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### The Social Networks and Paradoxes of the Opt-Out Movement Amid the Common Core State Standards Implementation

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**The Social Networks and Paradoxes of  
the Opt-out Movement  
Amid the Common Core State Standards Implementation:  
The Case of New York**

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**Abstract:** Opting out of state standardized tests has recently become a movement—a series of grassroots, organized efforts to refuse to take high-stakes state standardized tests. In particular, the opt-out rates in the state of New York reached 20% in 2015 and 21% in 2016. This study aims to illustrate the social networks and examine the paradoxes that have propelled the opt-out movement in New York—the movement’s epicenter with the highest opt-out rate in the United States. Drawing on the conceptual frameworks of social movement theory, social network theory, and policy paradox, this study compiled the opt-out corpus by using the data from 221 press-coverage and 30 archival documents. Social network analysis was performed by examining the relational data that suggest coalition ties between movement actors. Further, to explicate how the movement actors forged coalition ties, all data in the corpus were then coded by Stone’s framework of policy paradox regarding how the movement goals were articulated, how the movement was framed, and what policy solutions were mobilized. In addition to identifying the movement actors and two competing coalitions, it is found that to forge coalition ties, the movement actors in the opposing coalitions articulated contested goals of standardized testing, framed the movement via symbols, numbers, and

interests, as well as mobilized policy solutions via inducements, rights, and power. The findings have important and timely implications for policymakers and movement actors as they seek and advance on common ground to make substantive changes in education policy.

**Keywords:** Common Core State Standards; education policy; network analysis; opt-out movement; policy paradox; social movement; social networks; standardized testing

### **Las redes sociales y las paradojas del movimiento *opt-out* entre la implementación de los estándares estatales Common Core: El caso de Nueva York**

**Resumen:** La exclusión de las pruebas estandarizadas estatales se ha convertido recientemente en un movimiento organizado para rehusarse a tomar pruebas estatales de alto riesgo. El índice de opt-out en el estado de Nueva York llegó a 20% en 2015 y a 21% en 2016. Este estudio ilustra redes sociales y examina las paradojas que han promovido el movimiento opt-out en Nueva York, el epicentro con el índice más alto de opt-out en los Estados Unidos. Este estudio examina cómo los actores del movimiento crearon lazos de la coalición, cómo se articularon los objetivos del movimiento, cómo se enmarcó el movimiento y cuáles soluciones de política se utilizaron en la teoría de los movimientos sociales, la teoría de las redes sociales y la paradoja de las políticas fueron movilizados. De acuerdo con este estudio, para poder crear conexiones de coalición, los actores del movimiento en coaliciones opuestas articularon objetivos disputados de pruebas estandarizadas, enmarcaron el movimiento a través de símbolos, números e intereses, así como soluciones de políticas movilizadas a través de incentivos, derechos y poderes. Los hallazgos tienen implicaciones importantes y oportunas para los formuladores de políticas y los actores del movimiento a medida que buscan un terreno común para realizar cambios sustantivos en la política educativa.

**Palabras-clave:** Common Core; política educativa; análisis de red; movimiento opt-out; paradoja de la política; movimiento social; redes sociales; evaluación

### **As redes sociais e os paradoxos do movimento *opt-out* entre a implementação do normas estaduais Common Core: O caso de Nova York**

**Resumo:** A exclusão de testes estaduais padronizado tornou-se recentemente uma organizada se recusam a tomar testes estaduais movimento de alto risco. A taxa de opt-out no estado de Nova York atingiu 20% em 2015 e 21% em 2016. Este estudo ilustra as redes sociais e examina os paradoxos que promoveram o movimento opt-out, em Nova York, o epicentro com o índice maior opt-out nos Estados Unidos. Este estudo analisa como os atores do movimento criou laços de coalizão, como os objetivos do movimento foram articulados, como o movimento foi enquadrado e que soluções apólice de seguro de carro usado na teoria dos movimentos sociais, a teoria das redes sociais e políticas paradoxo foram mobilizados. De acordo com este estudo, a fim de criar conexões de coalizão, os atores se movem em coalizões opostas objetivos disputadas teste padronizado articulados, enquadrado o movimento através de símbolos, números e interesses e soluções políticas mobilizados por meio de incentivos, direitos e poderes. Os resultados têm importante e oportuna para os decisores políticos e actores do movimento como eles procurar um terreno comum para mudanças substantivas nas implicações políticas educacionais.

**Palavras-chave:** Common Core; política educativa; análise de red; movimento opt-out; paradoja de la política; movimiento social; redes sociales; evaluación

## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to illustrate the social networks and examine the paradoxes that have propelled the opt-out movement in the state of New York. Opting out of state standardized tests is nothing new. However, with the Common Core State Standards implementation, opting out is no longer an isolated case. Rather, it has become a movement—the grassroots, organized efforts to refuse to take high-stakes standardized tests (Bennett, 2016). Nearly half of the respondents (48.9%) to the recent national survey on the opt-out movement suggests that they joined the movement between 2014 and 2015 (Pizmony-Levy & Saraisky, 2016). For some, 2015 was deemed as “the year of opting out”, as nationally over half a million students opted out of the state standardized tests. In particular, the opt-out movement in New York struck a “triumphant” note in 2015, when unprecedentedly 20% (approximately 200,000) of eligible students in grades 3-8 opted out of the New York State Assessment (Ujifusa, 2015). This record-breaking opt-out rate was shattered again in 2016, when 21% of students (approximately 230,000) opted out of state standardized tests (The New York State Education Department, 2016).

Portrayed as a grassroots movement, the opt-out movement has been considered as being led by parents (Mitra, Mann, & Hlavacik, 2016). However, parents did not launch or propel the movement singlehandedly (Pizmony-Levy & Saraisky, 2016). For instance, the teachers’ union robo-called its members to remind them of the option of opting out of state standardized tests (Brody, 2015); some nonprofit education advocacy organizations provided guides and contact information for the opt-out parents across the states. As a relatively new phenomenon, little is known about the opt-out movement. While the extant literature examined the movement at an aggregated national level, less is known about the movement at the state level. In fact, the opt-out movement momentum varies substantially from state to state. On one end of the spectrum, the high opt-out rates in 13 states in 2015 drew attention from the U.S. Department of Education (Strauss, 2016); on the other end of the spectrum, 34 states and the District of Columbia did not allow opting out of state standardized tests (Lorenzo, 2015). Considering such substantial variations among states, this study therefore focuses on the movement’s epicenter in New York. Drawing upon social movement theory, social network theory, and Stone’s (2001) framework on policy paradox, this study seeks answers to four research questions:

1. What were the social networks that have propelled the opt-out movement in New York?
2. What goals were articulated by the opt-out movement’s major actors?
3. How was the opt-out movement framed by the major actors?
4. What policy solutions were mobilized by the major actors of the opt-out movement?

