The continuing existence, and sometimes growth, of certain ethnically homogenous low-income neighborhoods in today’s American cities is a puzzling phenomenon. In the past twenty-five years, new urban dynamics have dramatically reconfigured inner city neighborhoods. Young, white professionals have returned to the inner city in large numbers after forty years of “white flight” to the suburbs. Gentrification, understood as massive private and public investments in the inner city, exerts tremendous pressure on residential areas that are ethnically homogenous and economically depressed. By driving up housing prices and triggering waves of displacement, urban revitalization seems to lead, inexorably and unsurprisingly, to the dissolution of homogeneous poor ethnic areas.²³

However, there are a number of baffling exceptions to this pattern. Certain low-income groups have successfully carved out
homogenous ethnic areas for themselves in today’s cities, despite forces of gentrification. How do these ethnic enclaves survive the intense economic pressures of gentrification? Why do some enclaves thrive, while others fall short and are displaced by rising housing prices? This paper explores the tension between the gentrification process of the inner city and the production and maintenance of poor ethnic neighborhoods in contemporary American cities.

TWO COMMUNITIES FACING GENTRIFICATION

To address this question, the paper examines two neighboring communities in South Williamsburg, a heavily gentrified neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York City. One is the Satmar enclave, an insular, ultraconservative Hasidic Jewish community. The other community is comprised of Latinos of various national origins (primarily Puerto Ricans and Dominicans). While both groups are among the poorest in New York City, are visible minorities, and live in the same small area, they share few other similarities.

The Satmar seem extremely cohesive and isolated, segregating themselves from the outside world and building a collective identity on religion and a common language, Yiddish. They organize their experience of the contemporary American city around the re-creation of a “shtetl,” Yiddish for the small towns from which previous generations of Satmar emigrated. Throughout most of its history, the Satmar have been a largely homogenous and close-knit community. By contrast, Latinos in South Williamsburg, despite sharing a common language, have a more fragmented and transient collective identity. Puerto Ricans and Dominicans face different challenges and prospects for local mobilization, due to variations in citizenship and immigration status. Moreover, Latinos constitute a single ethnic group primarily just from outsiders’ points of view.

Resisting Gentrification and Feeding the Local Political Machine

This paper argues that to understand the impact of the gentrification process on poor minority neighborhoods, communi-
ties’ political capacity matters. “Political capacity” is understood as the ability of local communities to organize themselves effectively alongside political actors. Political capacity allows groups to tap into the flow of government funding, the most important kind of which is housing subsidies for low-income households. In a revival of the patron-client relationship of the early twentieth century, elected officials channel social services to ethnic enclaves to mitigate the impact of gentrification, in exchange for electoral support in the form of a voting bloc.

The Satmar have generally prevailed in the past two decades in the struggle for resources, and this has allowed them to resist gentrification more successfully than the Latinos. In recent years, however, their hold on the local political system in Williamsburg has been challenged, with some success, by grassroots Latino organizations. This history offers an opportunity to study how political capacity and connections with the local political machine are produced, maintained, and change overtime.

Methods and Data Collection

Research was conducted in these communities throughout the Fall 2010–Spring 2011 academic year. Using a mixed-method approach, we gathered data on the political field in Williamsburg and the distribution of housing subsidies for low-income families. We interviewed local leaders, attended public meetings, gathered newspaper accounts of daily life, performed ethnographic fieldwork among Latino undocumented immigrants working for Satmar families, and gathered statistics on the housing market.

This paper first describes, highlighting cultural factors, how the Satmar community shaped itself as a political actor able to trade votes for social services. It then supplements this qualitative and historical approach with attempts at measuring the extent of the housing subsidies received by the Satmar community. It concludes its focus on the Satmar community by stressing the recent challenges to the Satmar’s political clout by Latino community organizers. It then shifts attention to the Latino community in South
Williamsburg, emphasizing powerful internal lines of differentiation as a sharp contrast to the strong collective identity of the Satmar community. The last part of this paper analyzes the opportunities and constraints that young Latino community leaders face that shape their attempts to reform the political machine.

THE SATMAR AND THE POLITICAL MACHINE: A CULTURAL HISTORY

The Satmar have a deeply religious culture anchored in interrelated commitments to insularity, mysticism, and strong attachments to both geography and charismatic leaders. First arriving in the United States in the 1940s, they are a Hasidic movement of Eastern European origin, deriving their name from a small town in what is now Romania. They view their mission, above all else, as the protection of their mishkan (sanctuary) of Orthodox Judaism in the midst of the Williamsburg midbar (wilderness); in other words, protecting the community from external, secular influences. Despite forming tight political relationships where useful, there is a sense of overall detachment from racial and class-based struggles. This has resulted in a strange form of isolation, with a drive to protect the community’s shared religious mandate through shrewd but guarded maneuvering in the outside world.

