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Publication Date

2011-07-01

Peer reviewed

The Ambiguities of Political Opportunity

Political claims making of Russian-Jewish Immigrants in New York City

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Received: date / Accepted: date

Abstract How, and as what are immigrant minorities incorporated into the political process? A set of prominent approaches focus on the political opportunity structure immigrants encounter. Though promising in many aspects, political opportunity approaches fail to consider the internal heterogeneity of both immigrant populations and opportunity structures. This is partly a result of taking ethnic groups rather than political entrepreneurs as the unit of analysis and of not disaggregating the political context properly. This paper shows how Russian-Jewish immigrant political entrepreneurs in New York City used very different strategies of ethnic mobilization, each emphasizing a different ethnic cleavage: one was making claims in the name of Russians, the other downplaying the Russianness and highlighting the Jewish identity dimension. Both strategies had good chances at success thus illustrating that political opportunity structures may encourage different claims making strategies at the same time. Ethno-political entrepreneurs navigate complex and differentiated political landscapes that are ex-ante only partially transparent.

Keywords Political opportunity structure · immigrants · political incorporation

Support was provided by the UCLA Graduate Division, a pre-doctoral advanced quantitative methodology training grant (#R305B080016) awarded to UCLA by the Institute of Education Sciences of the US Department of Education, and the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius. The views expressed in this paper do not reflect the views of the funding agencies or grantees.

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1 Introduction

Originating in the social movement literature, a set of approaches labeled “political process theory” or theory of “political opportunity structure” (e.g. McAdam, 1982; McAdam et al, 2001; Tarrow, 1994, 1996) have recently been applied to analyze how immigrants and native minorities mobilize. In this research tradition, macro level variables such as citizenship policies, discursive traditions and political institutions determine which identities will become politically salient and how minorities will mobilize politically. The emergence of immigrant’s ethnic identities is seen as a consequence of how political entrepreneurs make political claims on their behalf. As Paul Statham put it: “The collective identities which minority groups use in their claims making are part of a process of ‘self’ and ‘other’ categorization... identities are constructed by the group as a self-definition of its relationship to the wider political community and other ethnic groups” (Statham, 1999, 9).

Thus the political opportunity structure (POS) approach addresses a question that often remained unanswered by research on minority political participation: How is it that minorities come to participate in politics under the umbrella of specific political identities and not others? For example, why do migrants in the UK present themselves as racial minorities while in Germany they make claims as “foreigners” (Koopmans et al, 2005)? Or why do Afro-Caribbean immigrants eschew a racial identity when struggling for political influence in New York City (Rogers, 2006)?

This lacuna emerged because traditional assimilation theory assumed that immigrant incorporation would go hand in hand with the gradual disappearing of cultural socio-economic and linguistic differences between minorities and the national mainstream. At the end of this process, immigrants and their children would cease to maintain separate ethnic identities. In contrast, political science research on the political incorporation of immigrants has argued that such incorporation usually assumes the form of ethnic politics which relies on the maintenance, rather than the disappearance of salient identities.

Both approaches take ethnic differences as pre-political and given: the literature that has empirically engaged political incorporation “has been almost exclusively aimed at narrowly conceived questions about partisanship acquisition, political participation, and political coalition formation” (Lee et al, 2006, 7) and has thus overlooked the multiple cleavages along which immigrant minorities *could* have mobilized. Most variants of assimilation theory also take the ethnic differentiation of migrants as given (for examples see the critique in Wimmer, 2009). Although new variants of assimilation theory acknowledge that ethnic differentiations are not something that is only “imported” with the immigrants but “that can be created in response to conditions and out of cultural materials in the host society” (Alba and Nee, 1997, 833), they provide little leverage how this creation of ethnic difference would occur, what shape it would take, and what the relevant variables are.

The POS approach has been used to answer exactly these questions. An impressive array of studies, both historical and comparative, link variation

in context to modes of political identity formation of minorities: Comparing across several European countries (Koopmans et al, 2005), across differently categorized immigrant populations within the same country (Statham, 1999) or across cities (Koopmans, 2004). Paschel (2011) explains the particular form and the timing of Afro-Columbian mobilization by pointing at shifting global and national opportunity structures. Other recent examples include studies on how American Muslims have employed the civil rights framework to respond to post 9/11 vilification (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 2008, 2009) and how Russian-Jewish immigrants make identity choices in Israel and New York City (Laitin, 2004).

While all these analyses convincingly demonstrate that there is a fit between political context and the eventually established modes of political claims making, the process by which this association is brought about and the decision making of actors involved often remain under-specified. The mobilizing actions of minorities almost “naturally” fit into the opportunity structure context. But, as Kasinitz (1992) points out: “...political identities do not spring forth automatically simply because the conditions for their emergence exist....but...must be introduced into public discourse by specific people with specific interests” (p.9). This lack of attention to the strategic choices of actors has been criticized even by social movement theorists themselves (e.g. Morris, 2000; Boussetta, 2000; McAdam et al, 2001)

As a consequence of this emphasis on structural factors on the one hand and “movements” on the other, these approaches don’t pay enough attention to the heterogeneity of the political environment and the variety of strategies that are pursued often simultaneously. However, not taking into account non-dominant and ultimately unsuccessful strategies, makes it hard to disentangle the process by which opportunity structures spark political action. Without seriously considering alternatives, political opportunities are then often conceptualized post-hoc to match successful strategies (see also critique in Meyer, 2004, 135).

To address this problem we need to add a true individual level component to the POS approach. That means to disaggregate and conceptualize political opportunity structures such that they do not exist for *groups* of minorities or migrants, but are faced by specific political entrepreneurs. In the context of ethno-political mobilization, this implies that for these entrepreneurs, the level of cohesion, the specific divisions within a putative “community” and particular tendencies for identification become part of an opportunity structure which in turn presents a number of tradeoffs.

