NATIONAL REFORM, GRASSROOTS RESISTANCE, AND THE "NEW POLITICS OF EDUCATION": THE OPT OUT MOVEMENT IN NEW YORK

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ABSTRACT

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EDUCATION": THE OPT OUT MOVEMENT IN NEW YORK

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Grassroots social movement activism is on the rise in American education, so much so that some scholars (e.g. Ferman, 2017) have announced the arrival of a "New Politics of Education" in which local actors increasingly challenge the neoliberal consensus and institutional centralization that has dominated twenty-first-century education politics and policymaking (Ferman, 2017). In recent years, no grassroots education social movement has mobilized more people or achieved greater salience than the opt out movement, in which millions of parents across the country have protested standardized testing by keeping their children at home on test day. Despite widespread media coverage of the opt out movement, little empirical research has examined this phenomenon or attempted to link it to broader understandings of the changing nature of public participation with education politics. Contributing to this line of inquiry, this research addresses four questions pertaining to the opt out movement and its implications for education politics and policymaking: 1) Who participates in the opt out movement and who does not?; 2) What motivations do people have for participating in, or not participating in, the opt out movement?; 3) What environmental contextual factors promote or hinder opt out activism within school districts?; and 4) What are the effects of this activism on local school politics and the individuals involved?

In answering these questions, this research is informed by and contributes to Marion Orr and John Rogers' (2011) theoretical concept of "public engagement for public education." It also draws upon relevant empirical research from the subfields of political participation (from

political science), parent engagement (from education), and social movement studies (from sociology). Overall, this research comprises a mixed methods, multiple case study analysis of the opt out movement in four New York school districts with varying demographics and opt out participation rates. It utilizes six sources of original data: parent surveys, parent focus groups, interviews with opt out activists, interviews with district elites, a collection of relevant documents, and a statewide quantitative dataset of district opt out rates.

Results indicate that the opt out movement is not the white, wealthy, suburban phenomenon it is often portrayed to be, but rather it mobilizes a diverse coalition of parents across virtually all districts in the State of New York. Second, opt out parents are motivated by a complex interaction of issue preferences (i.e. opposition to testing and neoliberal reform) and political attitudes (i.e. distrust, inefficacy, and estrangement vis-à-vis state and federal education policymaking). On the otherhand, non-opt out parents often share the issue concerns of opt out parents, but they do not construct their concerns as public problems demanding political intervention. Third, the divergent levels of opt out activism across the four case districts appears to be driven by differences in local social network ties as well as differences in parent perceptions of institutional and discursive support for the movement. In particular, district leadership is a critical factor in promoting or repressing opt out activism within these districts. Finally, results suggest that the opt out movement has not yet produced many changes to local testing and accountability policies, but it has been much more successful in increasing and transforming parent participation with education politics. This transformation, far from a nonaccomplishment, is likely to be the most significant legacy of the opt out movement moving forward.

To my students.

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This dissertation could not have been completed without the tremendous assistance of many individuals who have helped me throughout my graduate career.

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The act of writing a dissertation is an inherently lonely process. This experience was compounded by the fact that during my stay in Michigan, I have struggled enormously to adapt to the Midwest and cultivate many substantive friendships. For that reason, the few meaningful friends I have made—and the ones who have stuck with me from my college days (and even earlier)—deserve thanks for providing me with a social outlet and keeping me company. Research today shows that loneliness is more deadly than obesity, so not only have those individuals helped keep me socially engaged, they have also, in their own small way, kept me healthier than I would have been otherwise. Among those individuals, no one has been a more vital friend than Isabel Gallegos, who, despite living 2,200 miles away, has always encouraged,

supported, and believed in me. I am enormously looking forward to having her serve as the best man at my wedding.

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Like any creative enterprise, this dissertation is ultimately an amalgamation of influences from all of the wonderful individuals I have listed here as well as others whom I have neglected. Education philosopher Hugh Sockett once lamented that much scholarship in the field of education is characterized by "breathtaking triviality." Having spent five years immersed in the field, I dismally agree with him. It is my hope, however, that this dissertation does not contribute to the trash heap of triviality but rather contributes something novel to our understanding of the subject of education. If it succeeds in this aspiration, it will be to the great credit of all of the talented and loving individuals I have been surrounded by. If it fails, you can blame me alone.

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KEY TO ABBREVATIONS

OOP(s) = opt out parent(s), i.e. parents who opted out at least one child during the previous year

NOOP(s) = non-opt out parent(s), i.e. parents who did not opt out any of their children

HOO = high-opt out (as in district)

LOO = low-opt out (as in district)

TBA = test-based accountability

CCSS = Common Core State Standards

NYSED = New York State Education Department

NYSAPE = New York State Allies for Public Education, a pro-opt out group

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*These are our schools! We pay for them! These are our
children! We decide what is best for them! This is why we
are here today. We at United Opt Out National will
continue to tell everyone that we can end the dismantling of
our public schools. We can reclaim our public schools and
improve our public schools by refusing to play their game.
We call for a nationwide opt out of all high-stakes testing!
We call for parents to refuse the Common Core
curriculum! We must halt the harm being done to our
children now! These people privatizing our public schools
do not care about children. This is about one thing—
profit—profit using other people's children. We have one
thing they don't have. We have numbers! There are many
of us. And we are organized! We are smart! We are brave!
And we do not negotiate with our children's lives! We call
for a mass opt out! We will SHUT YOU DOWN!*
—Opt out activist Peggy Robertson (2013), speaking at an
Occupy the Department of Education protest, Washington,
D.C.

*If this [opt out] thing goes national, the whole education
reform movement is in serious trouble.*
—Michael Petrilli (2015)

Introduction

The calendar reads March 30, 2017. It is a Thursday. It is the tenth day of spring. And it

is test day at Floyd B. Watson Elementary School in Rockville Centre on Long Island. To be

precise, it is the third and final day of the New York State English-Language Arts standardized

tests—the annual, Common Core-aligned exams that all New York students in grades 3-8 are

required to take per state and federal law.

For the most part, the scene at the school is a familiar one. On every classroom door, teachers have taped up handwritten signs that read "TESTING—DO NOT DISTURB." The classroom doors are shut, and the halls are quiet. The teachers have already opened the shrink-wrapped stack of tests delivered earlier that morning, placed the exams on their students' desks, and read aloud the instructions. They have now taken their positions at the front of the room, where they will wait until the testing period is over.

The ritual that has unfolded at Watson Elementary would be entirely familiar to anyone who has worked in or attended school in the twenty-first century—except for one small detail that is missing: the students.

They aren't coming today.

And they didn't come yesterday either.

Or the day before that.

The district superintendent, speaking to reporters at the school, estimates that for the third consecutive year, only four out of every ten students will actually take their tests today. The remaining 60% of students are refusing to take them. Many of those students have simply stayed at home. The ones who have come to school have been seated in the cafeteria where they will spend the next several hours completing various review assignments devised by their teachers. The students can get up and walk around as they wish, he explains, but one thing is clear: they are not allowed to go anywhere near the tests. Their parents had been adamant on this point (Newsday Contributors, 2017).

Figure 1.1: A Mostly Empty Classroom on Test Day in Watson Elementary School

The empty classrooms like the ones in Watson Elementary School are part of an annual ritual that has taken place in pockets of America over the past seven years. They are the consequence of a nationwide grassroots social movement known as the opt out movement, in which parents protest standardized testing by keeping their children at home on test day. Originating in 2011 as a scattered, Internet-driven protest based in New York State, the opt out movement has exploded over the past seven years, today engaging millions of parents across dozens of states, with the greatest amount of activity being found in the Northeast and American West. In Colorado, for instance, 10% of all students across the state did not take their annual standardized tests in 2016. In New Jersey, 13% of students opted out, and in Washington, 30% of all high school students did the same. The epicenter of opt out activism has always remained New York, though, where 22% of students (about a quarter million students in all) opted out in 2016, and some districts reported opt out rates as high as 89% (NYSED, 2016).

While the opt out movement is most famous for the empty seats it produces on test day, its participants have not limited their protest tactics to test refusal. Each year between 2012 and

2015, the national opt out organization United Opt Out sponsored major protests and movement-building events, including multiple "occupations" of the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, D.C.; a three-day community organizing workshop in Denver; and a national opt out conference in Philadelphia that featured speeches by political radicals Chris Hedges, Bill Ayers, and Jill Stein (for more on each of these events, see McDermott et al, 2015).

At the same time, colorful exhibitions of local civil disobedience have proliferated in towns across the United States. In 2013 in Providence, Rhode Island, students dressed as zombies and marched in front of the statehouse to protest standardized testing, and in 2015 in Newark, New Jersey, students occupied the superintendent's office for three days, broadcasting their protest on YouTube (Strauss, 2013; PBS Newshour, 2015). At around the same time, a band of opt out activists in Pueblo, Colorado purchased billboards along Interstate-25 urging parents to opt out. One billboard read:

WASTE OF MIND, MONEY & TIME!
PARENTS: SAY NO NOW!

Another read:

PARENTS:
WE CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT THIS INJUSTICE.
OPT OUT LETTERS AVAILABLE ONLINE.

And in New York State, opt out activism has at times been a conspicuous feature of everyday life as activists have organized hundreds of local rallies and forums (sometimes attended by thousands of people), launched flyering campaigns, initiated letterwriting campaigns, led door-to-door canvassing drives, picketed the offices of legislators, and hosted film screenings of anti-

testing documentaries. Yard signs urging parents to refuse testing continue to pop up on front lawns each year around testing time, and online, opt out social media pages have sprung up in almost every district to share information, encourage parents to opt out, endorse local school board candidates, and shame local educators deemed unsupportive of the movement.

In their efforts to challenge standardized testing, members of the opt out movement have also sometimes received valuable assistance from educators fed up with recent education reforms. The New Jersey Education Association ran six weeks of TV advertisements in support of the opt out movement in 2014, and local chapters of the New York State United Teachers helped organize some opt out rallies and information sessions in 2015 (Harris, 2015). Even superintendents and school board members have occasionally lent support. In Lee County, Florida, the school board voted to opt out of all statewide Common Core tests even though it didn't have legal standing to do so (ABC Action News, 2014). And in one Long Island school district, the superintendent used an interview on the local CBS affiliate to rail against his state's education agenda: "If it's a rigged game, you don't play," he cried. "Parents' concerns have been systematically ignored by the state education department, and [now] they must take matters into their own hands" (CBS New York, 2014).

In the wake of this civil disobedience, the opt out movement has garnered a substantial amount of national media attention and political controversy, and reactions to the movement have, unsurprisingly, been mixed. Supporters have lauded the opt out movement as an emblem of democracy in action—a grassroots rebuttal to neoliberal, centralizing trends in American education. Diane Ravitch, for instance, gleefully celebrated the movement as a "popular uprising" against misguided corporate education reforms, and Loy Goss, co-founder of United to Counter the Core, pointed to the high opt out numbers in New York to claim that the movement

has become a mainstream phenomenon: "Twenty percent of students [opting out] cannot be called a fringe element" (Harris, 2015). Others, however, have been more condemnatory, disparaging the movement as a privilege-driven phenomenon that was undermining necessary reforms. Arne Duncan (2013) famously dismissed the opt out movement as a bunch of "white suburban moms who—all of a sudden on the tests—see their child isn't as brilliant as they thought," and Rosenfeld (2016) called it a brazen case of the self-esteem movement run amok. The New York State Education Department likewise insisted that "there is no provision in statute or regulation allowing parents to opt their children out of state tests" (Katz, 2013), and Board of Regents Chancellor Merryl Tisch cast the protests as unhelpful for children: "Those who call for 'opting out' really want New York to 'opt out' of information that can help parents and teachers understand how well students are doing. We cannot go back to ignoring the needs of our children. It's time to stop making noise to protest the adults. It's time to start speaking up for students" (Long Island News 12, 2015). All the while, national public opinion polls have revealed a citizenry deeply conflicted on the issue. One *Phi Delta Kappa* (2015) poll found that while 64% of Americans believe there is too much testing in schools, only 41% support the right of parents to opt out.[1]

By any estimation, the opt out movement represents a shocking and unprecedented development in the field of education politics and policy—one that, until the turn of the twenty-first century, was characterized primarily by quiet consensus and pragmatic localism (Ferman, 2017). Illustrating just how rarely the idea of grassroots social movement protest crosses the minds of education scholars, the most recent edition of the *Handbook of Education Politics and Policy* does not even include the words "activism" or "social movement" anywhere in the text (Cooper, Cibulka, & Fusarelli, 2015). Nor do those words appear in Dana Mitra's (2017) recent

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[1] Similarly, a survey by *Education Next* found that 32% of parents nationwide support the right of parents to opt out.

textbook *Educational Change and the Political Process*. Nevertheless, the experience of the opt out movement suggests that, in the contemporary era characterized by neoliberal reform and institutional centralization, education politics is changing as members of the public carve out new, adversarial roles for themselves in relation to their school system.

This dissertation is designed to provide a first-of-its-kind examination of the opt out movement as it has operated in four New York State school districts. Specifically, it is focused on uncovering insights about the opt out movement's participants, guiding motivations, political opportunity contexts, and impact on local education politics. In answering these questions, this dissertation stresses that an understanding of the opt out movement is important not just for its own sake, but because it can illuminate something new and important about the changing nature of public participation with education (and the growing role of education-related grassroots social movement activism in particular).

The remainder of this chapter sets the stage for the research that is reported in this dissertation. The next section provides a broad overview of today's education policy landscape, introducing key contextual concepts such as neoliberal education reform, institutional centralization, and the "new politics of education." It then describes the key theoretical concepts that inform this study—namely theories of political participation and public participation with education. It concludes by summarizing existing empirical research on the opt out movement and listing the specific research questions that animate this study.

The Policy Context: Neoliberal Reform and Institutional Centralization

In order to understand the opt out movement, it is important to first understand the policy context of American education today. Painting in very broad strokes, the past thirty years in education policy have been characterized by the steady rise of what some scholars refer to as the "neoliberal education reform agenda," an elite-driven agenda which conceives of education as a private good and attempts to "fix" education through market-based policy interventions like standardized testing, merit-based teacher pay and retention, the expansion of school choice, and union-busting (Apple, 2006; Trujillo & Renée, 2015; Lakes & Carter, 2011). At the core of this agenda is the idea that we need to rigorously and quantitatively measure student performance through testing and hold educators accountable for performance—an idea which was codified in twenty-first-century federal legislation like No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Race To The Top (RTTT), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

This elite consensus around the neoliberal agenda has been accompanied by an institutional centralization of power over education, in which educational authority, once the domain of local special-purpose institutions like school boards, has been absorbed by higher-level general purpose institutions like the state and federal governments. (e.g. Alsbury 2009; Cibulka 2001; Henig 2013; Kirst 2003; Manna, 2006; Manna & McGuinn, 2013; McGuinn, 2006; Rhodes, 2012). This flight from local democracy has been spurred by actors on both the left and the right, with those on the left deeming local governance a barrier to educational equity and those on the right condemning local governance as the progenitor of recalcitrant bureaucracy, unapologetic inefficiency, and cavalier indifference to poor performance (Finn & Petrilli, 2013; Hess & Meeks, 2013; McGuinn & Manna, 2013; Chubb & Moe, 1991; Moe, 2000,

2011; Plank & Boyd, 1994). Henig (2013) labels this upward migration of authority the "end of exceptionalism in American education" and he remarks that these changes are significant for the way they privilege new policy ideas and empower new actors such as state legislatures, mayors, governors, presidents, think tanks, and venture philanthropists: "Governance change is not important for its own sake. It is important because it affects who has influence over what governments do and how they do it…What [is] chang[ing] is whose values and interests determine the goals to which policies are oriented" (119).

The Resurgent Importance of Local Democracy

Despite the obvious implications of the neoliberal agenda and concomitant centralization for local democracy, little scholarly attention has been paid to the parents and community members who directly experience the ground-level effects of these developments, and most scholars have instead focused their attention on the newly empowered elite actors. After all, if local actors have lost so much power, why should we care to study them? This dissertation is built on the premise that despite the recent loss of influence for local actors, there are several reasons that an examination of these actors remains urgent and necessary in understanding education politics and policymaking in the contemporary era.

First, from the most immediate concerns about educational effectiveness, decades of scholarship has demonstrated that students and schools obtain wide-ranging benefits when local parents and community members participate in education, and therefore any changes in policy and governance that alter the dynamics of participation are likely to have real (albeit mediated) effects on performance. Among other things, increased parent and community engagement has

been associated with improved student achievement (Comer, 1980; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997); the mitigation of negative neighborhood risk factors (Vandell et al, 1999); improved parent attitudes about themselves, their school, and the nature of the parent-school relationship (Comer, 1980; Henderson et al 2007; Reynolds & Clements, 2005); and more collaborative and culturally responsive teaching practices (Fruchter, 2007; Noguera, 2001). As Henderson and Berla (1994, x) write in their review of literature on the topic, "to those who ask whether involving parents will really make a difference, we can safely say that the case is closed" (see also de Carvalho, 2001).

From a policy perspective too, the participation of parents and community members is critical in the drive to build local civic capacity, an indispensible ingredient in ensuring the sustainability and legitimacy of education reforms. Stone et al (2001, 12) define civic capacity as "the ability of a community to come together to address its problems" and they write that any successful, enduring education reform program must involve the local community in a collective process of defining problems, searching for solutions, and creating institutional structures that promote and preserve reform. This process of community mobilization and deliberation is an inescapably political process, and the authors argue that while education critics often complain about the influence of politics in education, it is only through local political engagement that citizens can "reconcile, put aside, or in some manner accommodate their differences in order to pursue their common well-being" (8). Put bluntly, the route to successful education reform "goes directly through, and not around, politics" (1).

