Political representation of ethnic minorities: A framework for a comparative analysis of ethnic minority representation.

Abstract

Globalization and the consequently migration flows, confront many European countries with a growing number of ethnic minorities. This situation raises several questions concerning (1) the political rights of these minorities, (2) their representation and (3) their participation in political decision-making as constitutive elements of citizenship. A true democracy represents all people, but nowadays ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the political institutions of many countries.

This paper discusses the theoretical framework and the research design of my future research on the political representation of ethnic minorities. More precisely, it discusses the use of the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) Model to explain the degree of political representation of ethnic minorities at a local level. The POS model exists out of four explanatory factors: the citizenship regime, the political party, the electoral system and the interest constellations. These factors all can have an effect on the political representation of ethnic minorities. The analysis concentrates on two dimensions: the descriptive and the substantive dimension of representation.

Introduction

According to Agnes Repplier, an American essayist, “Democracy forever teases us with the contrast between its ideals and its realities, between its heroic possibilities and its sorry achievements”. This quote also applies to the situation today. In contemporary democracies, all citizens should be represented by representatives. But this ideal of a true representative democracy where the elected assemblies mirror the population of a given country is not what we see in reality. In reality, there is an underrepresentation of different minority groups and women both in terms of their presence in the political assemblies and in terms of their substantive representation.

This research focuses on one of those minority groups, the ethnic minorities\(^1\). After World War II, foreign labourers were invited to work in West European countries. Since the migration stop in the seventies, family reunion and the search for asylum have become other important reasons for

\(^1\) This research focuses on one of those minority groups, the ethnic minorities. The term ‘ethnic minorities’ could encompass many people, but we choose to exclude EU-citizens and to restrict this group to visible ethnic minorities. This are persons (who either do or do not hold the nationality of the country of residence), who are not born in the EU and who do not have EU-parents (first generation) and persons from which one of the parents is not born in the EU (second generation). Furthermore, these persons have to belong to an ethnic group which is extraneous to a substantive part of the population of a country or city and they should have descriptive characteristics (appearance, cultural habits, name) by which they can be identified as ethnic minorities.
migration (Ireland, 2000). As a result, the number of ethnic minorities in contemporary societies is continuously increasing. They form a substantive part of our western society and this raises questions concerning their political rights and their representation. Ethnic minorities are underrepresented in many countries and this applies to all three dimensions of representation as identified by Pitkin (1967): formal, descriptive and substantive representation.

This research focuses on the descriptive and substantive dimension of representation. First, I investigate which factors contribute to the level of descriptive representation of an ethnic group. Secondly, I focus on the substantive dimension and analyze which factors determine the role perception of elected ethnic minorities concerning substantive group representation. By doing so I also explain differences between countries concerning the level of political representation of ethnic minorities. In other words, I investigate what determines the level of political representation (Bird, 2003). These insights are of great value in order to formulate recommendations to improve the political representation of ethnic minorities in the future.

The current state of affairs, does not offer answers for these questions. “There are very few studies that compare ethnic minority representation across countries or that address the underrepresentation of different groups within countries” (Bird, 2003: 7). This is due to several problems. First, the greater part of the literature on descriptive representation, for example, focuses on theoretical discussions about the use of quota and similar measures. Too little attention is paid to understanding which features promote or obstruct the representation of ethnic minorities. Next, ethnic groups differ from country to country and even the term ‘ethnic minorities’ is differently defined in different countries. This makes it difficult to compare. Furthermore it is not easy to take into account both the micro- and the macro-level factors that could have an influence and their causal relationship, because “it requires deep familiarity with not only national, but local race politics” (Bird, 2003: 8). These problems explain why most authors limit their studies to descriptive or single country studies.

This research takes the challenge of investigating what determines the level of (under) representation by doing a comparative research across and within countries, both on the micro- and macro level. For this purpose, we suggest to screen the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) model on its capacities for investigating what determines the level of political representation of ethnic minorities (see supra). More specifically, I discuss how the citizenship regime, the electoral system, the political party and the interest constellations of a given country affect the level of descriptive and substantive representation.
In the first part of this paper, I discuss different approaches that explain the level of political representation of ethnic minorities. Next, I suggest the use of the Political Opportunity Structure model to tackle this issue.
1 The political representation of ethnic minorities

There is a substantial amount of literature about the political representation of ethnic minorities (Ireland, 2000). Most authors agree that there is an underrepresentation of this group. But they differ in the reasons they bring forward to explain the level of representation. This results in different approaches: the class-based -, the SES-, the ethnic-, the social capital-, the elite-, the societal change- and the institutional approach.