However, and this is the central argument of this paper, from the point of view of a political entrepreneur it is ex-ante not necessarily clear which strategy of making political claims carries the highest chances for success. Which of a (hierarchically nested) set of possible cleavages should be used to orient an ethno-political mobilization effort? Should an aspiring politician emphasize ethnic distinctiveness versus a racial categorization as the case of Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the US, or highlight religious affiliation (Algerians in France or Irish in the US)? Even for those studying ethnicity, defining *ex-ante*

which part of a cultural repertoire becomes defining as these newcomers assert themselves politically is often perplexing. While eventually a “significant proportion ... consolidates around a single dimension of difference, conditioning their social and political behavior”, at the outset it is not clear which of the available dimensions will “win” in the end (Laitin, 2004, 5). Political opportunities have to be interpreted by concrete political actors before it can be a meaningful cause for specific types of political action. And as Kurzman (1996) has shown in the example of 1970s Iran, what appear to be “objective” opportunity structures do not always match the perceptions of political actors on the ground.

Researchers on immigrant entrepreneurship have made a parallel point. Summarizing a new generation of research in the field, Kloosterman and Rath (2001) argue that for potential entrepreneurs business opportunities are not structured in a way that is transparent at the outset. The process by which entrepreneurs develop business strategies that fit the existing opportunities is much more problematic than the neo-classic economic model suggests, and should not be neglected in research (p.190). I argue that the same holds true in minority politics. The fit between the way political opportunities are structured, and the kinds of claims minorities make and the political identities they adopt does not come about automatically, and more importantly, it is ex-ante not clear what the opportunity structure actually is and thus which strategy will work best.

Current research tends to ex-post highlight those aspects of the opportunity structure that fit the outcome and neglect those aspects that point in different directions. However as I show in my case analysis, a mix of national- and local-level factors, the specific organizational landscape, and timing can create opportunity structures that are quite ambiguous. The “right” strategy is usually not self revealing. Even if a political entrepreneur pursues what turns out to be the successful way of political claims making, the path is usually still full of disappointments, and political environments are generally not very generous in giving informative feedback and pointing the way.

I argue that from the viewpoint of political actors who work within opportunity structures, the context is not a coherent whole but has a multitude of dimensions. The majority of POS research emphasizes state level policies and institutional arrangements and how they shape the political identity formation of minorities. But for any individual ethno-political entrepreneur the local organizational landscape as well as the mobilization and tendencies for identification of what she sees as the target audience are important factors as well. As Barth (1994) argues, to get a realistic picture of ethnic mobilization in addition to macro variables we also need to consider the meso- and micro level dynamics within the population to be mobilized. Following this tack, for the purpose of my analysis I will disaggregate the opportunity structure in three dimensions: the legal and discursive context at the national and local level, the organizational context and finally the degree of mobilization and the cleavages in the putative community. As I show, the incentives that each of these dimensions provide do not always align, but can be contradictory and

in their combination present a heterogeneous situation to an ethno-political entrepreneur.

2 Setting and Method

This article is based on a detailed analysis of the political context that ethno-political entrepreneurs with a Russian-Jewish background in New York City faced in the late 1990s and early 2000s and the incentives for claims making strategies it presented. After parsing the political context I show how three political entrepreneurs differently interpreted this heterogeneous situation. The episode I cover is the time when Russian-Jewish immigrants first developed a political profile in the city and thus represents the timeframe in which a (consequential) political identity was first established. My focus is on a particularly tense episode which includes the City Council elections in 2001 and the 2002/2003 reapportionment of the electoral districts for the New York City Council. Finally I analyze the 2006 elections to the New York State Assembly in which two candidates with a Russian-Jewish background ran against each other in the primary election, one of whom was ultimately elected as the first Russian-Jewish immigrant to a state legislature.

I rely on several sources of data: During the redistricting I was employed as an analyst for the New York City Council working on technical matters related to the endeavor. In this function I attended a number of public hearings and meetings involving the redistricting. All public hearings and testimony from the redistricting were transcribed and are part of the public record. In addition I collected and analyzed newspaper and internet-blog coverage. After I had concluded my work for the City Council I also conducted several informal open ended interviews with people involved in local politics. I use surname analysis of voter and statistical techniques such as methods for ecological inference (King, 1997) to analyze voter registration and election data.¹

Summary of the case: From the late 1970's to about 1982 and then again with the onset of Perestroika in 1987 several hundred thousand Soviet Jews emigrated to the US and a large number of them settled in New York City, especially in southern Brooklyn, a neighborhood that became known as "Little Odessa". In the 2000 US Census in New York City about 243,000 people

¹ Surname analysis matches a dataset against a list of typical surnames of an ethnic group to assign individuals to ethnic categories. This method has been extensively used to identify Asian and Hispanic populations (Abrahamse et al, 1994; Lauderdale and Kestenbaum, 2000). The distinctness of Russian surnames allows me to apply this method in my case as well. The ability of surname analysis to reliably detect the ethnicity in question depends on factors such as residential segregation, SES and degree of intermarriage (Fiscella and Fremont, 2006). As I am looking at a relatively concentrated population of mostly first generation immigrants the method is likely to achieve good results in my case. I use the electronic versions of the 2001 and the 2005 voter registration lists of the NYC Board of Elections. I developed a list of typical Russian names to electronically match against the names in the voter registration file.

identified as Russian and another 62,000 as Ukrainian with small number tracing their ancestry to other former Soviet republics. Taken together they comprise about 4% of New York City's inhabitants. Starting in the late 1990's to about 2006 aspiring politicians that had immigrated to New York City from the former Soviet Union raised the political profile of this hitherto politically almost invisible immigrant population. As I will show in the sections that follow, from their point of view the political opportunity structure was quite ambiguous. And indeed two factions emerged that used different strategies and in effect tried to forge different political identities for the Ex-Soviet immigrants in New York City. On the one side political entrepreneurs tried to make claims as *Russians* - a distinct ethno-national linguistically defined minority that deserved representation just like other ethnic minorities in New York City. On the other side, an aspiring politician pursued a strategy de-emphasizing the Russian dimension and tried to build support by drawing on the ethno-religious identification of the émigrés. In discussing the case study I show how contradictions in the opportunity context made different strategies plausible and indeed gave both a reasonable chance at success.