Second, while the ideas of the neoliberal agenda have been articulated at the state and national levels, the implementation of these policies remains locally rooted, and local actors (e.g. parents and educators) are liable to impede the national reform agenda if they resist or

misinterpret these higher-level policies (Cohen, 1990; Cuban, 2013; Spillane, 2006; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1978). After all, it is local actors who serve as authorizers of charter schools, managers of school service provider portfolios, implementers of new curricula like the Common Core, users of new classroom technologies, and evaluators of teacher performance. In this way, the contest for educational authority is not a zero-sum game; rather as higher-level actors take on increased policymaking authority, they in fact open up greater opportunities for local actors to challenge or reshape reform agendas as they "muddle through" and adapt them to local conditions and knowledge on the ground (Lindblom, 1959; Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Marsh & Wohlstetter, 2013; Cibulka, 2001). At the same time, local control of public education continues to be revered and public opinion polling reveals that support for local governance has increased between the 1970s and today (Corcoran & Goertz, 2005; Jacobsen & Saultz, 2012). Recognizing the persistent integrality of local actors for the smooth translation of policy from Capitol Hill to the schoolhouse, national education reform interests who had once scoffed at local education institutions are now beginning to embed themselves in those institutions by endorsing local school board candidates, making philanthropic donations to school districts, and strategically organizing local communities (Russakoff, 2015; Reckhow, 2012; Reckhow, Henig, & Jacobsen, 2016).

Third, while twenty-first century test-based accountability (TBA) policies have embraced a variety of different policy tools, such as appeals to authority, incentives, and sanctions (Ingram & Schneider, 1990), a central mechanism in the causal chain leading from accountability to school improvement is the enhancement of public participation with education. Indeed, TBA policies are built on the premise that the public is largely in the dark about its schools and that public ignorance and political apathy is a serious barrier to reform. As a consequence of public

disengagement, educators are free to set low expectations for students and unreflectively resist making needed changes. To rectify this situation, advocates of TBA policies have made the public dissemination of school performance information a primary focus of the educational reform effort, arguing that standardized test data will empower parents to make informed decisions about where to send their children to school and demand change when poor performance merits it (Fusarelli, 2004; Rogers, 2006).

NCLB provides an emblematic case of this theory of reform. The blueprint of NCLB released by the Bush White House in early 2001 included four strategies for improving education: accountability, a reduction of bureaucracy, a focus on what works, and public empowerment. The lynchpin of the program, though, was the fourth pillar (public empowerment) in which parents would take up the new test score data to diagnose educational problems and demand change from educators. Throughout NCLB's legislative circuit President George W. Bush and his Secretary of Education Rod Paige championed the view that "parents armed with data are the best forces of accountability in education." Thus, NCLB-style accountability was designed to operate not only top-down (in the form of federally-mandated sanctions for poor performance), but also bottom-up (in the form of community shame and public pressure for reform), and parents were expected to be the key implementing agents of the policy. "There's nothing better to get parents involved in schools than to measure and report the results," President Bush (2001) said while stumping for NCLB in North Carolina. "There's nothing like getting a mother fired up when she sees the fact that her school may not be performing quite like she thought it was going to be." In fact, by harping on the parent empowerment goal of NCLB, the Bush Administration was able to frame a sweeping expansion of federal authority over education as merely promoting the values of small government and

local control—a devolution of power "to the people [parents] who care the most" about their schools.

And finally, the persistent importance of local actors is made even clearer when we consider the way that local grassroots activists have begun to openly protest and undermine the neoliberal agenda in recent years. Indeed, from teacher strikes and student walkouts to occupations and rallies, the last several years have witnessed an outpouring of grassroots activity from parents, teachers, and students seeking to reclaim local democratic control of education. Political Scientist Barbara Ferman (2017) points to this activism as evidence that we are entering a "New Politics of Education"—a highly conflictual, fragmented, and high-stakes debate over the foundational questions of who makes education policy, in whose interests, and for what purposes,—and she makes the argument that if scholars really want to understand the political dynamics of education today, they must pay attention to community members at the grassroots level. Just as in previous eras of reform and centralization, the future of education reform appears likely to emerge not through uncontested top-down imposition, but through a dialectical process through which elite actors and grassroots actors jostle for voice, power, and influence (Reese, 2002).

Theoretical Framework: Public Participation With Education in the "New Politics of Education"

By studying the opt out movement—the largest and most high-profile grassroots education movement in recent history—this dissertation is designed to shed light on the changing nature of public participation with education in the "New Politics" era. In doing so, it draws on and contributes much-needed empirical substance to Marion Orr and John Rogers' (2011)

theoretical concept of "public engagement for public education" (or, as I rename it here, "public participation with education"). In their book *Public Engagement for Public Education*, Orr and Rogers reframe the challenge of educational equity as one inextricably bound up with the "engagement gap"—inequalities in political participation which have left the education policymaking process unresponsive to historically marginalized communities and biased it in favor of the concerns of the most privileged:

> In addition to the problem of unequal schools, there is also the problem of unequal voice…We believe that the problems of unequal schools and unequal voices are interrelated. Schooling advantages enable the privileged to attain the skills, degrees, and access to power that amplifies their voice. Political advantages in turn allow the privileged to secure preferred educational resources.

To equalize political voice and promote educational equity, Orr and Rogers posit the theoretical concept of public participation with education, which they define as:

> When parents, community members, and youth identify common educational problems and work together to address them…[It] is about a shared responsibility to develop the capacities of all young people, even if one's own children are of foremost concern.

They then identify five "streams" of public participation historically relevant to education—coproduction, democratic governance, community organizing, alliances, and social movements—and call for more research into the antecedents and consequences of each of them. This dissertation answers this call by studying the last of these forms of participation, social movements, and in doing so, it draws on relevant literature from the fields of political science and social movement studies.

While studies of political participation are rare in the field of education, this topic has been a longtime focus in the field of political science. Indeed, since the founding of the

American Republic, political participation has been canonized by political philosophers, pundits, and scholars as an indispensible component of a vibrant democracy. As Verba and Nie (1972, 1) put the issue in their foundational text in this subfield:

> If democracy is interpreted as rule by the people, then the question of who participates in political decisions becomes the question of the nature of democracy in a society. Where few take part in decisions there is little democracy; the more participation there is in decisions, the more democracy there is. Such a definition of democracy is crude…yet it may get at the heart of the matter, since all other institutions associated with democracy can be related to the general question of who participates or is able to participate in political life.

It is through participation that the goals of society are set and decisions are made about what resources to commit to goal attainment. Participation helps answer the timeless question in politics: "Who gets what, when, and how?" (Lasswell, 1936).

Political scientists Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady (1995, 38) define political participation as "activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action—either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies." It includes behaviors like voting, working on campaigns, making financial contributions to causes, contacting public officials, joining political organizations, or attending protests and demonstrations. To explain why some people participate in politics and other people do not, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady offer a conceptual framework known as the Civic Voluntarism Model, which is comprised of three elements: resources (e.g. time, money, and education), motivation (e.g. interest in politics), and recruitment (e.g. being asked to participate). All three of these factors exert independent effects on the probability that an individual will become politically involved.

Despite the enormous amount of research on political participation in the field of political science, studies of *local* political participation (like the opt out movement) remain rare, and

Marschall (2010) has written that "a pressing need for data [on the topic] exists." This lack of emphasis is due first and foremost to the fact that it is extremely costly and time-consuming to obtain high-quality data about local political participation as there is no centrally-collected, readily available data source on the topic yet in existence. In their study of the Tea Party Movement between 2009 and 2012, Skocpol and Williamson (2012, ix) described the methodological challenges they faced studying locally-based grassroots activism:

> Most scholarship on U.S. politics addresses established academic questions, pulls concepts and hypotheses off the library shelf, and chews over computerized datasets. But when the Tea Party burst on the scene starting in 2009, it challenged assumptions about how U.S. political would play out following the big Democratic victories in the 2008 elections. No canned datasets would be of much use to track an emergent set of protests; and the Tea Party as a whole could not be plopped into available conceptualizations about third parties, social movements, or popular protests during sharp economic downturns. Perfect! Many in academia turn away if something doesn't fit…

At the same time, scholars of political participation have also tended to be more interested in the particular acts of participation (e.g. casting a ballot, attending a demonstration) than the level at which people execute those acts, simply assuming that what is true at one level of government must be true for all. Baybeck (2014), however, challenges this assumption and argues that local participation is different from other forms of participation insofar as it is readily accessible to citizens, rarely practiced, and intensely influenced by local contextual factors, and he contends that greater theoretical development is needed (see also Oliver & Ha, 2007).

While local political participation can take many different forms, grassroots social movement activism is *itself* a highly unique form of participation that adds further complexity to this research (see Reese, 2002; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Today, sociologists universally recognize social movements as distinctive social and political phenomena, and the study of social movements comprises its own subfield in the domain of sociology. The *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* defines social movements as "sustained, intentional efforts to foster or retard social

changes primarily (but not always) outside the normal institutional channels encouraged by authorities." Snow, Soule, and Kriesi (2004) offer a similar, although slightly more complex definition: "Collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part" (11). In recent decades, social movements have become a conspicuous feature of our political landscape, advocating for causes ranging from the environment and gay rights to nuclear disarmament and the humane treatment of animals. Some scholars have even gone so far as to refer to social movements as the "fifth estate" in our world (Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004), and Meyer and Tarrow (1998) have suggested that we live in a "movement society" as existing political institutions strain under a lack of public trust and legitimacy.

Social movements in general are comprised of many different ingredients, including political and material resources; environmental opportunity structures; social networks and alliances; leaders and followers; and guiding ideas, ideologies, and issue frames. Moreover, social movements can take many different forms, and *grassroots movements* (like the opt out movement) are further distinguished by their often heterogeneous and subdominant membership, reliance on the voluntary contribution of participants' time and resources, locally-based and decentralized organizational structures, and tendency to oscillate between periods of activity and latency. While grassroots activism has been on the rise in American politics overall in the past decade, it has only recently resurfaced in the realm of education politics, and as such, scholarship directly connecting grassroots social movement participation with education policymaking remains rare (for one rare example, see Warren & Mapp, 2011).

Previous Opt Out Literature

Despite widespread media coverage of the opt out movement, empirical scholarship on the subject is exceedingly limited in both quantity and scope. Today, there are just two peer-reviewed articles about the opt out movement currently in publication (Mitra, Mann, & Hlavacik, 2016; Wang, 2017), and almost all scholarship has relied exclusively on public documents and social media to explore the questions of who opts out and why, usually without connection to broader theories of political participation or education politics (e.g. Bennett, 2016; Chingos, 2015; Supovitz et al, 2016; one exception is Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016). As a result, important questions remain unanswered and much of what we know about the opt out movement remains anecdotal, conjectural, and theoretically uninteresting.

Arguably the most well-known piece of opt out scholarship is Pizmony-Levy and Green Saraisky's (2016) national survey of 1,641 opt out activists which provided insight into the questions of who opts out and why. They found that the majority of national opt out activists are highly educated, white, married, and politically liberal parents, and they are motivated predominantly by a dislike of standardized testing as well as secondary concerns about the corporatization of education, federal overreach in the wake of the Common Core, and the impact of testing on educational practice. A second influential report on the opt out movement is Supovitz et al's *The Bubble Bursts* (2016), which examined the opt out movement in New Jersey in 2015. Using district-level data from the New Jersey Department of Education, social media data from Twitter, and thirty interviews with education officials, union leaders, parents, educators, and interest group activists, the authors set out to uncover the extent of the opt out movement in New Jersey and the factors that contributed to its mobilization. The authors found

that the opt out movement is relatively robust in New Jersey, with approximately 11% of

students opting out statewide in 2015, although activism was greatest in wealthy districts (for

similar district-level findings, see Bennett, 2016; Chingos, 2015). Like Pizmony-Levy and

Green Saraisky, they found that the opt out movement has been fueled by skepticism about the

merits of high-stakes testing and furor over the Common Core, although they also highlighted

the importance of teacher unions in drumming up parent opposition to testing.

In addition to these reports, there are also two peer-reviewed articles about the opt out

movement in existence, although these articles again focus exclusively the antecedents of opt out

mobilization, and they rely solely on publicly available Internet-based documents. The first is

Mitra, Mann, and Hlavacik's (2016) content analysis of the United Opt Out website, which

examined how parents exploited "policy ambiguity" to create contested spaces where they could

challenge TBA reforms at the grassroots level. The authors argue that because most states have

not clearly defined their opt out policies, parents have taken it upon themselves to cobble

together an understanding of their opt out rights and organized organically to challenge

standardized testing. The other piece is Wang's (2017) social network analysis of opt out

coalitions—a piece of scholarship which used New York news media sources to map the

interrelated set of actors and interests who helped mobilize the opt out movement and articulate

its goals and policy solutions.

Altogether, these works have provided a valuable starting point in the study of the opt out

movement, although they also leave many critical questions unanswered and many valuable data

sources untapped. For one, the intense focus on the mobilization of the opt out movement has led

to a situation where we know a little about who participates in the opt out movement (at least at

the national level), but we know much less about the political consequences of the movement or

the way it interacts with features of local school district environments. Additionally, we know how the opt out movement has been portrayed in the media and online, but we don't have a clear understanding of what the movement looks like on the ground, or how district leaders have responded to this surge in activism. Furthermore, the voices of the everyday parents are conspicuously missing from this literature. Who are the ground-level, rank-and-file members of the opt out movement, and what motivates *them*? Are these individuals different from the national activists studied by Pizmony-Levy and Green Saraisky? And how do these parents differ from the parents around them who are *not* participating in the opt out movement?

This dissertation addresses these and other blind spots in our understanding of the opt out movement by providing an in-depth, ground-level analysis of the opt out movement in four New York school districts. It draws on a powerful set of original qualitative and quantitative data sources (discussed in Chapter 2) to provide what is arguably the most complex and comprehensive examination of opt out activism to date—one that simultaneously contributes to our understanding of grassroots education activism in the "New Politics" era.

Research Questions

Specifically, this dissertation addresses four questions related to the antecedents and political consequences of the opt out movement: "who," "why," "where," and "to what effect."

1. Who: Who participates in the opt out movement and who does not? What characteristics do opt out participants share and how are they different from nonparticipants? How equitable and inclusive is this form of education participation in terms of race and class?

2. Why: Why do people choose to participate (or not participate) in the opt out movement? What motivations do parents report, and are these motivations public or private in

orientation? Additionally, what role do explicit invitations or acts of recruitment play in encouraging people to participate?

3. <u>Where</u>: Why are opt out rates different across districts? What sociopolitical environmental factors (i.e. political opportunity contexts) explain the different levels of opt out activism in these four districts?

4. <u>To What Effect</u>: What impact has the opt out movement had on local education politics and policies? Do these effects vary across communities with different levels of opt out activism?

The next several chapters address these questions in turn. Following Chapter 2's brief overview of the data sources and methods used in this study, Chapter 3 takes up the question of who opts out, ultimately concluding that the opt out movement—far from being the white, wealthy, suburban phenomenon it is often portrayed to be—is in fact a highly diverse coalition of parents that has been visible across the vast majority of New York school districts. Chapter 4 explores the question of opt out motivations, examining why parents in the four case districts decided to opt out (or not opt out). It concludes that opt out parents are motivated not just by deeply-held policy preferences on key issues like standardized testing, but also by negative political attitudes like distrust, inefficacy, and estrangement from state and federal education policymaking. On the otherhand, parents who choose not to participate in the movement do so because they do not construct their concerns as demanding public intervention. Chapter 5 then proceeds to examine the district-level contextual factors that have promoted or repressed opt out activism across these districts. It highlights the important role that local social network ties have played in facilitating opt out mobilization as well as the role of district leadership in creating institutional and discursive spaces that either encourage or discourage opt out activism. In this way, district-level opt out rates have been the result of not just parental initiative, but also parental perceptions of local political contexts. And finally, Chapter 6 concludes this

dissertation with an examination of the political impact of the opt out movement, finding that while the opt out movement has not yet produced many changes in local testing and accountability policies, it has significantly increased and transformed the nature of parent participation with education politics in the four districts. It argues that these latter changes may prove to be the most significant and enduring political legacy of the opt out movement in the years ahead.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

[Research] is a lonely, isolated time of
struggling and pondering the data.
—Creswell (2013, 49).

Introduction

This dissertation takes the form of a mixed methods, multiple case study design in which

qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques were applied to six sources of data collected

in four New York school districts. This chapter provides a detailed description of the data

sources and methods employed in this study. It begins by describing case study as a general

methodological approach. It then describes the case selection process, the data sources and

instrumentation, and the data analysis techniques. It concludes by describing the steps taken to

ensure the validity of the findings—a primary concern in case study research.

The Case Study Approach

The goal of this dissertation is to uncover insights about the "who," "where," "why," and

"to what effect" of the opt out movement, and it does so by employing a multiple case study

research design. Case study research aims to "investigate a contemporary phenomenon in its

real-world context" (Yin, 2014, 2; see also Creswell, 2013). According to Yin (2014), case study

is the preferred research methodology when three criteria are met: 1) the main research questions

include "how" or "why" questions; 2) the researcher has little or no control over behavioral

events; and 3) the focus is on a contemporary, as opposed to entirely historical, phenomenon. It

is also an ideal method when there are no clear boundaries between the phenomenon of interest

and its context. "One of the most challenging of all social science endeavors," case study

research often relies on data triangulation to address the distinctive technical condition of having

more variables of interest than data points (2).

