

“Listen to the People of Starkville”: Dynamics of (Extra-)Local Political Opposition to Short-Term Rental Regulation in a Small Southern City

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Abstract

Though housing inequality is manifest in a variety of ways around the world, one of the most noteworthy has been the rise of short-term rentals. And while a growing body of literature has demonstrated the negative impacts of this new housing typology on cities and neighborhoods, as well as the need for such cities to regulate this phenomenon, scholars have had less to say about how the fights for and against these regulations have actually played out. Through a case study of proposed short-term rental regulations in the small southern college town of Starkville, Mississippi, this paper documents some of the key ways that fights over short-term rental regulation actually play out on the ground, and how these dynamics can lead to more effective approaches to regulating short-term rentals in the future.

Keywords

airbnb, housing, property rights, short-term rentals, urban politics

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Introduction

Over the course of the last decade, struggles over housing affordability, ownership and construction have been central to the broader landscape of social, political and economic inequality across the United States and elsewhere around the world. From the popularization of gentrification as a near catch-all term for housing and neighborhood change to the emergence of a countervailing “Yes In My Backyard” (or YIMBY) coalition that promotes housing construction as a panacea to housing affordability (Tapp 2021), the politics of housing have become fundamental to broader social challenges (Madden and Marcuse 2016).

One particular aspect of these struggles has focused on the emergence of short-term rental (hereafter, STR) platforms like Airbnb, Vrbo and others, which are widely seen to be exacerbating – if not outright causing – the affordability crisis in cities around the globe, resulting in further gentrification and displacement beyond what’s long been occurring in many places. Because of the potential for such short-term uses to reap larger profits for the property owner than would a conventional long-term rental, many cities are seeing a rapid proliferation of housing units converted exclusively for use as STRs. This results in permanent housing being taken off the market for local residents while also converting their neighborhoods into a combination of often vacant buildings with no permanent residents and a playground for tourists who flow in and back out at regular intervals.

Because of these deleterious effects on both housing affordability and neighborhood quality-of-life, citizens have spearheaded countless efforts for cities to impose regulations on STRs, targeting the number of units allowed to certain owners or in certain neighborhoods, the number of nights per year that such units can be rented, as well as the collection of taxes and permitting fees that STRs have often been exempt from by default, owing to their newness and lack of easy categorization in relation to other kinds of businesses and lodging arrangements. While critical scholars have contributed to both a much-needed body of evidence on the scope and spatial extent of STRs in various cities (cf. Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018; Jiao and Bai 2020a, 2020b), and helped to summarize the range of policy approaches that can be taken towards regulating STRs (cf. Wegmann and Jiao 2017; DiNatale, Lewis and Parker 2018; Furukawa and Onuki 2019; Nieuwland and van Melik 2020; van Holm 2020; Colomb and Moreira de Souza 2021), relatively little exists within the scholarly literature about the *politics* of STR regulation and how the oft-contentious fights that such regulation engenders have played out in different contexts. While there are certainly exceptions to this rule, the fact that most accounts of the contentious politics of STR regulation have been journalistic rather than scholarly are

indicative of a need to more thoroughly account for and investigate the specifics of how fights over STR regulation have played out and why.

Even further, the vast majority of work on the urban impacts of STRs has been focused in a relatively small set of cities that are notable for either their general importance as large, economically successful ‘global’ cities or their particular importance as tourist destinations that have long depended on such temporary uses for their livelihoods, albeit under somewhat different circumstances than those presented by STRs today. In the United States, cities like New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles have tended to dominate the conversation in relation to the former category, while the case of New Orleans represents an oft-discussed example of the latter. Internationally, research has looked at London, Toronto, Sydney and Barcelona, with other places being only sporadically mentioned as the focus of research, with some notable exceptions.¹ While this geographic particularity is understandable in many ways, it has also artificially narrowed the focus of scholarly work on STRs and their impacts to exclude a vast number of places that are similarly struggling with the challenges presented by these new housing arrangements. While certain aspects of these studies are undoubtedly generalizable to the STR experience in cities of all shapes and sizes, not everything translates to every context.

In order to address these two major gaps in the extant literature on STRs, this paper explores a case study of political contention around STR regulations in Starkville, Mississippi, a small southern college town of just 25,000 full-time residents in an isolated, rural corner of the state. Identified organically as part of a larger research project on housing in Starkville, the fight over proposed STR regulations in the fall of 2019 offered an opportunity to both document in detail the evolution of a single political episode centered on STR regulation, while also filling a gap in the understanding of STRs in places off the proverbial map of urban scholarship. Taken together, the goal of showing the particular contradictions at work in the logics of both supporters and opponents of the regulations, while also framing these empirics in relation to how similar episodes have been documented in larger, more prominent cities, offers a compelling opportunity to highlight multiple elements of the larger STR story that have hitherto seen minimal attention.

Ultimately, the paper documents five key sets of contradictory spatial frames and claims that marked Starkville’s debate over STR regulations, each of which point to a relatively unique dynamic of the Starkville case that’s not been discussed in detail elsewhere. These include: (1) conflicts in the framing of regulations as being targeted at preserving neighborhood quality of life rather than housing affordability, (2) contradictions in opposition discourses between arguing that STRs are not an extensive enough problem to warrant regulation while also being so important to the city’s

economy that they can't risk being regulated, (3) counterposed dynamics of extralocal comparison and extralocal residence, that is the simultaneous resistance to drawing on 'best practices' imported from other cities while many of the opponents are themselves not residents of Starkville, (4) perceptions of a fundamental unfairness in regulating STRs while conventional long-term rentals are not regulated, and, finally, (5) the primacy of a pro-private property rights, anti-big government political disposition within the city.

Together, these five sets of competing spatial frames and claims dictated the shape of the debate over STR regulations in Starkville, leading to their ultimate defeat. But, as the paper argues, these five frames and claims provide a useful base of evidence for understanding how fights over STR regulations play out in less-studied contexts, and how alternative ways of approaching STR regulations may ultimately play out were they to be adopted elsewhere. Even further, they help to demonstrate that any fight over STRs is never about STRs alone, but about an overlapping set of political contests that come together in the particularities of STRs. Before examining these particulars for the Starkville case, however, the paper first turns to examining the extant literature on STRs, their impacts on urban space and housing markets and attempts to regulate them, as well as how this literature might more fruitfully incorporate a focus on political contention by drawing on theories of 'contentious politics'.

Short-Term Rentals and the Changing Urban Fabric

As of January 2020, there are approximately 650,000 housing units used as short-term rentals across the United States (CBRE 2020). While these numbers are staggering in and of themselves in terms of the number of housing units that would otherwise be available for long-term residents, perhaps the most fundamental insight of the critical scholarship on STRs is that STRs don't just affect the property in question, but have broader effects at the neighborhood level and beyond (Rae 2019).