This mandate was set in motion by Joel Teitelbaum (1887–1979), the first and most famous Satmar Rebbe (master or mentor). Teitelbaum was a renowned figure for Jews across the world and an example of the Satmar devotion to central, charismatic authority. His followers numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and perceived him to be an otherworldly, godlike leader. The Rebbe was the kind of leader sociologist Max Weber described as “endowed with ‘supernatural’ abilities, commanding a group of followers who placed their absolute faith in his judgment.” The first generation of the Williamsburg Satmar was particularly ecstatic in its reverence for his religious knowledge and insight. Having survived the trauma of the Holocaust, they yearned for the uniquely rigorous orthodoxy Teitelbaum championed. At the same time, older gen-
erations of Hasidim introduced a fierce strain of political engagement. Enraged by what they saw as American inaction in the face of the Holocaust, they vowed to forge political connections to prevent anything similar from ever happening again.\textsuperscript{10}

Teitelbaum’s physical presence in the community only bolstered the Satmar perception that Williamsburg was to be a new stronghold for the Satmar Hasidim and a site of political action. Whereas Weber describes typical charismatic leaders as eschewing bureaucratic and administrative leadership,\textsuperscript{11} the Rebbe’s legacy took a decidedly hands-on approach to governance. Unlike comparable religious figureheads, he also took an active role in the development of leaders who could support future generations.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, while members of other Hasidic groups gradually moved away from their first-generation neighborhoods, geographic proximity to the Rebbe was of the utmost importance to the Williamsburg Satmar. His holy presence radiated outward throughout the whole community, anchoring its intense religious practice and ensuring its material security; and this sense of absolute reverence comes through in discussions with his informants.\textsuperscript{13} Crucially, his presence also established an early but profound connection between the Satmar religion and the literal, physical boundaries of the neighborhood. For his followers, it was impossible to imagine a Williamsburg without the Rebbe, and equally impossible to consider him living anywhere else.\textsuperscript{14}

Energized by devotion and motivated by survival, the Satmar searched for ways to capitalize on their newfound American freedoms. Whereas existence in the Old World was always threatened by societal anti-Semitism and government repression, life in Williamsburg presented the possibility of security and even prosperity. A new class of Satmar “culture brokers” found ways to balance their overarching religious mandate with the municipal needs of the neighborhood. Skilled networkers, communicators, and businessmen, they secured jobs and financial backing from the Brooklyn community at large.\textsuperscript{15} Satmar entrepreneurial efforts soon saw great success, in both Williamsburg and the rest of the city.\textsuperscript{16} Solidarity engendered by the Rebbe also enabled effective neighbor-
hood mobilization in political struggles. The Satmar were able to maintain the boundaries of their neighborhood for decades, refusing to yield their position because of fears of strangers entering the neighborhood and threatening their religious purity. This precedent grew into a fierce belief in self-determination and neighborhood control, and a natural tendency to mobilize the community toward that end.

The Satmar Rise to Political Power in Williamsburg

Satmar tactics began to transform from grassroots organizing into tightly formed relationships with the New York City political machine, reflecting a series of changes made to the nation’s poverty-fighting strategy from the 1960s to the 1980s. A core part of President Johnson’s War on Poverty was the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, an ambitious attempt to refocus revitalization programs on the local level. The law created a comprehensive network of Community Action Agencies meant to provide job training and education initiatives to impoverished communities. By receiving grants directly from the federal government and bypassing entrenched political machines, progressive community-based organizations rose to unprecedented power. A new generation of community activists and leaders began to threaten the existing routes of political control, attempting to “challenge the institutions of local government that kept them on the margins of American society.”

This legislation was a turning point in Williamsburg race relations. Previously content to merely police the boundaries of its colony, the Satmar was forced to actively compete for a limited amount of state resources. Given its already robust skills in collective action, the Satmar groups excelled in accessing these crucial development grants. The founding of the United Jewish Organizations (UJO) enabled a comprehensive strategy that coordinated grant requests.