There are three types of case studies which can be employed by researchers: 1)

exploratory case studies, which help the researcher develop a project or idea; 2) descriptive case

studies, which describe a phenomenon; and 3) explanatory case studies, which aim to establish

why something has happened in a causal sense (Yin, 2014; Berg, 2004). This study includes

both descriptive ("who," "where," "to what effect") and explanatory ("why") elements.

Furthermore, all three types of case studies can take the form of either a single case study or a

multiple case study. Single case studies, as the name suggests, examine just one case, often

because the case under examination is a highly unique or exceptional case capable of

illuminating some phenomenon. Multiple case studies, by comparison, examine a phenomenon

across several distinct contexts.

By examining the opt out movement across several districts, this study employs a

multiple case study design, which has a number of methodological benefits compared to a single

case study. The most significant benefit is the higher level of analytic power. As Yin (2014, 64)

writes:

> When you have the choice (and resources), multiple-case designs may be preferred over single-case designs. If you can do even a 'two-case' study, your chances of doing a good case study will be better than using a single-case design. Single-case designs are vulnerable if only because you will have put 'all your eggs in one basket.' More important, the analytic benefits from having two (or more) cases may be substantial.

Indeed, multiple case studies provide researchers the opportunity for replication, help ensure external validity, and yield more compelling conclusions (Herriott & Firestone, 1983; Eckstein, 1975). This methodology can also be valuable when trying to identify commonalities or differences across different contextual settings.

The New York State Context

Four school districts in New York were selected as cases for study in this dissertation. New York State is a compelling setting for this study for two main reasons: 1) it is the longtime epicenter of opt out activism, and 2) it is a state that has recently been a fierce battleground in the debate over key neoliberal reforms like charter expansion, the Common Core, and teacher evaluation. Today, New York ranks seventh among all states in terms of the number of charter schools in its borders, and it ranks sixth in terms of charter school enrollment. Additionally, New York was one of nineteen states to win a federal Race to the Top (RTTT) grant during the Obama Administration, in part by pledging to increase its number of charter schools, strengthen teacher evaluation procedures, and implement the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

New York's experiences implementing the Common Core illustrate the super-heated and frenetic political environment of education reform in the state. In January of 2011, the New York State Board of Regents adopted the Common Core as promised in the state's RTTT application, and the State Education Department immediately began the process of implementing it. Spurred by pressure from the federal government—which at one point put New York on a "watch list" for being slow in implementing its promised RTTT reforms,—NYSED adopted a rapid implementation schedule for the Common Core. Less than one year after its adoption, teachers

were expected to begin incorporating CCSS-aligned instruction in their classrooms, and by the

2012-2013 school year, NYSED expected that the curriculum would be fully implemented in

schools and CCSS-aligned standardized testing would begin. The hasty timeline for

implementation, however, left NYSED unable to adequately prepare teachers for the changes in

instruction and assessment that the new curriculum would require. Despite the fact that the

Common Core was expected to be fully implemented and assessed during the 2012-2013 school

year, the complete set of instructional resources was not made available to teachers until summer

2013. Additionally, opportunities for professional development were limited, with teachers

receiving only 3-5 days of professional development the summer before the 2012-2013 school

year.

At the same time educators were growing restless about the haphazard implementation of

the standards, parents too became increasingly unhappy as problems with the Common Core

tests piled up in 2013 and 2014 (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of these problems). By 2015,

public support for the standards had collapsed. A Siena College Poll found that 49% of New

Yorkers felt that the implementation of CCSS should be halted immediately, and only 34% felt

the state should stay the course (Siena College, 2015a). Another poll later that year found that

40% of respondents felt the Common Core had worsened education in New York and only 21%

felt it had improved education (Siena College, 2015b). Indeed, the Common Core had grown so

toxic that some opportunistic state legislators introduced legislation guaranteeing the right of

parents to opt out of the Common Core tests (the legislation never passed), and in 2014,

Republican gubernatorial candidate Rob Astorino secured enough signatures to create a "Stop

Common Core" party line on the general election ballot. Eventually, Governor Cuomo stepped

in and slowed the implementation of the curriculum. He admitted in a televised statement that

"the implementation of the Common Core just did not work" and he established a Common Core Task Force to create recommendations for a "total reboot" of the curriculum (Cuomo, 2015). Ultimately, New York, revised and renamed its curriculum standards, but, like in many states, the new standards were almost identical to the Common Core.

In addition to issues of school choice and curriculum reform, New York has also been a battleground over controversial test-based teacher evaluation systems. Alarmed that 96% of teachers had been rated "effective" or "highly effective" during the 2013-2014 school year, Governor Cuomo in early 2015 began pushing for teacher evaluation reform, ultimately winning passage of a proposal that tied 50% of a teacher's annual rating to student test scores. He also enacted legislation that allowed failing schools to be placed in a receivership whereby they would be managed by a nonprofit organization or even a charter management organization. However, by December 2015, with the state deciding to halt the implementation of the Common Core and public backlash against the evaluation law peaking, the Board of Regents placed a moratorium on using student test scores for teacher evaluation until the 2019-2020 school year.

District Sampling

The four New York school districts selected for this study were purposefully sampled to yield powerful insights into the "who," "where," "why," and "to what effect" of the opt out movement as it operates in different district contexts. According to Creswell (2013), purposeful sampling entails "selecting individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (156). Furthermore, following the advice of Yin (2014), my sampling strategy followed a replication

logic insofar as the cases were selected for their ability to predict either similar or contrasting results for anticipatable, theory-derived reasons.

The four case districts were selected using the 2x2 sampling matrix below to exploit variation in both district opt out rates (low or high opt out rates) and demographic contexts (low or high racial diversity) during the 2015-2016 school year. In each of these districts we would expect there to be anticipatable similarities or differences in the "who," "where," "why," and "to what effect" of participation. In the matrix below, "high racial diversity" districts are those where the percentage of nonwhite student enrollment was 28%+ of total enrollment (75th percentile or above statewide) in the 2015-2016 school year. "Low racial diversity" districts are those in which nonwhite student enrollment was less than 5% of total enrollment (25th percentile or below statewide). "High opt out" (HOO) districts were defined as districts where the opt out rate was 41% or higher (75th percentile or above), and "low opt out" (LOO) districts were those where the opt out rate was less than 15% (25th percentile or below).

Figure 2.1: Sampling Matrix

	Low Opt Out	High Opt Out
Low Racial Diversity	District A	District B
High Racial Diversity	District C	District D

Data from NYSED for the 2015-2016 school year revealed that each cell of the matrix contained between 29 and 70 districts to sample from (202 total), although these numbers were reduced

significantly (to 115 total) after removing undesirable districts (e.g. extremely large districts, extremely small districts, high-school-only districts, etc.). I then ranked the districts within each cell based on their desirability as a study site, attending to such concerns as district size, urbanicity, opt out rates, and demographics (race, poverty, and ELL) so that my final four districts would be large enough to yield an adequate pool of potential parent participants and simultaneously control on characteristics other than the two sampling variables.

Selecting the Final Districts and Securing Access

To select my four districts and secure access to them, I conducted a multi-stage outreach campaign between April and July 2017 in which I asked district superintendents for permission to conduct my study and offered them a $400 charitable donation to their district as an incentive. For my first contact, I mailed via USPS a letter on MSU letterhead to each district superintendent which introduced myself, explained the project, and invited them to participate. After the arrival of the letter, I followed up with an email addressed to the superintendent and his/her administrative assistant. If the initial email went unanswered, follow-up emails and phone calls were placed every three days. Once a superintendent agreed to participate, I stopped contacting the other districts in that same cell and focused my attention on the remaining cells. Over the course of my outreach campaign, I received responses from thirty-four district superintendents, with all but five of them declining to participate.

Figure 2.2 below describes the characteristics of the final four districts included in this study below. Overall, the four districts are matched relatively well. The two high-opt out districts both had opt out rates over 80%. The two low-opt out districts had opt out rates below

15%. The two racially diverse districts had nonwhite student populations above 34% of total enrollment, and the two racially homogenous districts had nonwhite student populations of less than 5%. The districts ranged in size from approximately 899 to 3819 students. One district is a rural district, two are suburban districts, and one is a small town.

Figure 2.2: The Four Case Districts

	Low Opt Out	High Opt Out
Low Racial Diversity	Greenville Opt out rate: 9% Enrollment: 1042 Nonwhite: 4% ELL: 0% Type: Town FRL: 32%	Danville Opt out rate: 89% Enrollment: 899 Nonwhite: 1% ELL: 0% Type: Rural FRL: 63%
High Racial Diversity	Easton Opt out rate: 14% Enrollment: 1879 Nonwhite: 57% ELL: 15% Type: Suburb FRL: 40%	Commonwealth Opt out rate: 84% Enrollment: 3819 Nonwhite: 34% ELL: 6% Type: Suburb FRL: 32%

Note: District names are pseudonyms. Data is from 2015-2016 school year.

Data Sources and Collection Methods

Within each district, I collected five sources of data, each of which will be discussed below with particular attention given to subject identification, instrumentation, and administration procedures. These five data sources were: 1) a parent survey; 2) parent focus groups; 3) interviews with district elites; 4) interviews with opt out activists; and 5) relevant documents and artifacts. In addition, I compiled a statewide quantitative dataset that listed each district's opt out rate alongside various demographic and political variables. Together, these five

sources allowed for a multidimensional view on each of my research questions (Table 2.1

below).

Table 2.1:

Research Questions and Corresponding Data Sources

Question	Relevant Data Sources
Who?	Parent Surveys; Parent Focus Groups; Elite Interviews; Docs
Where?	Statewide Dataset; Parent Surveys; Parent Focus Groups; Elite Interviews; Docs
Why?	Parent Surveys; Parent Focus Groups; Activist Interviews; Elite Interviews; Docs
To What Effect?	Parent Surveys; Parent Focus Groups; Activist Interviews; Elite Interviews; Docs

Parent Survey

First, I conducted an online survey of all grade 3-8 parents in each district which asked

parents about their opt out behaviors and motivations; perceptions of the opt out movement;

views on various education issues; political attitudes (e.g. trust, interest, efficacy, and

estrangement); political participation habits; perceptions of district context; and demographics.

The complete survey can be found in Appendix A.

Survey development. The survey was developed and refined through a multistage

process designed to ensure the reliability, validity, and accessibility of the survey instrument.

First, I reviewed extant research on topics directly relevant to this study (e.g. the opt out

movement, political participation, and social movement activism), and I paid close attention to

existing survey-based empirical research. From this review of the literature as well as my

collection of documents and artifacts, I determined a list of constructs to measure. Wherever

possible, existing survey items were used to ensure construct validity and allow me to make

comparisons with other samples—drawing most frequently on the Phi Delta Kappa Annual

Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, the American National Election

Surveys, the American Civic Participation Survey, and other surveys included in Robinson et

al's compendium *Measures of Political Attitudes* (1999). While research on the opt out

movement has been sparse, one opt out survey that proved especially fertile as a source of survey

items was Pizmony-Levy and Green Saraisky's (2016) national survey of opt out activists.

Table 2.2:

Survey Constructs and Sources

Survey Construct	Source
Opt out behaviors	Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky (2016)
Effects of the opt out movement	Originally designed
Views on Education Issues	
Interest in education issues	American National Election Studies
Views on testing	Phi Delta Kappa Survey; Casalaspi, Hutt, & Schneider (2018)
Views on education reforms	Phi Delta Kappa Survey; EdNext Survey
Views on governance	Phi Delta Kappa Survey
Right to opt out	Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky (2016)
Political Attitudes	
Trust	American National Election Studies
Estrangement	Robinson et al (1999)
Interest	American Civic Participation Survey
Efficacy	American Civic Participation Survey
Political Activity	American Civic Participation Survey; American National Election Studies
Perceptions of local opt out context	
Institutional support for opting out	Originally designed
Perceptions of opt out strength	Originally designed
District responsiveness	American Civic Participation Survey
Views of educational performance	Phi Delta Kappa Survey
Demographics	Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky (2016)

After an initial draft of my survey was created, I sought expert feedback on my survey

from survey experts, political scientists, and opt out researchers at Michigan State University, the

University of Maryland, and Columbia University. I also sought input from one nationally recognized opt out activist. After revising my survey to incorporate this expert feedback, I conducted a 90-minute, in-person cognitive focus group with six local adults. In this cognitive focus group, participants completed a paper version of the survey and collectively discussed their thought processes as they completed each section. They were also encouraged to point out areas where the survey seemed unclear, confusing, redundant, or suffering from omission. The survey was then revised and imported into Qualtrics, after which I conducted a two-stage online pilot. During stage one, fifty local adults (approximately 80% of them parents) completed the survey online and provided feedback on the questions and the functionality of the Qualtrics interface. This pilot allowed me to ensure respondents were being routed appropriately through the survey, estimate survey length (in minutes), and identify additional revisions to make. After this first set of fifty adults completed the survey, I revised and shortened the survey before sending it to a fresh sample of twenty-five adults, including ten opt out parents recruited from nearby Michigan school districts. I incorporated feedback from this second pilot in my final revisions.

The final survey that emerged from this process was sixty-one items long and required an average of 18 minutes to complete. A copy of the survey is attached in Appendix A. Respondents could take the survey by simply clicking an anonymous website link or entering a URL in the web browser on their computer, smartphone, or tablet. In all four districts, the URL was: tiny.cc/[districtname]survey. To incentivize participation, all respondents were entered into a districtwide raffle to win one of four $25 Amazon e-giftcards.

Survey distribution. Within each district, parents were recruited to complete the survey through an extensive communications campaign. In the Easton and Greenville school districts, the survey was distributed to parents via district-wide parent email list-servs. In the

Commonwealth school district, the survey was distributed through a district-wide text message list-serv, and the superintendent also asked parents to complete it during his weekly robocalls. The survey was also posted on the district homepage. In Danville, the superintendent posted the survey link on the district homepage as well as its Facebook page, which is followed by approximately 75% of district parents. Additionally, the superintendent made robocalls and sent printed letters home with students in grades 3-8. The letters included the survey URL as well as a QR code that parents could scan using their smartphone to access the survey. Each survey was open for fifteen days, and at least three regularly scheduled reminders were sent after the initial launch. All communications, including the initial survey invitation and subsequent reminder messages, were drafted by me and then copied, pasted, or recorded into the district's communications.

Final response sample. I received a total of 570 usable responses.[2] The final completion rates for the four districts were relatively strong: 10% (Commonwealth), 17% (Easton), 18% (Greenville), and 28% (Danville).[3] The table below describes the composition of the district samples alongside the population demographics of the districts. As the table below shows, the sample is heavily skewed toward females, and it tends to over-represent wealthier and more highly educated parents across all four districts. Therefore, in any effort to generalize from a particular district sample to its district population, I weighted the sample using iterative proportional survey weights.

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[2] "Usable" is defined as when the respondent completed at least the first 15% of the survey—the portion asking parents about their opt out behaviors and motivations. Of the 570 usable responses included in analysis, 468 (82.1%) were 100% complete and only 81 (14.2%) were less than 50% complete.

[3] To calculate the completion percentage, I divided the total number of complete responses in each district by the estimated the number of households with children in grades 3-8 in that district using data from NCES. More information about the calculation of these completion rates can be obtained by contacting the author.