The answers to these questions are particularly important as the movement in New York is not an isolated phenomenon. The opt-out rate in at least 13 states (California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Illinois, Maine, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington, and Wisconsin) possibly exceeded 5% in 2015 (Strauss, 2016). Thus, an enriched understanding of the movement in New York makes an important and timely contribution by informing the movement actors across states, including educational leaders and policymakers, as they seek and advance on common ground and capitalize on the movement to make substantive changes in education policy for the interest of students.

## Setting the Context of the Opt-out Movement

To study the opt-out movement, we must start by setting the context. Nationally, the movement came to the fore in 2013 amid the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. Since the sweeping adoption of the Common Core in 2009 across the states, the Common Core and its implementation have met with growing resistance. This growing resistance to high-stakes standardized testing was detailed in the book *More Than a Score: The New Uprising Against High-Stakes Testing*, in which teachers, students, and parents shared their accounts of standardized testing (Hagopian, 2014). For teachers, the rise of the Badass Teachers Association was prompted by the shared belief held by those who “refuse to be blamed for the failure of our society to erase poverty and inequality, and refuse to accept assessments, tests and evaluations imposed by those who have contempt for real teaching and learning” (The Badass Teachers Association, 2013, para. 4). Also in 2013, over 20 teachers in the Seattle Public Schools called a press conference, announcing their refusal to administer the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test (Naison, 2014). The district superintendent initially threatened the teachers with a ten-day suspension without pay, but later compromised and stated that high school students may opt out of the MAP test. The students in the Portland Student Union led a campaign of opting out of standardized testing (Garcia, 2014). The parent, Jeannette Deutermann, started the Facebook group of the Long Island Opt Out Info which attracted hundreds of group members within the first week (Deutermann, 2014). A recent study of over half of a million tweets with the hashtags #CommonCore and #CCSS in 2015 found that the Twitter users in all 50 states and the District of Columbia expressed negative sentiment towards the Common Core, regardless of whether or how long the states have adopted the Common Core (Wang & Fikis, 2016). Moreover, the hashtag #OptOut was one of the most frequently used hashtags by Twitter users in their discourse of the Common Core on Twitter. Further, the 2016 PKD/Gallup poll showed nearly half (43%) of the public school parents supported opting out, suggesting a remarkable increase from 31% in the previous year of 2015 (Phi Delta Kappa International, 2015, 2016). Not only did the public discuss the Common Core adoption and its implementation in the form of state standardized tests, they also voted with their feet. Nationally, over 670,000 students, according to the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, opted out of high-stakes standardized tests in 2015 (FairTest, 2016).

In the state of New York, the Common Core State Standards were adopted in 2010. New York became one of the first states to administer the Common Core-aligned tests in 2013. Then in 2014, approximately 60,000 students opted out of the state standardized tests. In the year that followed, the number of the opt-out students quadrupled to approximately 240,000, far exceeding that in New Jersey—the state with the second largest number (130,000) of the opt-out students in the same year of 2015. The ensuing year brought much change to the opt-out movement in New York. In January 2016, the former New York State Education Commissioner John B. King Jr., who spearheaded the implementation of the Common Core, became the Secretary of Education (The U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In March 2016, three new members to the state Board of Regents were elected to join the 17-member board, in which the majority of the board members disagreed with the direction of the previous leadership under the former Education Commissioner John King and the former Regents Chancellor Merryl Tisch (Dewitt, 2016). Meanwhile, the newly elected Regents Chancellor Betty Rosa even offered verbal support for the opt-out movement by telling *The Wall Street Journal* reporter that, “If I was a parent and I had a child who was taking these exams, and I looked at the conditions that exist, obviously I would say yes, I would opt out” (The New York Daily News, 2016, para. 4). On the political front, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton

also took an interest in the opt-out movement. When interviewed by *The Newsday*, Hillary Clinton voiced her support for the Common Core, but described its implementation as “disastrous”, and further voiced her opposition to the opt-out movement (The Newsday, 2016).

The existing research on the movement has been limited. Still, prior literature, which examined the movement at an aggregated national level, suggests that the movement emerged from the underlying tension surrounding the Common Core State Standards and high-stakes standardized testing (Bennett, 2016; Pizmony-Levy & Saraisky, 2016; Mitra et al., 2016). To direct attention to the social context of the movement (Bearman & Everett, 1993), this study focuses on the opt-out movement’s epicenter in New York to not only provide an inroads to understand the social networks that have propelled the movement, but also build upon prior movement network studies (e.g., Pizmony-Levy & Saraisky, 2016) by explicating how the coalition ties were forged through evoking the arguments on the movement’s goals, framing, and policy solutions.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual underpinnings of this study is grounded in the literature intersecting social movement theory, social network theory, and policy paradox. In this section, I first applied social movement theory to conceptualize the opt-out movement, and then applied social network theory to operationalize the movement as the social networks composed of movement actors and their coalition ties. To further understand how the coalition ties were forged, I then draw on Stone’s (2001) framework of policy paradox to analyze how the movement goals were articulated, how the movement was framed, and what policy solutions were mobilized by the movement actors.

### **Conceptualizing and Operationalizing Social Movements**

Social movement theory was used in this study to conceptualize the opt-out movement, and social network theory was used to operationalize the movement as the networks. Social movement theory posits that a social movement is a form of collective action that emerges from highly charged social contexts (Morris, 1984, 1999; Morris & Mueller, 1992). In such social contexts, there are many factors coming into play in mobilizing the social movement, including institutions and organizations, mobilizing structures, emotions manifested by collective enthusiasm, and the resultant collective action. Specifically, the institutions, either formal or informal organizations, create and coordinate collective action through communication and resource sharing channels. All these factors in a social movement can be operationalized as the social networks, as social network theory holds that actors are connected by their ties related to a given issue of interest (Borgatti & Everett, 1997; Saunders, 2008; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Consequently, in social networks of a social movement, the institutions and organizations are considered as the movement actors which are connected by their coalition ties functioning as the channels to amass social capital by building alliances, coordinating efforts, and pooling resources (Coleman, 1990; Crossley & Ibrahim, 2012; Diani, 1995; Lin, 1999; Marwell & Oliver, 1993; Snow, Zurcher, & Ekland-Olson, 1980). In this study, the individuals and groups became the movement actors when they engaged in the movement through providing support or voicing opposition. For instance, the parents became the movement actors when they opted their children out of state standardized tests; the Long Island Opt Out group and the teachers’ unions became the movement actors when the teachers’ unions helped distribute the Long Island Opt Out group’s event fliers about boycotting state standardized tests (Ferrette, 2016); some civil rights groups became the actors when they issued a statement explicitly opposing the movement (Schweig, 2016); the High Achievement of New York, a pro-Common Core advocacy organization, became the movement actor when it told the reporters that its goal was for the majority of suburban

areas to participate in state standardized tests, instead of opting out (Donachie, 2016b). As a result, the institutions and organizations as the movement actors, along with their coalition ties, constitute the social networks of the opt-out movement; the network's outcome is considered as the collective action of the opt-out movement.