These seismic shifts did not go unnoticed by more mainstream politicians and office-holders. The Seneca Democratic Club, a historically dominant force in Brooklyn politics, was es-
especially concerned about the threat posed by ethnic organiza-
tion. They cultivated relationships with Satmar leaders, who were
seen as more accountable and predictable than those from other
groups—a uniquely attractive ally because of their strong cultural
cohesion. 18 As Mintz notes, “Hasidim were not interested in pre-
senting their own candidates in elections [and] seemed to pose no
future conflicts of interest.”19

The Seneca Club harnessed the Satmar’s voting bloc by offer-
ing the community the most precious commodity of all: housing.
Exploiting its close relationship with the New York City Housing
Authority, the Seneca Club helped impose strict racial quotas on
public housing projects that drastically favored the Satmar by bra-
zenly manipulating housing waitlists and intentionally misleading
non-Hasidic families. In return, the Seneca Democrats did not
just gain votes, but also the support of a strong, homogeneous com-
munity that could stave off the neighborhood’s economic decline.
In other words, the Seneca Democrats pursued this relationship
as a shrewd political tactic, and not out of a charitable concern for
marginalized ethnic groups. This put the community’s other mi-
norities in a difficult position, as Satmar groups began to control
development projects through a mixture of private funding and
political maneuvers. By combining these different avenues, the Sat-
mar assembled a powerful web of community organizations that
effectively harvested its connections in government and business.

Martin Needelman, director of Brooklyn Legal Services Cor-
poration A—an organization providing legal aid to low-income in-
dividuals and community groups in Williamsburg—is no stranger
to the political tactics that rely on the Satmar’s unique cultural dy-
namics, as he has taken part in several high-profile investigations
into their practices. He recalled that the neighborhood’s political
terrain was once unified under War on Poverty programs in the
early 1960s: “the War on Poverty . . . created a large a network of
Community Action Programs that the federal government funded
directly, skip[ping] over the state. This was meant to empower low-
income communities and communities of color.” However, accord-
ing to Needelman, this approach was almost completely rolled back
as federal support had all but ended by 1980.

Just as the arrival of federal funding ended up being a boon to the Satmar, its withdrawal proved to be equally advantageous, opening new areas for expansion and influence. Politicians who were once weakened by the shifting political environment soon enjoyed a rapid rise to power and new control over urban neighborhoods. Their investment in the Satmar was tactical and mutually beneficial. No longer threatened by new ethnic leaders, the local political machine regained its hold over Williamsburg.

Meanwhile, the Satmar remained apathetic to demands for structural transformation and social progress, and instead focused on their overarching religious mandate. This meant protecting the neighborhood at any cost while ignoring the urban solidarity inspired by the War on Poverty. The revitalization of the political machine ensured that the Satmar could draw on skyrocketing numbers of development grants to carry out this goal. Their quiet collusion with entrenched political networks, both during the War on Poverty and throughout the subsequent conservative backlash, continued to enable the Satmar to easily secure new projects and provide for their neighborhood.

EVIDENCE OF DISPARITY IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE HOUSING MARKET

Despite occasionally veering into the realm of the openly criminal, such as when a prominent Satmar leader was charged with stealing $220,000 in federal housing subsidies in 2011, this quiet collusion usually happens out of public view and is difficult to observe directly. However, a quantitative search for the accumulated effects of these informal deals, both documented and suspected, can provide confirmatory circumstantial evidence for deals that channel the flow of state resources. An exploration of the financial structure of the Satmar rental housing market uncovered one particularly salient effect.

Using data from our field work, canvassing, the U.S. Census, New York City’s Department of City Planning, and prior
ethnographies, we isolated two select, contiguous groups of four census tracts each of Latinos and Satmar from several dozen potential candidates in the neighborhood, a four-square-mile area centered on a point just over the Williamsburg Bridge from Manhattan. These areas, half a mile apart and each home to about 20 thousand people, were chosen to be overwhelmingly homogenous—one was 56 percent Hispanic or Latino (and only 27 percent white), while the other, 98 percent white and only 3 percent Latino, was confirmed to be overwhelmingly Satmar and represents a substantial portion of the Satmar population in Brooklyn, with a 26 percent higher population density than the Latino area.

Figure 1 compares several key metrics for both of these areas, as well as Brooklyn on the whole.

These data show that the Satmar experience roughly comparable vacancy rates and housing prices. They have far larger families and are poorer and more overcrowded than their Latino neighbors and Brooklyn as a whole. These broad metrics alone demonstrate little of analytical value. More significant, however, is an examination of specific subsets of housing data, as subsidies and political deals are often narrowly tailored to the most uniquely salient features or subgroups. In the case of the Satmar, their very large families would be just such a feature. In this segment of the housing market, there is a clear disparity. To start, the Satmar and Latino markets are structured very differently in regard to unit size, with the Satmar heavily skewed toward larger units, as seen in Figure 2.