Table 1 summarizes the key election results involving Russian-Jewish candidates in the timeframe of my analysis: the 2001 Elections for the City Council and the 2006 State Assembly elections. The last column gives an estimate of the share of the Russian votes the candidate received.² In the 2001 Elections out of a field of six contenders in the Democratic primary election two Russian candidates managed to unite a large share (almost 70%) of the Russian vote behind them. In the subsequent general election Oleg Gutnik, a candidate emphasizing the linguistic and ethno-national distinctiveness of his constituency, ran on the Republican and Conservative party lines. He was able to get the large majority of the Russian-speaking votes in the district, but nevertheless lost to an Italian-American candidate by a margin that can be considered close by New York City standards. In the following reapportionment of New York's city council districts Gutnik pushed for a district that would have concentrated as many Russian speaking voters as possible. In contrast his compatriot Brook-Krasny who had lost in the primary election stayed neutral and did not see the need for a Russian "majority minority" city council district. Finally, in the 2006 Assembly elections, in a district in southern Brooklyn that includes large parts of the Russian-Jewish enclave, two Ex-Soviet immigrant candidates faced off in the Democratic primary. In this case it was a former Russian-language journalist who while getting the majority of the Russian vote, ultimately lost by less than 150 votes to Brook-Krasny who had de-emphasized Russian identity politics and built coalitions with established Jewish and Democratic political players.

² The share of Russian votes that candidates received are calculated using an ecological inference model as described in (King, 1997) and implemented in (King and Roberts, 2010). For the analysis of the 2001 election results I used the 2001 voter registration file on which I conducted a surname analysis to identify the number Russian registered voters in each precinct. For the 2006 election I conducted the same analysis using the 2005 voter registration file.

Table 1 Summary of key elections during the period of analysis.

Date	Election	Key Candidates	Result	Est. Share of Russian Vote
Sept 2001	City Council Dem. Primary District 47	Alec Brook Krasny	16.2%	51%
		Inna Stavitsky	8.0%	17%
		Domenec Recchia	34.8%	
Nov 2001	... General Election	Oleg Gutnik (REP)	42.5%	83%
		Domenic Recchia (DEM)	51.5%	
Sept 2006	Dem. Primary State Assembly District 46	Alec Brook Krasny	51.2%	14%
		Ari Kagan	48.8%	86%

3 Elements of the opportunity structure

As the summary of results above shows, at least two strategies, each emphasizing a different ethnic cleavage were plausible and had reasonable chances of success. In the following section I will detail how the opportunity structure that these political entrepreneurs were facing could be interpreted in several of ways and thus suggest different strategies.

3.1 Legal and discursive contexts - national and local

As Koopmans et al (2005) show in their landmark study, the national legal and discursive context - “national citizenship regimes and integration models” (p.112) - are a key factor in shaping the political identities and claims making of migrants. For instance in Britain, where policy is decidedly framed in multi-ethnic/multi-racial terms, immigrant groups were much more likely to base claims on anti-discrimination and unequal treatment frames while in France “the absence of a legal and discursive framework of equal opportunity and anti-discrimination [...] gives migrants few opportunities for demands against racial, ethnic or cultural biases in social institutions” (p.141).

But there is also important variation within countries - across differently classified minorities. The opportunity structure is not the same for everyone: groups that “meet the state’s criteria ... of pluralism would find it easier to constitute themselves as independent collective actors, and to assert claims for a further expansion of minority rights” (Statham, 1999, 600). In the United States immigrants from Latin America, Africa and Asia are officially categorized and recognized as minorities, while others like those from Eastern Europe or the Middle East are not. This categorization is institutionalized in powerful legal norms that influence chances for incorporation in many domains including business ownership, education and access to public benefits (Jones-Correa, 2005, 81-82). In the case of political claims making in the United States, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 plays a critical role. If a group of immigrants can claim to be one of the “protected minorities” under the Voting Rights Act, it is granted a set of protections that substantially limit the political establish-

ment's ability to exclude an insurgent minority from political representation. For example, in the 1990s when the Democratic party establishment tried implement city council districts that would have secured victories of their chosen candidates, a group of activists leveraged the protected status of Latinos and successfully petitioned the United States Department of Justice to force a change in the redistricting plan (Jones-Correa, 1998, 184-85).

But while the direction might have been straightforward for Hispanic activists, for the Ex-Soviet ethno-political entrepreneurs this part of the political opportunity structure presented some ambiguities. Although recognition as a minority or ethnic group can have direct political benefits and it is "practically dictated by the logic of the city's political institutions" (Rogers, 2006, 135), Ex-Soviet émigrés don't easily fit the criteria. As immigrants that are categorized as White and that by all accounts were treated quite favorably by the government it is not clear that they fit the criteria for attributing special minority rights in the framework of United States pluralism.

