Tenants’ New Clout

By John Atlas and Peter Dreier

MEDFORD, Mass. — The Presidential candidates have overlooked an important, increasingly active constituency. Tenants — more than one-third of the nation’s households — are the sleeping giant of American politics.

Tenants are just beginning to see themselves as a group with common problems and a common political purpose. In the last three years, tenants have won a variety of state and local laws nationwide to protect and extend their rights. Several dozen localities and states have passed restrictions, or outright bans, on condominium conversions. Tenants are challenging archaic landlord-tenant laws — enacting “warrant of habitability” legislation, revising security deposits, improving inadequate building-code enforcement, and maintenance and security, or outright bans, on condominium conversions. Tenants are challenging ar

The Nationwide rental-vacancy rate is the lowest in the postwar period, and in most cities it is almost nil. Construction is almost at a standstill and some predict a collapse of the private rental industry. This year fewer apartments will be built than abandoned, destroyed, and converted to condominiums. “Redlining” by banks, ar

1. Protection against arbitrary evictions even with “just cause,” including evictions for condominium and cooperative conversions.

2. Tax credits for tenants. Current tax law providing deductions for homeowners is regressive and discriminates against renters.

3. Reorienting (and increasing) Federal housing programs so that grants go directly to tenant-controlled low-income cooperatives and public housing (rather than to private developers) to build and rehabilitate rental housing. This gives tenants more of a say and a stake in their own housing. It also removes a major cause of inflation.

4. Recognition of tenants as a legitimate constituency with their own concerns. H.U.D. should establish an assistant secretary for tenant affairs. Congress should pass a national Landlord-Tenant Relations Act to protect tenant organizations the way the National Labor Relations Act protects labor unions. It would mandate that landlords in large buildings recognize tenant unions if more than half vote to form a group to bargain for them.

Tenants increasingly will be heard in city councils, state legislatures, and Congress. This election year provides an opportunity for candidates to tap the growing political awareness and activism of the nation’s 80 million tenants.

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