Restricting our study to only these units, we adopted a monthly rent of $499—less than two-thirds of the Borough-wide average for both categories—as the upper bound of a “below market” category, conservatively judging that a disparity of this magnitude presented a data point to be explained and constituted evidence of likely outside intervention in the market. Figure 3 shows the proportions of housing units by this price metric. Asked rent is another useful metric, reflecting a snapshot of units on the market at a given time. Figure 4 presents a disparity as well. Figure 5, taking population and poverty into account, provides the clearest
metric of disparity.

These data indicate that large families in the homogenous, strictly defined Satmar area have far better access to large apartments priced far below the market. In other words, it is much easier to be a large, poor Satmar family than it is to be a large, poor Latino family in Williamsburg. While these data say nothing of the provenance of this disparity or the desirability of subsidizing poor people raising large families, they are a window into the sharp contrast between the Satmar and their neighbors, and may serve to corroborate the results of existing and future qualitative investigation of development projects.

CHALLENGES TO THE SATMAR’S POWER: THE BROADWAY TRIANGLE CONTROVERSY

One such project is a controversial plan that seeks to develop up to 1,800 housing units, many of them government-subsidized for low-income tenants, on a vacant, city-owned thirty-one acre lot known as the “Broadway Triangle.” A source of political conflict between the Satmar Hasidim and the Latinos, the site has been the focus of a hotly contested two-year rezoning process, the fairness and legality of which are the objects of a suit filed by leaders of the Latino community and other community groups known as the Broadway Triangle Community Coalition (BTCC). The plan illustrates the Satmar’s incredible ability to control local political processes; its creation in partnership with the city is, in a sense, a culmination of the Satmar’s organizational evolution in the local political landscape. The Broadway Triangle is also significant because it is the last industrial site undergoing urban renewal in what is now an intensely gentrified neighborhood. In the late 1990s, young, college-educated residents began to move into Williamsburg and drove up housing values, and, as a result, threatened the availability of affordable housing for the low-income Latino and Satmar communities. The Satmar community—already contending with a population that was doubling every ten to twelve years, with an average family size of seven to eight children—was able to
secure substantial zoning victories in a “Memorandum of Understanding” brokered solely among politicians to the exclusion of local grassroots groups in 1997. These victories—including units zoned for very large families located in low-rise buildings (to accommodate Jewish religious proscriptions against the use of electricity, such as that in elevators, from Friday evening to Saturday evening)—came largely at the expense of the Latino community, which shared the Satmar’s dire need for housing but lacked their political clout.

The Broadway Triangle Community Coalition has leveled two distinct charges at the plan. First, the rezoning proposal’s inordinate amount of 6- and 7-room apartments unfairly favors the Satmar, who typically have large families. And second, the city’s approval process was undemocratic and lacked transparency. Development rights to the site were granted in a no-bid, closed-door process to two non-profit organizations—United Jewish Organization (UJO) and the Ridgewood-Bushwick Senior Citizens Council (RBSCC). UJO is closely affiliated with the Satmar community; RBSCC was co-founded by the long-time New York State Assemblyman and County Chair for the New York State Democratic Party, Vito Lopez. The plan’s critics allege that Lopez used his clout to influence the approval of the plan in exchange for support from the approximately four thousand-strong Satmar voting bloc (a substantial figure in an election with just over seventeen thousand total votes cast in the last cycle). Therefore, these two organizations are accused of colluding to give the Satmar unfairly privileged access to affordable housing.

During the Fall of 2010, the authors interviewed sources close to the controversy in both communities and attended meetings of Brooklyn Community Board 1, one of fifty-nine such unsalaried community advisory groups appointed by the city’s Borough Presidents to work on local land use, zoning, safety and other community issues. In addition to the underlying divisions in the Board’s 160,000-strong constituency, these meetings showed also that despite the political machine victory represented by the Broadway Triangle plan, the system was no longer quite as monolithic as
it once had been. On the Satmar side, the 2006 death of their holy leader set off a succession feud among his sons that ended up fracturing the movement into two wings, eroding the group’s united voting bloc. On the Democratic side, Assemblyman Vito Lopez—coming under increasing fire for his role in the Memorandum negotiations—began to lose confidence in his ability to control the traditional core of his constituency, which was developing a new taste for self-determination and grassroots activism.