Some authors like Castles and Kosack (1974: 1985), Lawrence (1974) etc. argue that the class or the socio-economic status (SES) of an ethnic group determines its level of participation. They support the class-based or the SES-approach. Several studies confirmed that “citizens with higher levels of education, income and occupational status tend to vote more, contact more, organize more and campaign more than those with lower status” (Leigley and Vedlitz, 1999: 1094). As ethnic minorities often belong to the lower classes or have a lower SES, this explains their low level of representation. These two approaches were criticized a lot though, as they do not explain why different ethnic groups with the same background, do not work together to pursue common goals (Freedman, 1999). Nor do they explain why similar ethnic groups use different participatory strategies (Ireland, 1994) or why the same ethnic groups have different levels of participation in different countries (Togeby, 2008).

Other authors, for example Moore (1975), Foner (1979), Rex and Tomlinson (1979) etc. do explain some of these issues by pointing to the ethnic identity of an ethnic group. They see ethnic, religious or cultural characteristics of a certain group as decisive for its participation (Ireland, 2000). This way, they predict that “immigrants of the same nationality or regional background in different host societies will adopt roughly similar forms of participation” (Ireland, 1994:8). This is however not the case in reality, as several comparative studies have shown that ethnic minority groups from the same country of origin behave differently in the different receiving countries (Togeby, 2008).

A third group of authors tries to explain the participation of ethnic minorities by taking their social resources or social capital into account. According to them, ethnic groups with a dense network of voluntary organizations, are associated with higher levels of civic activity and political participation (Newton, 2001).

Fourthly, two opposite approaches argue that representation and participation are the result of bottom-up or top-down processes. First, the elite model sees politicians and political parties as the rational actors who drive political change. These elites will show potential voters their support for minority issues, in order to win votes. On the other hand, the societal change model sees citizens and
social movements as the important actors. They will put pressure on the political parties and institutions to take into account ethnic minority interests. A good example of this is the civil rights movement in the U.S. (Kittilson and Tate, 2004). These two models successfully explain the sequence of change in minority representation, but they fail to explain where and when minority inclusion occurred (or did not occur) (Kittilson and Tate, 2004).

The approaches mentioned above certainly help to explain the level of representation of ethnic minorities, but they overlook one thing: the importance of political institutions. The institutional approach tackles this matter. According to this approach, the institutions of the host society determine the opportunities and costs of participation (Saalfeld, 2002). Certain kinds of immigration policies, administrative practices and policies and laws governing citizenship are likely to spark certain kinds of ethnic group participation (Ireland, 2000). This approach is important because it explains why ethnic groups from the same country of origin behave differently in the different countries of residence.

2 The Political Opportunity Structure model
In this paper, we support the institutional approach. More specifically, we suggest to use the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) model. The POS model was initially developed to explain the emergence of social movements, but Koopmans and Statham (2000) applied it to the field of citizenship and integration. The model describes the available opportunities and constraints of a political and institutional environment, in which actors operate. These opportunities and constraints determine if a certain group (for instance ethnic minorities) can take strategic action or not (Kittilson and Tate, 2004; Koopmans, 2004).

The POS model has two important strengths. The first strength of the POS model is that it combines the different interesting features of the aforementioned approaches. First, as possible opportunities and constrains we can distinguish institutional matters, like the influence of the electoral system, the citizenship regime or the political parties. These will be the first three dimensions of our model. As the class-based, the SES, the ethnic and the social-capital approach offer interesting insights too, these will also be incorporated. They will form the fourth dimension: the so-called interest constellations, which is comprised of the characteristics of an ethnic group (+SES and class) and its social capital.

Electoral system
The first dimension, the electoral system, consists, according to Rae (1969) of three factors: the electoral formula, the district system and the ballot structure. First, the electoral formula determines
the way votes are translated into seats and this way, we can make a distinction between majority systems, plurality systems, proportional systems and mixed systems. Secondly, it is also important how districts are organized. In most countries, the whole municipality is one district, but sometimes a municipality is divided in several other districts. Also the size of a district can matter. Thirdly, the ballot structure stipulates the options that an electoral system gives to voters, for instance if they can vote for individual candidates, for parties or for both. In general, proportional systems with open lists are considered the best systems for the representation of ethnic minorities. In some cases however, majority or plurality systems seem to be more interesting (Togeby, 2008). This is for instance the case if an ethnic minority group is largely concentrated in one area that corresponds with the boundaries of a district (Alonso and Ruiz-Ruffino, 2007). Mixed systems are situated somewhere in between proportional and majority/plurality systems (Kostadinova, 2007).

