

The housing crisis as an ideological artefact: Analysing how political discourse defines, diagnoses, and responds

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ABSTRACT

It is a truism that politicians from countries around the world claim to be in the midst of a 'housing crisis'. But how do they define it, who is affected, and what is the cause? This paper provides a critical evaluation of the emergence and scope of political discourse connected to the housing crisis in New Zealand under three National Party led governments (2008-2017), with a view to better understanding the ways in which the issue has been problematized in politics and operationalized in policy. It finds that although researchers draw upon multiple strands of evidence and recognize housing as a complex problem, the political framing of a housing crisis is simpler and shows a closer relationship to long standing ideological perspectives, notably an inefficient planning system and low supply of development land. This raises critical questions for how housing researchers can better influence politics and challenge both the lived experience of crisis and existing claims of normalcy.

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Introduction

Crises are both 'real', in the sense of actual changes in social processes, and socially constructed, in the sense that different interpretations of the crisis have implications for its outcome. The interpretation of a crisis may under- or over-state its magnitude and impact, as well as attribute blame as to its cause (Walby, 2015: 14).

The actual motivations for state action in the housing sector have more to do with maintaining the political and economic order than with solving the housing crisis (Marcuse and Madden, 2016: 119–120).

Politicians in many countries, and from across the political spectrum, routinely discuss housing in terms of a 'crisis': a sign of emergency; a call to arms; a need for urgent policy intervention. This crisis has an encompassing geography, affecting both the Global North and Global South, and it is all too common to read about housing crises in cities as diverse as New York, Mumbai, or Singapore. The scale of the

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concern is also not confined to larger cities, as regional centres and smaller urban areas have also gradually become part of the discourse (Aalbers, 2017; Wetzstein, 2017).

While a housing crisis may be commonly discussed in terms of demand, supply, or affordability, notions of crises have implications that intersect with multiple policy arenas, such as an increase in rents (both in the public housing sector and private rental markets), a stagnation in relative income, or even the rise in short-term rentals for tourists (Gurran and Phibbs, 2017). Discourses are further complicated by societal expectations concerning housing. In countries such as the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, homeownership and all that the ‘dream’ evokes has cultural dimensions connected to notions of responsible citizenship, belonging, and the logical progression through life (Munro, 2018; Dodson, 2007; Equb and Equb, 2015).

Given the consistent rise in house prices over time they are also marketed as a good investment, both for mobile global finance as well as the financial security of citizens seeking to move up ‘the ladder’ (Boddy, 2007; Clapham, 2017; Lemanski, 2011). The financialisation of housing has further knock-on effects, as those who own homes tend to have both increased wealth and an increased ability to borrow against these assets to purchase additional real estate to generate yet more capital returns. This can increase both intergenerational inequity and the economic exposure of nations to unpredictable global financial markets (Gallent et al., 2017; Squires and White, 2019). Housing in such contexts is framed not just as: “home, [but] as real estate” (Marcuse and Madden, 2016: 11) and is seen to provide not just physical shelter, but financial shelter (Smith, 2015: 62). Smith (2015: 75) brings these contradictions to light arguing that the centrepiece of the world’s major housing systems, mortgaged owner occupation, is held together by a: “spatial financial paradox that enables an inherently risky, and ethically contradictory, position to feel uncannily secure and unquestionably normal.”

As housing is both a home and a highly productive class of financial asset, and access to it is increasingly uneven, the notion and framing of a ‘housing crisis’ warrants significant interrogation. As the opening quotes argue, the discourses associated with crises—in particular the acceptance of a problem and the reasons for its existence—play a critical role in shaping the selection and effectiveness of the public policy strategies deployed in response (Roitman, 2014: 49-50). Put differently, crises are truth claims: they are invoked, they define, and, in doing so, they privilege certain ideologies or policy ‘solutions’ over others. If the problem is variably positioned as due to an excess of ‘red-tape’, too much immigration, or a generous taxation regime, then these may all require very different interventions. Beyond policy, the framing of crises also influences the allocation of political responsibility. For instance, the planning system tends to receive much blame internationally relating to its suggested propensity for restrictive zoning, or inefficiencies processing consents and supplying development land (e.g. Cheshire *et al.*, 2012; HM Treasury, 2015; New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2017). If we accept that the design and implementation of policy or regulation is critical in addressing crises, then so, too, does the framing that shapes the underpinning political discourse. In simple terms: words matter (Goetz, 2008).

The aim of this paper is threefold: to explore the political emergence, contestation, and construction of a ‘crisis’ frame relating to housing in Aotearoa New Zealand; to analyze the varying ways the crisis was framed by different political parties; and to discuss how these privileged certain types of policy initiatives or groups. In doing so, it reveals three key messages. First, while researchers recognize housing as a multifaceted public policy problem and draw upon multiple streams of evidence, the political framing of housing as a crisis and its links to policy are much more simple, siloed, and ideological. Although the wider political discourse does acknowledge the complexity of housing issues, the nature of politics means these became reduced into a simple dominant frame—in this instance poor land supply and an inefficient planning system—which informed subsequent policy responses. Second, if political power and pre-existing ideological perspectives are so central to the framing and response to a crisis, then this raises questions for how researchers can better integrate research into politics and policy. The simplicity of much political discourse suggests that we need to reflect anew on the real-world constraints affecting research impact and how researchers can adapt in response. Third, this disconnect may help explain how crises have become less of a one-off event and more of a modern lived condition that may never be ‘solved’ but rather redistributed politically.