Nevertheless, machine politics rolled along: Lopez managed to shore up his base by effectively trading control of the Broadway triangle to the more powerful Satmar sect in exchange for bloc support for him and his hand-picked candidates. Martin Needelman, who ran against one of Lopez’s political associates in a local election and is Plaintiff counsel in the suit, explained that politicians tended to embrace the Satmar’s cultural and religious needs because of the payoff they could reliably expect:

Lopez wanted Hasidic support . . . So he gave them Broadway Triangle as a tradeoff. I got 70 percent of the Latino vote, but my Puerto Rican opponent got 90 percent of the Jewish vote. He abandoned all the neighborhood housing organizations he had been affiliated with . . . and excluded them from the planning of the Broadway Triangle. It was a huge turnaround. The Hasidic community is very transactional. You can be a liberal, Democrat, conservative or Republican or gay or straight or black. They give you this and they negotiate this. They can deliver a lot. They can deliver four thousand votes for you or four thousand votes against you in a bloc.

After years of legal battles, the Broadway Triangle development plan continues to work its way through the courts. On January 4, 2012, the plaintiffs in the case, the Broadway Triangle Community Coalition, won a major victory when State Supreme Court Justice Emily Jane Goodman issued a preliminary injunction that has temporarily blocked the project. The left-leaning Justice Goodman explained that the impact of the development would severely increase segregation in the neighborhood. Justice Goodman, however, retired from the bench on February 28, 2012 and Justice
Shlomo S. Hagler will take the suit along with the rest of Goodman’s caseload,\textsuperscript{56} although it remains to be seen whether he will be as sympathetic to the plaintiffs. The legal counsel for the city has stated that it will appeal the temporary injunction, opening yet another chapter in an already drawn-out struggle.

LATINO CULTURE AND IDENTITY: A WORLD APART FROM THE SATMAR

If a new political moment has in fact emerged, it is the result of the Latino community’s rising influences within Williamsburg and the accompanying surge of grassroots sentiment that has challenged entrenched party boss Vito Lopez. The Latinos differ significantly, among themselves as well as in comparison to the Satmar, in the way they understand the relationship between race, place, and identity. Overall, they are far less cohesive and insular, lacking a shared identity with a clarity or intensity approaching anything like that of the Satmar’s. Moreover, they are culturally divided into ordinary workers—including many undocumented illegal immigrants—and more educated activists, like those who led the public charge against the Broadway Triangle plan. Unlike the Satmar, and somewhat surprisingly, these activists build cross-ethnic coalitions over affordable housing issues and express solidarity across racial lines in the face of gentrification. Conversely, undocumented Latinos describe racial tension and abuse at the hands of their Hasidic employers.

These differences in worldview—between Latino activists and Latino workers as well as between the Satmar and the Latino communities in general—give rise to differences in these groups’ political and organizational capacities, and by extension their success in resisting gentrification. The authors’ interviews\textsuperscript{57} and participant observation at an informal labor market in Williamsburg\textsuperscript{58} revealed crucial variation in the ways people think of their racial identity and form a related sense of place—the way in which they attach meaning to physical location. Ordinary Latinos in this neighborhood, especially the undocumented work-
ers interviewed, are far less sentimental about their homes and neighborhood. Lacking a strong attachment to Williamsburg or even the United States, they think of their true homes as their Latin American countries of origin, where their families often remain. For some, their attachment to place remains unequivocally to their countries of origin; for others, their attachment to the American communities in which they reside remains ambivalent at best.

Linés, an undocumented day laborer describing her struggle to make ends meet, casually discussed her and her friends’ living arrangements, and the possibility of moving to a different neighborhood in order to avoid overcrowding. In other words, she was far more concerned about making rent than staying in this or that particular home. She was even unsure of the name of the local social service organization that had given her meals, hinting at a real sense of indifference toward the community. Javier Bosque, director of that organization—the Southside Mission—explained that many workers don’t find civic engagement appealing because they do not see the United States as a permanent home. They are uninterested in learning English and hope to eventually return home to Mexico, El Salvador, and other home countries, a sentiment borne out in the authors’ discussions with the workers.

Their notion of social identity, spread across space and time, stands in contrast with older, static understandings of immigration in terms of assimilation or cultural retention. Recent migration scholarship has stressed the notion of transnationalism, focusing on experiences spanning national boundaries, or “multi-stranded social relations that link together societies of origin and settlement.” Transnational spaces, described by theorist Thomas Faist as “combinations of ties, positions in networks and organizations, and networks of organizations that reach across the borders of multiple states,” result in places like Williamsburg holding a drastically altered and weakened meaning for their residents.