Citizenship regime
Secondly, also the citizenship regime of a certain country can affect the level of representation. According to Koopmans (2004) a citizenship regime consists of two dimensions: a political and a cultural one. The first dimension encompasses the extent that a person can achieve a full and equal citizenship and whether he is enabled to vote or not. The second dimension is about whether a country allows ethnic minorities to have their own culture and interests. This way we can make a distinction between multicultural and assimilationist countries. Normally, there will be more political representation of ethnic minorities in countries with a multicultural citizenship regime, where citizenship is easily obtained and ethnic minorities are entitled to vote.

Political party
The third dimension, the political party, offers several explanatory party-level factors that could affect the representation of ethnic minorities in politics (Caul, 1999). First the organizational structure of a party can be important. Centralization, institutionalization and candidate selection at the local level improve ethnic minority representation. Secondly, also ideology is an explanatory factor. Left parties are more supportive for ethnic minorities than right ones (Matland and Studlar, 1996) and also newer parties do better in this respect (Caul, 1999). Thirdly, the presence of ethnic minorities within a party influences the representation of ethnic minorities (Caul, 1999). Fourthly, dominant rules and practices within a party, like for instance quotas, can have an effect (Fennema et al, 2000). And finally, Matland and Studlar (1996) emphasize the importance of contagion, a process where one party encourages other parties to adopt its policy and strategies. If one party places ethnic minorities on its list and achieves political success, other parties most likely will follow.
Interest constellations
The last dimension of the POS model consists of two parts. On the one hand, interest constellations refer to the characteristics or the political culture of a certain ethnic group. Ethnic groups can differ in number, concentration, SES, migration experiences etc. and they can have different resources or barriers (Bird, 2003). It is likely that large and concentrated ethnic groups, who are acquainted with the language of a country, etc. will achieve more representation. On the other hand, also the social capital of a group influences its representation. People who are a member of an ethnic organization, learn relevant skills and get information about political activity. They are more likely to be exposed to political messages and discussions and they can develop relevant networks (Verba, Schlozman, Brady and Nie, 1993). There is however some discussion in the consulted literature about the precise effect of social capital (Berger et al, 2001; Aptekar, 2009; Jacobs, Phalet and Swyngedouw, 2004; Togeby, 2004).

These four dimensions all can have an effect on the political representation of ethnic minorities and one could investigate their effect one by one. But the second strength of the Political Opportunity Structure model is that it also investigates the way these dimensions interact with each other. The electoral system for example, will have an influence on the political parties, as in proportional systems there are more parties than in plurality systems and there should be more internal cohesion (van der Kolk, 2007). The concentration of an ethnic group in a certain area, may also interact with the electoral system. As in plurality or majority systems, this fuels political representation (Bird, 2003). Furthermore, the concentration of a group also has an effect on political parties: if the importance of the ethnic vote increases, parties will incorporate more ethnic candidates (Ruedin, 2009). Next, a citizenship regime will shape the characteristics of an ethnic group and their patterns of organization by enabling them to maintain their cultural identity or not (Koopmans, 2004).

How these factors precisely interact with each other and which factors are most influential, is currently unknown. It is part of my research to investigate this and to develop a complex explanatory model to explain the level of political participation of ethnic minorities.

Conclusion
There are different approaches that explain the level of representation of ethnic minorities. In our research, we choose to use the Political Opportunity Structure model. The strength of this model is twofold. First, it combines interesting features of other models, like the SES or the ethnic model. This way it tries to offer a comprehensive answer to the question of underrepresentation. It takes into account both the responsiveness of the party and the political system and the characteristics of an
ethnic group. This way, we can distinguish four factors that influence representation: the citizenship regime, the electoral system, the political party and the interest constellations.

The second strength of this model is that it also investigates how these four factors interact with each other. It investigates how and to what extend these factors influence each other. This way, it offers a complex and comprehensive explanatory model for the (under)representation of ethnic minorities.

Finding an adequate methodology to verify this complex and comprehensive explanatory model will be the next challenge of this research.
Reference List


Ref Type: Generic