Following its statist bent, the opportunity structure is generally conceived as a national level construct where the key variables are on the national level (Koopmans, 2004). Still there is important local level variation that can contradict influences on the national level.³ For example, large electoral districts that do not trace ethnic enclaves discourage claims making based solely on narrowly defined group-identities. Rather, "ethnically targeted campaigning must be balanced by broader appeals to other constituencies..." (Rogers, 2004, 138). In New York City the local context provides strong incentives for making claims framed in narrow ethnic terms. The relatively small electoral districts closely trace residential enclaves of ethnic groups and thus in the minds of politicians and voters alike ethnic neighborhoods become the politically relevant jurisdictional units. "New York's 'city trenches', to borrow Katznelson's (1981) famous phrase, are its ethnic neighborhoods" (Rogers, 2004, 305). And indeed the city's history provides a long series of successful examples where claims for recognition as an ethnic minority paid off handsomely. Thus for some Russian-Jewish political entrepreneurs, as for any newcomer in New York City politics, a strategy based on making narrowly defined ethno-national appeals may appear to be an attractive choice even if the fit with the national level categories is marginal.

3.2 Organizational resources and fields of competition

Established political interests present another element of the opportunity structure for ethno-political entrepreneurs. Not only do those who have organizational and political resources try to influence whether or not a previously excluded group gains access to representation and power but also on what

³ Other recent work also emphasizes the importance of supra-national institutions and discourses that can significantly influence political opportunities that minorities face (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Tarrow, 2005; Paschel, 2011). However, for the purpose of my analysis this layer does not play significant role.

terms Shefter (1994): “At issue is the identity of the leadership under which the group will gain representation and the character of the ties that will bind it to the political system” (p.231). An aspiring minority politician who does not fit the ideological profile or who is perceived as trying to upset the balance of power will find little reception in the political establishment.

But even if allies in the establishment can be found, making political claims under the umbrella of other established organizations or political identities brings limitations in terms of the agendas that one can pursue or the way political resources can be used. After all, the resources, were won in the name of a larger entity. In contrast a political entrepreneur who eschews established organizations and opts for a strategy of organizing around a distinct identity will have fewer political debts to pay, and will be able to command resources on behalf of a much narrower basis.

However, in the process of making a claim a strategy of de-emphasizing distinction and joining a set of established organizations provides access to resources and know-how that newcomers do not have. Especially in a political setting like New York City that features a complex network of coalitions and an arcane set of legal hurdles, the value of experience and insider knowledge can hardly be overemphasized. In addition, downplaying a distinct identity may offer a broader set of potential voters. Although joining a larger organizational field can give access to more resources, it also means more competition for the individual entrepreneur within that field. For example, in the case of Caribbean immigrants in New York City Kasinitz (1992) has shown that as competition in the field of “regular” African American politics intensified, the “ethnic option”, mobilizing around a Caribbean identity became more attractive for political professionals with roots in the West Indian Islands (p.10).

In the case at hand, New York’s Jewish organizations are an obvious option. After all, Jewish organizations played a key role in the initial settlement of the newcomers: obtaining jobs, language instruction, housing and signing up for government benefits. Just like the Irish immigrants at the turn of the century had been organized by Tammany Hall politicians, the outreach and settlement efforts of Jewish agencies tied many Ex-Soviet émigrés into the network of Jewish institutions, and congregations. But the fit is not unproblematic as I detail in the following section. There are tensions and the Republican leanings of the earlier Ex-Soviet immigrants are suspect to many in the heavily Democratic political establishment of New York City.

3.3 Dynamics and cleavages within the “community”

If, as I argue in the introductory section, political opportunities are faced by individual ethno-political entrepreneurs, then the various cleavages within the population that the entrepreneur seeks to mobilize and represent become part of the opportunity structure. The mobilization of ethnic identities, or the lack thereof, do not of course occur on a tabula-rasa, but are bounded by and rooted in the conditions and tendencies in the putative community to be mobilized.

Transnational ties and political identity: Home country ties are one potential influence for ethno-political identity formation of migrants. For example, immigrants that have strong ties to the homeland will not be easily mobilized under the umbrella of an existing domestic category. Rogers (2006) shows that in the case of Caribbean immigrants in the US, “home country attachments do not just serve as a source of ethnic identification and a cue for ethnic vote choice, they shape how they “make sense of the political world, how they see themselves in it and whether they participate or not” (p. 241). The fact that Caribbean immigrants come from societies that neither have a dichotomous system of racial classification nor a recent history of systematic discrimination, leads them to develop a political outlook that is quite distinct from African Americans even though in the United States both groups are categorized as Black and share experiences of discrimination.

Not surprisingly, for the Ex-Soviet émigrés, home country ties do not provide a positive form of political orientation. Return to the home country, even hypothetically, is not something that Soviet immigrants see for themselves. The few return migrants that do exist become a sensation but are portrayed as abnormal (Markowitz, 1993; Orleck, 1999). Considering the migration history, it is quite understandable that there is not much longing for involvement in politics back home. The cohort of immigrants that came in the 70’s and early 80’s see themselves as refugees from the evil empire. But even the cohort that emigrated in the late 1980’s and 1990’s after Glasnost and Perestroika are very critical of anyone with real or perceived ties to Russian politics. It is telling that in a recent election two candidates accused each other of being too close to the Soviet government and its secret service apparatus.⁴

Numbers and mobilization: A minority population that is numerically small or not very interested in politics will not provide an attractive target for mobilization around a narrowly defined ethnicity. On the other hand, leveraging a cleavage that is too large will not provide a distinct constituency. Posner (2005) provides a detailed analysis of ethnic politics in Africa showing how considerations about the size of the minimum winning coalition drive the mobilization strategies of ethno-political entrepreneurs. Similarly, comparing the ethnic-politics trajectory of Ex-Soviet immigrants in the US and in Israel, Laitin (2004) argues that simple political accounting, ‘Counting comrades’ can explain why in Israel the émigrés organized around a Russian identity while in the US they embraced their Jewishness. In New York, according to Laitin, only conjoined with a larger group are Russian-Jewish immigrants a large enough group to capture a piece of political power. In Israel on the other hand a Jewish identity would not provide any distinctiveness that can be leveraged into political capital (Laitin, 2004, 6). However, as my examples will show, this conjoining was by no means such a foregone conclusion as Laitin makes it out to be.