The broader impacts of STRs are driven in large part because STRs are largely not drawn from surplus housing capacity in terms of spare bedrooms or accessory dwelling units, but rather the conversion of formerly long-term rental or owner-occupied housing *into* STRs. Scholars have used a variety of overlapping indicators to help determine whether or not STRs are true 'home sharing' arrangements or hotels under a different name. Among these are the prevalence of whole home and instant book rentals on Airbnb and other STR platforms, as well as hosts with multiple STR listings. Research by Wegmann and Jiao (2017) has shown that whole home and instant book rentals are the most dominant type of Airbnb listing, while Wachsmuth et al. (2017) have shown that even though units owned by those with multiple listings are not

an absolute majority of all listings, they often represent a disproportionate share of the total revenue generated by STRs. Together, this work runs counter to the claims of Airbnb and other STR proponents that STRs represent a way of redistributing the benefits of tourist spending to average citizens rather than hotel chains.

These indicators of full-time STR conversion provide an understanding of just how pervasive STRs are in changing the local dynamics of housing markets across the world. In the United States, Wegmann and Jiao (2017) find in their analysis of Austin, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco and Washington DC that the dominant types of listings are whole home rentals (between 59 percent to 79 percent), full-time whole home rentals (between 16 percent to 32 percent of revenue), and multi-unit lessors (between 30 percent to 40 percent of listings). Meanwhile, in New Orleans, one of the cities most affected by the proliferation of STRs, 82 percent of listings are whole home rentals. Almost half of the total number of STR listings in New Orleans are owned by just 18 percent of hosts, with one hosting company having over 100 listings (JPNSI 2018) and some corporate operators making as much as \$4 million annually from their different properties (Robertson, Oliver and Nost 2020). These numbers are somewhat similar in Boston, where the 18 percent of hosts with multiple listings control 46 percent of the total number of STR units (Horn and Merante 2017). Elsewhere around the world, Sydney, Australia has seen approximately one-third of all Airbnb units run by hosts with multiple listings (Gurran and Phibbs 2017), while Lisbon, Portugal has seen a quarter of all housing units in a single neighborhood converted to STRs, with 99 percent of them run by people from outside the neighborhood, with 78 percent of these being 'buy-to-let' investors (Cocola-Gant and Gago 2021). STRs have become so dominant in tourist-oriented cities like Barcelona that 2 percent of *all* housing units in the city are listed on Airbnb (García-López et al. 2019).

Cumulatively, these indicators of the structure of the STR market lend credence to the idea that STRs have grown largely through the conversion of existing long-term housing stock into illegal and/or temporary hotels. But the effect of these conversions has been an upscaling in local housing markets, with STRs allowing landlords to make more money than they would by using units as long-term rentals, in turn driving up prices through speculative buying by the corporate players mentioned previously. Essentially, STRs have served as tools of gentrification and displacement by both removing existing housing stock from the long-term market and bidding up the costs of what housing remains. As Wachsmuth and Weisler (2018) suggest, the existence of STRs leads to the production of a new rent gap based not on the previous depreciation of housing stock, but on new types of uses that only require the previous tenant to be forced to leave

(see also Robertson, Oliver and Nost 2020; Amore, de Bernardi and Arvanitis 2020; Yrigoy 2019). According to Robertson, Oliver and Nost (2020), some of the most successful ‘home hotels’ in New Orleans are estimated to make as much as \$100,000 annually, far more than would be possible with long-term occupancy. In some ways, this STR-driven gentrification occurs so rapidly and to such a significant degree because the prices for STRs are set based on trans-local economic dynamics rather than on preexisting local housing market conditions, which has the potential to distort local markets to previously unforeseen prices (Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018).

These gentrifying effects on local housing markets have been established through a number of empirical studies. At the national scale, Barron, Kung and Proserpio (2019) estimate that “the growth in home-sharing through Airbnb contributes to about one-fifth of the average annual increase in U.S. rents and about one-seventh of the average annual increase in U.S. housing prices”. In New York City, the removal of as many as 13,500 units from the long-term rental market in just a three-year period resulted in rent increases of 1.4 percent, accounting for 16 percent of the total rent increase across the city during that period (Wachsmuth, Combs and Kerrigan 2019). It’s worth noting, however, that these housing cost increases are not evenly distributed in urban space. For instance, Lee (2016) found that Los Angeles neighborhoods with the most Airbnbs saw rents increase 33 percent faster than in other city neighborhoods, while areas of New Orleans with the most Airbnb listings saw total rent increases of up to 72 percent between 2009 and 2015 (JPNSI 2018). Horn and Merante (2017) estimate that a one standard deviation increase in Airbnb listings relative to the total number of housing units in a given Census tract leads to a 0.4 percent increase in rents, for the tracts with the highest density of Airbnbs, this rent increase can be as high as 3 percent. Relatedly, Zou (2020) uses the case of Washington, D.C. to show that while STR listings could increase home prices across the whole city by 0.6 percent to 2.2 percent, these increases could be over 3 percent in predominantly Black or Latino neighborhoods, and by more than 5 percent in tourist-dominated neighborhoods.

Regulating STRs, Contesting Regulations

Because short-term rentals are associated with this bevy of negative effects on both housing prices and neighborhood cohesion and quality-of-life, cities across the United States, and even elsewhere across Canada and the EU, have sought to develop new regulations to limit the impacts of STRs. This includes cities ranging from global destinations like New York City, London, Paris and Los Angeles to somewhat smaller tourist locales like New Orleans, Louisiana and Charleston, South Carolina. But while cities

of all shapes and sizes have initiated the process of regulating STRs within their jurisdictions, these cities are just as varied in the specifics of *how* they've sought to regulate this emerging housing type.

In their survey of STR regulations across 11 American and European cities, Nieuwland and van Melik (2020) break down the particular regulatory strategies as being fundamentally quantitative, locational, density-based, or qualitative. In other words, STR regulations tend to be focused on some combination of (1) limiting the number of nights that a given housing unit can be rented via STR platforms, (2) limiting the existence of STRs to particular areas within the city, (3) limiting the number of STRs within particular areas, and (4) restricting STRs to certain conditions of ownership and use, most often relating to the unit being a full-time, primary residence for the host, who may or may not have to be present during the unit's rental. And while Nieuwland and van Melik (2020) see different versions of these regulations existing on a spectrum from full bans on STRs to a more *laissez faire* approach, Furukawa and Onuki (2019) identify a richer typology of approaches to STR regulations, including general, hybrid, residence-oriented and host-oriented approaches. While the specifics of these different regulatory approaches are not explored in more detail in this paper, a growing body of social scientific literature has explored the design, implementation and efficacy of these different policies (cf. van Holm 2020; Aguilera, Artioli and Colomb 2021; Smigiel 2020; Nieuwland and Van Melik 2020; Furukawa and Onuki 2019; Wachsmuth, Combs and Kerrigan 2019; Wegmann and Jiao 2017; Colomb and Moreira de Souza 2021), which provide an important foundation for any discussions of how to pursue such regulations.