For another group of Latinos, however—the activist leaders and their core constituency—Williamsburg has enormous meaning. Most of them were born and raised there, or have spent con-
siderable time in the area. They tend to exhibit a deep commitment to the community—particularly to its low-income residents—feeling compelled to defend the traditional neighborhood against the intrusion of the gentrifiers. Esteban Duran, one of Brooklyn Community Board 1’s fifty voting members and an aspiring local politician, cited his childhood roots in the community as a reason for returning and agitating for affordable housing, as did Rob Solano, director of Churches United for Fair Housing, one of the non-profit community groups opposing the Broadway Triangle development.

For these activists, this attachment to place also translates cross-ethnic solidarity with the Satmar over housing—in other words, unity against the common enemy of gentrification. Rob Solano said,

> When affordable housing wasn’t really an issue, we were in a moment of luxury. You had your apartment, you were set . . . But now we’re in a moment of crisis, and, in crisis, you don’t have time to be racist. When the building is burning down, you don’t have time to discriminate.

Esteban Duran echoed this conciliatory view, saying, “I don’t believe the Satmar are necessarily trying to exclude certain races, but want a plan that will give them the best potential for getting their members in.” Martin Needelman even went so far as to point out that some Satmar—those in the weaker of the two post-schism groups, who had the Broadway Triangle development steered away from them by Assemblyman Lopez—were suffering the same sort of discrimination as Latinos and others seeking affordable housing.63

At first blush, this solidarity seems odd, especially since the Satmar express exactly the opposite sentiment, with Satmar leader David Niederman, head of the powerful United Jewish Organizations (UJO) and one of the most public proponents of the Broadway Triangle plan, saying that the plan’s opponents “want that they should be the one, and that [we] should not have a part of it. That’s basically what it is. They are all greedy for money.” However, viewed in the larger context of the gentrification threatening the activists’ cherished neighborhoods, their conciliatory tone is not so strange.
Sociologist Jonathan Rieder, writing about a similar New York City case study, describes how the “vulnerability of place”—intense emotional significance attached to a neighborhood—often provokes powerful reactions that manifest themselves indirectly. The post-ethnic rhetoric of the Latino activists has every indication of being a proxy for their desire to protect their traditional low-income neighborhood against the rising tide of gentrification.

Accordingly, the transnationally-minded undocumented Latino workers, lacking this protectionist instinct, described their Hasidic employers as virulently racist. Maria, a Mexican day laborer, explained that Hasidic employers often look at her from head to toe and walk by, passing her over for one of the Polish workers standing in a group away from the Latina women; when they would hire her, they made her work ten hours without lunch. The bitterness with which she told her stories sounded nothing like the rhetoric of relative harmony from the activists, underscoring the rift between the place identity of the activists and the transitory racial identity of the workers.

This rift reveals the Latinos as fragmented, with nothing like the monolithic unity of even the post-schism Satmar. This division has crucial implications for political capacity: because the Latino leaders are not working with a cohesive, homogenous constituency sharing a uniform place or ethnic identity, they have not been as effective in interfacing with the political machine. Nevertheless, despite this disadvantage, activists like Rob Solano have scored some victories—like a successful push to add more affordable housing to a controversial 2005 rezoning plan—and continue to agitate for reform.

A NEW GRASSROOTS MODEL TO REPLACE THE MACHINE?

Might these activists represent a new breed of leaders working in a more democratically transparent and less sectarian political environment? New leaders like Esteban Duran and Rob Solano, have emerged from the Broadway Triangle controversy, claiming to
represent a way to make democratic voices heard in an otherwise stagnant machine-style party, adopting actions and language that attempt to downplay the importance of their political ambitions and emphasizing their role as compassionate advocates of those in need of affordable housing. Although they share some objectives, Duran uses primarily conventional means of organization, working through a rival to the entrenched Democratic party called the New Kings Democrats (Brooklyn is coterminous with Kings County, New York), whereas Solano reaches his constituents outside of party structures, mainly via local churches.