Framing phenomena as crisis

We draw upon two main bodies of literature to help us unpack discourses connected with the framing of a housing crisis. First, we consider ideas connected to the notion of issue framing and frame analysis, particularly when applied in a housing context. Framing has been used as a theory and approach in research seeking to understand how messages are created, deciphered, and promulgated. Second, we explore how ideas of crises have become both a pervasive modern phenomenon and useful political tool to invoke. This element is designed to situate the concept of a ‘crisis’ as a discrete research object for investigation.

Framing theory stems from the pioneering work of the sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) and demonstrates that the ways that a phenomenon is presented holds power in influencing people’s perceptions of reality. In a seminal article, Entman (1993: 52) noted that framing helps to understand four fundamental characteristics of an issue: they define problems; diagnose causes; make moral judgments; and suggest remedies. Within public policy, this inevitably has a normative dimension that not only serves to establish the nature of perceived reality and the direction of discourse, but also indicates a preferred set of ideas logically associated to a response. Both of which may assign political blame and responsibility (Fischer, 2003). Frames have power and are an unavoidable part of communication and politics, whether through intentional spin or not.

Research has further established how the frames constructed by politicians are subsequently picked up by other politicians and the media, both of which affect how citizens make sense of problems (Entman, 2004; Lakoff, 2014). Consequently, political framing may be understood as an arena where competing ideas from elites jostle for dominance in ‘competitive democracies’ (Chong and Druckman, 2007). As such, the

literature also usefully highlights the importance of counterframing, which are attempts to influence public opinion in a different direction, whether as an immediate rebuttal, an alternative message repeated frequently over time, or one waiting to emerge when the timing is right. This can also reveal insights into the relative power of participants, as, for example, those with fewer resources need to be selective with regard to the timing of opposing frames. In order to have the most resonance on political discourse or citizen perspectives, counterframes may be usefully promoted after significant events or as public attitudes shift (Chong and Druckman, 2013).

Framing strategies take a number of forms, such as seeking to align political positions with abstract principles and societal values, e.g. egalitarianism, humanitarianism, or 'good' citizenship (see Wise and Brewer, 2010: 437). In the case of a housing crisis this includes housing framed by some as a 'human right' while for others owner occupation is an 'earned' aspect of responsible citizenship (e.g. Smith, 2015). Both principles bring their own political and economic vocabularies, make contrasting claims of normalcy, and stimulate very different governance questions. More pragmatically, new problem framings may also be closely aligned with existing ideology, policy goals, or desired solutions. In this instance, the perception of a logical 'sense making' process whereby framing provides: "guideposts for knowing, analyzing, persuading, and acting" (Rein and Schön, 1993: 146) becomes troubled. This more opportunistic view is usefully described as being like 'surfers waiting for the big wave' (Kingdon, 1995: 165). Instead of problems being rationally considered and bespoke options discussed and designed, here policy entrepreneurs frame the issue around pet solutions that have been waiting for a political window to open.

As much of the focus is on ascertaining the ways that definitions and discourses are constructed in politics and the media, the early use of framing has been most noticeable within communication studies and public opinion research (Entman, 1993; 2004; Hansen, 2007; Iyengar, 1994; 2015). More recently, researchers have also applied the lens to other social science fields, such as analyzing the varied framing of climate change, particularly how differing ideas may influence policy formation and public opinion, and how issues could potentially be changed to provide new interpretive storylines (e.g. Nisbet, 2009; Fünfgeld and McEvoy, 2014; Bosomworth, 2015).

Framing research has also expanded to influence housing scholarship. Jacobs et al., (2003a; 2003b) argued that constructivist approaches able to analyse how housing problems are defined and accepted hold much potential for critically informed research. Their studies examined the ways that narratives can create justification for policy intervention, identify villains or victims, and build coalitions. They established how changes in UK political and media discourse led to targeted policy responses that changed the way groups, such as council tenants or lone mothers, were viewed by government and the public alike. In the United States, Goetz (2008) found that the term 'affordable housing' was stigmatised and that reframing publically-assisted, low-cost housing using different terminology generated less public opposition. It is further argued that new frames hold potential in forging new discourse coalitions between actors, such as in the use of the term 'low-carbon housing' rather than 'sustainable housing' (Lovell, 2004). As such, framing research offers value as a means to agree a new epistemic object; a means to make a problem that may not have fixed

qualities (such as a ‘housing crisis’) into a discrete subject of inquiry that holds relevance for multiple parties. Success does, however, require a degree of consensus. For instance, research focused on housing construction in Denmark found that while frames can build capacity and forge coalitions amongst situated actors with different interests and identities, without a single dominant frame there can be a lack of coordination that affects implementation (Jensen, 2012).

Turning to ideas of crisis within public policy, it is claimed—and widely accepted—that we have concurrent urban and environmental crises (e.g. Florida, 2017; IPBES, 2019; Pachauri et al., 2014). With regard to housing, a May 2019 search for ‘housing crisis’ in Google Scholar identified 2.6 million results, over half of which are since 2000. Interestingly however, while academic notions of a housing crisis are clustered towards more recent times, the term has a long history. A 1926 paper, for instance, compares the more severe nature of the housing crisis in Europe to that in the United States. This included discussions of supply shortages, tenants’ rights, ways to encourage more construction, and lamenting how private capital had been diverted towards more attractive forms of investment (Clarke, 1926). All aspects that sound very familiar almost a century later.

This pervasiveness of crises is reflected in the literature more generally. Roitman (2014), for example, highlights how crises claims are a feature of contemporary society, from financial, to climatic, to political, and have become less of a signifier for a critical, decisive moment and more a discursive practice to open up certain narrative accounts and foreclose others. Klein (2007) further highlights the political utility of crises, demonstrating how they have been used to push through a neoliberal political agenda. In a similar vein, Paglia (2018: 96) refers to the growing use of crises as a dominant frame as a process of ‘crisification’, in which political actors increasingly use the term as a valuable discursive device to set agendas and align behind. In the context of housing, Marcuse and Madden (2016: 119-120) highlight the political nature of crisis and the myth of a benevolent state. They argue that while governments may appear to act out of concern for the welfare of all citizens, there are ideological aspects at play more aligned with maintaining the current political and economic order than an objective response to an emerging policy problem.