But Airbnb, like other 'sharing economy'² platforms such as Uber (cf. Zwick 2018), depend significantly on the outright circumvention of existing regulations, the creation of new regulations or the deliberate rollback of regulations in order to be profitable (van Doorn 2020). As such, these sharing economy companies have become active players in local, state and national politics, through lobbying of and donations to elected officials, the sponsorship of ballot measures, and the creation of so-called 'astroturf' groups that appear to be grassroots community organizations, but are actually bankrolled by corporate dollars (cf. Raile 2015; Yates 2021). The result has been a recurring theme of contention between these companies, the users of the platforms, residents and citizens in the places they operate and governmental officials seeking to limit their greatest excesses. One particularly interesting manifestation of this hostility to regulation by Airbnb has been the company's refusal to share data with municipalities, even purging certain listings before releasing a heavily doctored report on the state of Airbnb in NYC in order to make the extent of Airbnb-driven residential conversions seem less significant (Cox and Slee 2016). This particular issue, along with the

more general lack of funding for municipal governments to hire staff devoted to monitoring STRs, makes actual enforcement of STR regulations difficult even when cities have passed them with significant support (Leshinsky and Schatz 2018).

Despite the emerging political contention around regulating STRs, there has been relatively little in-depth discussion of such dynamics in the scholarly literature. In one particularly notable exception, Aguilera, Artioli and Colomb (2021) suggest that place-to-place differences in regulatory approaches “cannot be simply viewed as the result of different structural political-economic conditions, but [should be seen] as a product of the struggle between collective actors with various interests, modes of action and narratives embedded in place-specific institutional arrangements” (1960–1691). For example, they point to Barcelona’s fight to regulate STRs and other broader forms of tourism-displacement as the genesis of a larger political realignment within the city around the Barcelona en Comu party and mayor Ada Colau, who have since become celebrated for their success in contesting these dynamics. Elsewhere, Medvedeva’s (Forthcoming) dissertation examines the variety of ways that STR hosts navigate the increasingly fraught terrain of these battles in order to produce their own ideas of ‘home’ across case studies in Boston, Washington, D.C. and San Francisco.

In order to address the general lack of scholarly attention to how political contests over STR regulations have played out, the rest of this paper focuses on integrating discussions of the geographies of STRs with work on contentious urban politics. Because of the growing regularity and highly politicized nature of these debates in countless places, studies of how these fights have emerged and played out have particular salience in the present moment. Of particular use in these situations is the concept of ‘contentious politics’ taken from the work of Douglas McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly. While broadly applicable to any “collective political struggle”, McAdam et al. define the realm of contentious politics as any “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants” (2001: 5).

Despite their primary on national-level episodes of contention for practical reasons, McAdam et al. also note that “[t]his does not mean, however, that our alternative analytic program applies only to periods of broad national contention. Suitably modified, it also applies to local, sectoral, international, and transnational contention” (2001: 8). That said, the genesis of the contentious politics literature between sociology and political science has left an opening for a greater attention to the way that geography is both a key input to, and outcome of, contentious politics.

As Martin and Miller argue, “many forms of contentious politics involve struggle over the spatial constitution of social, political, and economic relations” (2003: 150). But the importance of geography to contentious politics is not limited to the fact that all politics ‘takes place’ in a given location. Instead, Leitner, Sheppard and Sziarto (2008) point to the multiple, and often contradictory, spatialities that are put to work in contentious politics. As they write, “Social movements often seek to strategically manipulate, subvert and resignify places that symbolize priorities and imaginaries they are contesting; to defend places that stand for their priorities and imaginaries; and to produce new spaces where such visions can be practised, within that place and beyond” (Leitner, Sheppard and Sziarto 2008: 161–162). But of particular importance to this broadened view of geography, it is equally important to take account of how contentious politics are developed, practiced and reverberate through relational networks that extend beyond territorial borders where such contention may be concentrated (Nicholls 2009). While the role of the internet in facilitating extralocal interactions and organizing has become almost taken for granted (Warf and Grimes 1997), such horizontal, relational networks also include the role of ‘best practices’ and ‘policy models’ transferred through the mobilities of urban policies (McCann 2011; McCann and Ward 2011).

The contentious politics framework is notable for its attempt to systematize the study of such contentious episodes by decomposing them into something of a mechanistic framework. Yet, perhaps the most fundamental insight from this literature is that these various elements of contention can – and do – occur in a near infinite number of combinations, with no single universal trend or single universal site of ‘proper’ political action. Contentious politics can therefore draw our attention to the contingency of political controversies, like the fight over STR regulations in Starkville, while also elucidating the complexity of such controversies and the variety of other contentious issues that are imbricated within them. In the language of McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) and Martin and Miller (2003), events like the Starkville STR fight represent a kind of relational or linking mechanism, linking previously unconnected people, institutions, events and processes together.

But rather than focusing on an institution or collective as the linking mechanism in the Starkville STR example, it is the contention itself that brings together a temporary, potentially fragile political coalition to oppose the regulations through a series of shifting justifications and strategies that show the complexity of relationships. These relationships are evident in a variety of overlapping and intersecting issues fundamental to urban politics and governance: concerns around not stifling local economic development in an era of austerity and inter-urban competition; suburban and small-town ideals of neighborhood order and desirability; competition between different players

within the same local industry; and more macro-scale political ideologies that do not always accord with the alliances otherwise being developed around more local issues (e.g. the emphasis on private property rights that emerges so clearly in the Starkville case, as is discussed in more detail below.) That is to say, even without mobilizing the totality of the contentious politics framework, this work can help to highlight how the fight over STR regulations in Starkville was never about the specifics of STRs alone. Instead, by focusing on the particular points and moments of contention in this case, I argue that understanding the fight over STRs requires understanding these other broader issues of urban politics and governance, and the specifics of how they play out in Starkville. Only through an attention to these intersecting points of contention can one understand why the fight over STR regulations in Starkville happened the way that it did, and what alternative pathways might have been possible there, or might be possible in other spatial and temporal contexts.

Struggling Over STR Regulations in Starkville

Given the potential for integrating a lens of contentious politics into the study of STR regulations, the paper turns now to the process by which STR regulations were introduced, contested, negotiated and ultimately defeated in Starkville, Mississippi in late 2019. First, I provide a background on the regulations themselves and the genesis of the controversy around them. Second, I turn to providing a brief methodological note on how the research was conducted. Finally the rest of the section focuses on outlining five key ways that competing spatial frames and claims dictated the shape of the conflict.

Setting the Stage

A small college town of approximately 25,000 residents in rural Mississippi, Starkville is the home of Mississippi State University, which is its primary distinguishing feature. While relatively small and spatially isolated, the presence of the university, and particularly the cultural prominence of the school's football team, is the town's economic engine, driving tourism and spending. In recent years, a significant portion of this spending has focused on housing and real estate, especially in the form of so-called 'gameday homes' and other accommodations for weekend tourists in town for football games, often at short-term rentals like Airbnb (Shelton 2021).

In response to a growing recognition of the issues presented by these processes, Starkville's proposed short-term rental regulations were formally introduced by recently elected Alderman Hamp Beatty on the night of September 28, 2019. Included as part of the city's planned update to its

comprehensive plan, Beatty's STR regulations included stipulations that hosts obtain a required permit for a fee of \$300, that units could be rented for a maximum of 10 weekends (or 20 nights) per year, and a requirement that any STRs be the primary residence of their hosts. On their own, these regulations would qualify among the stricter of any locality across the United States, though certain elements of the regulations – to be discussed in more detail below – would have moderated some of the stringency of these key elements.

The forceful nature of the proposed regulations was not lost on those with the most potential to be affected. While the initial regulations were formally proposed on the night of September 28, 2019, by the morning of October 1, local STR hosts had already created a Facebook group called “Starkville Airbnb (Short Term Rental) Hosts” to coordinate their response. The group quickly grew to approximately 130 members, though the group was not composed entirely of actual STR hosts, with some group members being business owners who relied on the steady stream of STR guests and others just being supporters of the cause. Though organized online, this group manifest quickly offline, becoming a dominant presence at the various public meetings and hearings devoted to the proposed STR regulations.

One interesting aspect of this organized opposition is that they had not previously been organized as such. That is, STR hosts had not previously been a target of any kind of government intervention or regulation in Starkville, and even property owners and landlords more generally had not previously had to represent a united front in relation to the local government. This is further interesting because, unlike fights over STR regulations in much larger cities throughout the country where Airbnb spent millions of dollars to influence local ballot measures (cf. Benner 2016; Ferre-Sadurni 2019), STR platforms were *not* themselves involved in the Starkville fight. That is to say, the opposition movement in Starkville was truly grass-roots, and, as a result, saw itself struggle with multiple competing interests, understandings and strategies throughout the process in the absence of a top-down directive.

This process is seen in the ever-evolving series of competing spatial claims made by proponents and opponents of the STR regulations in Starkville, which are examined in more detail below. Together these five contentions highlight both the fundamental and unique elements of the Starkville STR regulation fight. While conflicts were most obviously played out in the ongoing dialogs between Alderman Beatty, Starkville Mayor Lynn Spruill and Alderman Sandra Sistrunk representing the key proponents of the regulations and the various opponents of the regulations organized through the Facebook group, some competing spatial claims and frames were internal to a given side of the debate.

Methods

Researching the contention around Starkville's STR regulations was, in some ways, an accident. The events and processes described in this research were studied as one part of a larger research project on changes in the local housing market in Starkville. While other aspects of this project were primarily focused on a quantitative and spatial analysis of housing prices and ownership dynamics (cf. Shelton 2021), the emergence of STR regulations as a key issue of local concern in the fall of 2019 required a turn towards qualitative methods of participant observation and discourse analysis in order to understand how the issue was framed and debated amongst the concerned parties.

Participant observation of the fight over STR regulations in Starkville occurred both in conventional face-to-face settings of public meetings, as well as in online observations of a Facebook group for STR hosts dedicated to fighting the proposed regulations. A total of four public meetings were observed, including public listening sessions on October 3rd and 22nd, a planning commission meeting on November 12th, and a Board of Alderman meeting on December 3rd. Where possible, public videos were accessed and transcribed in order to supplement notes taken during meetings. While these official public meetings allowed for a view into how the two sides clashed openly about certain aspects of the regulations, being able to follow conversations in a private online group allowed for an understanding of how those private conversations were used to internally develop and debate particular talking points and discursive maneuvers prior to public encounters with elected officials and pro-regulation residents, who were not nearly as well organized.

In addition to in-person and online participant observation, two other methods were key to understanding the STR landscape in Starkville. To add to the GIS-based research on Starkville's housing market done elsewhere as part of the larger project, STR listing data was manually reconstructed for the Starkville area to ascertain the scope of the local STR market and key features, such as the ownership structure and characteristics for those operating in this market. Together, these mixed methods provide for a multi-faceted perspective on the matter of STRs in Starkville and how different discourses either are or are not supported by ancillary evidence around the issue.

Contention #1: Neighborhood Character versus Housing Affordability

As mentioned above, the initial version of the proposed STR regulations in Starkville would have been among the more stringent sets of regulations across the entire country had they ultimately been adopted. That is, except

for one particular confounding aspect of the proposal: that the regulations were designed to only apply to ‘traditional neighborhoods’, roughly approximating the extent of the city’s R1 single-family zoning categorization. This zonal restriction would have meant that in areas of the city *not* defined by the exclusive presence of single-family homes, STRs could have continued unabated, without being subject to any of the regulations. While seemingly mundane, this element of the regulations was both deeply rooted in the origin story of these regulations in Starkville, and deeply consequential for how the regulations were framed by both proponents and opponents alike.

The genesis of STR regulations in Starkville is largely attributed to the complaint of a single resident of the city’s Oktibbeha Gardens neighborhood, a quaint, older subdivision just north of the city’s small downtown core. The resident in question reported to her alderman, the aforementioned Hamp Beatty, himself a resident of Oktibbeha Gardens, about repeated disturbances caused by a dedicated STR house next door, ranging from having her mailbox run over by a car to having guests drunkenly knock on her door in the middle of the night when mistaking the address of their destination. Though not particularly surprising given the plethora of bad experiences with STR guests that one can easily find, the particular nature of this one resident’s experiences ended up having an outsized influence on the way the STR fight in Starkville played out, as the rest of this paper ultimately documents. This is at least in significant part because of the lack of any organized support for the proposed regulations, which allowed for the one individual’s voice to be pushed to the forefront as representative of the rationale for the regulations.

This origin story is important because it helped to frame the importance of the proposed STR regulations as fundamentally being about the preservation of neighborhood character and quality-of-life in Starkville’s ‘traditional’ neighborhoods. While these issues have undoubtedly been present in countless other locales where STR regulations have been introduced and debated, Starkville is relatively unique insofar as this was almost the *sole* justification for the regulations, in contrast to other localities where the impacts of STRs on housing affordability have been at the center of such disputes.³ As Mayor Lynn Spruill said at the initial public meeting on October 3rd, the effort to introduce the regulations “was nothing other than us trying to make sure we maintain the integrity of our single-family residential neighborhoods”.

The key contradiction with respect to housing affordability is that the existence of a zoning-based regulation scheme would have ultimately negated any of the potential productive things about other parts of the regulations. In particular, the original requirement that any STRs must be the primary residence of the host has been notable across the country as being one of the key ways to eliminate housing speculators and other profiteers from capitalizing on STRs

at the expense of local residents. In short, it prevents the conversion of full-time, permanent housing units into dedicated STRs that sit empty otherwise. But if such restrictions only applied in single-family neighborhoods and not, for instance, in the city's relatively small, dense and walkable core neighborhoods, then such areas would almost certainly see even more pressure from speculators and absentee owners than they already are, though this did not seem to be a consideration in the original version of the regulations.

Indeed, based on a GIS analysis of approximate Airbnb listing locations in Starkville, the zoning-based regulations would have had a minimal impact on the overall nature of the city's short-term rental problem. Of the 175 Airbnb listings in the Starkville area, just 61 would have even been effected by the proposed regulations, with 58 being subject to the regulations based on their location in a traditional neighborhood and three that would be forced to close due to being located in areas where STRs were to be prohibited (see Figure 1). 55 of the 175 listings in the area lie outside of the city limits, and so wouldn't have been subject to the regulations at all, while another 59 are located in the areas of Figure 1 in green, where the proposed regulations would not have applied. But at the same time as the regulations wouldn't have met the lofty goals articulated by Alderman Beatty at various points throughout the process, the limited scope of the regulations also contradict the arguments

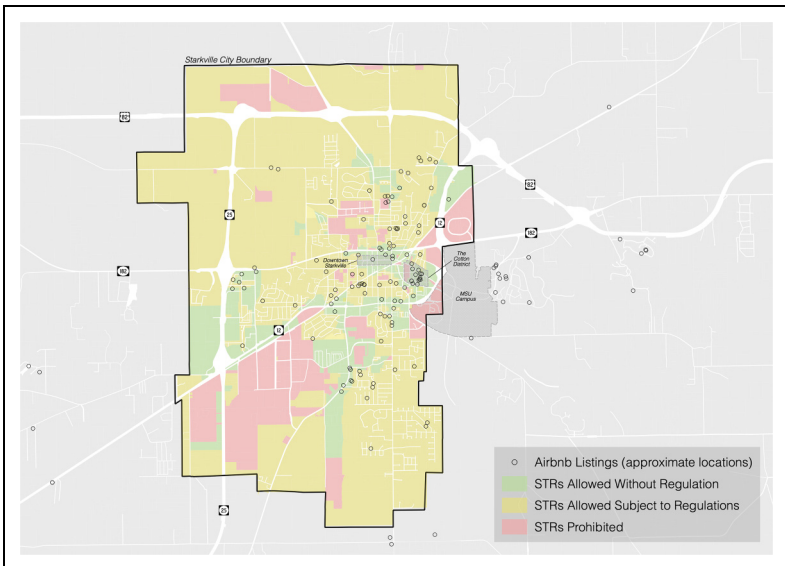


Figure 1. Approximate locations of Starkville area STRs in relation to regulatory zoning scheme.

of the regulations' opponents that they represents a draconian big government overreach (as will be discussed in more detail below), since less than one-third of all listings would have even been effected at all.

This neglect of the broader housing affordability implications is further seen in the fact that, with the exception of a single brief comment by Alderman Beatty at the October 3rd public meeting, it would take more than a full month after the beginning of this episode before housing affordability was mentioned as being a rationale for enacting the proposed regulations. Even then, housing affordability was primarily mentioned by a very small group of fewer than five local college professors who were effectively the only residents vocally in favor of the proposed regulations at any of the various public meetings.⁴ It was, however, too late to make this stick as a rationale, when so much of the debate up to this point had been focused on the neighborhood character components of the regulation, especially in relation to the 'origin story' of the regulation being rooted in the experience of one homeowner feeling uncomfortable with an STR next door. Ironically enough, by the time housing affordability began to be mentioned as a justification for the policy, the key mechanisms that might have encouraged such affordability – namely the restriction that all STRs must be the host's primary residence – had been scrapped as part of the process of negotiating the regulations, which is described in more detail below.

Contention #2: STRs as a non-Existent Problem versus STRs as Driver of the Local Economy

Another issue where competing and contradictory spatial claims came to the fore is interesting insofar as it represents a debate largely *internal* to the opponents of the regulations. Early on in the debates over the proposed regulations, opponents struggled to articulate a consistent line of reasoning around whether STRs were too few in number to constitute a problem worth regulating, or arguing that, on the contrary, STRs were a key driver of the local economy that would be detrimental to the city's future to regulate or eliminate. This point is particularly interesting because Starkville is indeed notable in that it initiated the process of regulating STRs while only having 175 Airbnb listings in the greater Starkville area, while similar cities, like nearby Oxford, Mississippi had somewhere in the range of 800 Airbnb listings at the same time, while larger cities like New Orleans have over 6,000 listings and New York City over 37,000. This is not to say that even Starkville's relatively small total number of STRs did not have the potential to generate negative effects, but to highlight that opponents of the regulations were not fabricating the fact that STRs were not as widespread in Starkville as in other places, even of a similar size.

At the October 22nd public meeting, one of the most prominent STR hosts opposed to the regulations responded to claims by the mayor and aldermen by arguing that “It’s not proliferating... I just don’t want to continue a lie over and over in that you say that it’s proliferating”. And in response to the idea that the continued proliferation of STRs could mean outside corporations who specialize in STR conversions coming in and buying up large amounts of property in Starkville, one prominent realtor who opposed the regulations said at the December 3rd Board of Aldermen meeting that “I wish I knew who all these big corporations were who are supposedly coming in and buying up properties. I don’t have any of them”.⁵

But at the very same time as the opponents of regulation were arguing that STRs weren’t even a big enough problem to consider regulating them, they were also making the argument that STRs represented a major boon to the local economy and would continue to grow as long as the city didn’t unnecessarily regulate them.⁶ Some noted that without the tourists attracted by STRs, local businesses would be unable to stay afloat, and potential workers would be less attracted to live in a city that restricted things like Airbnb.⁷ One commenter at the October 22nd public meeting stated plainly – albeit in direct opposition to the aforementioned idea that STRs were not growing in the city – that “more and more people are trying to get Airbnbs in this town”, while another comment at the same meeting argued that “These Airbnbs are coming. They’re not going to go away, and I think it’s going to drive the economy of Starkville, bring in a lot of money that will help us develop the town into an even more attractive place”. Proponents of STRs argued that the regulations would ruin the market for second homes in Starkville, which was dependent on the continued potential for use as STRs. One local realtor noted that “as a realtor, 99 percent of my clients that I sold to are buying second homes here, and the first question they ask me is ‘Can they rent it out?’ And I will tell you, if you can’t rent it out, Airbnb, Vrbo, they’re not buying it”.

Opponents of the regulations did not seem to recognize the contradiction between these two major discourses mobilized in service of opposing the regulations. If Airbnb isn’t a big enough deal to warrant regulation, how is it also driving the local economy? How is the entire local housing market going to collapse if this supposedly small and insignificant aspect of the economy is regulated?

Contention #3: Extralocal Comparison versus Extralocal Residence

As mentioned previously in this paper, one of the key spatial dynamics of contentious politics is the extension of these spatialities beyond the boundaries of a given territorial unit (cf. Leitner, Sheppard and Sziarto 2008; Nicholls

2009). This is no less true in the Starkville case, where the relationship between Starkville and places beyond its borders represented a key contradiction in how space was conceptualized and mobilized in the course of the conflict.

In response to the initial complaints from STR hosts unhappy with the proposed regulations, Mayor Lynn Spruill and Alderman Hamp Beatty looked beyond Starkville's borders as a way of justifying their belief in the necessity of regulating short-term rentals. At the initial public meeting on October 3rd, both Mayor Spruill and Alderman Beatty referenced the importance of looking at what other cities were doing in order to generate regulations that were based on best practices. At that meeting, Alderman Beatty commented that "I had looked at and studied some other cities... You know I'd talked with some people but also looked at some other places... Auburn, Alabama is going through this right now, dealing with the same thing... In Tampa, Florida, you cannot rent out a property that you buy that is not your primary residence. That's a requirement in Tampa, Florida. That's a requirement in a lot of cities".

Alderman Beatty continued this general line of thinking over the course of the various public meetings and statements he made throughout the Fall of 2019, regularly appealing to these and other cities to bolster his position. While intended as a way of mobilizing this kind of relational comparison for the purposes of depoliticizing and quelling dissent among those opposed to the STR regulations (Clarke 2012; Kennedy 2016), Beatty's appeal to extra-local best practices largely backfired. Instead of acknowledging that if other cities around the country were pursuing STR regulations then maybe Starkville should consider the same, regulation opponents instead seized on this as an example of Beatty being out of step with the community.