Coalition ties have been operationalized in an array of approaches in prior network analysis studies on social movements and policymaking. For instance, in the social networks accounting for the rise of civil society in Mexico, the coalition ties were operationalized as co-participation in protest campaigns together (Wada, 2014). The actors (i.e., workers, peasants, students, civic associations, and non-governmental organizations) were thus connected by the coalition ties if they co-attended a protest campaign. Moreover, in the networks of reading curriculum policymaking, the ties were operationalized as the collaborations or interactions between the actors (e.g., educational organizations, school districts, business or businesses associations, private reading consultants, and philanthropic foundations) (Song & Miskel, 2005, 2007; Song & Yong, 2008; Yong, Wang, & Lewis, 2016). In the networks of charter school reform in the state of Washington, the ties were operationalized as the wealthy elites' and their affiliated philanthropies' financial ties through donation or contribution to the Yes on 1240 campaign (Au & Ferrare, 2014). Following the operationalizations of ties in prior literature, this study therefore considers a coalition tie exists if (1) the groups and organizations co-participate in an event regarding the opt-out movement, and/or (2) they collaborate or interact with one another in the movement. By doing so, the opt-out movement can be elucidated as the social networks, in which the movement actors are connected by the coalition ties functioning as the conduit to mobilize and coordinate resources in the movement. However, the social networks of the opt-out movement only illustrate whether the coalition ties exist. To further examine how the coalition ties were forged, this study then drew upon Stone's (2001) framework of policy paradox to unpack the rich information hidden in the dichotomous ties of the opt-out movement's social networks.

### **Policy Paradox**

The axiom of Stone's framework is that a policy is usually not created "in a fairly orderly sequence of stages" (Stone, 2001, p. 10), in which a problem is defined, and solutions are proposed, evaluated, selected, and implemented. Instead, policymaking "is a constant struggle over the criteria for classification, the boundaries of categories, and the definition of ideals that guide the way people behave" (p. 11). As a result, the paradoxes are ubiquitous in three elements of policymaking—goals, problems, and policy solutions. The goals—the enduring values (e.g., equity, efficiency, security, and liberty)—are usually contradictory and are evoked to unite or divide people. The problems are defined and portrayed deliberately through symbols, numbers, causes, interests, and decisions to "win most people to one's side and the most leverage over one's opponents" (p. 133). The policy solutions—also called policy instruments (e.g., inducements, rules, facts, rights, and power)—are the "ongoing strategies for structuring relationships and coordinating behavior to achieve collective purposes" (p. 261). From the vantage point of policy paradox, this study examines what and how paradoxes were used by the movement actors to seek allies and build coalition ties in the movement. Specifically, this study focuses on how the goals were articulated, how the movement was framed, and how the policy solutions were mobilized in the movement.

### **Methods**

To illustrate the social networks and examine the paradoxes that have propelled the opt-out movement, this study used the data collected from press coverage and archival documents to first conduct social network analysis to illustrate the social networks that have propelled the movement.

Next, a document analysis was performed to examine the paradoxes of the movement in terms of the movement goals, framing, and policy solutions. Here I present in detail the data collection procedures and analytic strategies used in this study.

### Data Sources

Data for this study came from 221 press-coverage and 30 archival documents on the opt-out movement in New York—a state with the highest opt-out rate in the country, thereby garnering much media attention. A total of 221 press coverage is the primary data source for this study. This is because “media attention helps to define public understanding of a movement itself—who its leaders are, what it wants, and how it seeks to bring about social change” (Andrews & Caren, 2010, p. 841), rendering press coverage the well-suited data source to fulfill the purpose of this study. To collect the press coverage on the movement, the keywords “opt out”, “education”, and “New York” were used to set up Google Alerts to monitor and archive the press coverage of the movement on a daily basis from January 1 to August 31, 2016. The press coverage includes national liberal (e.g., *The New York Times*), centrist (e.g., *Cable News Network*), and conservative (e.g., *Fox News*) sources, as well as local sources such as *The Long Island Press*. For the purpose of this study of the opt-out movement, I included the press coverage only related to opting out of state standardized tests, and excluded the coverage on opting out of other issues, such as sexual education, religious education, and public school system.

Next, the press coverage data on the opt-out movement were supplemented by 30 publicly available archival documents, adding to the reliability and credibility of the findings from this study. The documents were identified and included in this study if (1) their hyperlinks were inserted by the press coverage online, (2) the Google searches by the document names mentioned in the press coverage directed the researcher to where the documents were published online, and (3) they were germane to the opt-out movement in New York. By doing so, the archival documents were downloaded from the websites of an array of organizations (e.g., the U.S. Department of Education and the New York State Education Department) and groups (e.g., the United Opt Out, the Long Island Opt-out, and The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights). Together, the 221 press coverage and 30 archival documents make up the opt-out corpus.

### Data Analysis

To identify the movement actors, social network analysis was performed by examining the relational data that suggest the coalition ties between the actors in the opt-out corpus. As noted earlier, the opt-out movement’s social networks are constituted of the movement actors and their coalition ties. Among the movement actors, to distinguish supporters from opponents, this study coded the actors by their sentiment towards the opt-out movement: supporters are those who expressed positive sentiment towards the movement; opponents are those with negative sentiment. For instance, if a parent teacher association (PTA) encouraged parents to opt out, then the PTA was considered as the movement supporter. If a civil rights group issued a press release to criticize the opt-out movement, then the group was considered as the movement opponents. As such, the differentiation of opponents from supporters provides rich information on how the two opposing sides forged coalitions, respectively. Moreover, the coalition ties were recorded if the data suggest: (1) the groups and organizations co-participate in an event regarding the opt-out movement, and/or (2) they collaborate or interact with one another in the movement. A couple of examples would suffice. A coalition tie between the teachers’ union and the Long Island Opt Out group was recorded when the media reported that the teachers’ union joined a Long Island Opt Out group’s event and distributed the fliers about opting out (Ferrette, 2016). A coalition tie between the New York State Education Department and the U.S. Department of Education was recorded when the



U.S. Department of Education urged the New York State Education Department in a letter to sanction local education agencies with a high opt-out rate, and then the New York State Education Department punished the schools with the high opt-out rate by withholding grants (The Lockport Union-Sun & Journal, 2016). After identifying the movement actors and their coalition ties, the opt-out movement's social networks were visualized and analyzed using the software NodeXL. Further, I calculated degree and betweenness centrality of the movement actors to identify who were at the center of the network, which suggest who were the major movement actors. I also calculated density and fragmentation index of the two subgroups of the movement actors—the supporters and opponents—to compare the two opposing coalitions' network structure. This actor-actor network is a one-mode network because it contains only one category of nodes (in this case the movement actors) and their coalition ties.