⁴ Boris Fishman. “Glasnost Grows In Brooklyn” in *The New Republic*. Friday, October 6 2006

For one, Ex-Soviet immigrants are, compared to other immigrant groups, engaged in electoral politics at a high rate - providing a large number of potential voters. According to my analysis of voter registration and turnout data, they are about as likely to be registered as the population in south Brooklyn on average. In southern Brooklyn about 43% of the overall population is registered to vote, while among Soviet immigrants it is 41%. In the western part of south Brooklyn Russian-Jewish voter registration is with 45% of the population registered to vote even a bit higher. When we look at voting turnout they also participate at high rates. In the 2001 elections for City Council and the mayoral election overall, 39% of the registered voters in south Brooklyn voted according to the voter registration rolls; among the Russian-surname voters I identify the number is almost 47%.

Political divisions and ethnic unity: Even a mobilized population will not provide a good base for mobilizing around a narrow distinction if it is politically divided.⁵ And in terms of political outlook the Ex-Soviet émigrés are indeed quite heterogeneous: One of the clearest dividing lines is the wave of immigration. Each wave brought a distinct set of political experiences to the United States. In contrast to their predecessors from the 70s, the post Glasnost migrants did not come from a communist regime that systematically suppressed them, but from a relatively more liberal state. They do share experiences of anti-semitism but not the government-sanctioned, systematic version. Also, the home country they left was no longer governed by an authoritarian communist regime, but was a society that has suffered chaos and disintegration during the transition to a free market economy. These differences are also reflected in their politics in the US: The 1970s generation of Ex-Soviet émigrés greatly sympathize with Ronald Reagan for his aggressive position against communism and the Soviet Union (Markowitz, 1993, 164-176). In contrast the post Glasnost immigrants have aligned more with the Democratic party (Orleck, 1987).

My analysis of party preferences among registration cohorts confirms this interpretation. Table 2 breaks out the share of registered Russians in southern Brooklyn for each of the major registration categories by time periods of registration. These cohorts approximate the immigrant cohorts for Soviet immigrants. Those who registered before 1980 are overwhelmingly Democrat. If we assume that it takes about 5 years from immigration to citizenship then those who registered before 1980 mostly predate the immigrants that came in the mid to late 1970s and are either immigrants who came in the early 20th century or their children. Those who came in the late 70s to early 80s would have been eligible for registration starting somewhere in the early to mid 1980s and in fact we do see a spike in the share who registered as Republicans during that time period. Finally the latest cohort of Russian immigrants that came after Glasnost would have been eligible for registration no earlier than 1992

⁵ The need for political unity is even an explicit criterion for recognition of ethnic minority claims in the Voting Rights Act.

and here we see an increase in the Democratic registration and a sharp decline in the Republican party registration. I compared these numbers to other groups in Brooklyn and found no similar trend that could explain this as part of a larger trend in registration.⁶

Table 2 Voting registration of Russian-Jewish immigrants by year of registration.

Year Registered	No Party	Democrat	Republican
before 1980	4.9%	84.7%	9.2%
1980 to 1992	18.2%	47.5%	33.3%
since 1992	26.6%	53.3%	17.9%

These differences in party registration notwithstanding, there is a tendency for “ethnic voting” across party lines. For example, in the 2001 general election for the City Council, a large majority of Russian-Jewish voters, about 83%, chose the Russian-Jewish candidate Oleg Gutnik who was running on the Republican and Conservative party lines (see Table 1). Estimating the share of Russian-Jews who are registered as Democrats indicates that close to 90% of them chose the Russian Republican candidate over the Democratic candidate.

Cultural Material: Jewishness and Russianness: The politicizing of a particular dimension of difference, whether Jewish or Russian, would hardly be possible or consequential if there was no underlying “cultural material” or tendencies of identification. And in fact it does seem that Russian-Jewish immigrants indeed identify with both sides of the hyphen. A survey of about 1000 Soviet immigrants in 1998/1999, asked an open ended question about identification: 71% included “Jewish” in the category mix and 31% identified only as “Jew” (the single largest identification). At the same time 56% mentioned Russian or Ukrainian as part of their identification (Research Institute for New Americans [RINA], 2000).

In the Soviet-Union, Jewishness was an explicit category codified in the “fifth line” of Soviet passports. However, once in the US the émigré Jews quickly realized that there were profound differences between them and their American co-nationals. Having grown up in a context where religion could not be freely practiced, the immigrants’ knowledge of Jewish rituals did not measure up to the expectations of their American fellows. Some of the Russian-Jewish immigrants had their credentials as good Jews questioned and felt that they were unfairly regarded as backwards. (Markowitz, 1993, 61-62).

⁶ Since all these data are processed from a registration file from 2004 the true trends are likely even more pronounced for two reasons: (1) the possibility that those from the second cohort registered only after 1992 and (2) the record keeping of the Board of Elections of NYC is less than perfect and thus people who move for example get often kicked off the rolls and come on the rolls with a new registration date. This means that many voters that originally registered in the 1980 to 1992 period were re-processed at some point and show up with registration dates that are post 1992. All these trends would introduce noise into the trend and understate it but not exaggerate it.