By drawing on framing research this paper offers an innovative lens through which to interrogate the recent construction of a housing crisis. While it may be widely accepted that crises generate windows of opportunity (Kingdon, 1995), we seek to understand in more depth who the opportunity is for, the ways by which the crisification of housing may be used to advance particular ideological values or ideas, and the ways in which these lead to policy responses that privilege particular groups.

Methodology

To identify the political emergence, acceptance and contest over the framing of a housing crisis we analyzed transcripts of Hansard speeches delivered in New Zealand Parliament. While there have been sporadic claims and counter claims of a housing crisis in New Zealand for a number of decades, this debate has gathered significant momentum. To drill down into the developing nature of recent discussions we

selected a timeframe that represents the entirety of three consecutive National-led governments (2008-2011; 2011-2014; 2014-2017) with the Labour Party and other smaller parties in opposition. As housing is a broad term, the search criteria used was 'housing supply' and 'housing affordability.' This identified 18 Bills for detailed analysis, which includes 53 separate Hansard debates. This resulted in 611 speeches from actors reflecting viewpoints and perspectives from the parties represented in parliament: National, Labour, the Māori party, the Greens, ACT, and New Zealand First. In order to grasp the nature of the 'crisis' discourse and its development over this period, a further search resulted in a detailed analysis of the term 'crisis' in relation to 'housing crisis,' 'crisis of affordability,' and 'crisis of availability.' This identified 32 Readings of the 18 Bills, that is, First, Second, In-Committee and/or Third Readings. The number of speeches which contained any of the above references to 'crisis' was 144.

We analysed the text through critical discourse analysis (CDA). This approach has gained currency in investigating housing discourse, and is deployed here as a tool to illuminate connections and: "link language, ideology and social change" (Marston, 2000: 351). CDA allows us to better understand the ways in which phenomena have been problematized in politics and operationalized in policy. More generally, CDA is an effective means to grapple with issues of power and language in the policy formation process, to shed light on the interests of stakeholders, and to ascertain whose ends it serves (Hastings 2000; Jacobs, 2006). This form of research finds its epistemological roots in the works of Fairclough (1992; 1995) and Fairclough and Wodak (1997) who link 'text', 'discursive practice', and 'social practice' with a view to uncovering hidden meanings in language (Marston, 2000; 2002). This is particularly appropriate when recognising how language may seek to frame an issue as a crisis, and therefore make the issue more contentious or urgent, and how this discourse subsequently links to policies designed to respond.

The frame analysis and coding were designed to inductively identify the claims and patterns that politicians used in reference to the search terms. To help ascertain meaning we drew upon established approaches to code data into two themes: dominant frames and more subordinate counterframes. In identifying counterframing, we draw on Iyengar's work (1994; 2015) on media analysis, in particular the use of thematic and episodic frames, to help reveal both broader themes that emerge as well as more individualized narratives. The dominant frames are characterized by words or phrases that have the highest acceptance and frequency. The counterframes were more contested and had a lower acceptance and frequency. This data was then linked to the focus and wording of the resulting policy initiatives designed to address the housing crisis.

While there has been research undertaken in the United Kingdom to analyse parliamentary debates and speeches (e.g. Hunter and Nixon, 1999) and research deploying content analysis of presidential speeches in the US (e.g. Norris and Billings, 2017), there has not been a study undertaken to examine transcriptions of parliamentary speeches in New Zealand in order to ascertain dominant frames, the contested nature of these frames, and how they affect discourse on public policy. More specifically, the research provides an opportunity to apply framing theory and CDA to better

grasp the complexities and nuances of a claimed ‘housing crisis’. The use of Hansard speeches is particularly valuable as it allows us to identify the specific language used by politicians before it is filtered by the media. It therefore aids in connecting political framing and truth claims to power and the policy initiatives developed in response. While the study uses a New Zealand case study, given the international prevalence of ‘housing crises’ we anticipate our findings will have relevance for other countries similarly grappling with understanding both the ways these are constructed and responded to, and why they seem to persist.

Housing in New Zealand

An overview of the recent history of housing in New Zealand is offered here as a way to contextualize the subsequent discussion of crisis. While this content is nationally specific, this brief insight into the prevailing focus of neoliberal reforms, financialisation trends, and market conditions should help both ground the discussion and increase the relevance of the research to other countries.

Murphy (2014) outlined three distinct periods of housing policy changes beginning in the early 1990s. As globalization and privatization intensified in the global economy, neoliberal reforms took hold in New Zealand under successive National Party governments. Housing policy moved steadily away from ‘bricks and mortar subsidies’ (Murphy, 2014: 898) towards ‘accommodation supplements’ for those earning less, which meant that they were less able to buy their own homes. As in the present, legislative reform was also a theme. The Resource Management Act (RMA) 1991 and the Building Act 1991 both sought to reduce regulation with regard planning and construction. A second period of housing reforms took place during the 2000s at a time when New Zealand experienced a ‘leaky building crisis’ due to a lack of regulation concerning build quality. At the same time, we begin to see a drastic increase in house prices and the financialisation of housing in common with other jurisdictions. The third period of housing reforms began with the election of the National Party in 2008, and which corresponds with this study period. The policies in this period are characterized as focused on finding ‘market-based solutions to housing issues’ (Murphy, 2014: 899).¹ It is during the decade from 2008-2017 (the study period) that we see a significant increase in house prices, prompting the rise in discussion of housing in terms of a ‘crisis’. Although in New Zealand, it should be noted that this narrative stretches beyond affordability to also be associated with issues like homelessness, and poor-quality damp and cold housing (Howden-Chapman et al. 2007; 2008).