To capture the larger social context of the opt-out movement, this study further views the movement situated in the larger context of the Common Core State Standards and the New York State Assessment, as noted in prior literature (Bennett, 2016; Foster, 2016; Pizmony-Levy & Saraisky, 2016). Thus, this study further included these highly salient contextual factors in the movement's two-mode social network (the actor-contextual factor network) which contain two categories of nodes (in this case the movement actors and the contextual factors). The two-mode social networks have been constructed and analyzed in many policy studies. For instance, in the political networks of climate change, the two-mode networks include not only the actors who were the witnesses at congressional hearings on climate change, but also the statements made by the actors (Fisher, Leifeld, & Iwaki, 2013; Fisher, Waggle, & Leifeld, 2013; Leifeld, 2016). In this study, adding the focal issues related to the opt-out movement (i.e., the opt-out movement, the Common Core State Standards, and the New York State Assessment) to the network provides a richer backdrop of the social context of the movement.

In doing so, the networks in this study are fundamentally different in two ways from the one in Pizmony-Levy and Saraisky's (2016) study on the opt-out movement. First, the scopes of the networks are different. The social networks in Pizmony-Levy and Saraisky's study are at the national level, including the opt-out related organizations in various states (e.g., FL Opt Out, GA Opt Out, and CA Opt Out). By contrast, this study zoomed in on the state of New York—the state with the highest opt-out rate in the country. Second, the natures of network ties are different. The ties in this study represent the coalitions between the actors; whereas in Pizmony-Levy and Saraisky's study, the ties represent the organizations contacted the same survey respondent regarding the opting out.

One shortfall of network models is that they tend to simplify the rich content of ties to dichotomy—whether the tie is present or not (Krinsky, 2010). To date, there has been no good solution to this inherent limitation in the network studies of coalitions. The strength of coalition ties (i.e., how many times a movement actor is referenced in press coverage) rarely contains unbiased information, because reporters and journalists largely decide how often an organization or an individual are interviewed (Leifeld, 2016). To surmount this limitation, this study took a close-up view of the content of ties by employing Stone's (2001) framework of policymaking to advance our understanding of what major arguments were used by the movement actors to forge coalition ties. Therefore, after identifying major actors in the opt-out movement from social network analysis, all data in the opt-out corpus were then analyzed from the policy paradox perspective. That is, all qualitative data were then coded by Stone's framework in terms of how the movement goals were articulated, how the movement was framed, and what policy solutions were mobilized by different actors.

## Results

### The Social Networks of the Movement

According to the opt-out corpus, the movement’s actor-actor network is visualized in Figure 1 to reveal the aggregated categories of the movement actors, and the de-aggregated list of major movement actors are displayed in Table 1. In the actor-actor network, the actors in red color represent the movement supporters. They comprise the advocacy groups and organizations (e.g., the Long Island Opt Out and the New York State Allies for Public Education), the teachers’ unions (e.g., the New York State United Teachers and the Levittown United Teachers), the opt-out parents and students, as well as the pro-opt-out teachers. By contrast, the actors in blue color represent the movement opponents, including the education agencies (e.g., the U.S. Department of Education and the New York State Education Department), some civil rights groups (e.g., the Civil and Human Rights Coalition), the opposing groups (e.g., the High Achievement New York and the New York Campaign for Achievement Now), the Common Core Task Force, some school leaders (e.g., some superintendents and school principals), and some parents.

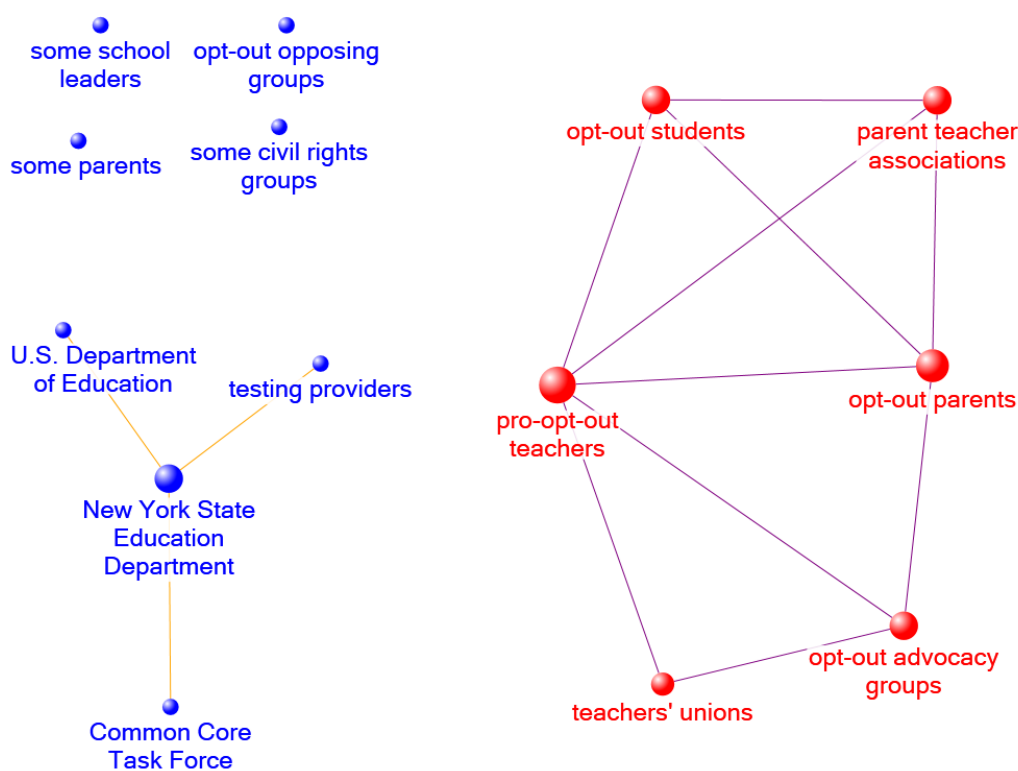


Figure 1. The actor-actor network of the opt-out movement in New York

Note: The node size is proportional to degree centrality. The purple ties represent positive sentiment shared by the actors towards the movement, and the orange ties represent negative sentiment.