Duran, a son of immigrants born and raised in Williamsburg, feels a sense of obligation to promote transparency and accountability. He is no stranger to the machine, having worked on the 2005 campaign of a City Council member allied with Vito Lopez. However, following Lopez's reversal away from community-based groups and toward the Satmar, Duran felt he was no longer an appropriate ally and became involved with the New Kings Democrats, who challenge traditional party structures by supporting independent candidates typically ignored by the machine. Matt Cowherd, the group's founder, said, “One-party rule fosters corruption. In Brooklyn, Tammany Hall is very much alive and well. We felt like, because people weren’t paying attention, party leaders were getting away with murder.”

Although the Brooklyn residents targeted by New Kings for outreach appear not to be the same lower-income, mostly Latino residents for whom Duran claims to advocate, New Kings offers Duran an outlet to signal his public challenge to the established party. This kind of public challenge—even to just belong to the group, which frames itself as a reformer of the urban political machine, is to rebuke Vito Lopez—is an integral part of Duran's strategy as a community-oriented leader. He also believes he must defend his motives and embody the role of this kind of leader. He explained that he “look[s] at [New Kings] in the sense of bringing focus to practices that are happening in the borough”—in other words, he sees it as a way of exposing corruption, not as a realistic successor to the party (nor himself as a challenger to Lopez). And
he takes every opportunity to speak out against corruption in just this way.

These opportunities come largely in the form of access to public stages from which he can voice his rejection of the machine. Another such stage is the Community Board, where he is a vocal critic of the established Party. During one meeting, after an FBI representative had briefed the attendees on a new local anti-terrorism initiative and opened the floor to questions, Duran—referencing an ongoing FBI investigation into a non-profit associated with Vito Lopez and the Broadway Triangle—obliquely asked him about “the local non-profit that is currently under investigation.” Although irrelevant, the question showed the importance of visibility as a political tactic.

Rob Solano seeks to change the status quo as well, albeit by organizing through churches instead of a traditional political organization. He founded Churches United for Fair Housing in 2003 as a way to help community members who felt powerless to challenge a disappointing lack of affordable housing in a new waterfront rezoning plan. Solano credits the group’s organizational effort, which succeeded through a series of large public demonstrations and by harnessing the Community Board’s powers to weigh in on proposed zoning changes, with generating a credible grassroots movement. He says:

[The 2005 rezoning issue] gave us our clout, our credibility in the community, because we got most of what we wanted: 30% affordable housing in the revised plan . . . this is a very high percentage by nationwide standards . . . Now people come to us when they’re planning affordable housing.

Like Duran, Solano seems to be dedicated to securing affordable housing for South Williamsburg, and together they have harnessed momentum from a grassroots resurgence. Their rhetoric sharply contrasts the transactional, “votes for favors” approach of the Satmar and, until only recently, Vito Lopez, emphasizing empowerment, cooperation, and reconciliation. The New Kings Democrats have even claimed to be less interested in being successors of the Brooklyn Democratic Party than in offering tangible
community improvement. Although it is impossible to say whether this tactic is genuine, there is no denying its effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Despite their deep differences, both the Satmar and Latino communities possess enough demographic potential to make or break the profitable tide of gentrification. At different points in their histories, both the Satmar and the Latinos have made the choice to exploit the attention of political enterprises, because attention has proven more beneficial than neglect. But there are still those today who remember a time when the political machine was less entrenched (or at least less obviously so), pursuing civics without politics. Joseph Garber, an Orthodox Jew who is nonetheless marginalized because he is not fully Hasidic, has lived almost his whole life in Williamsburg and has taken up a variety of positions in local government and housing organizations to advocate for more transparency. Garber uses Community Board meetings to boldly call attention to improper dealing, often loudly and aggressively. “I’m very committed to honesty in government . . . [it] is the most noble profession when done well,” he explained. A self-admitted gadfly—“people consider me an informer because I rat them out . . . I don’t play games”—his passion for honesty in public life has brought him into conflict with some of the most powerful Satmar leaders, including Rabbi Niederman. Niederman, exemplifying the sectarian Satmar mindset of absolute unity, responded by publicly labeling Garber a *muser*—an insult that refers to a traitor who appeals to secular authorities instead of allowing Jewish courts to exercise their divine authority.

Yet many of the authors’ interviews and observations at Community Board meetings revealed that the community has a kind of begrudging respect for Garber. Perhaps they can detect that he is motivated by something beyond today’s divisive politics. As Garber himself observed, the sectarian state of affairs does not stretch quite as far back as it may sometimes seem:

Blacks and Jews, by their similarity of trouble, always had kin-
ship together. I go to East New York [Brooklyn] housing developments, there are blacks in their 80s who remember the Jews, there are ladies who can speak Yiddish!