The emergence, resistance, and acceptance of a housing crisis

In a Radio New Zealand interview, Guyon Espiner questioned the new National Party leader, Simon Bridges (2018), about whether New Zealand finds itself in a housing crisis. In opposition to Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s Labour-led coalition government since October the previous year, Bridges readily agreed. Reflecting upon how National ministers had repeatedly tried to avoid this framing during the long time

the Party was in power (e.g. Moir, 2015; Sachdeva, 2016; Key, 2016) Espiner responded:

“It is interesting you call it a housing crisis now. Man, you’ve avoided that term for a long time”.

Bridges replied: *“I’m leader of the opposition now, I suppose I get to decide how we phrase things and where we see things”.*

Leading Espiner to raise the question: *“It’s a crisis when you are no longer responsible for it?”*

This brief interchange helps set the scene for the political debate that follows. Considering how discussing housing in terms of a crisis is now so prevalent it is practically a truism; it is surprising to find the frame has only emerged recently in a substantive manner in Hansard and then mainly by opposition parties. After 2008 and 2009 witnessed no uses of the term in 2010 it was raised in an isolated manner twice by Labour and Māori party MPs in direct conjunction with rising homelessness during a debate about Residential Tenancies. 2011 again saw no examples, before 2012 saw a further two references, both by Green Party MPs during an in-committee stage reading of the Building Amendment Bill (No3). For example:

It is fair to say that the context for this bill is that we have a crisis in housing in New Zealand. It is both a crisis in the affordability in housing and a crisis in the availability of housing. The amendments that this bill makes to the Building Act are relevant to how we are going to address that crisis.

This framing was the first to move beyond the specific issue of homelessness to attempt to define the wider systemic aspects of a housing crisis. Since then, the Green Party and all other opposition parties, promoted a ‘housing crisis’ frame in all major debates concerned with housing up to the end of the study. This is apparent in the growth of ‘housing crisis’ references in Hansard from only two in 2012 to 38 in 2013. 2013 marks the year when we can say the crisis substantively entered party politics in New Zealand and has been largely maintained since. The high figure for 2013 onwards demonstrates a concerted effort to get the crisis frame accepted as a means to attack the government, while the governing National Party repeatedly resisted acknowledging this framing. For example, in debating the Social Housing Reform (Housing Restructuring and Tenancy Matters Amendment Bill) in 2013:

...the government is in denial. It insists there is no housing crisis in Canterbury when people are paying hundreds of dollars a week to live in sleepouts and caravans (Labour).

The government seems to be in denial that there is even a housing crisis in parts of New Zealand... So here we have a Government whose head is in the sand about the housing crisis (Labour).

...the thing that the Minister and his predecessor have failed for the last 5 years to do is acknowledge that there is a housing affordability crisis (Labour).

Figure 1 provides an illustration of the emergence, frequency, and the party-oriented nature of the crisis frame during the study. From being used only 2 times

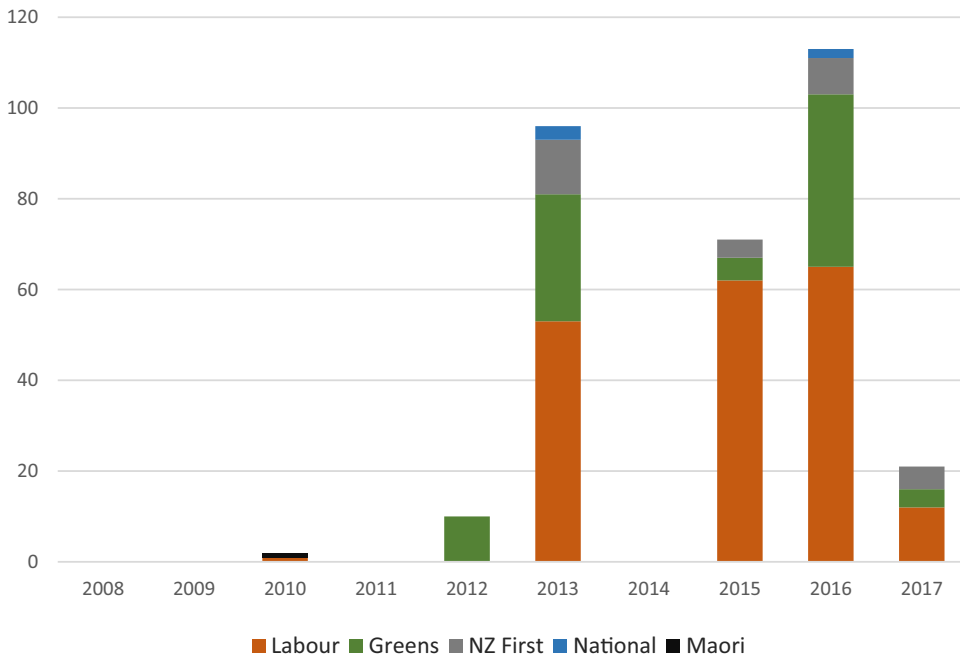


Figure 1. Frequency of the ‘housing crisis’ framing by year and political party.

within speeches during the first term of National government (2008-2011) we see the term used 105 times in the next period (2011-2014), and 205 times in the following (2014-2017). The lack of use in 2014 appears more related to parliament being distracted by an election year than the profile of the issue. Further, the framing is almost exclusively deployed by non-governing parties, in particular by the largest opposing party, Labour, and the Greens. Considering the Greens only had 14 MPs between 2014-2017 compared to 32 for Labour and 59 for National, their frequent use shows it is clearly an attempt to establish housing as an urgent political priority. In contrast, it is striking to note that the term was only used five times by MPs from the National Party, and then mainly in response to previous speakers to resist the charge. For example, in the debate just discussed, a National MP highlights the framing and counterframing battle going on regarding the existence (rather than substance) of a crisis, arguing:

When push comes to shove, what the New Zealand public have recognized-try as those members might to manufacture a crisis...