At the same time there is also a distinct “Russian” aspect to the lives of Ex-Soviet immigrants in southern Brooklyn. In particular the last wave of immigration led to a revival of ethnic businesses, restaurants and culture in southern Brooklyn. Russian nightclub-restaurants in Brighton Beach are an ethnic destination on par with Restaurants in Chinatown. Cultural events such as poetry readings, music performances are places where Russianness and the belonging to an “Russian intelligenzia” is expressed. As Markowitz summarizes: “Soviet immigrants participate in what they consider overtly ‘Russian’ activities... The ways by which these individuals come together to articulate and reaffirm what it means to be ‘Russian’ ... in New York make real the symbolic boundaries of this community and shape the contents of its meaning” (p. 236).

These tensions notwithstanding, there are also plenty of ties to Jewish life in Brooklyn. For some of the elders Yiddish provides a platform for bonding and others have found full reception in religious communities. Especially the second generation also has extensive contact to Jewish organizations, many going to school in Yeshivas, identify as Jewish American and in turn “...pushed many of their parents into a religiously based Jewish identity” (Laitin, 2004, 32).

4 Ambiguous contexts and strategies for mobilization

Taken together it becomes clear that rather than straightforwardly suggesting a course of action, any ethno-political entrepreneur faces a political context that sends mixed signals that she will first have to interpret and make sense of. And depending on what elements are emphasized and which ones given less weight, a different *perceived* context emerges, in turn suggesting different strategies: In the case at hand one interpretation the situation might be a context that provides plenty of successful examples for organizing around ethno-national defined identity, a unified linguistically delineated community that has high citizenship rates, is registered to vote, ready to be mobilized for electoral politics and is deserving of its own voice in politics and recognition as a minority group. But another plausible interpretation would postulate no “community” but rather an immigrant population that is divided in terms of political ideology, has several salient poles of identification; a population that does not fit the state’s criteria for attributing minority rights but on the other hand has linkages to organizations of an established political group.

And indeed aspiring Ex-Soviet immigrant politicians came to quite different conclusions about what the opportunity structure is and pursued quite different strategies.

4.1 A strategy of Ethno-national mobilization

One key figure was Dr. Oleg Gutnik who immigrated to the United States from the Soviet republic Kazakhstan in 1980. As soon as he naturalized he enrolled

in the Republican party. Gutnik describes himself as a fan of Ronald Reagan whose hard position against communism he credits for him being able to leave the Soviet Union and for the collapse of the communist regime. He has held a number of low level appointed and elected offices. He was appointed by the Republican governor as the coordinator of an organization that helps Russian naturalize as member of a community board, and has served on the board of the Brooklyn Public Library. He was also elected district leader in the Republican party. His first bid for a major political office were the 2001 elections for City Council where he won the Republican party's primary election and in the general election came with about 43% within 2,000 votes of winning against the Democratic candidate (a non-Russian). In a city where only 3 out of 51 city council members are Republican and in most districts, if there is a Republican running at all, Democratic candidates win by margins of 60 points or more, this is a noteworthy achievement. As my analysis of the voting results, summarized in Table 2 shows, Oleg Gutnik received the overwhelming majority of the Russian vote.

In Gutnik's view there is a distinct Russian community that is now established as an ethnic group in the city and "...is poised to play a key role in politics"⁷. But he feels his community is slighted by the Democratic political establishment in the city. And even the Jewish community does not treat the Russians with the due respect: "We are treated as grown-up children or younger brothers, not as equals. We are seen as growing and learning, but not at the level where we deserve equal respect."⁸

During the 2002/2003 redistricting for the New York City Council Gutnik made an aggressive case for a Russian "minority-majority" district. A district that would unite the Russian-Jewish immigrants and create an electoral base in which it was possible to elect "one of their own" as a representative. In making this claim Gutnik liberally used the toolbox for "making ethnicity". He (mis-) quotes Census figures to establish the size of the community he speaks for - according to his view there are 800,000 "Russian-speaking Americans" living in the City of New York.⁹ He also expressly used the language of minority/civil rights politics to make a case of recognition of the immigrants as an ethnic community. For example in one of the earlier public hearings he quoted a passage from the New York City charter that in turn is based on the Voting Rights Act: "Such District and plans shall be established in a manner that ensures that a fair and effective representation of the racial and language minority groups in New York City, which are protected by the United States Voting Rights Act of 1965 as amended and district lines shall keep in fact neighborhoods and communities with established ties of common interest in association, whether historical, racial, economic, ethnic, religious or other."¹⁰. And in a subsequent hearing, when it became clear that the district-

⁷ Adam Dickter, "Russians Long For Clout", *The Jewish Week*, 03/14/2003

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Public hearing of the New York City redistricting commission, February 12 2003

¹⁰ Public hearing of the New York City redistricting commission, November 21 2002

ing scheme to be enacted in southern Brooklyn would not unite the Ex-Soviet immigrant population but rather further split it into two different districts, he talks about disenfranchisement.¹¹ Gutnik adopts a narrative of victimization and emphasizes that as Jews in Russia they had to endure political injustices and are thus worthy of protection. He emphasizes the refugee character of Russian and Eastern European migration to the US and claims that many of the community are Holocaust survivors.¹²

Oleg Gutnik's connections with organizations outside the Russian-Jewish "community" were mainly oriented towards the conservative end of the spectrum. For example Gutnik had alliances with the Conservative and the Republican party organizations in southern Brooklyn and in the 2001 general election ran on both party lines. In the redistricting process it was a Republican commissioner from South Brooklyn who advocated repeatedly on behalf of Oleg Gutnik.¹³ He is also the president of the Brighton Beach based "Partnership of Russian-American Voters" (PRAVO), an organization that is focussed on supporting aspiring Russian politicians in New York City. As one of their members put it in an interview "We [Russians] have one dream. Our dream is for a candidate from our group to be elected" (Krotov, 2005). The fact that during the 2005 mayoral election several candidates including Mayor Bloomberg contacted the organization to organize meetings shows that the organization does have some political clout.