Table 1  
*Major Opt-out Movement Actors in the State of New York*

Supporters	Opponents
Advocacy groups/organizations	Education agencies
- Class Size Matters	- New York State Education Department
- Network for Public Education	- U.S. Department of Education
- New York State Allies for Public Education	Some civil rights groups
- Long Island Opt Out	- Civil and Human Rights Coalition
- Opt Out CNY group	- National Council of La Raza
- Stop Common Core in New York State	Opposing groups/organizations
Teachers' unions	- High Achievement New York
- New York State United Teachers	- Bellwether Education
- Levittown United Teachers	- Rethinking Testing group
- Mahopac Teachers Association	- New York Campaign for Achievement Now
- Wappingers Congress of Teachers	Common Core Task Force
- Wantagh United Teachers	Some school leaders
- West Seneca Teachers Association	- Some superintendents
Some parent teacher associations	- Some school principals
Opt-out parents	Some parents
Opt-out students	
Pro-opt-out teachers	

Who were the central actors in the opt-out movement in New York? According to the centrality results in Table 2, for the movement supporters, the pro-opt-out teachers have the highest degree (5) and betweenness (3.5) centrality, indicating they are the major actors who have forged the largest number of coalition ties with other groups (e.g., the opt-out parents, the opt-out advocacy groups, the teachers' unions, the parent teacher associations, and the opt-out students) to mobilize and coordinate resources for the movement. The opt-out parents were also the central actor in the movement, having four coalition ties with the parent teachers associations, the opt-out advocacy groups, the opt-out students, and the pro-opt-out teachers. For the movement opponents, the New York State Education Department has the highest degree (3) and betweenness (3.0) centrality, indicating it interacted with the Common Core Task Force, the U.S. Department of Education, and the testing providers to address the issues related to the opt-out movement.

All movement actors in Figure 1 fall into two subgroups: movement supporters in red color and movement opponents in blue. The movement supporters were much more well connected by the coalitions ties than the opponents, as evidenced by the supporter subgroup's density (0.6000) substantially higher than that of the opponents (0.107). Moreover, the supporter subgroup's fragmentation index is 0, indicating all movement supporters were connected to one another. By sharp contrast, the opponent subgroup's fragmentation index is 0.786, indicating they were highly fragmented and no coalition tie was found among some civil rights groups, some school leaders, the anti-opt-out parents, and the opt-out opposing groups. The movement supporters' well-connected network structure stands in contrast with the opponents' fragmented network structure, explaining why the movement has gained traction in New York when the opponents, particularly the education agencies, had much more authority-based power over standardized testing.

Table 2  
*Results of social network analysis of the opt-out movement*

	Degree centrality	Betweenness centrality	Density	Fragmentation
Subgroup 1: movement supporters			0.600	0
pro-opt-out teachers	5	3.5		
opt-out parents	4	1.0		
opt-out advocacy groups	3	0.5		
parent teacher associations	3	0		
opt-out students	3	0		
teachers' unions	2	0		
Subgroup 2: movement opponents			0.107	0.786
New York State Education Department	3	3.0		
Common Core Task Force	1	0		
testing providers	1	0		
U.S. Department of Education	1	0		
opt-out opposing groups	0	0		
some civil rights groups	0	0		
some parents	0	0		
some school leaders	0	0		

After analyzing the actor-actor network of the opt-out movement, this study also visualized the actor-contextual factor network in Figure 2. To do so, the focal issues of the movement—the Common Core State Standards, the New York State Assessment, and the movement—were added to Figure 1. Moreover, the movement actors' sentiment towards those focal issues were represented by ties: positive sentiment in purple, and negative sentiment in orange. To highlight the movement actors' sentiment towards the focal issues, the actors' coalition ties in Figure 1 were visualized in dotted gray lines. In Figure 2, the sentiment ties in the movement's social network manifest a consistent pattern: most movement actors expressed the exact opposite sentiment towards the opt-out movement and the New York State Assessment, regardless of the actors being the movement supporters or opponents. For example, the opt-out parents and the Long Island Opt Out supported the movement and expressed negative sentiment towards the New York State Assessment; whereas the Civil and Human Rights Coalition and the High Achievement New York criticized the movement and expressed positive sentiment towards the New York State Assessment. While this finding is not surprising, it clearly demonstrates that standardized testing and the Common Core are the focal issues of the movement.

### **The Paradoxes of the Movement**

How did the movement actors forge coalition ties in the network? According to Stone's (2001) framework of policy paradox, it is found that the movement actors on the opposing sides articulated contested goals of standardized testing, framed the movement via symbols, numbers, and interests, and mobilized policy solutions via inducements, rights, and power. I now present the findings in detail on the movement's goals, framing, and policy solutions.

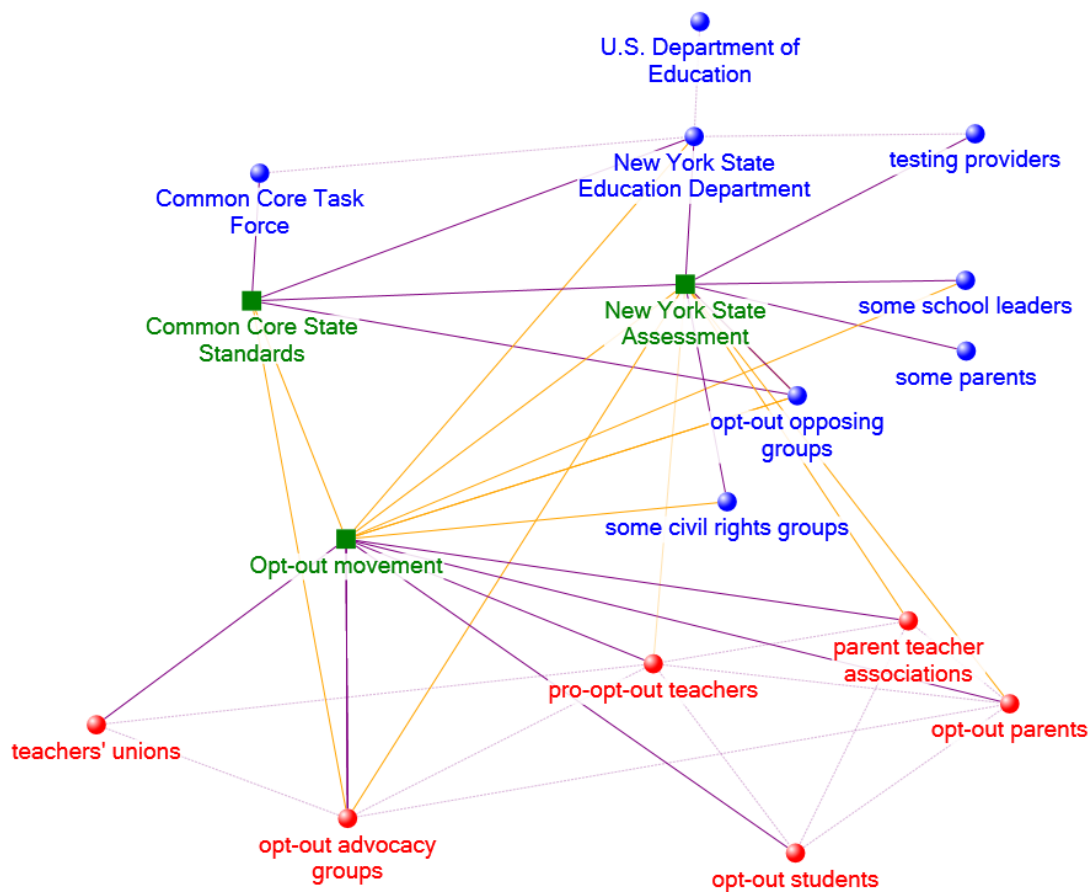


Figure 2. The actor-contextual factor network of the opt-out movement in New York