While the literature on crises shows how they can be routinely invoked to raise agendas or assign actions, our first observation here is that there is a noticeable tendency to claim a crisis within political discourse without attaching specific meaning. In this regard, it has characteristics associated with an ‘empty signifier’, essentially a malleable claim that has political utility in setting the terms of the debate to be about *competence* as well as *action*. A second point of note is that we can start to build up an appreciation of political nuance by beginning to interrogate the extent the ‘housing crisis’ frame was supported or resisted, and by whom. As the opening radio interview

signposted, it was clear that this wasn't just on party or ideological grounds, but rather more closely related to whether you were in power and for how long. From this perspective, there is a temporal dimension emerging whereby the political invocation of crisis allocates blame within the political class, before the construction of interpretative frames seek to define the crisis and potentially reallocate responsibility. We explore this in the next section.

The framing and counterframing of the housing crisis

Dominant frames

Dominant political frames are those that aim to influence wider political, media, and public understandings of problems connected to housing and indicate areas requiring policy attention. An initial point of interest is that while the governing National Party resisted the crisis frame, they did deploy significant policy resources in response. By far the most dominant frame they used to explain housing issues was connected to inefficiency within the Local Government sector, specifically planning policy, processes, and practices. Within Hansard, it was frequently claimed that housing problems were due to the restricted supply of land and overbearing regulatory regime. Therefore, we need to focus on 'freeing-up' more land. This policy push was visible even before the political focus on resisting the 'crisis' emerged from 2013 onwards. For example, during the Residential Tenancies Amendment Bill 3rd Reading in 2010 a National Party MP stated:

Freeing up supply of land and reducing red tape strangling the building and construction sector were crucial for addressing New Zealand's housing problems.

Similarly, during the Building Amendment Bill (No3) 3rd Reading in 2012 another National Party MP posited there is a:

Direct correlation between reducing red tape, reducing bureaucracy, and the cost of a house.

This was a constant view which was also apparent when discussing the Housing Accords and Special Housing Areas Bill in 2013:

The reality is that increasing land supply is critical to housing affordability, and unless we address it, nobody in this Parliament can pretend they are serious about dealing with the issues of housing affordability (National).

The consistent governmental frame gathered new momentum in response to opposition claims of 'crisis', and can be readily seen as National MPs interpret the Housing Legislation Amendment Bill in 2016:

Those figures make very plain that it is the issue of land-use planning that is at the core of the challenges around housing affordability in Auckland.

Land-use policy is the single most important public policy issue affecting housing supply and affordability.

The special Housing Accord allows for us to fast track the consenting so that we can ensure that we can address the issue. What does it say? It says that the issue is around supply. This housing issue is around supply. We think that this is critically important.

On this side we know that housing affordability and availability can be addressed by increasing the supply.

In contrast, where more detail was provided on the nature of the crisis both Labour and the Greens adopted their dominant framing of a ‘housing affordability crisis’. These quotes from 2013 debates connected to the Housing Accords and Special Housing Areas Bill summarize the ways they repeated issues connected to ‘affordability’ rather than the ‘supply’ frame of the National Party:

We are here passing this insipid piece of legislation because now National members know that they have to show that they are taking the affordable housing crisis seriously. This bill will not deliver affordable homes. It is not going to do anything to deal with the affordable housing crisis (Labour).

Simply allowing land to be freed up does not necessarily mean that people will be able to build affordable houses (Labour).

What the Government fails to grasp is the housing crisis is not just driven by the availability of houses on the market (NZ First).

In the same debate, the Green Party also directly mention a key rationale for this paper, and indeed, the value of framing research more generally, stating in reply to the supply-focused legislative and policy response:

The essential problem with this bill is that it defines the problem as the supply of affordable housing, but it sets out a solution that is designed to address something different, and that is land supply.

It should be noted that although affordability was acknowledged as part of the housing problem by all parties, and was the dominant frame by opposing parties, given the balance of power the consistent messaging of the National Party had the most impact upon policy. This was a narrative centred on an inefficient and overly bureaucratic planning system that stifled the release of development land. It was a frame that promoted a supply rationality, where more land should logically lead to more houses, which means that affordability would be met by extension. The alternative opposition counter frame of affordability also begins to build the connection to long-standing political ideologies, an issue we pick up in the discussion.

Counterframing

Hansard revealed a number of counterframing attempts, which were more diverse, contested, and had a lower frequency in repetition. It is here we see the attempts by opposition MPs to frame the housing crisis as not just a ‘supply’ issue, but one which is connected to multiple societal areas and which demand different policy solutions. For example, the Green Party intermittently illustrated the growing difficulty in attaining homeownership for many New Zealanders in the context of wages and disposable income:

Housing affordability is a major issue in New Zealand, with close to one in three New Zealanders now spending 30 percent or more of their disposable income on housing. Demographia’s 2009 international housing affordability survey found that the median house price in New Zealand is 5.7 times the median household income, ranking New

Zealand in the category of “severely unaffordable”, with only Australia worse at 6.0 (Residential Tenancies Amendment Bill, Second Reading, 2010).