4.2 An ethno-religious strategy of mobilization

The other Russian-Jewish political entrepreneur in the early 2000's, Alec Brook-Krasny, came to New York as part of the post-Glasnost cohort of Russian immigrants. He was born in Moscow and emigrated in 1989. In New York City he made a career as a self-made entrepreneur. He founded a fun park in Coney Island and worked in various private businesses, including as a manager for a heating oil company.¹⁴ In his political career up to 2000, he had been elected treasurer of a community board and chair of a political committee on the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC).

In 2000, Alec Brook-Krasny challenged a member of the State Assembly in a district in southern Brooklyn. But he lost his place on the ballot when

¹¹ There was even some rumor that he and his allies wanted to appeal to the Department of Justice.

¹² Public hearing of the New York City redistricting commission, February 12, 2003

¹³ In fact one of the most contentious meetings of the whole redistricting process was the one that never happened: on Jan. 22nd 2003 the stated meeting of the Districting Commission was cancelled just 10 minutes before it was supposed to start. The Republican commissioners appointed by Mayor Bloomberg had been instructed to withhold their votes necessary to advance a redistricting plan that would *not* have included a proposed amendment by Gutnik. Somehow Oleg Gutnik's South Brooklyn Republican connection had enough leverage with the Mayors office in City Hall for a moment to force such a standoff. To prevent a public dispute the meeting was rescheduled at the last moment and the issue was later resolved behind closed doors – to the dissatisfaction of Dr. Gutnik.

¹⁴ see also <http://www.gothamgazette.com/searchlight2001/dist47.html>

a judge ruled that many of the supporters signatures he had collected to get on the ballot were invalid. Challenging the signatures that candidates collect in order to qualify for the primary election is a common strategy that the established candidates and political clubs use to keep insurgent newcomers from competing in primary elections. The established organizations have the resources and experienced lawyers to challenge the authenticity of signatures, newcomers without support from the party organization often can't muster the expertise and resources to counter these legal challenges and navigate the complicated New York election law. Nevertheless, he got 1,200 write-in votes in the primary election. In 2001 Brook-Krasny ran in the Democratic primary for City Council and made a strong showing, earning 16% in a 6-way race with one other Soviet immigrant candidate running who received around 8% of the vote. My analysis of voting patterns indicates that the two Russian-speaking candidates together received with 68% the large majority of the Russian vote.

Compared to the vocal presentation of minority claims that Oleg Gutnik pursued, Brook-Krasny was almost absent from the redistricting process. He did not see a basis on which the Soviet immigrants could make a claim to be united as one "minority" in a single district. In an interview with a Jewish newspaper he said: "There is no consensus on this issue in the community, [...] because of this we have not become involved."¹⁵ Rather than exclusion on part of the establishment he thinks the problem is that the Russian community is not united behind one candidate. But he hopes ultimately the immigrants will mature and that voters will "understand that the community has to unite behind one strong candidate."¹⁶

Brook-Krasny did not present the Ex-Soviet immigrants as a distinct ethnic minority, nor did he emphasize discrimination although he had experienced the rough side of New York City politics. He shrugged off the treatment he received as politics as usual that did not have anything to do with the fact that he was Russian but was normal for many newcomers to New York City politics who do not have the support of the party establishment. Over the years Brook-Krasny built connections and supporters mainly within Jewish democratic organizations. He became political director of JCRC (Jewish Community Relations Council), one of the main Jewish political organizations and later the executive director of The Council of Jewish Émigré Community Organizations (COJECO), an umbrella organization of some 40 other Soviet émigré organizations. Its self stated mission is "to facilitate successful integration process of Russian Speaking Jews into mainstream Jewish community and the greater American society." Tellingly the organization refers to the Russian-Jewish immigrants as "Russian-speaking Jews".¹⁷

In retrospect his strategy seems to have paid off. In 2006 he won a seat in the New York State assembly representing a part of south Brooklyn. In the Democratic primary election he beat the only other candidate, another

¹⁵ Adam Dickter, "District Split Roils Brighton Beach" in *The Jewish Week* 12/27/2002

¹⁶ Rachel Donadio, "Russians Reflect" weblog for *Forward* 10/05/2001

¹⁷ <http://cojeco.org/>, last accessed 3/30/2011

Ex-Soviet immigrant by a razor thin margin - less than 150 votes. The general election was (as so often) in heavily Democratic New York City a mere formality and he became the first Russian-Jewish politician to win elected office.¹⁸ In the primary election, Krasny did not win due to the “ethnic vote” but because of support outside of the Soviet immigrant population. As my analysis of the voting data shows (Table 2), it was his opponent who won the most heavily Russian-speaking areas around Brighton Beach and Coney Island, receiving an estimated 86% of the Russian vote.¹⁹ In this context clearly the question was less *whether* a Russian-Jewish politician would be successful but rather what kind of representative would be elected. In this contest Brook-Krasny had the solid support of the Democratic political establishment as well as most American-Jewish political organizations. His opponent Ari Kagan, a journalist who worked for a series of Russian language media, had strong ties to organizations that reach out to the Russian speaking population and ultimately won the overwhelming share of the Russian vote.