**Contested goals: Efficiency and equity vs. control over education.** In the movement, the two opposing sides had contested conceptions of the goals of high-stakes standardized testing, leading to competing arguments on the opt-out movement. On the one hand, efficiency and equity were the goals of standardized testing upheld by the movement opponents. The New York State Education Department and some civil rights groups unequivocally asserted that standardized testing was the only objective measure of student progress, holding teachers and schools accountable; taxpayers were entitled to know whether their money spent on public education was used effectively. For instance, the New York State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elisa said “the tests are the only objective measure to compare and measure student progress” (Stoianoff, 2016, para. 3). In a press release announcing their opposition to the opt-out movement, 12 national civil and human rights groups (The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, The American Association of University Women, Association of University Centers on Disabilities, Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, Inc., Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, League of United Latin American Citizens, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Council of La Raza, National Disability Rights Network, National Urban League, Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, and TASH) stated,

Our commitment to fair, unbiased, and accurate data collection and reporting resonates greatest in our work to improve education. The educational outcomes for

the children we represent are unacceptable by almost every measurement. And we rely on the consistent, accurate, and reliable data provided by annual statewide assessments to advocate for better lives and outcomes for our children. These data are critical for understanding whether and where there is equal opportunity. (The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, 2015, para. 3)

In an article in *The New York Post*, Riley (2016) argued that the opt-out movement “deprive[s] parents, schools and taxpayer of valuable information about how well (or badly) we are educating our kids” (Riley, 2016, para. 1). Therefore, opting out denied the access to student learning data, rendering test scores inaccurate in evaluating schools and districts. An opt-out movement opponent stated, “You can opt out but you may be opting out of your child’s future” (Donachie, 2016b, para. 25).

Moreover, the movement opponents argued that standardized test scores reveal the achievement gap among racial and socioeconomic groups. The opting out in New York was concentrated in Long Island’s Nassau and Suffolk counties, two of the wealthiest counties in the country, in which more than half of the students opted out of the state standardized tests (Franchi, 2016). By contrast, according to a recent 2016 PDK/Gallup poll, approximately two-thirds of African-Americans (67%) voiced their opposition to opting out, higher than 59% of Americans (Phi Delta Kappa International, 2016). Since opting out was concentrated among White and middle class (Pizmony-Levy & Saraisky, 2016; Ujifusa, 2015), as attested by the hashtag #OptOutIsSoWhite on social media, the opt-out parents were “inadvertently making a choice to undermine efforts to improve schools for *every* [emphasis added] child” (Talyor, 2016, para. 2), according to a statement by a civil rights group. The movement was thus described as “ridiculous, selfish, and more than a little hypocritical” (Riseman, 2016, para. 15) by a co-founder of a nonprofit organization that aims to improve educational outcomes for high-needs students.

On the other hand, the movement’s ardent supporters argued that the goal of high-stakes standardized testing revolved around who takes control over education, and thus opting out was to take back the control over education. Many opt-out parents saw standardized testing as part of a corporate takeover agenda to wring profits from public education by charging districts for testing cost, by replacing low-performing schools with charter schools run by for-profit companies, and by selling student data to colleges, military recruiters, and businesses (e.g., credit card companies and cellphone carriers) (Lederman, 2016; Taylor, 2016). The hashtag #TestingIsSoGreen was thus coined on social media. The New York State Education Department’s decision to change the testing provider from Pearson Inc. to Questar Assessment Inc. in 2015 did not assuage the movement supporters’ dissatisfaction after the revelation that Questar hired its chief assessment officer from Pearson (Solnik, 2016). The movement supporters further argued that teachers know their students best, and “it is the teachers’ authority to assess students learning”, rather than the tests that take place only once a year. As a corollary, the opt-out movement was a means to an end—retaking the control over education.

**The movement framed by symbols, numbers, and interests.** The major actors in the opt-out movement primarily framed the movement in three ways to build alliances and garner public support: symbolic representations, numbers, and interests. First, symbolic representations were attested by the helplessness-and-control narratives and the wedge-and-incline argument. In the helplessness-and-control narratives told by many parents, the helpless was symbolically represented by the students, particularly those with test anxiety and special needs. For instance,

Jeanette Deutermann founded the Long Island Opt Out group on Facebook after she investigated into her son's test anxiety, stating,

I saw it [her son's test anxiety] emerge a little bit during testing season in third grade. ... But then the test anxiety became constant in fourth grade. After speaking with teachers and parents, I knew it was the testing. (Burriss, 2015, para. 3)

Many educators said, “the standardized tests unnecessarily humiliate students with special needs, pushing the children to lose their already wobbly self-esteem and hinder their learning” (Finch, 2016, para. 8). Further, the anti-Common Core advocates argued, “[the] Common Core-aligned tests are too difficult and children with disabilities shouldn't be expected to undertake the same exams” (para. 8). In the wedge-and-incline argument, standardized testing was metaphorically imagined as the wedge: once it gets in the door of public education, education privatization—the metaphoric incline—will be pushed through, doing a disservice to students, minority students in particular. This argument implies that the first move—standardized testing—should be avoided to prevent the inevitable “push” towards the direction of privatizing public education. Jia Lee, an opt-out activist and a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher contended that the tests were part of a corporate agenda (NBC News, 2016).

Second, how numbers were used to frame the opt-out movement attests to Stone's (2001) claim that no number is innocent. The movement supporters claimed that standardized test scores (numbers) were an invalid measure of student learning, teacher performance, and school accountability. Moreover, the two opposing sides fought how to interpret the opt-out rate. When the opt-out rate reached a plateau in some districts in 2016, it was interpreted by one side as the manifestation of suppression and intimidation—the schools pressuring parents to have their children take the tests, and by the other side as the movement losing its steam. The interpretation of the movement momentum was in the eye of the beholder, depending on whether they are supporters or opponents of the opt-out movement.

Third, the interests were defined widely different. In the pro-movement framing, students were harmed when high-stakes standardized testing provoked undue stress, when the test-driven culture took away student learning time to prepare for and administer standardized tests, when students were simply defined by test scores, and when student data were sold by testing companies as a moneymaker. Teachers were harmed by being taken away their authority over evaluating student achievement, and by being tethered invalid standardized test scores to teacher evaluation. Taxpayers were harmed by using their hard-earned money to administer for-profit testing companies' flawed standardized tests. In contrast to the pro-movement's framing of interests, the movement opponents framed the movement as White, affluent families' irresponsible behaviors. Therefore, the minority students were harmed, as the school ratings might be in jeopardy, potentially leading to decreased school funding. Further, the movement was not framed by the opponents as the movement to protect students from excessive testing, but rather the movement led by the “teachers' unions and far-left policy leaders to completely abolish any serious accountability within student assessments” (Bennett, 2016, para. 7), according to William Bennett, the former Secretary of Education.

**Policy solutions mobilized through inducements, rights, and power.** In the wake of the opt-out movement, three policy solutions were primarily mobilized: inducements, rights, and power. First, inducements—incentives (e.g., promises and rewards) and deterrence (e.g., threats and punishments)—were used simultaneously by the New York State Education Department with the attempt to change the opt-out parents' mind. The positive inducements include the state officials promised to (1) shorten state tests by cutting the number of questions; (2) remove

test time limits for students, (3) have teachers review the tests; and (4) impose a four-year moratorium on using test results to evaluate teachers and principals (The New York State Education Department, 2015). Such positive inducements pleased some parents. However, for others, such inducements were necessary but not sufficient policy solutions. They saw the inducements as “minor, cosmetic changes” and “lip service”.

Meanwhile, the negative inducements were used by the education agencies in the form of top-down threats, sanctions, and punitive regulations targeting the states, districts, and schools with a high opt-out rate. In December 2015, the Department of Education sent a letter to all state school officials, warning the potential loss of Title I funds and urging states to sanction local education agencies with a high opt-out rate (i.e., exceeding 5%) by withholding funds and lower school ratings (Strauss, 2016). The high opt-out rate was again addressed in the Department of Education’s proposed regulations Section 200.15 stating,

failure to meet the 95 percent participation rate requirement is factored in the State’s accountability system in a meaningful, publicly visible manner through a significant impact on a school’s performance level or summative rating, identification for targeted support and improvement, or another equally rigorous, State determined action, thus providing an *incentive* [emphasis added] for the school to ensure that all students participate in annual State assessments. (The U.S. Department of Education, 2016)

At the state level, in 2016 the New York State Education Department kept 99 schools off the Reward School list, and 16 New York City schools were ruled ineligible for up to \$75,000 in grants, due to the high opt-out rate (The Lockport Union-Sun & Journal, 2016). The schools’ loss of funding, according to the Regents Chancellor Betty Rose, was not a punishment but rather “*unintended consequences*”. While the semantics of “incentive” and “unintended consequences” are distinct from “punishment”, they were interpreted the same by the movement supporters as the punishments.

In addition, some opt-out parents claimed that they and their children were punished, in the form of harassment and intimidation, for exercising their right to opt out of the state standardized tests. Yvonne Gasperino, founder and administrator of the Stop Common Core in New York State Facebook page, said harassment, intimidation, and punishment were a common experience shared by the opt-out parents, including “favoritism ... grade extortion, personal phone calls by some teachers trying to influence the parent’s decision, bribery via contests with monetary or other rewards, and exerting authority over the children who refused. ... [as well as] children being reprimanded by some school officials for decisions their parents made on their behalf” (White, 2016, para. 9). In fact, the opt-out parents were called “unreasonable” and the pro-opt-out teachers were called “unethical” by the New York State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia (Spotlight News, 2016).

Another policy solution revolved around the parents’ right of opting out. The New York City Councilman Daniel Dromm argued that the New York State Education Department “has not done an adequate job of informing parents of their rights” (Donachie, 2016a, para. 3), even though the City Council approved a resolution on March 31, 2015, requesting the State Education Department to amend the Parents’ Bill of Rights and Responsibilities to include the information about how parents can opt their children out of testing. The opt-out supporters claimed that education officials not informing parents of their opt-out right contributed to the opt-out population skewing toward wealthy and White families. Further, the Capital Region Republican Assemblyman Jim Tedisco wrote a letter to the Regents Chancellor Betty Rosa, asking for her support for the Common Core Parental Refusal Act which codified the parents’ right to opt their



children out of tests (Willard, 2016). Moreover, deriving from the parents' right to opt out is the teachers' right to inform parents of opting out. A spokeswoman for the New York City Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña said teachers should not advise parents to opt out if they speak as representatives of the Department of Education; whereas the teachers argued that the lines between their identities as educators and private citizens were blurry.

Facing the negative inducements and the ambiguity in parents' opt-out right, some parents resorted to the third policy solution: gaining authority-based power in the policymaking system. Some opt-out parents were elected and won their seats in the districts' school board. In doing so, they gained the power to advocate for "a more holistic" education approach that goes beyond test scores, placing focus on the whole child. In one district, three Long Island Opt Out-endorsed board members were elected in 2015 to serve on the nine-member board (Franchi, 2016). In addition to amassing power at the local level, the Long Island Opt Out group was active at the state level by strongly supporting the election of Todd Kaminsky (D-Long Beach) to the State Senate, who sponsored the bill that untethered teacher evaluation from standardized testing scores, and wrote a letter to the Secretary of Education John King to urge the Department of Education to reconsider its decision to punish school districts with the high opt-out rate (The New York State Senate, 2016).

## Discussion

The opt-out movement in New York presents a unique case in a state with the highest opt-out rate in the United States in 2015 and 2016. This study illustrates the social networks and examines the paradoxes that have propelled and will continue to galvanize the opt-out movement. In addition to identifying the supporters and opponents as the major movement actors, the findings of this study demonstrate how the movement actors forged coalition ties by articulating contested goals, framing the movement, and mobilizing policy solutions. By revealing the paradoxes of the opt-out movement—the way the opposing sides clash, the points of contention, and the movement actors' strategies and approaches, the findings of this study have profound and timely policy implications as the movement actors seek and advance on common ground and capitalize on the movement to make substantive changes in education policy for the interest of students.

### **The Grassroots Approach to Influence and Power in Education Policymaking**

One intriguing finding of this study is the grassroots approach to amassing influence and power in education policymaking. The pro-opt-out teachers were the most central actors, followed by the opt-out parents, the opt-out advocacy groups, the parent teacher associations, and the opt-out students. They emerged as the central actors in the opt-out movement as they built coalition ties with one another to mobilize and coordinate resources, thereby accruing influence and power. This finding is in contrast to Song et al.'s (2005) study in which the non-government actors had much less influence than the government actors in reading curriculum policymaking at the state level. While the authority-based power in education policymaking is not equally distributed among stakeholders and "more diffused and weaker interest are less likely to organize effective groups to represent their 'latent' opinions" (Glynn & Herbst, 2015, p. 98), the non-government actors, most of whom emerged as the opt-out movement supporters, brought their voice on standardizing testing to the fore and pressured educational officials to address them. They did so by forging coalition ties through interacting with allies regarding the movement's goal, framing, and policy solutions strategically and consistently.

First, the movement supporters forged coalition ties by deliberately communicating with allies the movement's goal. By stating the movement's goal as parents and teachers re-taking control over education, the movement supporters not only mobilized the existing social networks (e.g., the

social interactions between teachers and parents in the teacher parent associations), but also built alliance with the teachers' unions and many advocacy groups such as the Network for Public Education Foundation, the New York State Allies for Public Education, Class Size Matters, the Stop Common Core in New York State. The deliberately crafted argument on the parents' loss of control over education not only motivated many parents to act beyond their parochial interests in their own children to advocate for the policy change in standardized testing, but also forged a broad, unifying coalition that brought together the movement supporters in a coordinated opposition to the current policies on standardized testing. The coalition then empowered the movement supporters, mostly non-government actors, to overcome the institutional obstacles of not having much authority-based power by amassing social influence in the movement, thereby propelling the movement forward.

Second, the movement supporters forged coalition ties by consistently communicating the movement's goal, framing the movement, and mobilizing policy solutions. The movement's goal of re-taking control over education was consistent with the helplessness-and-control narratives and the wedge-and-incline argument used in the supporter's framing of the movement, and was also consistent with advocating for parents' right of opting out, and engaging in the elections at the local school board level and state level. To change the status quo of high-stakes standardized testing and to re-take control over education, it took more than just arguing for the right of opting out of state standardized tests. One of the adamant opt-out movement supporters—the Long Island Opt Out—accrued influence and power in the policymaking by engaging in the process of electing school board members at the district level and a pro-opt-out senator at the state level. Gaining the power seats at the policymaking table was particularly important for the opt-out movement, when many education officials as the power holders resorted to a repertoire of hardline intimidating tactics—including threats, sanctions, and punitive regulations—to suppress the movement. By gaining access to the power of making policies, the movement supporters did not stay in the shadow of existing power holders or were marginalized to the periphery in the movement's social network, but forged coalition ties in the network to chart a course with an attempt to bring about policy change on standardized testing. This grassroots approach is validated by the finding that the movement supporters' well-connected network structure stands in contrast with the opponents' fragmented network structure, explaining why the movement has gained traction in New York when the opponents, particularly the education agencies, had much more authority-based power over standardized testing. The findings of this study are also consistent with the central themes of social movement theory (e.g., resource mobilization structure, institutions and organizations, belief system, tactical repertoires, and collective action) (Morris, 1984, 1999; Morris & Mueller, 1992). The movement supporters (the institutions and organizations) used the re-taking control argument (belief system), along with other tactics (e.g., using social media to communicate and distribute opting out information, as well as engaging in school board and state senate elections) to build coalition ties (resource mobilization structure) in the opt-out movement (collective action). In doing so, they took the grassroots approach to overcome the institutional barriers and amass power and influence.

### **The Future of the Opt-out Movement**

What does the future hold for the opt-out movement? While it is still too soon to judge the future, the staying power of the movement is incumbent upon how the movement's social networks continue to evolve. Here I provide a couple of possibilities. First, if the movement supporters continue to strengthen current coalition ties and build new ones, the movement might be afoot to the substantive change to the policies on standardized testing in the state of New York. The literature on advocacy coalitions (Henry, Lubell, & McCoy, 2010; Leifeld, 2013; Weible & Sabatier,

2005) suggests that the policy beliefs have a homophily effect on coalitions—actors tend to form coalition ties with those who share similar policy beliefs, thereby leading to fragmented subgroups with different ideologies. To sustain the opt-out movement momentum, it is critical that the movement supporters continue to build coalition ties with those who have not engaged in the movement but potentially agree with the movement supporters' goal, problem framing, and policy solutions. Further, consider the opt-out movement from the perspective of the diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 2003). If the movement is conceptualized as an innovation—a practice that is *perceived* as new regardless of the *objective* newness, then the movement's future—how the movement will be diffused—is subject to four elements: adopters, communication channels, social system, and time. Regarding the adopters of the opt-out movement, the 21% of the opt-out rate in New York in 2016 has already exceeded the threshold of 2.5% of innovators and 13.5% of early adopters. If the communication channels and social system (i.e., social networks) remain strong and continue to grow, then over the time the opt-out movement is unlikely to dissolve.

Second, the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) will have salient implications on how the opt-out movement unfolds. While ESSA does require at least 95% of public school students participating in annual state assessments of student achievement, it grants much control to each state over how the 95% participation rate is factored into the statewide accountability system (ESSA, 2015). Further, ESSA states that “Nothing in this paragraph [on assessments] shall be construed as preempting a State or local law regarding the decision of a parent to not have the parent's child participate in the academic assessments” (ESSA, 2015, §1111.(b) (2) (K)). With the states having control over the consequences of opting out and the parents' right of opting out, state education agencies have much maneuver in using negative inducements—such as threats and punishment—as policy solutions to suppress the opt-out movement. However, such negative inducements would create a climate of conflicts and resentment. Even if the threats (e.g., withholding funding) are not carried out, they draw the irk and engender the distrust between the movement supporters and opponents, reinforcing the helplessness-and-control framing used by the movement supporters to garner even broader public support. Moreover, the threats and punishments imposed by the state education agencies might harm student interest—the very group's interest they intend to protect. Withdrawing the Title 1 funds would deprive the students, particularly minority students and students with low socioeconomic status, of equitable education.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Inquiry**

This study has three major limitations. First, the data collected for this study might not provide a full, comprehensive view of the opt-out movement in New York. The data sources for this study are press coverage and archival documents, suggesting the movement actors and coalition ties identified in this study are notable enough to be documented by media and archival documents. While much of the data in this study come from liberal, centrist, and conservative press coverage, it is still necessary to take into account the nuanced political bias of media. For instance, some may argue *The New York Times* is a liberal newspaper, but it is quite conservative in its coverage on education and education policy. Moreover, it is possible that some movement actors and their coalition ties are missing or unidentifiable in the opt-out corpus compiled for this study. If the movement actors use private communication channels via emails, phone calls, and face-to-face conversations, then it is unknown to the researcher that some major movement actors and their ties might be missing. More diverse data sources are therefore recommended for future inquiry. Second, this study only examines one single state of New York—the state with the highest opt-out rate in the country in 2015 and 2016. While New York represents a unique case, the opt-out movement in other states merits further investigation as well. The opt-out students in New York were

disproportionately White in families with relatively high socioeconomic status (Franchi, 2016; Pizmony-Levy & Saraisky, 2016); however, other states might not share the same racial, socioeconomic pattern. For instance, in Ohio there was not much disparity in the opt-out rate between White, wealthy communities and communities of color and low-income communities (Neill, 2016). Thus, further studies on the opt-out movement in multiple states are highly encouraged. Third, this study offers only a snapshot of the movement. Given the intimate interplay among the movement, the Common Core, and standardized testing, it is of paramount importance to longitudinally examine whether and how the movement continues to influence educational policymaking regarding the Common Core and standardized testing.

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