When it takes 70 percent of the average income in Auckland to service the mortgage on the lowest-quartile house, we have a crisis, and we need legislation to do something about it (Housing Accords and Special Housing Areas Bill, Second Reading, 2013).

A different counter frame of note reflected social and cultural dimensions of the housing crisis. In the Residential Tenancies Amendment Bill First Reading (2009) the Labour Party framed housing shortages as connected to:

Population growth in New Zealand and from [international] migration.

From 2009, the Labour Party also attempted to promote their affordability frame in other social contexts, such as the significant differences in Māori and Pākehā² homeownership rates and rental occupancy, and making a link between the lack of affordable housing and the increase in rental costs. The Māori Party focused specifically on the needs of Māori communities and drew attention to the dramatic decrease in Māori homeownership:

From 61.4% (in 1991) to 45.2% (in 2006)... [and] a reliance on rental tenure up from 38.6% to 54.8%.

During this debate, the Labour Party also provided wider evidence for its affordability frame, drawing attention to the plight of impoverished communities and the need for more support for the community housing sector. For example, Labour MPs included statistics for Pacific Island communities and the rates of homeownership and rental tenancies. One Labour MP noted only 18% of Pasifika families own their own home and that 82% of Pasifika families rent either from the State or from private landlords (Residential Tenancies Amendment Bill – Third Reading, Labour 2016). Additionally, it was claimed that Cook Islanders had the lowest homeownership rates of any Pacific Islanders (Residential Tenancies (Safe and secure rentals) Amendment Bill – First Reading, Labour 2016).

Housing beyond homeownership was also an emergent theme, and tended to include issues related to the increasing rate of homelessness and renting. For example, when the Residential Tenancies Amendment Bill goes into the In-Committee reading stage in 2010, both Labour and the Greens discuss this, exemplified by the comment that:

Tenants in New Zealand do not enjoy an enormous amount of protection, compared with tenants in other countries around the world that we generally compare ourselves with (Greens).

The Labour Party also intermittently highlighted more principle and community-focused perspectives of housing. For example, this is from a 2009 debate:

Housing is about providing people with homes. Having a home is about having a place where people can live with their families, a place where they can get a sense of community and identity, a place that provides them with security, a place where they are warm and safe, and a place that gives them some sense of ownership in their community. Housing is not just about houses.

As may be expected, the number of subordinate counterframes struggling for attention in the ‘competitive democracy’ of framing increased in number and variety but were dispersed and struggled for impact. Further, it is noticeable that they were

Table 1. Dominant, thematic and episodic/missing frames.

Dominant Frames	Thematic Counterframing	Episodic and Missing Frames
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor land supply and an inefficient planning system • Housing Affordability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wages and income • Immigration and migration • Private rental market and security of tenancy • Māori and Pasifika aspects of homeownership • Homelessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of homes: insulation and mould • Quality of homes: design and type • Quality of Place: liveability, sustainability, or amenities • Regional or spatial perspectives • Foreign ownership and investments

almost exclusively employed by opposing parties. While the counterframes may have had frequency, they struggled to gain resonance and power in comparison to the disciplined dominant supply/regulation frame of the governing National Party.

Turning to the episodic individual frames, we gain insights into which had the lowest rates of acceptance and frequency, or were missing entirely. These are of particular interest as they help demonstrate what perspectives and voices were not represented in any meaningful manner within political housing discourse within the study period. These frames tended to focus on issues connected with quality, or more multifaceted urban development perspectives. Notable topics here included the quality of dwellings, such as regarding insulation and mould; the type, for example, density and design; and the quality of places and urban design, for instance, liveability, sustainability, or amenities. In addition, more spatial or complex perspectives, relating to regional economic or growth issues, or to foreign investment or the financialisation of housing, were not represented in crisis discourse in a substantive manner.

A factor of note is that when episodic frames did occur, they tended to be individualized. This framing may also be an attempt to raise visibility by generating an emotive response in parliament, which may then in turn, attract the attention of the media or other parliamentarians (Iyengar, 2015; Harris 2010). For example, in New Zealand the scholarship linking poor-quality damp, cold housing to low health outcomes for vulnerable populations is well known (Howden-Chapman et al. 2007; 2008). In a speech in 2016 on the quality of rental properties, a Labour MP referred to the death of a child in 2014, in which the coroner's report said the cold and damp State house played a contributing factor (Residential Tenancies Amendment Bill - Second Reading, Labour, 2016). The case elicited attention from a diverse range of groups, the popular media (e.g. Walters et al., 2015) as well as members of Parliament. Poor, low-quality housing was, for a time at least, highlighted as an issue in particular for vulnerable and marginalized populations, but remained minor.

Table 1 provides an overview of the strength and focus of the framing themes identified. In some ways the thematic and episodic counterframing attempts provide an insight into the complexity of the housing crisis in New Zealand. They emphasize its multifaceted nature, and how parliament struggles to grapple with numerous possible frames in contrast to the dominant governmental frame that appears both easier to communicate and 'solve' within policy. The episodic and missing frames also shed light on the relationship between science and politics, an issue that we will return to shortly.

Discussion: the construction and deconstruction of a crisis

Framing, power, and policy

We now turn from the political framing to the policy response. The political discourse led to a suite of new legislative and policy initiatives delivered by the National government during the study period. It particularly focused towards more recent times when the issue of a crisis in housing became increasingly high profile and the narrative—whether accepted or not—raised the issue as a priority. The reforms were all deemed to address the dominant government frame of poor land supply and an inefficient planning system, and interestingly, do not just provide direction, but seek to justify and blame too. In this regard we see the main planning legislation, the Resource Management Act (RMA), receive repeated culpability and calls for change. For example, the Housing Accords and Special Housing Areas Act (HASHA) 2013 made direct reference to resource consent, regulatory frameworks, and land supply. By linking Hansard to policy, we can appreciate how the words detailing the purpose of the HASHA closely resonate with the dominant framing by government MPs:

To enhance housing affordability by facilitating an increase in land and housing supply in certain regions or districts, listed in Schedule 1, identified as having housing supply and affordability issues (Parliamentary Counsel Office, 2013).

A similar framing and causal link are also visible in the 2017 report Better Planning. The government charged the Productivity Commission to review the effectiveness of the planning system, who subsequently claimed a key aim of planning should be to:

Provide sufficient development capacity to meet demand. The harmful effect of spiraling house prices is indicative of a serious imbalance between supply and demand (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2017: iii).

Three other policy initiatives of note during this period were the National Policy Statement on Urban Development Capacity (New Zealand Government, 2016), the Housing Infrastructure Fund from 2016, and the Urban Development Authorities Report (New Zealand Government, 2017), all of which closely reflect the dominant political frame and seek to allocate blame for housing affordability towards a local government sector that has not supplied enough land for housing. For example,

This national policy statement aims to ensure that planning decisions enable the supply of housing needed to meet demand. This will contribute to minimizing artificially inflated house prices at all levels and contribute to housing affordability overall. Currently, artificially inflated house prices drive inequality, increase the fiscal burden of housing-related government subsidies, and pose a risk to the national economy (New Zealand Government, 2016: 3-4)

Uncompetitive land markets drive housing costs higher and higher. Land market constraints are primarily due to planning rules, the costs of overcoming land-use restrictions and infrastructure shortfalls. This has led to New Zealand house prices becoming increasingly more expensive relative to incomes over the past 25 years (New Zealand Government, 2017: 11).

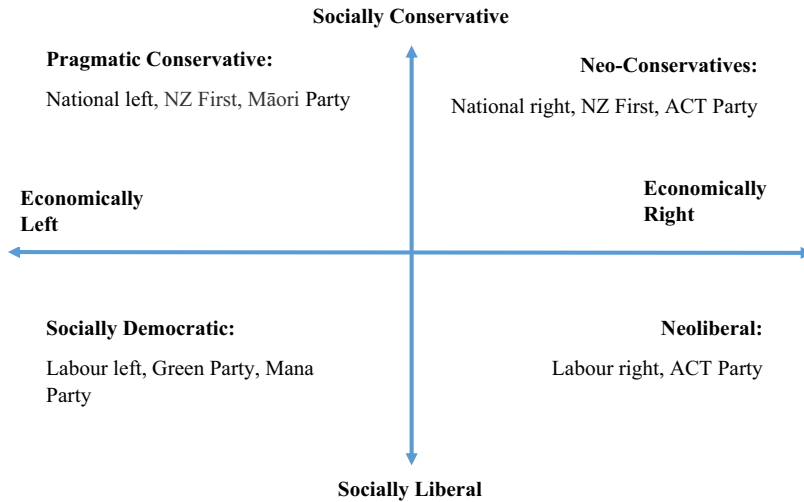


Figure 2. Ideological Dimensions and Political Parties in New Zealand (adapted from Miller, 2015: 169).

By linking the variable framing of the housing crisis to political parties we can gain insights into the links between the policy narratives and the less visible, ideological aspects of the housing crisis. To help provide context, [Figure 2](#) maps the typical ideological position of each of the major political parties in New Zealand. The vertical axis represents social conservatism at the top and social liberalism at the bottom, and the horizontal axis represents an ideological move progressively from the economic left to the economic right. The intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes creates four quadrants assigned to notional political ideology. Note while Parties may fall into more than one ideological category and can shift over time, the figure is designed to help readers unfamiliar with New Zealand to link political framing to predominant ideological positions. During the period of data collection the National government would mainly be positioned in the upper right quadrant as economically right and socially conservative. In that regard they hold similarities with the Conservative party in the UK or the Republicans in the US.

This discussion allows us to connect the various framing attempts to the ideological positioning of political parties. For example, we can better appreciate how the dominant interpretation of the housing crisis by the National Party is in line with long-held socially conservative and economically right views of an inefficient public sector and too much red-tape. More broadly, while the policies provide a public assurance of action, they also provide insights into what was *not* up for debate, and which interest groups were not represented by this frame.

Crisis as an ideological object

It was clear that the discourses of a crisis are not just linked to party affiliation or ideology, but also to whether the party is governing or opposing, and the length of

time that situation has stood. We see how the opposing parties, particular Labour and the Greens, essentially acted as a discourse coalition to advance a 'crisis' framing, even though they defined this differently. The recent change in position by the National Party post their recent election loss lends weight to the idea of a housing crisis having utility as a political weapon; a useful, vague signifier of incompetence by which to attack the governing party.

The second issue of note is that the invocation of a housing crisis by opposing parties, led to not just a contest over whether this was correct, or its meaning, but the opening up of new political spaces for policy action. Interestingly, this is less a battle of framing and counterframing where competing ideas jostle for prominence, but one rather more connected to power and ideology. The constitution of the New Zealand parliament during the study period meant that the National government had sole power. Therefore, while there were frames and counterframes visible and a battle for meaning, as may be seen in other research focusing on the media, within this study the dominant frame by the governing party had the central impact on policy formation. Moreover, this narrative directly influenced a suite of legislative and policy reforms designed to address the claimed problem of poor land supply by an inefficient planning system.