Table 2.3:

Survey Samples and District Populations

	Danville		Commonwealth		Greenville		Easton	
	Survey	**District**	**Survey**	**District**	**Survey**	**District**	**Survey**	**District**
Total Respondents	83	-	185	-	112	-	190	-
Opt Out Status								
Opted out	58 (69.9%)	89.0%	141 (76.2%)	84.0%	21 (18.8%)	9.0%	51 (26.8%)	14.0%
Did not opt out	25 (30.1%)	11.0%	44 (23.8%)	16.0%	91 (81.3%)	91.0%	139 (73.2%)	86.0%
Race/Ethnicity								
White/Caucasian	66 (93.0%)	96.6%	132 (84.6%)	72.4%	91 (97.8%)	96.9%	122 (86.5%)	71.4%
Nonwhite	5 (7.0%)	3.4%	24 (15.4%)	27.6%	2 (2.2%)	3.1%	19 (13.5%)	28.6%
Hispanic	0 (0.0%)	1.5%	8 (5.1%)	18.8%	0 (0.0%)	1.0%	5 (3.5%)	16.4%
African American	0 (0.0%)	0.4%	2 (1.3%)	2.6%	0 (0.0%)	0.0%	2 (1.4%)	3.4%
Native American	1 (1.4%)	0.5%	1 (0.6%)	0.1%	0 (0.0%)	0.2%	0 (0.0%)	0.0%
Asian	0 (0.0%)	0.2%	2 (1.3%)	3.3%	0 (0.0%)	1.6%	4 (2.8%)	5.5%
Pacific Islander	0 (0.0%)	0.0%	0 (0.0%)	0.0%	0 (0.0%)	0.0%	0 (0.0%)	0.0%
Other	2 (2.8%)	0.0%	7 (4.5%)	1.8%	1 (1.1%)	0.0%	5 (3.5%)	2.2%
Two or More	2 (2.8%)	0.8%	4 (2.6%)	1.0%	1 (1.1%)	0.4%	3 (2.1%)	1.1%
Language at Home								
English	72 (100.0%)	93.1%	155 (98.7%)	79.7%	94 (100.0%)	97.0%	137 (96.5%)	72.8%
Other	0 (0.0%)	6.9%	2 (1.3%)	20.3%	0 (0.0%)	3.0%	5 (3.5%)	27.2%
Gender								
Male	10 (13.9%)	48.5%	20 (12.7%)	48.6%	12 (12.6%)	50.9%	22 (15.5%)	49.1%
Female	60 (83.3%)	51.5%	133 (84.2%)	51.4%	78 (82.1%)	49.1%	116 (81.7%)	50.9%
Other/Prefer Not to Say	2 (2.8%)	-	5 (3.2%)	-	5 (5.3%)	-	4 (2.8%)	-
Highest level of school completed								
Less than high school	1 (1.4%)	17.6%	0 (0.0%)	8.2%	0 (0.0%)	9.4%	1 (0.7%)	7.1%
High school graduate	6 (8.3%)	38.4%	16 (10.2%)	30.2%	6 (6.3%)	33.1%	10 (7.0%)	20.4%
Some college/no degree	12 (16.7%)	19.9%	23 (14.7%)	15.7%	12 (12.6%)	16.8%	14 (9.9%)	13.2%
Associate/community college/nursing degree	24 (33.3%)	11.9%	18 (11.5%)	8.3%	15 (15.8%)	10.2%	11 (7.8%)	10.2%
Bachelor's degree	10 (13.9%)	6.1%	34 (21.7%)	21.8%	28 (29.5)	16.8%	54 (38.0%)	27.3%
Graduate degree	19 (26.4%)	6.1%	66 (42.0%)	15.8%	34 (35.8%)	13.6%	52 (36.6%)	21.7%
Annual household income								
Less than $49,999	14 (20.3%)	58.2%	9 (6.1%)	24.6%	13 (14.1%)	39.7%	19 (14.4%)	29.4%
$50,000–$99,999	28 (40.6%)	31.8%	29 (19.6%)	30.5%	36 (39.1%)	29.7%	26 (19.7%)	26.4%
$100,000+	27 (39.1%)	9.9%	110 (74.3%)	44.9%	43 (46.7%)	30.5%	87 (65.9%)	44.3%
Partisan Affiliation								
Republican	24 (32.9%)	-	53 (33.1%)	-	32 (33.3%)	-	30 (20.3%)	-
Democrat	13 (17.8%)	-	43 (26.9%)	-	22 (22.9%)	-	55 (37.2%)	-
Independent	25 (34.3%)	-	46 (28.8%)	-	32 (33.3%)	-	49 (33.1%)	-
Something Else	11 (15.1%)	-	18 (11.3%)	-	10 (10.4%)	-	14 (9.5%)	-
Education Employee								
Yes	13 (18.1%)	-	50 (32.5%)	-	16 (16.9%)	-	27 (19.0%)	-
No	59 (81.9%)	-	104 (67.5%)	-	79 (83.2%)	-	115 (81.0%)	-

Notes: Totals within each category do not equal total sample size due to item nonresponse.

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Focus Groups

To obtain greater insight into the "why" and "to what effect" of opt out participation, I also conducted eight one-hour, in-person parent focus groups (two in each district) in September 2017. Within each district, the first focus group was comprised solely of OOPs and the second was comprised solely of NOOPs. Focus group participants were recruited through the parent survey. At the end of the survey, parents were asked if they would be interested in participating in a focus group for which they would be paid $50 cash as an incentive.[4] If a parent indicated that he/she was interested, he/she was prompted to enter an email address where I could contact them to schedule the focus group. Approximately 10% of survey respondents expressed an interest in participating in a focus group, and I followed up with the respondents in each district to schedule a date, time, and location that would maximize participation.

In the end, each focus group was comprised of between five and eight people (depending on attendance and the availability of volunteers), which is regarded as an adequate size for focus group discussions (Kitzinger, 1995; Krueger & Casey, 2015). Following the advice of focus group methodologists, I assembled each group to be homogeneous along my main variable of interest: participation in the opt out movement (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 2012). In this way, one focus group in each district was comprised solely of OOPs and the other focus group was comprised solely of NOOPs. This allowed me to capitalize on the participants' shared experiences, and it also promoted an environment of trust and comfort among participants as they spoke about this charged political topic. I also assembled the groups to be as closely matched with district demographics as possible. In the Danville and Easton School Districts, the

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[4] Krueger and Casey (2015) recommend $50 as the minimum incentive for focus group participation. They also recommend cash-based incentives that are delivered at the immediate conclusion of the focus group.

focus groups were held in a high school conference room, and in the Commonwealth School District the focus groups were held in the district office boardroom. In Greenville, the focus groups were held in a conference room at a local library.

According to Morgan (2012), focus group researchers can study two different aspects of conversation: content and interaction. Researchers interested in content focus their research on the substance of the discussion—that is, what the participants say,—and they employ a more directive moderating style to elicit dialogue relevant to the research topic. Researchers interested in interaction are interested in *how* the participants speak to one another, and they usually employ a less structured moderating style. The focus of my research here was the content of the conversation, and I therefore structured the conversations so that they would advance through an iterative, participant-driven process of "sharing and comparing" substantive comments (Morgan, 2012).

To begin each discussion, I oriented the participants by introducing myself and the topic of discussion. To establish an open and comfortable environment, I informed the participants that they were purposefully gathered together because they were all on the same side of the opt out issue (either all OOPs or all NOOPs), and I explained that I was hoping to hear about not only the experiences they had in common, but also the areas in which they differed from one another. I reminded them that they were guaranteed confidentiality.

Each focus group lasted one hour, during which I posed nine open-ended questions probing the motivations participants had for opting out (or not opting out) as well as their perceptions of how the opt out movement has impacted them and their community. These questions, which were piloted on six local Michigan parents to ensure clarity and precision prior to final administration, were designed to more deeply investigate themes that had emerged from

the preliminary analysis of my survey and document-based data. The complete focus group

protocols can be found in Appendices B and C. To allow the conversations to flow naturally, I

avoided interjecting except to re-establish the focus of the discussion or probe potentially

important lines of reasoning. All focus groups were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

District Elite Interviews

In addition to obtaining the perspective of parents, I also sought to learn about the

experiences of district leaders who have dealt with the opt out movement in their professional

practice and could potentially provide countervailing perspectives on the issue. In each district, I

conducted phone interviews with the superintendent and four school board members (for a total

of 20 interviews) which were audio-recorded and later transcribed (Creswell, 2013).[5] The

superintendent interviews lasted an average of forty-five minutes and the school board interviews

lasted an average of thirty-five minutes, with officials in high-opt out districts generally having

longer interviews. The interviews followed a semi-structured format in which I followed the

advice of Johnson (2002, 111) and "[went] with the flow" of the conversation while remaining

"assertive enough to return the interview to its anticipated course when necessary." Given the

politically charged nature of the opt out movement, I guaranteed the confidentiality of these

district elites and their districts in this research.

Just like the focus group protocols, the protocols used in these interviews were

standardized so that I could identify the degree of consensus that emerged among officials within

and across districts. Officials were asked about their perceptions of opt out activism in their

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[5] I reached out to all school board members in each district requesting interviews and was successful in interviewing
four of them in each district. In three of the districts, there are a total of seven school board members. In the fourth
district, there are a total of five school board members.

district; the motivations parents had for opting out (or not opting out); features of their local community which seemed to promote or hinder opt out activism; and the effects the movement has had on their work and local education politics. Questions were derived from my prior engagement with opt out literature and documents. Together, these questions were designed to uncover information about the "who," "where," "why," and "to what effect" of the opt out movement in each district. The complete protocol for these interviews can be found in Appendix D.

Activist Interviews

In addition to district elites, I conducted in-depth phone interviews with one key activist local to each district to uncover further information about the "why" and "to what effect" of the opt out movement (Johnson, 2002). These activists were identified by contacting the administrator of the local opt out Facebook page and also asking the district superintendent for names. In all four districts, the lead activist was the administrator of the local Facebook page, and three of them were associated with the New York State Allies for Public Education (NYSAPE), a grassroots education organization which has been active in promoting the opt out movement. My interviews with the activists focused on their personal background, their motivations for opting out, the challenges they have faced organizing their community, and the effects that activism has had on them personally. These interviews took place later in the research process (in December 2017), and as a result the protocol construction was informed by preliminary analyses of the previously collected survey, interview, and focus group data. The protocol for these interviews can be found in Appendix E. Like the district elite interviews, these

interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The average interview lasted sixty-three minutes.

Documents/Artifacts

I compiled a large collection of publicly available documents and artifacts related to the opt out movement as it operated in each district and across the state of New York. This collection included over 500 pages of newspaper articles from relevant national, state, and local media (e.g. the *New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Daily News*, *Albany Times-Union, Utica Observer-Dispatch*); public statements by state and local officials about the opt out movement; Facebook and twitter posts from local opt out organizations; archived video reports from local TV news organizations; school board agendas and meeting minutes; and statements and manifestos published by the national opt out organization United Opt Out.

These artifacts, almost all of them textual, were analyzed using document analytic techniques (Bowen, 2009). According to Bowen (2009, 27), document analysis is a "systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic material." It is a preferred method for organizational and archival research, and it is especially powerful as a means of triangulation when put alongside other sources of data, such as surveys or interviews. Bowen (2009, 29-30) points out that document analysis can serve five important research functions: 1) providing evidence of the context within which research participants operate; 2) identifying questions or hypotheses to probe; 3) providing supplementary research data; 4) offering a means of tracking change in developments over time; and 5) providing a means to verify findings or corroborate evidence from other sources.

In this research, the documents were used in two different phases of research design and analysis, mirroring Botwinski's (2013) model of using documents to scaffold qualitative interview data (Figure 2.3 below). First, the documents were used to guide the development of the other data collection instruments (i.e. the parent survey, interview protocols, and focus groups protocols). Early in the design of my study, I perused my collection of documents and artifacts to glean initial insight into the "who," "where," "why," and "to what effect" of the opt out movement and identify hypotheses to explore.[6] Second, the collection of documents and artifacts itself served as an important independent source of data capable of confirming or challenging the results uncovered in the survey and interview data. It also independently contextualized my data by providing a public record of opt out- and education-related events in New York State over the past few years.

Figure 2.3: Botwinski's (2013) Model of Document Use

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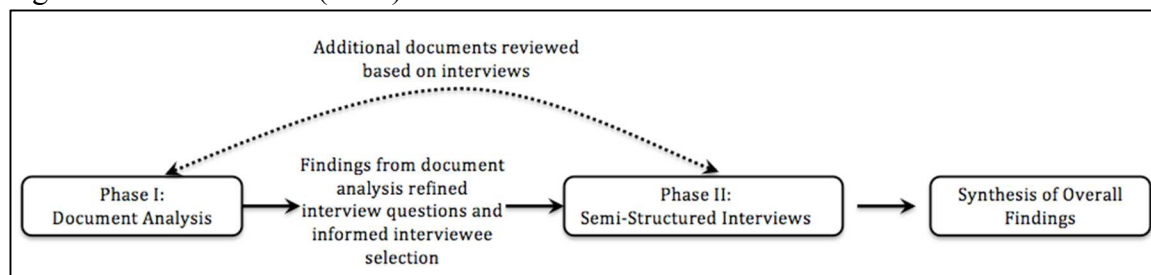
[6] As an example of this process, the *New York Times* published multiple articles in 2015 about district responses to the opt out movement, revealing that some districts accommodated students opting out much more comfortably than others. In some districts, students were allowed to hang out in the gym during the test while in others students had to sit in the classroom and stare at the wall. This insight informed the questions I asked parents and district leaders about their local opt out context as I hypothesized that districts which provided more comfortable accommodations for opt out students would have higher opt out rates.

Statewide Dataset

        Finally, I also compiled an original dataset of district opt out rates in New York State.

The dataset listed every New York school district alongside its grade 3-8 opt out rate and various

demographic and political variables obtained from NYSED, the American Community Survey

(ACS), and the New York State Board of Elections. A complete list of these variables and their

sources can be found in the table below. This dataset allowed me to obtain a statewide

perspective on the opt out movement and identify which variables are most strongly associated

with district-level opt out rates.

Table 2.4:

Variables in the Statewide Dataset

Variable	Description	Source[a]
Identifiers		
distcode	District identifier code	NYSED
distname	District name	NYSED
county	County in which the district is located	NYSED
Opt Out Variables[b]		
elarefuse2016	ELA opt out rate (2016)	NYSED
mathrefuse2016	Math opt out rate (2016)	NYSED
elarefuse2017	ELA opt out rate (2017)	NYSED
mathrefuse2017	Math opt out rate (2017)	NYSED
elachangepct	Percentage change in ELA opt out rate between 2016 and 2017	NYSED
mathchangepct	Percentage change in Math opt out rate between 2016 and 2017	NYSED
Educational Variables (2015-2016 school year)		
locale	District type (urban, rural, town, suburb)	NCES
enroll	Total enrollment (in hundreds)	NYSED
whitepct	Percentage of district enrollment that is white/caucasian	NYSED

Table 2.4 (cont'd)

nonwhitepct	Percentage of district enrollment that is not white/caucasian	NYSED
blackpct	Percentage of district enrollment that is African American	NYSED
hispanicpct	Percentage of district enrollment that is Hispanic/Latino	NYSED
asianpct	Percentage of district enrollment that is Asian	NYSED
nativepct	Percentage of district enrollment that is Native American or Hawaiian Native	NYSED
frlpct	Percentage of district enrollment that qualifies for free or reduced lunch	NYSED
ellpct	Percentage of district enrollment classified as English-Language Learners	NYSED
specialedpct	Percentage of district enrollment with special needs	NYSED
grade4elaprof2015	Percentage of students who were proficient on the grade 4 ELA exam (2015)	NYSED
grade4mathprof2015	Percentage of students who were proficient on the grade 4 Math exam (2015)	NYSED
grade8elaprof2015	Percentage of students who were proficient on the grade 8 ELA exam (2015)	NYSED
grade8mathprof2015	Percentage of students who were proficient on the grade 8 Math exam (2015)	NYSED
grade4elaprof2016	Percentage of students who were proficient on the grade 4 ELA exam (2016)	NYSED
grade4mathprof2016	Percentage of students who were proficient on the grade 4 Math exam (2016)	NYSED
grade8elaprof2016	Percentage of students who were proficient on the grade 8 ELA exam (2016)	NYSED
grade8mathprof2016	Percentage of students who were proficient on the grade 8 Math exam (2016)	NYSED

Community Demographic Variables

income	Median household income (in thousands of dollars)	ACS
college	Percentage of adults age 25+ with a Bachelor's Degree	ACS
totalpop	Total population	ACS
adultpop	Total population over age 18	ACS
age	Median age	ACS
whitecollar[c]	Percentage of residents employed in white collar industries	ACS
homeownership	Percentage of population which owns a home	ACS
marriage	Percentage of males age 15+ who are married	ACS

Table 2.4 (cont'd)

staffcount	Total teaching staff count in the 2015-2016 school year	NYSED
teachexp	Mean years experience of teaching staff in the 2015-2016 school year	NYSED
newteach	Percentage of teachers with less than 5 years experience	NYSED
teachprop	Proportion of teaching staff relative to the total adult population	NYSED/ACS
Political Variables[d]		
sanderspct	Percentage of voters who voted for Sanders in the 2016 Democratic Primary	NYSBOE
trumppct	Percentage of voters who voted for Trump in the 2016 Republican Primary	NYSBOE
presturnout	Voter turnout in the 2016 presidential election	NYSBOE

[a] Abbreviations: New York State Education Department (NYSED); American Community Survey (ACS); National Center for Education Statistics (NCES); New York State Board of Elections (NYSBOE).
[b] NYSED reports the percentage of students who did not take their annual standardized test. It does not indicate if the student opted out or was simply absent on test day for other reasons (e.g. illness). In the analyses that follow, it is assumed that all (or nearly all) absences were cases of opting out and that other types of absences were evenly distributed across districts.
[c] White collar professions are defined according to the IPUMS USA occupational coding guidelines. White collar workers are workers who work in professional or technical careers; managers and administrators; sales or office workers; clerical workers; or workers in the arts and sciences. For more information, visit: https://usa.ipums.org/usa/volii/97occtc.shtml.
[d] Vote totals and percentages are available only at the county-level.

Data Analysis

This research used both qualitative and quantitative techniques to analyze the collected data sources.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data from the interviews, focus groups, and documents underwent their own unique qualitative data analysis procedures. Yin (2014) writes that qualitative case study analysis is a complex and often circuitous process. It involves "examining, categorizing,

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tabulating, testing, or otherwise recombining evidence to produce empirically based findings,"

and unlike in quantitative analyses, "there are few fixed formulas or cookbook recipes to guide

[researchers]" (133). Creswell (2013) likewise conceptualizes the process of qualitative data

analysis as a "custom-built" spiraling process in which the researcher iteratively organizes, reads,

memos, codes, revises, and visualizes the data (see also Dey, 1993). Despite the tailor-made

nature of qualitative analysis, Creswell (2013, 180) recommends compartmentalizing the process

of data analysis into three stages: 1) Preparing and organizing the data; 2) Reducing the data

through coding; and 3) Representing the data in the form of figures, tables, or a discussion. The

sections that follow discuss each of these three stages in turn.

Preparing and organizing the data. After being transcribed, all of the qualitative data

were uploaded to Dedoose Qualitative Analysis Software, where it was organized first by district

and second by source type (e.g. district elite interviews, parent focus groups, documents, etc.). I

then conducted an initial survey of the data through which I "read the [data]…immersed myself

in the details, [and] tried to get a sense of the [data] as a whole" (Agar, 1980, 103). As I read the

data, I took marginal notes and wrote analytical memos based on the patterns I saw emerging in

the data. Following the advice of Yin (2014, 136), this process included a "ground up" approach

that was complemented on occasion by reliance on existing literature and theoretical

propositions.[7]

The development and application of codes. After this initial organization and perusal

of the data, I began the process of code development. Saldaña (2013, 8) defines codes as

"word[s] or short phrase[s] that symbolically assign a summative, salient, essence-capturing,

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[7] As one example, literature in political science and social movement studies suggests that recruitment is an
important predictor of people becoming involved. I used this theoretical understanding to scan my data for instances
where recruitment appeared to be an important predictor of opt out activism while simultaneously remaining vigilant
for alternative explanations.

and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data…[and that], when clustered together according to similarity and regularity (a pattern), actively facilitate the development of categories and thus analysis of their connections." When developing codes, Creswell (2013, 184) encourages researchers to be "lean" so that the codes can be condensed into an easily digestible number of themes.

Codes aligned with each of my research questions were developed both inductively and deductively in correspondence with my general "ground up" analytic strategy. Deductive (or *a priori*) codes were drawn from my collection of public documents as well as previous scholarship about political participation, social movement activism, and the opt out movement specifically. Inductive codes were developed through a multistage content exploration of the qualitative data (Saldaña, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 2014). First an initial list and categorization of codes was developed through a close examination of the data sources. After that, a random sample of twelve documents (3 district elite interviews, 3 focus group transcripts, 3 activist interviews, and 3 documents) was coded to refine and enhance the coding schemes as needed (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).[8] This sample of documents was also given to a second person unaffiliated with this project who was asked to identify key themes relevant to each research question to ensure that my own coding scheme had not neglected anything. The list of codes was then revised and recategorized accordingly. My colleague and I then coded another small set of documents to ensure the reliability of the coding scheme. Any discrepancies were noted and discussed, sometimes leading to a search for alternative explanations or a further revision of the coding scheme (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This joint coding process continued until we had achieved an inter-rater reliability of 80%, after which I completed the remainder of the coding

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[8] Guest, Bunce, & Johnson (2006) report that it is unlikely that new themes will emerge after the first dozen interviews. They found that theme "saturation" in qualitative interviewing typically occurs within the first 12 interviews and metathemes appear as early as within the first six interviews.

myself. The final coding process relied on a system of simultaneous pattern coding in which excerpts of text could receive multiple codes, and the codes themselves were organized into thematic categories of parents codes, child codes, and grandchild codes (Saldaña, 2013).

Analysis and representation. After the coding was complete, I identified "key linkages" and themes in the data using Dedoose's data analysis tools as well as Microsoft Excel (Erickson, 1986).   In Dedoose, the data were examined visually in the form of code clouds, crosstabulations, and charts showing the frequency with which codes occurred as well as the presence or absence of codes in and across the sources. The data were also exported into Microsoft Excel, where additional data displays in the form of frequency tables, bar graphs, and pie charts for the various codes applications were generated. This visual analysis enabled me to confidently highlight the strongest themes and participant voices in the data as well as identify any disconfirming evidence. These results are reported in a variety of formats, including textual narratives, textual tables, and quantitative tables (Creswell, 2013).

When analyzing case study data, Yin (2014) identifies five possible analytic techniques: pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis. This dissertation relied primarily upon cross-case synthesis—a technique well-suited to multiple case studies in which findings are aggregated across individual cases to produce generalizations and illuminate patterns relevant to the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2014, 164). In the case of this present research, I looked for not only commonalities and differences across my case districts, but also areas of convergence or divergence across participant voices (e.g. district officials v. parents, OOPs v. NOOPs, etc.). The stronger the degree of convergence among voices, the more confident I felt in my findings, and in cases where voices diverged, I

was pushed to identify more complex relationships in my data or otherwise undertake additional explorations.

Quantitative Analyses

In addition to the qualitative data analysis described above, I also applied quantitative data analytic techniques to my survey data and statewide dataset—something which allowed me to discern patterns in the "who," "where," "why," and "to what effect" of the opt out movement at both the individual and district levels. After the survey data were collected, the data were imported into STATA statistical analysis software and prepared for analysis. I generated descriptive statistics (e.g. means, standard deviations, proportions, etc.) for each item and construct in the survey and looked for patterns across different groups of respondents using parametric tests (e.g. t-tests), nonparametric tests (e.g. chi-squared tests of independence), and data displays (e.g. histograms, bar graphs, pie charts) as appropriate. I also conducted a logistic regression to determine which factors appeared to be the most significant predictors of an individual parent's decision to participate in the opt out movement.

The statewide dataset was likewise compiled in STATA, cleaned, and analyzed using a variety of methods. I generated descriptive statistics and data displays of key variables as well as correlation tables showing the relationships between variables. Furthermore, I conducted an OLS regression using the formula below to identify which district characteristics seemed to be most significantly associated with district opt out rates:

$$O_i = \beta_0 + \mathbf{D}_i \beta_2' + \mathbf{P}_i' \beta_3 + \varepsilon_i$$

where O_i is the opt out rate in district i; D is a vector of district and community-level demographic variables; and P is a vector of political variables. In addition, I mapped the data with the assistance of a user-created STATA spatial mapping program that allowed me to see the geographic dispersion of the opt out movement across the state.

Triangulation

As described above, the six data sources each underwent their own unique set of analyses so that the findings emerging from those sources would be as nuanced and robust as possible. All six of the data sources were examined collectively in a "triangulating" fashion (Yin 2014, 17). In this way, data analysis was often an iterative process in which insights uncovered in one analysis spurred additional analyses or cross-checks in the same or different sources of data.[9] Furthermore, the quantitative and qualitative analyses regularly complemented each other. In some instances, the qualitative data illustrated and deepened a phenomenon uncovered in the quantitative data, and in others, the quantitative data contextualized and numericized the qualitative data. By putting these various sources of data in conversation with one another, I was able to produce a complex, multidimensional, multivocal, and robust view of the opt out movement along each of my research questions.

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[9] For instance, if a school board member reported that she felt nonwhite parents were less active in the opt out movement, I would cross-check this claim using my other sources of data.

Validity

A particular concern throughout this research, as in all scientific research, was the problem of ensuring the validity of the results. Maxwell (2005, 106) defines validity as "the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account." According to Yin (2014), validity is a concern that should be guarded against at every stage of the research process, and there are many tools that can be leveraged to protect against threats to validity. In case study research specifically, there are several potential threats to validity, including: researcher bias, in which the internal biases of the researcher influences the direction of conclusions; reactivity, in which the act of conducting the research changes the behavior of participants; and manipulation, in which the researcher tries to find data that fit his/her hypotheses. It is impossible to ever erase the researcher's own biases entirely from a study (Peshkin, 1988), but several steps were taken to combat potential validity threats over the course of this dissertation, from the initial design of the study to the final reporting of the findings. These steps were derived from the recommendations of both Yin (2014) and Maxwell (2005).

First, the decision to study four different site districts promoted external validity because the cases were selected following a replication logic that allowed findings, through cross-case synthesis techniques, to have greater analytic power when illustrating the opt out movement across different contexts. Additionally, within and across districts, multiple sources of evidence were gathered and triangulated so that the results would not reflect the biased perspectives of a single group of respondents (e.g. district officials, opt out parents, non-opt out parents, journalists, etc.), but would rather yield a complex, multidimensional, multivocal view on each

of my research questions. Identical protocols and surveys were also used within and across

districts throughout my study, ensuring that the data from each site would be systematically

collected and any potential researcher bias would be minimized. As mentioned above, these

protocols and surveys were also reviewed and piloted prior to final administration to ensure their

ability to measure intended constructs and collect unbiased information directly linked to the

research questions. Additionally, I made the decision to record my interviews and use verbatim

transcripts rather than rely solely on my own note-taking, which allowed me to obtain the

unfiltered views of participants in my study. After my data were collected, I also employed

respondent validations in which I asked key participants to read my notes, transcripts, and initial

drafts of findings and provide feedback. Finally, in the late stages of analysis, I asked a "critical

friend" to review drafts of my findings and search for discrepant evidence in a random sample of

my data sources (Maxwell, 2005).

What Follows

In the chapters that follow, I report the findings derived from the data sources and

analysis methods described above. Taken together, these data and methods have allowed me to

produce reasonably confident answers to each of my four research questions, beginning in the

next chapter where I take up the question of who participates in the opt out movement (and who

does not).

CHAPTER 3: WHO OPTS OUT?

Social movements are made up of people, and so it is obvious that to understand social movements we must understand who are the people that compose them.
–Sociologist Jack Goldstone (2015)

Today, the voices of American citizens are raised and heard unequally. The privileged participate more than others and are increasingly well organized to press their demands on government. Public officials, in turn are much more responsive to the privileged than to average citizens and the less affluent. The voices of citizens with lower or moderate incomes are lost on the ears of inattentive government officials while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policymakers readily hear and routinely follow.
—American Political Science Association (2004, 1)

Introduction

This chapter addresses my first research question—Who participates in the opt out movement (and who does not)?—with an eye toward assessing how equitable and inclusive this form of activism is across the divides of race and class. The question of who participates in the opt out movement is an urgent one when we consider for a moment the chronic inequalities in participation that exist in American politics and education especially.

While numerous models of participation have been offered to explain inequalities in participation, the most persuasive model today is Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) civic voluntarism model. The civic voluntarism model contends that political participation is driven

primarily by three factors: resources (i.e. money, time, education), engagement (i.e. interest in politics), and recruitment (i.e. being asked to participate). These factors are highly correlated with socioeconomic status, leading to uneven patterns of participation that reinforce the privilege and political influence of high-SES individuals. High-SES individuals are more likely to have the time and money needed to participate in politics, and they also tend to inhabit social environments that encourage political engagement, the acquisition political knowledge, and the cultivation of civic skills (Abramason and Aldrich 1982; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993; Putnam 2000; Brady, Schlozman, & Verba, 1999; McClurg, 2003; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Rosenberg, 1988). In addition to being more likely to participate in politics, high-SES individuals tend to participate in deeper and more substantive ways than low-SES individuals. They contribute more hours, donate more money, and organize more thoroughly in ways that further amplify their voice (Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 1999). Wealthy individuals also tend to care about different issues than low-income individuals, and governmental agendas consequently tend to skew toward their concerns (Gilens, 2012; Bartels, 2016). Indeed, "economic resources are convertible into political resources," and socioeconomic differences account for a nontrivial part of the differences in political participation and governmental responsiveness (Solt, 2008).

Beyond issues of SES, scholars have also examined the participatory inequalities that exist across different racial and ethnic groups, with a large body of literature indicating lower rates of participation among people of color (Verba & Nie 1972; London & Hearn, 1977; Shingles 1981; Miller, Gurin, Gurin, and Malanchuk, 1981; Miller, 1982; Welch, Comer, & Steinman 1975; Welch, 1977; Brischetto & de la Garza, 1983). While some research has found that racial differences in participation disappear when controlling for SES (Verba, Schlozman,

Brady, & Nie 1993; Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; Hero & Campbell, 1996), other research has found that racial differences exist independently of SES (Stokes, 2003; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Shaw, de la Garza, & Lee, 2000). Principal among the non-SES factors that explain these differences are uneven feelings of group consciousness and social connectedness (Miller et al, 1981; Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Dawson, 1994; Stokes 2003), which can promote participation by sparking political interest and establishing collective identities that encourage participation among people of color (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Hansen and Rosenstone 1993; Brady et al, 1999; McClurg 2003; Stokes 2003).

These participation inequalities, present in American democracy writ large, are equally manifest in the field of education, where white, high-SES parents are generally more engaged in the governance of their schools. High-SES parents are more likely to volunteer on the PTA, attend school board meetings, vote in local elections, and talk about education issues with their peers and local educators. They are, to borrow a word from McAdams (2000), "persistent" in advancing their preferences, and almost always these parents are treated with deference and respect by educational officials. In contrast, low-SES parents and parents of color face systemic barriers to education participation, often finding that their interactions with school officials are structured by race, class, culture, and language (Rogers, 2004; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). Indeed, when low-income parents or parents of color attempt to redress a problem pertaining to their child's educational experience, they are frequently ignored or treated with hostility by education officials who do not appreciate the cultural capital they possess. In her book *Unequal Childhoods*, Lareau (2003, 7) writes that "when working-class and poor parents try to intervene in their children's educational experiences, they often feel ineffectual…bullied and powerless." De Carvalho (2000, 12) uses the phrase "symbolic violence" to describe the alienation and

discomfort historically marginalized parents feel when learning that their school community does not value their cultural background, and she notes that as parents collect negative experiences trying to participate, they become increasingly estranged and cynical about the power of their own voice. These challenges are even thornier if the parents do not speak English, and it is a fact of practice that many school systems do not provide adequate language support services for ELL parents.

In the face of these challenges, some scholars have advocated for new models of participation with education—one of which is the embrace of grassroots social movement tactics. Advocates for education social movements argue that this mode of participation is necessary to equalize political voice because conventional participation fails to challenge the institutions and cultural logics that inherently entrench inequality (Rogers, 2006; Anyon, 2005; Orr & Rogers, 2011; Ferman, 2017). Additionally, social movements can offer an opportunity for people of different backgrounds to come together in common cause, share valuable political resources, create new networks, build collective identities, and deploy organizing strategies that maximize political voice among less privileged parents.

This faith in grassroots social movement activism is not on its face misplaced, and it remains an important question if and how grassroots social movements (like the opt out movement) might promote greater equity in education participation. Indeed, grassroots movements usually mobilize diverse and subdominant memberships, and they tend to exhibit egalitarian, decentralized control structures that allow for intramovement equity of voice (Horton, 2013). They also tend to be geographically bounded in localities, which facilitates dense social networks that promote group consciousness and identity building.

On the otherhand, political resources (i.e. time, money, and education) remain indispensible to social movement mobilization, and as long as resources remain unequally distributed within and across communities, grassroots social movement mobilizations may not necessarily be a force for political equity. As Edwards and McCarthy (2004, 117) write:

> Middle-class groups remain privileged in their access to many kinds of resources, and, therefore, not surprisingly social movements that resonate with the concerns of relatively privileged social groups predominate and the mobilizations of the poor groups are quite rare in advanced industrial democracies.

Illustrating the upper-class bent of social movements, cross-national research has found that social movements tend to be founded earlier and at faster rates in wealthy democracies (Smith & Wiest, 2005), and *within* those countries, movements are more likely to emerge in metropolitan and suburban areas with more privileged populations (McCarthy et al, 1988). In the United States, many of the most salient social movements in history—such as the abolitionist, temperance, feminist, conservation, and Tea Party movements—have tended to present the voice of white, middle-class people. And even the movements that *have* mobilized underprivileged populations have tended to have as their *leaders* people who come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004). Thus, a gap remains in our understanding of just how inclusive and equitable grassroots social movements may be in education.

The Opt Out Stereotype: White, Wealthy Suburbanites

The prevailing stereotype of the opt out movement is that it is a movement driven primarily by white, wealthy, suburban parents, and as a result, it is not a force for political or educational equity (Hairston, 2017).   The most famous espousal of this stereotype came in 2013,

when Arne Duncan dismissed parents opposed to Common Core testing as "a bunch of white suburban moms who—all of the sudden [on the test]—[see] their child isn't as bright as they thought they were." Duncan, however, was not the only person to spread this belief, and this caricature of the opt out movement has been widely promulgated throughout the news media and on social media sites like Twitter, where the hashtag #OptOutSoWhite began trending in 2015. A 2016 editorial by the *Washington Post* lamented that "white suburban parents, the driving force of the opt out movement" were hurting low-income children by undermining important TBA reforms—a sentiment that was echoed repeatedly in other outlets like the *New York Times* and *Education Week* (Editorial Board, 2015, 2016). Robert Pondiscio (2015) of the Fordham Foundation was even more unsparing in his critique of the opt out movement, beginning one of his commentaries like this:

> There used to be a wry and mildly provocative blog called "Stuff White People Like." Briefly popular in its heyday, it was described by the *New Republic* as a "piquant satire of white liberal cultural mores and hypocrisies." The site's creator stopped updating it a few years back after landing a book deal. But if it were still active, "opting out of tests" might have been right up there with craft beer, farmers' markets, NPR, and Wes Anderson movies on that list of mores. Maybe hypocrisies, too.

He went on to predict that opt out parents were on a "collision course" with "low-income families of color who have been the primary beneficiaries of testing and accountability."

Figure 3.1: The Opt Out Movement Stereotype on Twitter
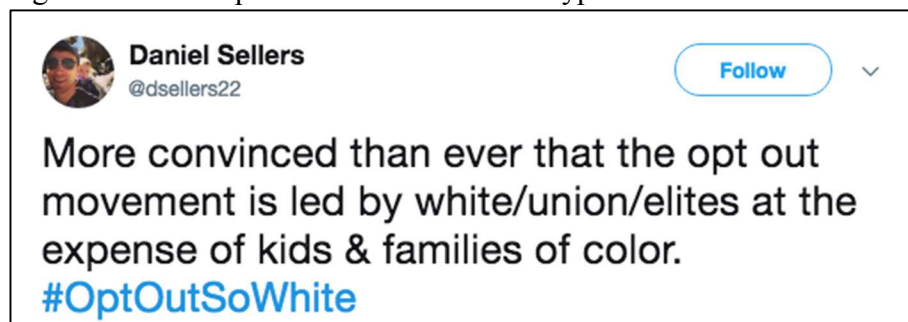
As discussed in Chapter 1, research on the opt out movement has been highly limited and of variable rigor, but what little research exists has generally concluded that the opt out movement fits this stereotype, at least when looking at district-level data. Chingos (2015) examined district-level opt out data in New York collected by the opt out organization United to Counter the Core and found that districts with higher opt out rates tended to be more affluent, serve fewer disadvantaged students, and have higher test scores (see also Bennett, 2016; Supovitz et al, 2016). Furthermore, in the one study to date that examined the *individuals* involved in the opt out movement, Pizmony-Levy and Green Saraisky (2016, 6) reported that "the typical opt out activist is a highly educated, white, married, politically liberal parent whose children attend public school and whose household median income is well above the national average."

The claim that the opt out movement is predominantly a white, affluent phenomenon has received greater resonance by public disavowals from civil rights groups as well as national polling data which reveal racial cleavages in testing views. In the midst of the 2015 opt out explosion, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights released a statement signed by twelve national civil and human rights groups condemning the opt out movement:

> Today, 12 national civil and human rights groups announced their opposition to anti-testing efforts springing up across the country that are discouraging students from taking standardized tests and subverting the validity of data about educational outcomes. Data obtained through some standardized tests are particularly important to the civil rights community because they are the only available, consistent, and objective source of data about disparities in educational outcomes…The anti-testing efforts…would sabotage important data and rob us of the right to know how our students are faring. When parents 'opt out' of tests—even when out of protest for legitimate concerns—they're not only making a choice for their own child, they're inadvertently making a choice to undermine efforts to improve schools for every child.

Further underscoring these racial tensions are national survey data, which reveal that parents of

color tend to be more supportive of testing than white parents. A 2015 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup

poll found that 72% of black parents and 61% of Hispanic parents considered test scores either

"very" or "somewhat important" for measuring the effectiveness of schools, compared to 55% of

white parents. When asked about the opt out movement specifically, the poll also found that

44% of white respondents supported the right of parents to opt out and 41% opposed it. In

contrast, only 28% of black parents and 35% of Hispanic parents supported the right of parents

to opt out. Furthermore, when asked if they would opt out their own child from testing 75% of

black parents, 65% of Hispanic parents, and 54% of white respondents said they would not.

While this narrative of the opt out movement continues to hold sway, it has not gone

uncontested. In 2015, the Seattle/King County chapter of the NAACP broke with national

leadership and encouraged parents to opt out from the new Smarter Balanced tests, and in 2016,

the *New York Times* remarked that the opt out movement appeared to be diversifying. Ceresta

Smith, an African American leader of the national opt out organization United Opt Out,

expressed frustration that testing supporters remained fixated on the white and suburban

elements of the movement even as the movement mobilized diverse parents:

> I think the black and brown voices have been silenced [by testing supporters]. When it comes to
> their participation in this movement you see just a handful of the same faces, and they're
> predominantly white. When you look at the face of the movement, it's the Long Island moms—
> and unfortunately the Philly moms, the Jersey moms, the black women in Miami, and Fort
> Lauderdale, and in Seattle, you had a lot of African Americans involved but you don't see it. It's
> not visible. It's not publicized.

According to Smith, the effort by TBA supporters to "whitewash" the movement was an

intentional effort to marginalize the movement from education reform discussions (Quinlan,

2016; see also Teague, 2016).

From this perspective, then, the question of who opts out is an important one not only because it can yield insight into the promise of grassroots social movement activism to beget equity in participation with education, but because perceptions of who is involved can impact how the movement is received by audiences. Is the opt out movement merely another vehicle for the concerns of white, wealthy parents who should be dismissed because of their privilege, or is it more diverse—uniting various elements of the community in the collective voicing of concerns?

The Opt Out Movement Across New York School Districts

The prevailing white, wealthy, and suburban stereotype of the opt out movement is not borne out in my data. In fact, whether one looks at patterns in opt out participation at the level of the district or the level of the individual, the opt out movement appears to mobilize (with only slight exceptions) a diverse coalition of actors across a diverse array of New York school districts.

Figure 3.2 below illustrates the strength of the opt out movement in school districts across New York State during the 2015-2016 school year. As the figure illustrates the opt out movement, while varying in strength across localities, impacted the vast majority of school districts in New York and did not seem confined to any particular geographic region (e.g. Long Island) or district type (e.g. suburban districts). In fact, 94.5% of districts included in my dataset (648) had opt out rates above the 5% "legal limit" for opting out.

Figure 3.2: District ELA Opt Out Rates, by Quartile (2016)
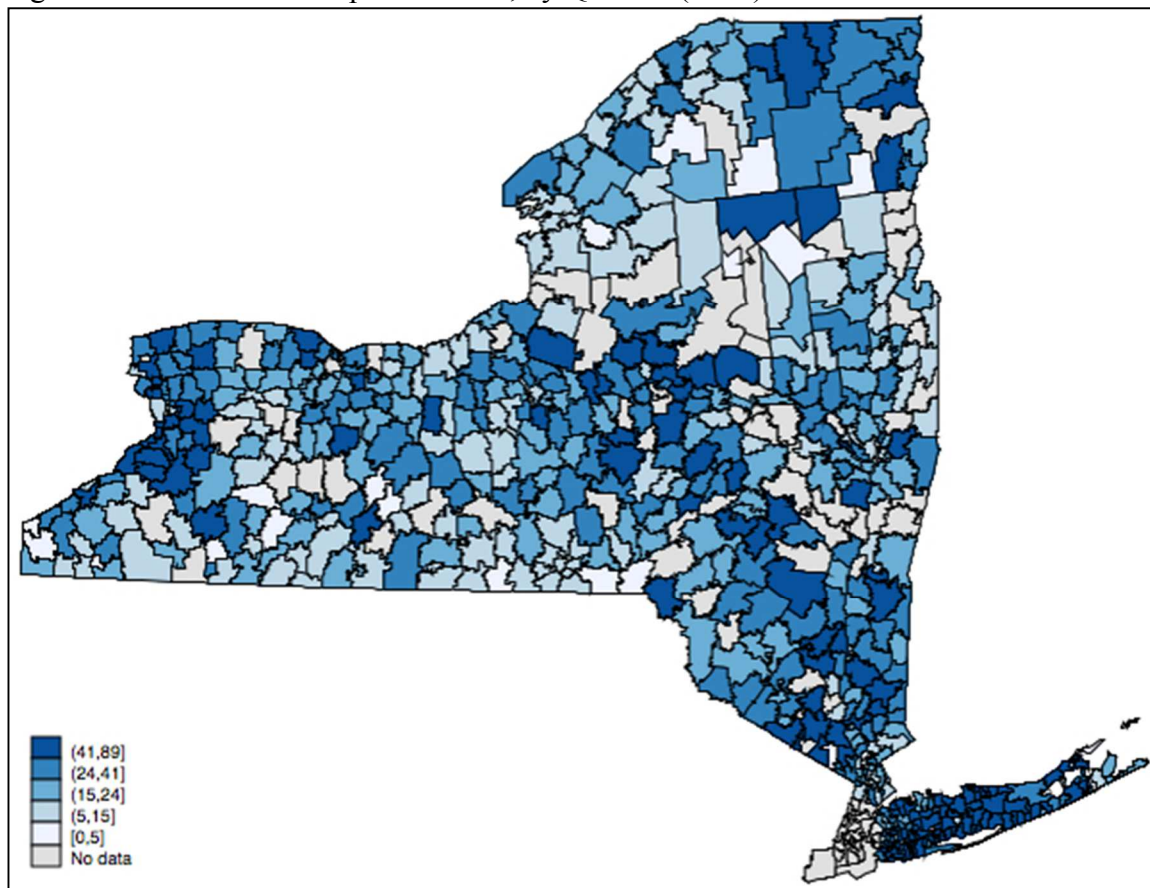
Note: Colors show the percentage of grade 3-8 students who opted out of the 2016 NYS ELA exam as reported by NYSED. The colors represent percentage quartiles of the total opt out rate in the state with the addition of a separate color for 0-5% (the "legal limit" of opting out). For instance, the darkest blue represents districts that were in the 4th quartile of opting out and had opt out rates over 41%. Dataset excludes New York City.

Cross-quartile comparisons of district opt out rates likewise confirmed that the opt out movement has not been confined to white, wealthy, or suburban districts (Table 3.1). While suburban districts did tend to have higher average opt out rates (36.1%) than their urban (15.6%), rural (23.8%), and town (27.3%) counterparts, all four types of districts experienced high average opt out rates. Moreover, the opt out movement was a significant presence in racially diverse districts, and in actuality, districts in the top half of nonwhite student enrollment actually had *higher* average opt out rates than districts in the bottom half of nonwhite student enrollment. Mirroring the findings of Bennett (2016) and Chingos (2015), opt out rates did seem positively

correlated with district wealth, but it is important to highlight that even the least wealthy districts

exhibited average opt out rates over 20%.

Table 3.1:

District Opt Out Rates by Racial Diversity, Income, Education, and Urbanicity

District Nonwhite Student Enrollment Quartile	Mean Opt Out Rate (s.d.)
1st quartile (<5.7%)	23.9% (16.6)
2nd quartile (5.7%-12.0%)	29.1% (19.0)
3rd quartile (12.0%-28.8%)	35.0% (18.8)
4th quartile (>28.8%)	28.5% (18.0)

District Median Income Quartile	Mean Opt Out Rate (s.d.)
1st quartile (<$58,200)	20.1% (15.1)
2nd quartile ($58,200-$69,300)	24.6% (15.5)
3rd quartile ($69,300-$95,800)	32.9% (17.0)
4th quartile (>$95,800)	38.5% (20.8)

District College Attainment Quartile	Mean Opt Out Rate (s.d.)
1st quartile (<18.3%)	21.0% (14.9)
2nd quartile (18.3%-25.0%)	27.9% (17.3)
3rd quartile (25.0%-39.2%)	33.8% (19.8)
4th quartile (>39.2%)	33.4% (19.3)

District Urbanicity	Mean Opt Out Rate (s.d.)
City (n=21)	15.6% (8.9)
Suburb (n=262)	36.1% (20.6)
Town (n=101)	27.3% (14.8)
Rural (n=301)	23.8% (16.3)

Note: ELA opt out rates reported. Similar findings were produced using Math opt out rates.

These descriptive statistics complicate existing narratives about the demographics of the

districts impacted by the opt out movement, but they are not able to predict which individual

district characteristics are most powerfully associated with opt out activism when controlling for

other confounding variables. To address this limitation, I turned to Ordinary Least Squares

(OLS) Regression analysis. As described in the previous chapter, the formula for this model was:

$$O_i = \beta_0 + \mathbf{D}_i \beta_2' + \mathbf{P}_i' \beta_3 + \varepsilon_i$$

where O_i is the opt out rate in district i during the 2015-2016 school year; D is a vector of district and community variables; and P is a vector of political variables. Table 3.2 below provides a description of the variables included in this analysis. The correlations amongst the variables can be found in Appendix F.

Table 3.2:

Descriptive Information for OLS Variables

VARIABLE	DESCRIPTION	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
District/Community Population Characteristics					
Enroll	Total K-12 enrollment in the district (in hundreds)	23.52	30.37	0.110	339.1
Nonwhite	Percent of students who are not white/Caucasian	21.59	22.71	0.556	100
FRLpct	Percent of students who qualify for free/reduced lunch	42.72	19.32	0.617	95.97
Dispct	Percent of students who are classified as special needs	14.87	7.602	4.703	96.62
Home	Percent of population which owns home	75.79	11.67	26.50	96.40
Married	Percent of males age 15+ who are married	53.42	8.303	22.93	77.34
Age	Median age in the district	42.32	5.225	12.40	62.10
Grade4ELAProf	Percent proficient on the 2015 NYS Grade 4 ELA Exam	33.78	15.59	0	80
Grade4MathProf	Percent proficient on the 2015 NYS Grade 4 Math Exam	47.16	17.62	0	90
Teachexp	Mean experience of district teachers (years)	16.41	1.761	7.570	25.43
Teachprop	Proportion of the adult population that works in district schools	1.645	0.491	0.258	5.906
Type	Type of school district (urban, town, suburb, or rural)	-	-	-	-
Political Characteristics					
Sanderspct	Percent of voters in democratic primary who voted for Sanders	51.30	9.040	32.81	72.35
Trumppct	Percent of voters in republican primary who voted for Trump	58.30	8.370	37.52	72.25
PresTurnout	Voter turnout in 2016 presidential election	72.16	3.430	64.55	78.74

Table 3.3 reports the results of the OLS regression analysis. First and foremost, the regression confirmed that suburban districts have significantly higher opt out rates than urban, rural, and town districts. When controlling for various demographic and political variables, suburban districts exhibited average opt out rates 13 percentage points higher than urban districts, 6 percentage points higher than town districts, and 9 percentage points higher than rural districts. Support for the notion that the opt out movement is most prevalent in

socioeconomically privileged districts, however, was more mixed. The results revealed that districts which serve a larger percentage of nonwhite and poor students do tend to have lower opt out rates, and this relationship is statistically significant (p=0.000). Specifically, a 1 percentage point increase in nonwhite student enrollment or a 1 percentage point increase in poor student enrollment was associated with approximately a 0.2 percentage point decline in district opt out rates. On the otherhand, districts that enrolled a higher percentage of special needs students tended to have *higher* opt out rates. While this finding may seem paradoxical (because special needs enrollment is positively correlated with nonwhite enrollment and poverty), it is in fact consonant with the finding, discussed in the next chapter, that parents who have a special needs children were more likely to opt out due to concerns that the tests would pose a severe burden to their children.

Table 3.3:

Estimated Effects on District Opt Out Rates (OLS Regression)

VARIABLES	Model 1 ELA Opt Out Rate	Model 2 Math Opt Out Rate
Enroll	0.074**	0.066*
	(0.028)	(0.028)
Nonwhite	-0.237***	-0.249***
	(0.052)	(0.053)
FRLpct	-0.214***	-0.196***
	(0.055)	(0.057)
Dispct	0.833***	0.789***
	(0.226)	(0.228)
homeownership	0.235**	0.260***
	(0.077)	(0.079)
marriage	-0.469***	-0.520***
	(0.137)	(0.135)
Age	0.271	0.329
	(0.179)	(0.172)
Grade4ELAProf	-0.116	
	(0.066)	
Grade4MathProf		-0.174***
		(0.051)
Teachexp	0.565	0.493
	(0.381)	(0.393)
Teachprop	-3.077	-3.787
	(2.016)	(1.950)
Urban (comp. to suburb)	-13.436***	-12.797***
	(3.084)	(2.981)
Town (comp. to suburb)	-6.217**	-5.085*
	(2.172)	(2.190)
Rural (comp. to suburb)	-9.278***	-7.987***
	(1.965)	(1.948)
Sanderspct	-0.032	-0.115
	(0.125)	(0.123)
Trumppct	0.947***	0.827***
	(0.094)	(0.093)
Presturnout	0.052	0.054
	(0.205)	(0.206)
Constant	-26.595	-8.277
	(20.042)	(20.221)
Observations	629	628
F-Value	26.30	22.58
R-squared	0.394	0.352

Note: Robust standard errors reported. Political variables are measured at the county-level. *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$.

District educational performance likewise appeared to have at most a mixed relationship with opt out rates. Districts that posted higher performance on the state math tests during the previous school year (2014-2015) had slightly lower math opt out rates in 2015-2016 (p=0.001), but the relationship between ELA performance and ELA opt out rates was not statistically significant (p=0.081).[10] The regression further revealed that the proportion of the adult population which works in district schools was not significantly related to opt out activism, casting doubt on the claim that the opt out movement is spurred by teachers and union actors. In fact, the relationship between those two variables was actually negative.

Finally, two political variables from the model are worth discussing. The literature on political participation generally concludes that participation in one form of political activity, such as voting, is positively correlated with participation in other forms of political participation, such as volunteering on a campaign or attending a demonstration. In other words, people who vote are also more likely to participate in other forms of political activity. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, 66) have explicitly tested the hypothesis that there may be participation "specialists" who focus only on one type of political participation (e.g. people who attend demonstrations but do not vote), but they found "little support" for that hypothesis in their data:

> Only a small proportion of those who are politically active beyond voting engage in only one other political activity. Nor are there particular activities for which we find specialization. We might have expected protesters to be specialists [due to feelings of alienation from the political system], but the vast majority of them (93%) engage in some other activity beyond voting.

This predicted positive relationship between voting and participation in the opt out movement, however, was not borne out in my own analysis. ELA and Math opt out participation rates were

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[10] The high rates of opting out in 2014-2015 make it difficult to truly ascertain district performance as measured by test scores as the population of students taking the test is likely to be unrepresentative. NYSED has reported the proficiency standings of students who opt out and found that students who scored lower on the previous year's tests were slightly more likely to opt out.

actually negatively correlated with voter turnout in the 2016 presidential election (r=-0.17 and

r=-0.14 respectively), and in the regression model, the coefficients for these variables were near

zero and not statistically significant (p>0.8). Moreover, my survey data reveal that OOPs did not

appear any more or less likely than NOOPs to have voted in the 2016 election or engage in other

forms of political participation over the previous 12 months.

The political variable that appeared to be most closely associated with district opt out

rates was the percentage of voters in the Republican Primary who voted for Donald Trump

(r=0.44). In fact, the regression model suggests that a 1 percentage point increase in support for

Trump in the 2016 Republican Primary was associated with a 0.9 percentage point increase in

district opt out rate. This finding, which I will return to in the next chapter exploring the

motivations for opting out, suggests that participation in the opt out movement may be driven by

anti-establishment political attitudes.[11]

Taken together, the statewide data challenge the stereotype that the opt out movement is

confined to white, wealthy, and suburban districts. It is true that larger enrollments of nonwhite

and poor students are negatively associated with opt out rates and that suburban districts have

much higher opt out rates than their urban, rural and town counterparts. However, elevated

average opt out rates appeared present in virtually all types of districts, and the most racially

diverse districts in actuality exhibited opt out rates on par with the least diverse districts.

Furthermore, I found little evidence that the presence of educators in a district was associated

with opt out activism. Overall these findings suggest that, at least at the district level, the opt out

movement is in fact much more diverse than previously reported, and it may in fact mobilize

parents across the demographic spectrum.

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[11] It should be noted, however, that the percentage of voters in the Democratic Primary who voted for Bernie
Sanders, another anti-establishment candidate, was negatively correlated with opt out rate (r=-0.21) and not
statistically significant in the regression model.

The Opt Out Movement *Within* Districts

The findings above challenge the stereotype of the opt out movement as white, wealthy, and suburban. However, the preceding analyses are vulnerable to the same criticisms that can be leveled against Chingos (2015), Bennett (2016), and Supovitz et al (2016): they run the risk of committing an ecological fallacy by inferring that patterns found at the district level are also found at the individual level. It is possible, in other words, that while the opt out movement is present in a wide diversity of districts, the individuals participating in the movement are actually much more homogenous. District X may be racially diverse, but perhaps the parents opting out *within that district* are mostly white, wealthy, and unrepresentative of the district as a whole.

To address this question, I turn now to the data collected in my four site districts, focusing attention on the survey data and interviews with district elites. Using my survey data I tested for demographic biases in the composition of the opt out movement by comparing the percentage of total survey respondents in a particular demographic group to the percentage of OOPs and NOOPs in that same demographic group. For example, if white parents comprised 70% of the total survey sample in a particular district, but 90% of OOPs in that district, then the claim could be made that the opt out movement is skewed toward the concerns of white parents in that district.

Table 3.4:

Racial Composition of the Opt Out Movement

Total Pooled Sample[a]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
White	89.1%	89.0%	89.3%
Nonwhite	10.9%	11.0%	10.7%

Greenville School District[b]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
White	97.9%	100.0%	97.4%
Nonwhite	2.1%	0.0%	2.6%

Danville School District[c]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
White	93.0%	90.0%	100.0%
Nonwhite	7.0%	10.0%	0.0%

Easton School District[d]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
White	86.5%	82.4%	87.9%
Nonwhite	13.5%	17.8%	12.2%

Commonwealth School District[e]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
White	84.6%	89.1%	70.3%
Nonwhite	15.4%	10.9%	29.7%

Notes: Analyses use unweighted sample. Analyses of weighted sample yield similar results. a: $X^2=0.01$ (p= 0.94); b: $X^2=0.42$ (p= 1.00); c: $X^2=2.26$ (p= 0.31); d: $X^2=0.67$ (p= 0.41); e: $X^2=7.68$ (p= 0.01)

Table 3.4 above and Table 3.5 below report the results of these analyses for the characteristics of race and income respectively. Across the total pooled sample, no statistically significant differences emerged on either characteristic. Moreover, within each district subsample, no statistically significant differences emerged across income levels, and in only one district (Commonwealth) did there appear to be any racial differences in opt out participation

patterns. In Commonwealth, white parents comprised 84.6% of the total survey sample and

89.1% of OOPs while nonwhite parents comprised 15.4% of the total survey sample and 10.9%

of OOPs (p=0.01).

Table 3.5:

Income Composition of the Opt Out Movement

Total Pooled Sample[a]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
<$50,000	12.5%	13.4%	11.6%
$50,000-$99,999	27.0%	25.8%	28.0%
$100,000+	60.5%	60.8%	60.3%

Greenville School District[b]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
<$50,000	14.1%	23.5%	12.0%
$50,000-$99,999	39.1%	29.4%	41.3%
$100,000+	46.7%	47.1%	46.7%

Danville School District[c]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
<$50,000	20.3%	20.4%	20.0%
$50,000-$99,999	40.6%	40.8%	40.0%
$100,000+	39.1%	38.8%	40.0%

Easton School District[d]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
<$50,000	14.4%	20.0%	12.8%
$50,000-$99,999	19.7%	23.3%	18.6%
$100,000+	65.9%	56.7%	68.6%

Commonwealth School District[e]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
<$50,000	6.1%	7.1%	2.9%
$50,000-$99,999	19.6%	19.5%	20.0%
$100,000+	74.3%	73.5%	77.1%

Notes: Analyses use unweighted sample. Analyses of weighted sample yield
similar results. a: X^2=0.47 (p= 0.79); b: X^2=1.81 (p= 0.38); c: X^2=0.01 (p= 1.00);
d: X^2=1.61 (p= 0.45); e: X^2=0.84 (p= 0.83).

Additional analyses allowed me to test another characteristic of opt out participants—their partisan affiliations and political ideologies. Both Pondiscio (2015) and Pizmony-Levy and Green Saraisky (2016) have suggested that OOPs are politically liberal and that the opt out movement may therefore be a vehicle for leftist policy ideas. Contrary to this stereotype, I found in my own data that the opt out movement appeared to mobilize Democrats (24.4%), Republicans (33.0%), and Independents (30.9%) across all four districts, and there were no significant differences in participation rates among parents in these groups. Furthermore, when asked about their political ideology, OOPs tended to be more liberal than NOOPs in Greenville and more conservative than NOOPs in Danville, Easton, and Commonwealth, although these differences were not statistically significant. Overall, both OOPs and NOOPs appeared to be relatively moderate in their political leanings, and the opt out movement appeared to mobilize people across partisan and ideological divides (see Table 3.6 below).[12]

Table 3.6:

Mean Political Ideology Score of Survey Respondents, by Opt Out Status

	Total	OOPs	NOOPs	p-value
Pooled Sample	3.96	4.18	3.75	0.00
Greenville	3.96	3.81	4.00	0.64
Danville	4.25	4.40	3.89	0.18
Easton	3.65	4.00	3.53	0.08
Commonwealth	4.13	4.20	3.84	0.14

Notes: Political Ideology Scale ranges from 1-7 in which 1 is "Extremely Liberal" 4 is "Middle of the Road" and 7 is "Extremely Conservative." P-values reported for two-tailed t-test comparing OOPs and NOOPs.

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[12] Some might hypothesize that the opt out movement is populated by political extremists rather than moderates. OOPs and NOOPs might have similar *mean* ideology scores, but perhaps OOPs come primarily from both extremes of the spectrum while NOOPs come from the middle of the spectrum. To test this, I examined the distribution of the political ideology scores for OOPs and NOOPs, and I did not find evidence that OOPs were any more or less likely to come from the ends of the political spectrum. Both distributions were of a similar bell curve shape, with kurtosis values of 2.63 and 3.54 respectively.

Finally, the results of my survey produced mixed evidence regarding the prevalence of educators in the opt out movement. In the total pooled sample, educators did appear significantly over-represented among OOPs (p=0.01). In three of the districts, educators comprised a larger percentage of OOPs than their percentage of the district survey sample, but statistically significant differences were not evident in any of the four districts. These differences appeared larger in the two LOO districts (Greenville and Easton) than in the two HOO districts (Danville and Commonwealth). In Greenville, educators made up 16.8% of the total survey sample and 23.5% of OOPs, and in Easton educators made up 19.0% of the total survey sample and 26.5% of OOPs. In contrast, educators in Danville and Commonwealth exhibited greater parity between their percentage of the total survey sample and percentage of OOPs. Thus, in LOO districts, educators appeared to play a slightly more outsized role than non-educators in the opt out movement, perhaps due to their professional knowledge of the movement or union mobilization.

Table 3.7:

Educator Presence in the Opt Out Movement

Total Pooled Sample[a]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
Educator	22.9%	28.6%	17.7%
Non-Educator	77.1%	71.4%	82.3%

Greenville School District[b]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
Educator	16.8%	23.5%	15.4%
Non-Educator	83.2%	76.5%	84.6%

Danville School District[c]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
Educator	18.1%	17.7%	19.1%
Non-Educator	81.9%	82.4%	81.0%

Easton School District[d]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
Educator	19.0%	26.5%	16.7%
Non-Educator	81.0%	73.5%	83.3%

Commonwealth School District[e]

	% of Total Sample	% of OOPs	% of NOOPs
Educator	32.5%	34.8%	25.0%
Non-Educator	67.5%	65.3%	75.0%

Notes: Analyses use unweighted sample. Analyses of weighted sample yield similar results. a: $X^2=7.83$ (p= 0.01); b: $X^2=0.66$ (p= 0.42); c: $X^2=0.02$ (p= 0.89); d: $X^2=1.61$ (p= 0.20); e: $X^2=1.20$ (p= 0.27)

The findings of limited demographic differences between OOPs and NOOPs within districts were largely confirmed by the interviews I conducted with district elites, although there was greater consensus on this point in the HOO districts than in the LOO districts.

In both of the HOO districts (Commonwealth and Danville), the superintendent and all four school board members reported that the opt out movement seemed to mobilize a broad

cross-section of their community, with one Commonwealth board member saying it mobilized

"pretty much everybody," and another directly challenging the white, wealthy caricature of the

opt out movement:

> [Commonwealth] gives you a nice broad cross section of all different types of income levels. And I believe it was Arne Duncan who said it was a bunch of suburban soccer moms who are now just finding out their kids aren't as smart as they thought they were. But no, I think Commonwealth is a perfect example of it going across all different socioeconomic models. You have lower income families that are just as invested in their kids' education in this district and participating in the refusals as you do the pockets of wealth that are in this district. I could say with confidence, that our district definitely isn't just a bunch of rich white people who don't want their kids taking these tests. We've got a nice cross section of people who are refusing.

Echoing the views of his board, the Commonwealth superintendent even expressed surprise that

this was the case: "I would have thought it [the opt out movement] would've [fit a particular

demographic profile] but it seems to be a random cross-section."

District officials in Danville expressed similar views about the movement in their district.

However, some district officials were careful to differentiate between the most active OOPs (i.e.

the leaders of the movement) and the rank-and-file OOPs. According to the Danville

superintendent, the movement in her district could be roughly divided up into three groups: a

cadre of activists, a group that is socially connected to these activists but not as individually

active, and another group of parents who were just mindlessly following the herd:

> The movement was actually started by two parents, who are sisters and former valedictorians at this school. The two women themselves are very educated, very bright, very passionate about the topic, and so they began informational meetings. They started a Facebook page, and that gathered a lot of steam. I'd say that the first group of people [is] the group of people who are very educated on the topic, embrace the opt out [movement] completely, and are knowledgeable about it. They know their reasons why they're opting out. They know what they want to see change. They are writing letters. They are making phone calls [and] emails to senators and different people about what they're dissatisfied about. So that's the one group.
>
> The second group, I'd say, are the people who are not completely aware of everything that's going on, but heavily influenced by the group that does know what's going on. So they're connecting

through the Facebook page. They're connecting at their kid's sporting events and things like that, and they're talking, and they're having these conversations.

And then, there's another group, I think, that is completely clueless and are just along for the ride. I wanna be honest about that. I do. I would basically put them in those three categories.

When asked what seemed to differentiate the most active opt out parents (group one) from the less active ones (groups two and three), she said the people in that category tended to be "more educated and, socioeconomically, are probably in a higher class as far as income is concerned…[but] level of education is more central than how much money they make." Multiple Danville board members likewise agreed that the most active OOPs appeared to be more educated or have children who were high performers on the tests.

Contrary to the findings in the HOO districts, in the two LOO districts, the results were more equivocal regarding the diversity of the movement, although there was no clear evidence to refute the survey findings of null demographic biases. In both Easton and Greenville, two of the four board members remarked that the opt out movement represented something of a cross-section, although the superintendents tended to disagree with this assessment. The Easton superintendent remarked that he felt it was "the higher socioeconomic group" opting out, and the Greenville superintendent said that "educated parents" were the ones most likely to opt out. Furthermore, the Easton superintendent felt that people connected to the teaching force were more likely to opt out, and this sentiment was echoed by one of the Easton board members: "I guess the opt outs here I think are either related to teachers [or] teachers' kids—and that's not a small community here." This perception of outsized teacher presence in the Easton opt out movement did seem to be borne out in the survey data (discussed above).

The Most Active and Longest-Tenured OOPs

Overall, the balance of evidence suggests that in all four districts, the opt out movement has effectively mobilized an approximate cross-section of parents although there might be some demographic differences in terms of movement leadership and activity rates, particularly in HOO districts. To further explore if the parents who were most active in the opt out movement tended to be wealthier or more educated, I again turned to my survey data.

Table 3.8:

Mean Number of Opt Out Activities Among OOPs

	All Districts	Greenville	Danville	Easton	Commonwealth
All OOPs	2.1	1.5	2.1	1.1	2.6
White	2.4	1.8	2.0	1.3	2.9
Nonwhite	2.0***	0.0	3.2	0.2	2.5
No College	2.7	0.3	2.0	0.4	2.0
College	2.8	2.5	2.5	1.5	3.2**
Low Income	1.3	1.8	1.8	0.7	0.9
Middle Income	2.1	1.4	2.9	1.0	1.8
High Income	2.8**	1.9	1.7	1.6	3.4*

Notes: Parents were asked "Have you ever participated in any of the following activities in support of opting out? Select all that apply." Eleven options were available for selection: attend a meeting; attend a demonstration; call in to a radio/TV show; contact an official; donate money; join an online group; post on social media; raise money; write a letter to the editor; convince others to opt out; or other. *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

Table 3.8 above reveals the mean number of opt out activities reported by OOPs broken down by district and demographics. Overall, white OOPs reported participating in a greater number of opt out activities than nonwhite OOPs in LOO districts. Additionally, college-educated OOPs appeared significantly more active than non-college-educated parents in all four districts as well as across the total pooled sample, although these differences were not always

statistically significant. Wealthy OOPs were not only more active, but they also reported being involved in the movement for a *longer period of time* than poorer OOPs (Table 3.9 below). The wealthiest OOPs (those making more than $100,000 per year) reported that they had opted out their children for an average of 3.3 years whereas the poorest OOPs (those making less than $50,000 per year) reported that they had opted out their children for an average of 2.5 years (p=0.01). Moreover, when examining just those OOPs who reported opting out their children for 4 or more years (i.e. "opt out oldtimers"), 75% of them were from the highest income bracket and only 4% were from the lowest income bracket. Thus, while the opt out movement has embraced parents of all backgrounds, the most invested and visible parents in the movement appear to be more highly educated than the movement as a whole. At the same time, there is some evidence that the movement may have originally been comprised of high-SES parents, but over the years it has diversified and brought in parents of less privileged backgrounds. My data is not well-equipped to confirm this trend over time, however.

Table 3.9:

Average Number of Years Opting Out

	All Districts	Greenville	Danville	Easton	Commonwealth
All OOPs	3.0	2.6	2.6	2.3	3.4
White	3.1	2.9	2.7	2.3	3.4
Nonwhite	3.0	0.0	2.3	2.5	3.5
No College	2.9	3.5	2.7	2.2	3.1
College	3.2	2.5	2.8	2.4	3.6
Low Income	2.5	2.8	2.5	1.8	2.8
Middle Income	2.8	3.2	2.5	2.6	3.2
High Income	3.3**	2.7	2.9	2.4	3.6

Notes: Parents were asked "Thinking about the child you have opted out the greatest number of times in their academic career, how many years in the previous five years have you opted out this child?" Response options ranged from 1 to 5. *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001

A Caveat: Hispanic and Asian Parents

      A final qualification about the general diversity of the movement worth mentioning was the perception among a couple school board members in each racially diverse district (Commonwealth and Easton) that Hispanic and Asian parents were less likely to be involved in the opt out movement—perceptions that were not corroborated by other evidence but which are compelling for theoretical reasons. Three out of these four board members felt that the barriers to participation among these populations had little to do with language differences or differences in political resources (e.g. time, money, and education) but were primarily cultural in nature. They sensed that parents in these communities were more reluctant to challenge the authority of educators or political officials when it comes to their child's education.[13] Illustrating this phenomenon, one Commonwealth school board member remarked that "culturally, you tend to notice that the families that are generally Asian are gonna say, 'No, these tests are tests that they're supposed to be taking. They're gonna take them.' You definitely can draw comparisons or links to cultural backgrounds and the test refusals." One of the activists I spoke to even laughed about the futility of attempting to organize the Asian community: "My husband is Chinese, and I wouldn't even think of trying to organize in the Chinese community or any place like that. You're talking about thousands of years of hierarchy!" Furthermore, with regard to the Hispanic community, a different Commonwealth board member claimed that the Hispanic community "tend[s] to opt out at slightly lower numbers [and] part of it is cultural. There's this sense that you don't tell your teacher no, and so if they give you a test, take the test." Another board member in Easton, who works as an ambulance paramedic, offered his own observation

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[13] One Easton board member did feel that the barriers facing Latino parents were primarily socioeconomic in nature. She stated in her interview that the Latino population is a "working class population" that "doesn't have time to focus on it."

that the reluctance of Hispanic parents to opt out was related to a general feeling of uneasiness in

that community. Since many Hispanic parents in the district are undocumented immigrants, there

is a wariness of drawing attention to oneself lest it open up the risk of deportation—anxieties that

have only become worse since the 2016 election:

> And there's the wall. There's a[n] [opt out] wall that exists between the Hispanic population. A lot
> of undocumented [people]. There's a very good attitude towards them here. We're not a big issue
> of being a sanctuary city. This is a sanctuary. Our police do not try to cooperate with ICE as much
> as they can. It's a good thing. But there's a fear. I've been [working] in the ambulance 35 years. We
> have Hispanic people that won't go to the hospital because they're afraid [to] get captured there.
> It's a real serious problem. And it's gotten worse with Trump.