The case study of the Broadway Triangle controversy reveals that a coordinated effort to tap into a neighborhood’s political processes is an effective means by which groups can attempt to fight against gentrification. In other words, American pluralistic, party-based democracy is deeply susceptible to the concentrated influence of sectarian groups trafficking in voting blocs and informal deals. Yet such practices have also resulted in robust local elections, media attention on a national stage, and governmental institutions invigorated by political agitators. Today, the neighborhood’s political scene mixes the traditional traits of a healthy, contentious public sphere with unavoidable signs of collusion, unfairness, and outright corruption. Thus, the Broadway Triangle is neither a tipping point of progressive, grassroots change that will usher in “kinship together”, nor ultimate proof of the political machine’s strength. It is likely some combination of both.

To view all charts and tables, visit:
http://www.helvidius.org/2012/iserp

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Notes
We adopt a cultural and historical perspective to explain the striking political empowerment of the once-marginalized Satmar Jews. Building on the seminal ethnographic work of George Kranzler (Hasidic Williamsburg 1995), Jerome Mintz (Hasidic People, 1992) and Nicole Marwell (Bargaining for Brooklyn, 2007), our interviews with both insiders and outsiders.

"rebbe", derived from Yiddish for master, teacher or mentor, refers to the leader of a Hasidic Jewish movement.

Weber 241
Kranzler 7
Kranzler 208
Weber 243
Kranzler 215 - 220
Mintz, in his ethnography, relays this sense of absolute reverence from a discussion with one of his informants:

He cared so deeply for every individual in the community that he literally remembered them not by the strength of memory but by the strength of his love and caring . . . There's not a life in this community that he hasn't touched. There's not a single person that I know that I come in contact with that did not have at least one incident [with the Rebbe] that would be considered miraculous. (Mintz 41)

Kranzler 17
Mintz 34
Kranzler 12 - 15
Marwell 43
Marwell 49
Mintz 252
Marwell 28


NYC Dept. of City Planning – Census FactFinder http://gis.nyc.gov/dcp/pa/address.jsp

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census.

We noted that the connection between “white” and “Satmar” – while strongly suggested by other sources – is inferential and required further verification; the author canvassed the target area, covering ~60 percent of the length of the streets. No fewer than 2 of every 3 pedestrians were males wearing distinctive Hasidic garb, including hat and black coat. Only one in approximately five pedestrians was black or Hispanic in appearance. Extrapolating
from this, census data, and prior ethnographies of this community, we concluded that the population of this area is predominantly Satmar.

33 http://journalism.nyu.edu/publishing/archives/livewire/archived/family_feud_will_the_real_satm/index.html
34 85,721 / sq mi vs. 63,523 / sq mi
35 Census 2000: SF3 Sample Data. Calculated by weighted averaging of the four Satmar tracts data for this item
36 Universe: Specified renter-occupied housing units paying cash rent
37 Assumption: take middle of each price bracket; setting $1,000 in place of "$1,000+"; ignoring "no cash rent" category
38 $680 for 2+ bedroom units and $702 for 3+ bedroom units
39 Assumption: take middle of each price bracket; setting $1,000 in place of "$1,000+"; ignoring "no cash rent" category
40 Ibid.
43 Jerilyn Perine, interview by Brian Lehrer, The Brian Lehrer Show, WNYC, January 17, 2012. Jerilyn Perine, executive director of Citizens Housing and Planning Council and former Commissioner of the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, said in an interview on the Brian Lehrer show, "What you see here is kind of the end of a long line of projects that really, you know, could be— look— taken as a whole didn't just pop up as a site. It's the last of the more complicated old industrial sites in this part of Brooklyn that over a very, very long period of time through urban renewal efforts have been transformed through all kinds of housing needs."
44 Ibid.
47 Even the seating areas were strikingly punctuated by different demographic pockets, with Satmar Hasidim sitting in one small cluster and community activists in another.
48 On her retirement: http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/editorials/toodles_judge_poodle_IMLEZ2BTYsXlP0grrNib1J,
49 We use pseudonyms for the undocumented laborers. Some gave only their first
names, or obviously-fabricated names.

58 At the corner of Marcy and Divisions Sts.

59 Handlin, Oscar. The Uprooted


Peggy Levitt and B. Nadya Jaworsky.


62 Faist, Thomas “Transnationalization in international migration” (2000), p. 4


64 Rieder, Jonathan. Canarsie, p. 90


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Rieder, Jonathan. Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism


