelical bigot Ruben Diaz Sr.

But the Bronx machine is also starting to crack. Council member Diana Ayala took over Mark-Viverito’s seat without the support of the machine, and is now at odds with Diaz over where to build a new jail in the borough. More importantly, the Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements have spawned a new generation of aspiring politicians. A small faction of Bronx Progressives is now rising within the party: leading members Samelys Lopez and Michael Beltzer became county committee members in 2016;¹⁸ the Bronx Progressives helped Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to victory in her Queens-Bronx district, and the group backed Alessandra Biaggi for the State Senate in 2018, when she defeated white conservative “rainbow rebellion” leader Jeffrey Klein.¹⁹

As the housing crisis deepens and elite consensus becomes harder to maintain, loyalists are frightened the machine could face further losses.²⁰ Their vulnerability gives us a window of opportunity to put real estate capitalists and their political collaborators on the defensive.


State level, and judicial delegates who decide on judicial candidates specifically.⁴

Elected officials automatically become members the county committee. Of these, a few are chosen to sit on the executive committee in addition to their elected role, to help run the machine. The executive committee includes a treasurer, secretary and so on. Its chairman, sometimes called the “party boss,” is responsible for keeping the whole machine running smoothly, and is voted in by the district leaders. The Borough President also plays a key role maintaining consensus within the machine.

On paper, the county committee simply coordinates the work of the Democratic party in the borough. But in practice, it works to give a small elite control over the decisions that shape our lives.

How the Machine Works

The machine maintains a small base of loyalists through clientelism: trading favors for political support. Politicians cater to middle class climbers and small-time capitalists by helping them access funding and assistance for their businesses, nonprofits, churches and homeowners groups. The result is a one-party system. Other parties find it nearly impossible to out-organize this network of relationships, and sometimes don’t even bother to run candidates. Instead, aspiring challengers try to break into the Democratic party itself. For this reason most general elections are uncompetitive, their outcomes already decided beforehand in the primary contest among Democrats.

To control who wins primaries, the political machine strangles internal challengers within its ranks. Party bosses stack the county committee with loyalists: staffers, business associates, devoted supporters, or opportunists aiming for elected office. In return, the county committee supports whatever

candidates the leadership wants. If an outsider can still gather enough signatures to run in a primary, they face legal challenges from machine-hired lawyers, who use technicalities to kick them off the ballot. They struggle to out-fundraise the party machine, with its war chest and donor base. Julio Pabon was defeated this way when he ran against Rafael Salamanca for City Council in 2015.\(^5\)

Party bosses use various tactics to maintain the loyalty of the county committee. Elected officials **appoint** supporters to positions in their administrations, thereby cultivating a circle of lackeys who owe them favors in the future. The process starts at the community boards, where the borough president selects board members and grooms them for promotions. Party bosses also tap loyalists to run in **special elections**. Special elections take place when seats become vacant between election cycles (often because the officials have been appointed elsewhere by the machine). Candidates are hand-picked by the party’s executive committee and don’t face a primary contest. Because the votes occur at irregular times, almost no one participates besides party loyalists. Thus party bosses can use special elections to install their proteges in “elected” office. Council member Rafael Salamanca came to power in exactly this way, winning just 1,455 votes in a district of over 150,000 residents.

Politicians who come up through this system owe the party bosses far more than the masses of working class Bronxites. They show it by returning favors to the machine: for example, former Bronx District Attorney Robert Johnson, who let off Amadou Diallo’s killers, was hand-picked in a special election 1988, and shielded his patron Carl Heastie from legal investigations for years, before being rewarded in 2013 with an appointment to run. Melissa Mark-Viverito operated independently of the Bronx machine, but her district still extended into the borough, and she became a conduit for the machine’s concerns from 2014-17 as Speaker of the City Council. **Carl Heastie** became speaker of the State Assembly in 2015, giving him control over which bills will be introduced for votes in Albany. **Rafael Salamanca** became chair of the City Council’s powerful land use committee in 2018. Wielding this unprecedented political influence, the Bronx machine works to attract capital and bury the “Bronx is burning” image under a flood of new development.

The Bronx Democratic Committee is chaired by State Assemblyman **Marcos Crespo**, a Diaz protege who met the borough president while interning in Albany: “Ruben was exactly the kind of man I wanted to be like,” he recalled in an interview.\(^7\) Crespo was groomed for his position in a series of special elections (he inherited Diaz’s vacant Assembly seat in 2009, and Heastie’s vacant chairmanship in 2015.) As party boss he has extended the machine’s tentacles by bringing Bangladeshi, Garifuna and West African delegates into the county commit-


while exploiting and displacing the rest of us. This is the mission of the current clique of Bronx politicians, who built their careers on selling us out.

**The Current Clique**

The Bronx political machine is inherently unstable. As individual politicians climb from office to office, they establish alliances with one another and build networks of loyalists and proteges. Conflicts erupt when politicians undercut each other’s goals, or favor some alliances over others. The system is constantly shifting as different cliques rise, fall, and compete for power.  

The current ruling clique came to power in 2008, when a so-called “rainbow rebellion” displaced then-party boss José Rivera. The “rainbow” term referred to the multi-ethnic character of the winning coalition, in contrast to Rivera’s circle that was seen as narrowly serving Puerto Ricans and even his own family. The core of the “rainbow rebellion” was Ruben Diaz Jr, supposedly representing Puerto Ricans, Carl Heastie, supposedly representing blacks, and Jeffrey Klein, supposedly representing whites. Over the following decade, this clique ushered in what some are calling the “golden age” of Bronx political power.

Ruben Diaz Jr. became Borough President in a 2009 special election and has remained there ever since, helping woo investors to the borough and preparing an eventual mayoral run for an even higher court. Amazingly, about a third of all state-level elected officials in New York City have come in through special elections.

Outside a small base of loyalists, the machine cultivates voter apathy. Of the Bronx’s 1.5 million residents, less than half are registered to vote, and the vast majority of those are registered Democrats. This arrangement is useful for the party bosses: if voter registration stays low, most voters will be Democrats, and if few Democrats turn out to vote, most will come from their established networks. The party bosses thus have an interest in discouraging voter participation, because it makes elections routine and predictable for them. In 2017, for example, De Blasio was comfortably re-elected with only 150,000 people voting in the entire Bronx, the lowest turnout in the city.

Party lackeys often deflect blame for stifling democracy by disparaging our communities. They blame the ignorant masses for “not getting involved” while applauding themselves for stepping in as informed, responsible leaders. But this is just a way to make themselves look good. Voter abstention is actually a product of the way their clique maintains power: it comes from our accurate perception that the system is rigged and voting rarely affects what it does. The machine monopolizes power first among registered Democrats, then the county committee, and then the executive committee, until the decisions that shape our lives are made by a small clique of party bosses. When authority is centralized this way, it is easier for politicians to serve the interests of capitalism.

**How the Machine Serves Capitalists**

Occasionally, individual politicians help individual capitalists in exchange for bribes. But more often, politicians collab-

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orotate with the larger collective organizations of the capitalist class. Bronx small businesses, developers, and industrial firms join together in associations such as Business Improvement Districts, the Bronx-Manhattan North Association of Realtors, and the Bronx Chamber of Commerce, and agencies such as SoBro, WHEDCo, and the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation. Through these groups, capitalists define their shared interests and pool resources to influence policy. They invite politicians to speak at their luncheons, hold private meetings, and hire firms to advocate on their behalf.

**Lobbying firms** are companies hired by private actors to influence politicians (usually capitalists hire them, but sometimes unions or other groups do too). The biggest lobbying firms in New York City—such as Kasirer LLC or Capalino & Associates Inc—work citywide, while others specialize in borough politics. **Consulting firms** are often hired by political campaigns, to help candidates establish support from capitalists and influential constituencies. Sometimes a single firm does both roles.

Campaign staffers often work as lobbyists or consultants between election cycles, and elected officials do the same once they’re voted out or hit term limits. For example, former Bronx party boss Roberto Ramirez formed the MirRam consulting group after being ousted in 2000, and soon brokered the construction of the new Yankee Stadium. The lawyer Stanley Schlein is one of the most notorious such figures in the Bronx, having served as a lobbyist and consultant for a string of politicians since the 1970s.

Business associations, development agencies, lobbyists and consultants provide the glue between the political elite and the capitalist class. They cultivate a consensus that makes sure capitalist interests are served before ours. Some Bronx politicians collaborate simply to line their pockets, but most sincerely believe that working with capitalists is the best way to help their black and Latinx constituencies. They see capitalists as “job creators” who “generate value” when we’re the ones doing the work, and they depend on profits from our exploitation as a source of government revenue. They see themselves as champions of the borough, triumphing over the stigma of the 1970s by “bringing money” or “bringing jobs” into the area.

But capitalist development is an abusive relationship: it always serves elites more than the working class. It delivers obscene profits to capitalists, while giving us shitty jobs only slightly better than unemployment. It attracts wealthy white residents to enrich developers, while leaving us unable to afford our own neighborhoods once they’ve been renovated. It gives a few black and Latinx entrepreneurs the chance to make it big,

### Top-Earning NYC Lobbying Firms, 2019

- Kasirer LLC ($12.8 mil)
- James F. Capalino & Associates, Inc. ($11.1 mil)
- Pitta Bishop & Del Giorno LLC ($4.8 mil)
- Bolton-St. Johns, LLC ($4.5 mil)
- Constantinople & Vallone Consulting LLC ($4.4 mil)
- Greenberg Traurig, LLP ($4 mil)
- Davidoff Hutcher & Citron LLP ($3.1 mil)
- Geto & de Milly Inc ($2.9 mil)
- Connelly McLaughlin & Woloz ($2.6 mil)
- Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel LLP ($2.6 mil)

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7 See https://www1.nyc.gov/site/sbs/neighborhoods/bid-directory.page
8 See http://www.bmar.org/
9 See http://www.bronxchamber.org/
10 See https://sobro.org/who-we-are/
11 See https://whedco.org/about-us/
12 See http://www.boedc.com/