5 Discussion

As I show in the preceding sections, for a Russian-Jewish at least two quite different strategies for making claims for representation were plausible and both strategies had reasonable chance at success. Although it can be perceived that for the Russian-Jewish immigrants the Jewish dimension has won the day, once we disaggregate the opportunity structure one would be hard pressed to see how the political opportunity structure straightforwardly shaped this outcome.

There might well be cases where the opportunity structure is unequivocal, virtually prescribing a specific strategy of making claims and strongly limiting the viability of others. And in every situation there are certainly many types of claims that do not deserve closer consideration. For example in Germany where a discourse about racial identification is stigmatized, few aspiring politicians from a migrant minority would pursue a strategy that tried to mobilize and make claims around a racial identity. In contrast in the UK this strategy has considerable appeal Koopmans et al (2005).

Yet we should not underestimate the degrees of freedom that remain. This is especially true for newcomers and in complex political environments where there is no one established path to follow. Here the political context is not likely to be clear cut but rather provides ambiguous signals about what are feasible strategies that those making political claims can pursue.

This does not negate the fundamental conclusion of the political opportunity structure argument: that the particular institutional and discursive contexts that minorities face, shape how they make political claims, and in turn

¹⁸ Michael Gormley “First Russian Jew in American Legislature”, *Newsday* online edition November 14, 2006

¹⁹ see also Boris Fishman, “Politborough: Glasnost Grows In Brooklyn”, *The New Republic*, October 6 2006

influence the formation of political and ethnic identities. But the POS approach as it is applied now tends to over-determine the degree of homogeneity of the political contexts as well as the putative communities that it shapes. While the opportunity structure approach can still be fruitful for an analysis of ethnic and political identity formation, it needs to be specified in a more detailed and rigorous manner.

Specifically my analysis points at the following related points: If political opportunity structures are to explain the formation of ethnic and political divisions, then *groups* that “make claims” or achieve policy objectives cannot be the starting point of the analysis. If we want to go beyond the question of “who gets what” and also get analytical leverage on the issue of “who is what” (Brubaker, 1992, 182), the fundamental contestation in the formation of ethnic identities, then we have to take these as the eventual outcomes of mobilization processes that take place within an opportunity structure rather than predefined “groups” that achieve recognition or expand the rights accorded to them. Instead, I argue that political opportunities exist for individuals - political entrepreneurs who “construct ... coalitions out of disparate elements” (Mollenkopf, 1983, 4). And a part of the puzzle for these entrepreneurs then are the tendencies for identification within the putative “community” to be mobilized.

In most instances there will be several cleavages that could be leveraged for the building of a constituency which in turn may require different strategies.²⁰ A careful analysis of the political opportunity context then needs to specify the incentives for a series of different categorizations and not simply assume that the cleavage that eventually became defining is the only possible one. Most current research post-hoc emphasizes those aspects of the opportunity structure that fit with the observed outcomes and neglect those aspects that pointed in different directions. But as my analysis suggests, opportunity structures as seen from the ground do not form coherent units. Once we begin disaggregating the political opportunity context, we see that different aspects of the context can be interpreted to favor the promotion of different distinctions. Global and national-level discourses, institutional arrangements and policies do not translate in any straightforward way to the local level, but rather are refracted and blended with local dynamics to create opportunity structures that will often be quite ambiguous.

One might argue that even if they are ambiguous and not easily perceived, opportunity structures are still be selective, determining which of a variety of mobilization strategies will be ultimately successful. Considering that in my case two different strategies were almost successful, the outcomes may not always be so clear cut. And as Kurzman (1996) has shown, there are instances where despite a lack of “objective political opportunity”, mobilization occurs and is successful. And since virtually all applications of the POS approach neglect the strategies that were not successful, but might have come close, we

²⁰ On the nestedness of ethnic differentiations see Moerman (1965) For an inventory of strategies for boundary making see Wimmer (2008a)

know little about the universe of failed mobilizations. Also, from an epistemological point, such a theory, the opportunity structure as a selection process of the “fittest strategies”, would completely cut out any strategic decision making of social actors, leaving us again with an approach that is overdetermined by structural factors and has little to say about the choices of individuals in the making and re-making of ethnic and political identities.

Rather, this article suggests that we pay attention to how strategic political actors perceive or misperceive the opportunity context. How do they make sense of heterogeneous opportunity structures as well as the multiple cleavages in the populations they are trying to mobilize? Protagonists of the POS approach have acknowledged the importance of subjective interpretations (“cognitive liberation”) yet maintain that opportunity structures provide the cues that trigger shifting perceptions (McAdam, 1982, 51). I argue that given the complexity of political situations there will always be multiple ways to interpret any given context. The question then is not only *what* the political opportunity context is but also *the ways in which can be read*. A finely disaggregated analysis of the political opportunity context that draws out contradictory elements is a first step in that direction. Further research might draw on the research on the cognitive bases of political behavior more broadly (see for example Lau and Sears, 1986) or the more specific approaches in the study of ethnicity (Brubaker et al, 2004).

Such an approach could contribute to comprehensive models of ethnic boundary making, presenting a link between institutional arrangements, power relations and organizational interests on the one side and the individual strategies of boundary change on the other (see for example Wimmer, 2008b, 1009). If the opportunity context shapes the choices of actors involved in boundary making, then how these actors perceive this context and how their perceptions change is a critical link, especially since in most cases the context at least *a priori* will be ambiguous.

Acknowledgements For comments and suggestions on earlier versions I am grateful to Andreas Wimmer, Roger Waldinger and John Mollenkopf as well as participants in the International Migration Study Working Group at UCLA and the Migration and Immigrant Incorporation Workshop at Harvard University. All remaining errors and shortcomings are the fault of the author alone.

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