In this sense we can see the term crisis, even if resisted, still provides a political opportunity for the ruling party to ascribe meaning, make causal links, and enact responses in line with pre-existing ideological positions. While this was not the intention of the opposition, the growing discourse helped created the 'big wave' (Kingdon, 1995) momentum for National to advance ideological positions centred on a logic that aimed to be more market-friendly and increase the supply of development-ready land. Housing crises, therefore, may be less of a sign of a critical, decisive moment, or even a battle of frames, and more akin to a means for the ruling party to open up political space to promote ideological ideas. The meanings that are generated by these claims are not just about 'policy', but are laden with power and make assertions about the preferred relationship between the state, private sector and market. By extension, the counterframing attempts serve to shed light on which groups and issues are privileged in politics and policy, which are not, and the normalcy that should be protected.

The science-politics-policy interface

Beyond notions of crisis, the recasting of what are complex housing issues within such a narrow dominant framing reveals a significant challenge for housing researchers. If the ways that politicians define and interpret a problem is so closely aligned with long-standing ideological perspectives it raises issues for the effective interface of research into policy and practice, and, more broadly, the ability to address issues such as housing affordability. For example, we discussed in the introduction how researchers commonly highlight the complex and multi-faceted nature of housing. Here, issues such as cultural expectations, the supply of skilled construction labour, or the nuances of taxation all exert an influence and are seen as co-creating markets relating to land, housing, or finance. Equally, researchers frequently promote issues

that appear to be poorly represented in political housing crisis discourse, such as the quality of homes or importance of urban design, to the value that more spatial or regional perspectives can bring in redistributing labour and capital away from overheating urban centres. The simplicity of much political discourse suggests that we need to reflect anew on the real-world issues constraining the ability of housing research to influence politics and policy. This study suggests that a focus on power, ideology, and language holds potential to deepen understanding of the science-politics-policy interface.

Yet, it is worth noting that many aspects of housing concerns *were* present in political debates. For example, the privatization of the rental market, quality of homes, or homelessness were all visible counterframes. In some ways, the diversity of counterframes is positive in that it better reflects the acknowledged complexity of housing as a public policy concern. However, the failure of more systemic perspectives to influence in comparison to the power of simple political narratives emphasizes a tension between scientific and political domains, and potentially between science and particular parties. If there is a clear incongruity in the way researchers write about housing and the way politicians discuss it, then it suggests science impact is less of a deficit, pipeline, or translation model, and more related to the timing of research and the fit with the existing ideological frames of governing parties. More concerning is how the reductive and simplifying nature of politics may not just be ill-suited to 'solve' the housing crisis, but may actually be a part of its co-constitution. This perspective sheds light on the long-term nature of any notional housing crisis; how it is less an 'event' or 'problem' in need of a 'fix', and more of a lived condition that becomes normalized in a variegated manner.

Conclusion: Words matter

While discussion of housing crises is well researched, particularly in countries such as Canada, the US, the UK, and Australia (Aalbers, 2015; Hulchanski and Network, 2002; Marcuse and Madden, 2016; Murphy, 2011; Young et al., 2006), the selection of New Zealand provides a fresh comparison to what is a lively international debate. In line with other research broadly focused on the politics of housing problems, such as on agenda setting, policy capture, or stigma (e.g. Jacobs *et al.*, 2003b; Gurran and Phibbs, 2015; Jacobs and Flanagan, 2013) the study of political speeches provides rich insights concerning the role power and ideology play in the construction and maintenance of a housing crisis. In doing so, it adds to housing scholarship which highlights the value that more interpretative and constructionist perspectives can bring in understanding policy failure and the influence of the status quo (Jacobs et al., 2003a; Jacobs, 2018).

Framing research allows us to interrogate the ways by which a 'thing' is identified and defined as a 'problem', the causal aspects that are selected and given salience, the preferred lens by which solutions should be interpreted within, and the formation of policy. Although, interestingly, the research highlights that this may occur in a far less objective and linear manner than this phrasing suggests. Frames relating to crises have added political dimensions given the pejorative nature of the term, but we see

here how a housing crisis presents an opportunity. Even if the frame is not accepted, there is new political space to set agendas and enact policies that are in line with the political ideology of governing parties. Contrasting the resultant, simple dominant framing with the complexity of housing as a public policy problem also allows us to better appreciate how crises are less 'solved', and more redistributed between various constituencies over various timescales. The yawning gap between science and policy in this study may also, therefore, hold interest for researchers trying to address the various other crises that resist resolution.

With the recent emergence of the term 'crisis' in parliamentary debates, we witness the contest in defining what constitutes the housing crisis, who is affected, and which interventions are implemented to address the situation. As National was the governing party during the study period, it was clear how the discourse framed this within their preferred ideological lenses as being due to a lack of housing supply due to an inefficient supply of development land. This was even visible in the policy wording, which did not just explain but also sought to allocate blame beyond the political sphere to planning actors or agencies who are unable to partake in a parliamentary debate. Equally, the inclusion of thematic and episodic frames allows the more silent aspects of the housing crisis to be emphasised, which served to highlight, but not necessarily address, the predicament of thousands of vulnerable and marginalized individuals and families. These multiple discourses demonstrate how the spatial financial paradoxes identified by Smith (2015) become rendered politically visible in uneven and partial ways. In reality, the various frames show how there is not just a *singular* housing crisis. There may be a supply crisis, a demand crisis, a quality crisis, a distribution crisis, a credit crisis, a rental crisis, and so on, all of which differ spatially between local, national, and international contexts.

Overall, the research positions the housing crisis as an ideological artefact; a means by which groups can promote political goals that have more in common with ideology than with the nature of the problem. More generally, we argue it raises significant questions for housing researchers aiming to understand how science and evidence can have a greater impact on practice.

Notes

1. For a full discussion of housing reforms and policies in New Zealand see Dodson, 2007; and Murphy 2004; 2014; 2016.
2. A Māori language term for New Zealanders of European descent.

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