One commenter at the October 3rd meeting said that "It's great to see what other people have done. But I think we really need to listen to the voices of people in our own communities and our own neighborhoods". In response, various members of the Starkville STR Hosts Facebook group commented on the livestreamed video posted to the page saying things like "We don't need to act like everyone else. We are Starkville, we need to pave the way... please look in your own backyard", and "We are not Auburn.. what's good for auburn is not a good fit for us! Should we as my daddy used to say "jump off bridges because our friends do!" This is a terrible idea!". Or, as another citizen said at the meeting, "listen to what the people of Starkville are saying, not what the people of Auburn, Alabama are saying". At the October 22nd meeting, upon Beatty's mention of Tampa, Florida, the group of regulation opponents who were seated together instantly shouted in unison that "We're not Tampa, Florida!". When Alderman Beatty reiterated that "There's cities that have done this before", another citizen in

the audience again exclaimed “We’re not a city!”. By the time the issue came to a head at the December 3rd Board of Alderman meeting, Alderman Perkins made known his belief that “we need to do things without trying to base ourselves on another jurisdiction”.

While certainly effective in resetting the terms of the conversation to explicitly exclude consideration of other cities that had passed STR regulations, this rhetorical maneuver by regulation opponents was especially ironic given that many of the hosts fighting the regulations didn’t actually live in Starkville, themselves. Most notable of these is David Buchanan, who served a kind of overly-boisterous and confrontational spokesperson for the opposition, who lived primarily in the suburbs of Jackson, Mississippi while commuting to Starkville on a regular basis to run a series of businesses, including apartments he rented out on Airbnb. But this contradiction is not limited to Buchanan, or even the several other members of the opposition who drove in from their out-of-town primary residences to speak in opposition to the regulations. Even further, of the 123 Airbnb listings in the Starkville area with a listed host location, 56 had a host location listed outside of Starkville. That is to say, while the opposition to Starkville’s proposed regulations was undoubtedly grassroots, it would be a mistake to characterize it as being fundamentally ‘local’ in origin; as the ownership dynamics of Starkville’s STRs are fundamentally extra-local in just the same way as the kind of relational comparisons made by Alderman Beatty and Mayor Spruill were.

This particular irony came to the fore only once during the course of the fight over the regulations, when a Mississippi State University English professor spoke in favor of the regulations at the October 22nd meeting, when she said:

You might just say you’re just making investments and how dare the city interfere with that...Well, my family have made an investment as well, a pretty sizable one, not just in money, but of our family, to live in our neighborhood that we want to be a certain way, that we thought we were moving into...and now that neighborhood and community is being undermined by the financial interests of a few people who don’t even live here. Their kids are not going to be trick or treating there. Meanwhile, they drive up the prices of otherwise affordable homes pricing out young families and people who don’t have the money to buy second or third properties.

In the moments immediately after, David Buchanan began shouting and approaching the small group of regulation supporters in the crowd in an aggressive and confrontational manner, leading to significant tension within the room and rebukes even from his fellow regulation opponents. But this

moment was escalated by another one of the regulations' supporters interjecting to Buchanan and the other STR hosts that "you don't even live here!". And while some – indeed, many – of the opponents of the regulations *were* long-term Starkville residents, the fact that those who stood most to benefit from the lack of regulations on STRs were *not* residents was never capitalized on by those seeking to promote the regulations, but remained a fundamental contradiction in relation to the broader discourses around the STR regulation fight.

Contention #4: Short-Term Rentals versus Long-Term Rentals

On the contrary, opponents of the regulations were much more adept at creating – and even fracturing – coalitions that could unite around common cause and framings of the problem. The most notable example of this throughout the process was their mobilization of a discourse of unfairness in relation to the way STRs were being treated as compared with more conventional long-term rental properties.

Throughout the latter days of the debate over the proposed regulations, opponents called attention to the idea that if it was so necessary to regulate STRs to improve quality of life in Starkville's traditional residential neighborhoods, why was it not also necessary to regulate conventional long-term rentals that were dominated by students, many of whom were equally, if not more disrespectful of neighbors? Pointing to rowdy off-campus parties held by fraternities and sororities, cars and trucks parked in front lawns due to overcrowding and countless other inconveniences not unlike those described by early critics of STRs, the opponents of the regulations were able to stymie the regulations through a classic case of asking the question, "but what about?"

Of course, it should not go without mention that the repeated claims that long-term rentals should be regulated as well were almost entirely disingenuous, since many of the opponents were either long-term landlords themselves or otherwise involved in the real estate industry and/or ideologically opposed to any government intrusion on their private property rights, as will be discussed in the following section. One comment on the opposition's Facebook group attempted to strengthen the rationale by saying that "Tying to LTRs should be a good thing since the city isn't going to limit those (# of them or how many any person/entity can own) and you'll have a much larger group of interested parties that'll be engaged in the regulatory process", with another commenter going even further, saying that "There will be 4 buildings full of landlords if Long Term is addressed. We may have to meet at Mississippi State Davis Wade Stadium", referring to the football stadium which seats some 60,000 fans. That is, opponents of the STR

regulations were fully aware of, and took advantage of, the fact that while local property owners can act as a unified bloc like a classic urban growth machine, fractures in this powerful coalition could also work to stave off any further action by the local state.

The effectiveness of the focus on long-term rentals was due in no small part to the fact that Starkville Mayor Lynn Spruill represents one of the largest residential landlords in the city. By articulating Spruill's support for STR regulations as a double standard that would benefit her personally, the regulations' opponents were able to frame the debate as one that was fundamentally about fairness. In one thread on the opposition's Facebook group, some debated the strategy, with one remarking that "The mayor owns too many long-term rentals to push this any further", and another responding "...and that's a good thing. The longer we keep them linked, the longer it'll take to get them written and passed!" In a later comment, the second commenter remarked further that "As long as we can keep the message consistent that regs for LTRs and STRs must be linked together (for fairness, equity, consistency), then our future will be relatively secure."

It was, however, only a small discursive leap for opponents of the STR regulations from framing the question of *not* regulating long-term rentals from one of fairness to one of discrimination (albeit in a distorted view of the term). One prominent white realtor made her final plea at the December 3rd meeting based on these talking points, saying that:

I would like to ask that this section of the unified development code that describes regulation of short-term rentals be removed, deleted. This is based on that it is discriminatory. Discriminatory because it does not regulate long term rentals and it singularly targets only a small section of the rental market. It violates federal fair housing law. It violates 4th Amendment rights, and it targets a small segment of the population. If we're going to have regulations, if we're going to have a \$20 business fee, then everybody that's got rental property needs to be treated the same. I know we don't want to discuss long term rental, but it's there, it's the elephant in the room, so until we make a regulation of all rental property, I don't think we should select a few landlords to discriminate against.

Of course, such an argument ignores the fact that there is nothing whatsoever about regulating short-term rentals that violates the Fair Housing Act of 1968 or the 4th Amendment, and that landlords are not a protected class that can be discriminated against in any way, shape or form. But such comments were echoed by Alderman Perkins in his comments supporting his vote against the regulations, saying that "If we are so attuned to addressing the rental issue, let's put before this board, if it desires, a package that speaks

to the entire rental market in the city of Starkville. Now, this is a matter of fairness. This is a matter of equity, in my opinion. I do not think that the short-term rental market should be singled out.”

So while this discourse of fairness and discrimination was already being put into circulation by the regulation’s opponents, it was the surprise appearance of the local head of the Oktibbeha County NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) at the December 3rd Board of Alderman meeting to speak in opposition to the regulations that helped to put the final nail in the coffin of the regulations. While very few, if any, of the specific points raised spoke to any particular concern of Starkville’s Black community with respect to STRs, the local chapter head stated plainly, “this issue is discriminatory”, adopting the precise language of the regulation’s opponents. But by making the leap from a generic form of unfairness to racially-motivated discrimination – especially in a place with such deep-rooted and publicly-displayed racism as Mississippi – a new weight was thrown behind those in opposition to the regulations. Though the local NAACP head was forthcoming about the fact that her appearance in opposition to the regulations was due to her “duty to uphold the partnership between our national NAACP and...Airbnb to promote travel, offer new economic opportunities to communities of color, and to fight discrimination on all levels”, as well as the fact that as part of this partnership,⁸ “Airbnb have agreed to give us a percentage of what they make yearly, and donate it to the NAACP on the national level”, her comments belied the fact that promoting a deregulatory stance on STRs ignores a plethora of evidence pointing to a much more complex picture with respect to the potential of STRs to encourage Black wealth-building and entrepreneurship.⁹

Nonetheless, it was the combined effect of this shift towards fracturing local real estate interests under the guise of fairness and non-discrimination that the proposed regulations were voted down by the Board of Alderman in a vote of 5–2, with even one otherwise more liberal alderman surprising others by joining the opposition to the STR regulations. In one of the last posts on the Facebook group used for organizing the opposition, David Buchanan wrote that, “I won’t take credit for it, but I believe OUR success to this point was that it continued to be linked with LTRs which continue to be a much bigger issue for Starkville to deal with.”

Contention #5: The Primacy of Property Rights

Though focusing on the unfairness of regulating STRs while leaving other rental properties unregulated represented the last, best argument for the regulations’ opponents, this was not the crux of the fight that unfolded over the later months of 2019. Ultimately, the key dynamic driving the contention

over STR regulations in Starkville was the primacy of private property rights. Though various discourses circulated over the course of these months to justify the opposition to the regulations – about the class character of STR guests, the continued growth (or lack thereof) of STRs in the city, their importance in driving the local economy, the need for locally-grounded solutions and the need for equity between short-term rental and long-term rental regulations – these largely proved to be immaterial to the ultimate outcome of the fight over STR regulations. It was instead the fundamental belief among opponents that *any* regulation whatsoever was an affront to their rights to dispose of and capitalize on their private property however they wished, without interference from the government, and that any such attempts to infringe on those rights was worth fighting to the end.

From the very first public meeting held to discuss the proposed regulations, opposition was repeatedly stated to *any* regulations in general, rather than to the particular elements of Alderman Beatty's proposal. One resident standing against the back wall of the room at the initial October 3rd meeting repeatedly interjected while Mayor Spruill or Alderman Beatty were speaking, shouting comments about "it's the city telling you how to live!" and "they never saw a dollar they didn't like!". Other STR hosts and Starkville residents made less bombastic, but no less clear statements of their general opposition to government regulation, making statements like "I'm not so excited about the government getting more involved in my personal property", and one even saying that "I don't have any [short term rentals], but I don't want somebody telling me what I can do with my property". One prominent realtor in town who was heavily involved in the resistance to the regulations argued at the December 3rd meeting that "This isn't anything I consider the need for regulation on because we're a university town, you know? Do we want to grow? Do we want to accommodate the parents of students and the students that are here? Or do we want to regulate them to death? And I am personally not for any more regulation than we already have".

But at the final Board of Aldermen meeting on December 3rd, it was Alderman Roy Perkins, a conservative Black Democrat known for his cantankerous nature and opposition to nearly all proposals put forward to the board, who said:

...the language here is another burdensome restriction, or imposition rather, by the governing body. It's just another regulation. Already, we have too much governmental regulation. We have too much governmental interference. The government is trying to dictate everything about the lives of the people here in the city of Starkville.

At the same meeting, Alderman Ben Carver, the most traditionally conservative member of the Board of Aldermen similarly stated that "[he] was

totally against any type of short-term rental regulation on the books whatsoever". It was this shared disposition that led to the asymmetries throughout the process of negotiating the regulations, wherein the proponents and progenitors of the regulations were quick to adapt and adjust the proposal in order to address the concerns of opponents, who in turn continued to hold a hard line in opposition to any concessions. Indeed, by the time the proposed regulations were voted down by the Board of Alderman on December 3rd, the draft regulations were on their 22nd different iteration, and substantially watered down from their initial form. Even the aspect of the regulations seen to be most important to their initiator – Alderman Beatty remarked at the October 3rd public meeting that the only element he was 'inflexible' on was the owner occupancy requirement – ended up being something that *was* compromised on, as mentioned previously. That is to say, even as a handful of city officials pushed strongly for these regulations, they were inordinately flexible in what *specifically* the regulations included in order to achieve some level of consensus from those who would be most directly affected.

In response, however, opponents of the regulations were unyielding. Even in the leadup to the initial public meeting on October 3rd, there was disagreement on the opposition's Facebook page, with some arguing that the most up-to-date alternative plan "had everything we 'needed' and basically nothing we didn't", and therefore should be considered acceptable. Others jumped in quickly to say that anything short of stopping the regulations altogether would be a loss, questioning "Why do you want to go back to anything now? Why not try to defeat this outright? I am not ready to settle for anything at this point", with others chiming in to say, "Please do not even hint at conceding" and "No concessions". So despite these particular points of contention over specific elements of the proposed STR regulations like the licensing fee, the number of nights units would be allowed to be occupied, etc., arguably the most significant point of pushback amongst the coalition of those opposed to the regulations was their belief that such activities shouldn't be regulated by the government *at all*.

While the prominence of such an anti-'big government' regulation stance is perhaps unsurprising for a small town in rural Mississippi, this particular dynamic is important insofar as it represents a relatively unique aspect of how this fight played out in this geographic context vis-à-vis fights over STR regulations in bigger, more liberal, coastal cities in the US. In cities like San Francisco and New York City, a generalized anti-regulation, pro-property rights stance is a political non-starter for many more liberal residents who might otherwise be supportive of STRs.¹⁰ Instead, in these places, STR platforms have sought to construct 'astroturf' groups of hosts to offer narratives about the role of these platforms in helping struggling homeowners or renters

survive in the face of an affordability crisis, or that STRs provide a way to build community and demonstrate fundamental values of neighborliness.

Another unique element of this steadfast opposition to any and all regulations in Starkville is that it flies in the face of what event STR platforms like Airbnb have argued for when they have gotten directly involved in fighting new regulations. In these cases, they rarely take an all-or-nothing approach because of their awareness of how politically untenable this might be, and instead advocate for “sensible regulations” to provide the appearance of cooperation, even when the substantive desire to flout regulations remains the same (Medvedeva 2019). This acquiescence to some regulation therefore provides a legitimating function for STR platforms and hosts, opening up space for continued operation with less direct confrontation or criticism from local governments or activists. But even in a generally more liberal-leaning college town like Starkville situated in the conservative deep South, these trappings were entirely absent from the contention around regulating STRs, as the episode was ultimately about the formation of a new group fighting in favor of the status quo in order to preserve perceived rights to property free of any social regulations or obligations.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this paper has shown how the particular circumstances of (extra-) local opposition to short-term rental regulation played out in Starkville, Mississippi, a small southern college town, the likes of which has not previously been included in the growing literature about the geographies and politics of short-term rentals. From the lack of attention to housing affordability as a rationale for instituting such regulations and subsequent lack of political mobilization in support of regulation to the more generalized anti-government and anti-regulation sentiment pervading the opposition to the regulations, Starkville’s experience with considering STR regulations stands in contrast to much of what has already been outlined in both the scholarly literature and journalistic accounts, which have been based on larger cities with more pre-existing regulations and political grounds on which to contest new forms of housing injustice. While elements of the Starkville case are undoubtedly unique to the particular place and time of the debate documented in this paper, the Starkville case also has the potential to inform our broader understandings of both regulating short-term rentals and researching the social dimensions and impacts of these emerging forms of housing.

Though different cultural, political and economic circumstances in different places means that everywhere will have a different set of dynamics that need to be grappled with, the five competing sets of spatial frames and claims outlined above are general enough to have potential applicability to

other cases, even as their combination in Starkville proved relatively unique. The Starkville case is generally suggestive of the fact that both neighborhood character and zoning-based regulations are less effective in galvanizing a coalition than are housing affordability arguments that have been used elsewhere. Similarly, Starkville's experience points towards the need for regulations to be designed with greater intentionality, rather than thrown together relatively haphazardly and negotiated in public where the changes can be weaponized as examples of a lack of knowledge or preparation on the part of those promoting the regulations. It also points towards the necessity of organized civil society or activist organizations, the absence of which in Starkville made marshaling support for the regulations quite difficult, and allowed that vacuum of citizen engagement on the issue to be filled almost entirely by the STR hosts who were able to more quickly organize themselves based on shared financial interest. Ultimately, however, it points towards the need for such regulations to be attentive to the fact that fights over STRs are never about STRs alone; there exists significant potential for oppositional political coalitions to be built on broader bases than just the STR issue – such as the one developed in Starkville around the primacy of private property rights – and any attempt at promoting such regulations must grapple with these possible coalition politics.

The example of Starkville's fight over STR regulations also helps suggest future directions for the broader social scientific research agenda on STRs. On the one hand, the unique combination of elements introduced as part of Starkville's STR regulations ought to be studied in more depth in the places that have implemented different strategies in order to understand whether certain regulatory approaches can even achieve the intended results. For instance, having a zoning-based strategy that would limit STRs in single-family neighborhoods is likely only to push more STRs into other types of mixed-use neighborhoods which may already be experiencing greater price pressure for a variety of reasons. At the same time, this study calls attention to the need for a broader range of case studies of how STR regulations have been proposed, fought over and implemented in different types of cities across the United States and elsewhere. While Starkville represents a unique case relative to both the scholarly and journalistic work that does exist along these lines insofar as it is a small college town in the American South – and a place that ultimately failed to implement such regulations – the variety of experiences can be suggestive of which strategies have been successful and which have not, and how certain strategies may have particularly salience in different geographic contexts.

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Notes

1. Undoubtedly, this geographic targeting is driven in part by the lack of accessible data on STRs, especially industry-leader Airbnb, thanks to the company's refusal to publicly share data. Even with the emergence of activist-driven resources like the website InsideAirbnb that publish free data on STRs in a select number of cities, when combined with the profit motives of third-party data brokers like Airdna, it means that for many academics, only those cities that InsideAirbnb has collected and released data for are really available for study.
2. While I use the term 'sharing economy' here because of its pervasiveness and common usage in the larger discourse around these issues, I place the term in scare quotes because it is something of a misnomer, as there is rarely any 'sharing' in the sense that was originally intended. Instead, it might be more accurate to identify these companies as progenitors of what Srnicek (2017) and others have called 'platform capitalism'.
3. It should be noted, however, that this is *not* because housing affordability is not a concern in Starkville. Indeed, as the other aspects of the larger research project that this paper is a part of demonstrate, the significantly more extensive growth of gameday homes in Starkville – which, like STRs, are used primarily as investment vehicles for non-resident owners who otherwise leave the vacant the vast majority of the time – has had deleterious effects on housing prices, *especially* in central Starkville neighborhoods (cf. Shelton 2021).
4. Again, it is worth noting that there was no organized support for the regulations, *per se*. While opponents of the regulations used their Facebook group to coordinate a response to Alderman Beatty's proposal, there was no deliberate attempt to promote or advocate for the regulations in Starkville. While there was certainly more support for the proposal than was evident at the various public meetings, the vocal support for STR regulations was limited to this small group of

professors, who were all neighbors and friends of the original complainant about STRs that led to the regulations' introduction in the first place.

5. Based on the analysis of the reconstructed listing database for Starkville Airbnbs, three units in Starkville are owned by national STR firms Engage and Gameday Housing, which had a total of 468 and 206 different listings at the time data was collected in January 2020. So while the total numbers remain small, it suggests that non-local STR speculators were already beginning to appear in Starkville even without the knowledge of those in the real estate industry who purported to have complete knowledge of such processes.
6. These benefits were only ever quantified in the local news article announcing the STR regulations, which included data from an Airbnb press release saying that "property owners registered with the site hosted more than 1,700 guests in the city of Starkville during MSU's 2018 football season, generating nearly \$300,000 in supplemental income for owners" (Vrbin 2019).
7. Opponents of the regulations did not consider, however, the impact that have affordable home prices might have on local businesses and the attraction of new residents who could help support local businesses year-round.
8. Airbnb's partnership with the NAACP is largely the result of the company's desire to improve its public image after a series of newsworthy incidents of racial discrimination (cf. Parkinson 2016), as well as scholarly research finding racial and ethnic discrimination on the platform in violation of the Fair Housing Act (Edelman et al 2017). But, as Medvedeva (2021) shows through an examination of these various anti-discrimination campaigns, Airbnb seeks to individualize these instances of discrimination and injustice while avoiding any structural explanations of or solutions to these problems, as these would be more directly incriminating of Airbnb's role in perpetuating contemporary racial capitalism.
9. Aside from the extensive evidence that STRs are driving gentrification and therefore contribute to overall increases in the cost of living in formerly Black neighborhoods, most, if not all, cities have a near complete lack of STR listings in predominantly poor and Black neighborhoods (Wegmann and Jiao 2017). Even when STRs *are* located in Black neighborhoods, they tend to be owned by white hosts (Cox 2017, 2018), or use language in the listing that reinforces racist, colonial tropes that dehumanize and objectify Black people and places (Törnberg and Chiappini 2020). That is, the benefits of STRs are highly unlikely to accrue to Black hosts, and even less likely to accrue to Black neighborhoods and businesses.
10. While these wholesale anti-regulation elements exist even in the most liberal locales, the overall political climate in such places has meant that these voices are not the most prominent during fights over STR regulations.

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