Thus, while evidence of lower participation rates among these groups was not corroborated in

my other data sources, there did appear to be some compelling anecdotes which instantiate

existing literature on the culturally-bounded nature of parenting and school-family relationships

and suggest that Hispanic and Asian parents may face unique cultural barriers when it comes to

engaging in grassroots social movement protest activities.

Conclusion

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it has been an open question as to whether

or not grassroots social movements can be an inclusive force for political and educational equity.

The findings of this chapter suggest that the answer to that question is a qualified yes. Indeed,

the most important discovery from the preceding discussion is the finding that the opt out

movement is in fact a diverse movement that generally mobilizes people across racial and

socioeconomic divides. It does not appear to be the white, wealthy, suburban phenomenon it is

widely stereotyped to be. Moreover, unlike many social movements, it is not confined to

wealthy metropolitan areas, but rather exists across all geographic regions of New York. Taken together, these findings lend credence to the idea, espoused by some scholars, that social movement activism can help alleviate inequalities in education participation by providing a locally-based and relatively accessible opportunity for parents to get involved, learn about education issues, and work coalitionally with others unlike them.

At the same time, though, it is important not to paint too sanguine of a portrait of the opt out movement's diversity since a second important finding in this chapter is the double-edged nature of white, middle-class involvement. Scholars of social movement studies have emphasized the indispensability of middle-class involvement for movement success since middle-class participants are uniquely positioned to lend vital material resources, social networks, and cultural capital to collective action endeavors. Indeed, it is doubtful that the opt out movement, which has always been dependent upon the voluntary contributions of time and energy from parents, would have ever taken off without the involvement of middle-class parents. In Danley and Rubin's (2017) comparative case study of grassroots protest against state control in Newark and Camden, the authors attribute the success of Newark activists and the failure of Camden activists to the presence of a robust, civically engaged middle-class in the former city but not the latter. Furthermore, in a United States educational system that implicitly favors white, middle-class cultural values, the inclusion of parents who embody those values may be critical in ensuring a movement obtains recognition and legitimacy (Lightfoot, 1981). Whereas low-SES parents and parents of color are often dismissed as uninformed troublemakers when they advocate for educational change, white, middle-class parents are often treated with respect and deference by educators and policy elites (Lareau, 2003). In light of this lamentable but ineludible fact, it seems unlikely that the opt out movement would have obtained the same level

of traction and public attention if it did not include a substantial number of white, middle-class parents alongside nonwhite and low-income parents.

While the presence of white, middle-class parents is an enormous benefit for the opt out movement, it also appears in my data to pose some risk vis-à-vis participation equity. As Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (1999) demonstrate, white, middle-class individuals not only participate *more frequently* in politics, but they also participate in *deeper and more substantial* ways. My data suggest that this has remained the case in the opt out movement insofar as white, wealthy parents reported participating in a greater number of opt out activities than low-income parents and parents of color. They also reported being involved in the opt out movement for a longer period of time. Thus, while the rank-and-file membership of the opt out movement may be diverse, the most active members, and the ones most likely to assume local leadership positions, have tended to be whiter, wealthier, and more educated than the movement as a whole. This uneven level of participation *within* the movement could have serious consequences for overall equity and inclusiveness. As Morris and Staggenborg (2006) write: "Social movement leaders are the actors whose hands and brains rest disproportionately on the throttles of social movements." It is the leaders of a movement who frame the movement's agenda, organize its activities, and serve as its public face in interactions with policy elites and members of the media. If the leadership does not reflect the diversity of the movement, the more privileged elements of the movement could come to exert outsized influence over the movement's agenda, mobilization efforts, and public image.

Additionally, the presence of easily spotlighted white, middle-class parents inevitably opens a movement up to stereotyping which can marginalize the movement in the discussion of education reform. The allegation of Ceresta Smith that the movement was being intentionally

"whitewashed" by testing supporters is an eminently reasonable one that takes on added severity

because so much of today's education reform debate is imbued with racial and social justice

overtones. If a grassroots education social movement can be raced and classed as white and

wealthy, this may delegitimize its voice from the political discussion of education reforms.

Thus, grassroots activists must be careful to guard against this threat, and it would behoove them

to make conscious efforts to foreground their movement's diversity, especially early in its

lifecycle, so that stereotypes of privilege are less likely to stick. This task, however, is

challenging, and one opt out activist highlighted the frustration she felt as a highly educated

leader of color:

> There's this persistent feeling that it's a white movement. I mean, even within our own ranks that happens. Sometimes I'm like, "Ugh!" because people will be like, "Well, we have to have parents of color say that," and I'm thinking, "I'm a parent of color! You don't even see me?" I know that's not what they mean, 'cause I'm a parent of color, but I went to Stanford. It's like I'm not the parent of color they're thinking about. We've got to dispel that mess.

Finally, the perception that Hispanic and Asian parents may face cultural barriers to

participation is something that should be probed in further research. Research has definitively

established that these parents face institutional barriers when it comes to participation in the life

of their school communities, due in part to their distinctive orientations toward the school-family

relationship. This dissertation suggests that these cultural barriers may continue to be present

when it comes to *extra*-institutional forms of participation such as grassroots social movement

protest. Given the deference of these parents to the wishes of educators and policy elites, it is

less likely that these parents will be intrinsically motivated to challenge educational authority

without receiving encouragement from those same authorities. In this way then, explicit requests

to participate from teachers, educators, or other local officials could be especially critical in

activating these parents, and grassroots activists would be wise to form alliances with sympathetic educators and then leverage the authority of those educators in their outreach to those parents. Additionally, activists working in the Hispanic community may face the additional challenge of reassuring parents who are already skittish about national political developments. The barriers to equity in participation not only exist at the level of the locality or the individual, but also remain invisibly embedded in national political developments—suggesting that activists will have to attend to national concerns even while laboring locally to organize their community.

CHAPTER 4: MOTIVATIONS

Cuomo, he paces the Albany floor
Plotting revenge on the teachers.
He's mad they didn't endorse him, now he'll settle the score
Determined to punish the leeches.
And so he's selling out your children like an egomaniac-ac-ac-ac.
He oughta know by now
Excluding most teachers from creating the test,
Is that what he bought with our money?

And the tests are a waste of time
With results that are filled with doubt
Andrew, if that's how to teach then I'm
Opting out!
I'm opting out!

And though he's governor, four times he failed the bar-bar-bar-bar
He oughta know by now
When you're born to a powerful daddy,
It's easy to have a career.

And the tests are a waste of time
With results that are filled with doubt.
Andrew, if that's how to teach then I'm
Opting out!
I'm opting out!

I'm opting out!
I'm opting out!

—Lyrics to "Opting Out (Cuomo's Song)" by Youtube's Bald
Piano Guy, set to the tune of Billy Joel's "Movin' Out (Anthony's
Song)"

Introduction

We have established that the opt out movement represents a novel, highly unique form of

public participation with education—one that breaks the mold of existing models of participation

in education politics. The preceding chapter provided insight into the types of people who participate (or don't participate) in the opt out movement and concluded that, generally speaking, individuals of all backgrounds have participated in the movement. This chapter dives deeper into this phenomenon by asking *why* individuals choose to participate. That is, what motivations do people have for participating in (or not participating in) the opt out movement? Additionally, what role do explicit invitations or acts of recruitment play in encouraging people to join the movement?

Today, scholars of political science widely recognize motivation as an important independent factor in predicting participation, although it remains severely undertheorized and understudied. In *Voice and Equality*, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady remark that while differences in socioeconomic resources—the subject of the previous chapter—explain why individuals have different *capacities* for participation, individuals must also have motivation to participate. As Aldrich (1997) writes: "Having even copious resources…is not, I believe, sufficient to answer, 'Why did she get involved?' What is missing is…what it is they want to achieve, or, in short, why they are participating."

Much scholarship on the subject of political motivation today stresses the importance of intrinsic psychological attitudes like political interest, partisanship, efficacy, and trust in motivating people to get involved (Gastil & Xenos, 2010; Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Fiorina, 1999; McAtee & Wolak, 2011; Campbell et al 1960; Hill & Huber, 2017). All of these attitudes appear positively correlated with individual participation, and interest and efficacy appear especially impactful in spurring participation in time-based political activities like protesting.

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In addition to internal attitudes, research emphasizes the role of social networks in externally organizing individual motivation. The first way that social networks motivate participation is through recruitment, or the explicit invitation to participate. Indeed, requests to vote, join a campaign, contact a legislator, or attend a demonstration occur regularly through interactions with friends, family members, coworkers, and acquaintances (McClurg 2003; Gerber & Green 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Nickerson, 2008; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Brady et al, 1999; McAtee & Wolak, 2011; Campbell, 2006). The second way that social networks shape motivation is through the application of social pressure to conform. Gerber, Green, and Larimer (2008) demonstrate that social pressure, particularly feelings of social pride and shame, are causal factors influencing an individual's decision to vote (see also Panagopolous, 2010; Posner & Rasmusen, 1999). Not all social networks are equally impactful in motivating participation, however, and two social network characteristics that promote participation are the substance of discussion that occurs in those networks as well as their degree of discursive homogeneity. If an individual does not encounter many opportunities to discuss political issues with those in her network, then social interaction is unlikely to spur her to greater political participation (McClurg, 2003). Moreover, Mutz (2002) reports that people who inhabit social networks marked by political disagreement (i.e. heterogeneity) are less likely to participate in politics than people who inhabit more homogeneous networks due to a desire to avoid putting social relationships at risk. Makse and Sohkey (2014) add an additional dimension to this finding by reporting that in more homogeneous political environments, individuals are more likely to participate for expressive reasons (i.e. to express solidarity with their community) whereas in more heterogeneous political environments individuals are more likely to participate for communicative reasons (i.e. to persuade others).

Most of the literature on political motivation has approached the subject from an issue-free perspective—that is, it explores motivation generally and without regard to the policy context of the particular act of participation. In contrast, Han (2009) advances the argument that people can also be motivated to participate by another factor: concrete issue commitments or policy preferences. If someone is deeply concerned about a particular issue, especially one impacting their own life, they may feel moved to get involved even in the absence of political resources, interest, or social networks. In this way, issue preferences, or a stake in what government does, can function as yet another force for stimulating participation (see also Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, 415).

Finally, scholars who embrace a rational choice perspective on political participation argue that individuals feel motivated to participate when the perceived gratifications of participation outweigh the costs (Downs, 1957; Olson, 1965; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). From this perspective, "people participate because they get something out of it" (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Scholars have long debated the types of gratifications people might receive from political participation, and Schlozman et al (1995) have offered a typology of gratifications which includes three "selective gratifications" that inhere to the individual and one "collective gratification" that inheres to the community. The selective gratifications are material benefits (e.g. jobs, career advancement, help with a personal or family problem); social gratifications (e.g. the enjoyment of working with others or the excitement of politics); and civic gratifications (e.g. satisfying a sense of duty or a desire to contribute to the welfare of the community). The collective gratification is the opportunity to help enact a desired policy or elect a favored candidate. In general, Schlozman et al report that when asking activists why they participate in politics, they "frequently recall gratifications that…reflect a concern for civic involvement, for

the welfare of the larger community or nation, or for issues of public policy" (3). However, different gratifications were reported for different types of activities, and protest activities appeared to produce primarily social, civic, and policy gratifications.

Thus, while literature on motivation remains underdeveloped, the work to date has yielded a variety of important findings about the role of issue preferences, political attitudes, social networks, and gratifications. These findings become more complicated, however, when we turn our attention to the field of education. Literature from the field of education has generally approached the subject of participation from an apolitical lens that focuses mainly on the motivations for parent engagement in the education of their children—most often examining parent engagement in small-scale acts like school bake sales, PTA work, teacher conferences, and homework assistance. Evidence from this literature suggests that the motivations parents have for engagement are somewhat different from the motivations for general political participation. Whereas the motivations for voting, campaigning, and protesting are often communal in orientation and colored by internal political attitudes, the motivations for parent engagement appear much more private, consumerist, and one-dimensional. To put it bluntly, parents participate because they want to improve the educational experiences and welfare of their child (Henderson et al, 2007; Lightfoot, 1981, 2003; Epstein, 2001; McAdams, 2000; Barton et al, 2004; Horvat et al 2003). As McAdams (2000) writes: "Most parents see [education] in terms of their child, their school, their neighborhood, this year."

Of course, all parents care about their children, so to explain why some parents are more active participants in their child's education than others, scholars have turned to three key concepts. The first is parent role construction, or the way that parents interpret their job in relation to their child's school and educational experience (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005;

Auerbach, 2009; Lightfoot, 1981; Laureau, 1989; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2001; Green et al, 2007). A parent who conceives of her role as complementing, reinforcing, and partnering with educators will be more involved than a parent who views the school and family as distinct entities. Indeed, differences in role construction appear to explain much of the variation in parent involvement between middle-class and low-income parents as well as between white and nonwhite parents (Lareau, 1989; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). The second factor is self-efficacy, or the belief that one can have a positive impact on one's child's education through participation (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2001; Green et al, 2007; Henderson et al, 2007), and the third factor is recruitment from school officials. While parents do sometimes carve out their own opportunities for involvement (Barton et al, 2007; Rogers, 2006), in general they are reluctant to become involved without an invitation from educators (Henderson et al, 2007; Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Epstein, 1986, 1990; Lareau, 1989; Auerbach, 2009; Rogers, 2004; Schutz, 2006; Warren et al, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2001; Green et al, 2007). In this way, "the responsibility for [parent engagement] rests primarily with school staff, especially school teachers" who must indicate to parents the importance of participation and establish school environments that welcome it (Henderson et al, 2007, 47).

Taken together, these literatures suggest that the motivations for parent participation with education are different from the motivations for more general political participation. In the realm of education, parents are more likely to be motivated by private concerns (as opposed to public ones), and they are more likely to act on those motivations when they receive an explicit invitation from educators. However, this literature also appears to be unequipped to explain a phenomenon like the opt out movement, which is an enormous grassroots social movement

protest that does not fit existing models of parent engagement with education. At the same time, grassroots social protest is even characterized by political scientists as "unconventional" or "anti-system" political behavior, leaving it unknown if participation in the opt out movement would be motivated by the same attitudes, social pressures, and gratifications as more "conventional" forms of political participation like voting. All of this leaves several questions worth exploring: Are the motivations for this kind of protest activity the same or different from the motivations for other forms of education participation? Are OOPs motivated by private concerns about their own children (as the education literature suggests) or are they motivated by communal concerns (as the political science literature suggests)? Moreover, what role (if any) does political recruitment play in promoting such unconventional political behavior? And how do political attitudes and issue preferences intersect in this unique domain? This chapter begins to answer these questions, describing the issue preferences, political attitudes, recruitment efforts, and parent role constructions that motivate OOPs to participate in the opt out movement and motivate NOOPs to remain on the sidelines.

Awareness of the Opt Out Movement

Before exploring the motivations people have for participating or not participating in the opt out movement, it is important to investigate (and reject) one relatively simple explanation: that NOOPs do not opt out because they have not heard of the opt out movement or do not know that they *can* opt out. If participation in the opt out movement is largely a matter of awareness, then it would be of little interest why some people opt out and others do not. The answer would be simple: some people opt out because they know they can, and others do not opt out because

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they are ignorant of the possibility. Furthermore, any comparison of the motivations between OOPs and NOOPs would be relatively fruitless because NOOPs would not have given any thought to the matter, and in fact if they were more aware, they might actually opt out—making them a poor comparison group.

The data from my survey definitively rejects this possibility as the vast majority of parents (97.7%) indicated that they had heard of the opt out movement prior to taking the survey, including 97.3% of NOOPs. Moreover, awareness of the movement was not confined to HOO districts. In HOO districts, 98.9% of parents indicated that they had heard of the opt out movement, and in LOO districts, 96.7% of parents indicated that they had heard of the opt out movement. Thus, the decision to opt out (or not opt out) does not appear to be a product of differences in awareness across different groups of parents. Rather, parents on both sides of the issue and in all four districts have made conscious decisions vis-à-vis participation in the movement, and as such, it is worth probing the motivations they offer for their decisions.

Issue Preferences

Views on Standardized Testing and Other Neoliberal Reforms

The most frequently employed explanation for opt out activism is that opt out parents are motivated simply by opposition to standardized testing or its effects on their children. This motivation was evident in Arne Duncan's quote about suburban moms, and it suggests that the opt out movement is driven primarily by issue preferences (Han, 2009). At the same time,

however, testing is just one component of the neoliberal education reform agenda, and my collection of documents led me to believe that many parents may be motivated by a diversity of related issue preferences. In one local TV news report, a Long Island mother explained that her decision to opt out was motivated primarily by her antipathy toward the Common Core: "The exams feed the Common Core. The Common Core thrives on data. The exams feed the beast, and we have to cut off the food supply" (CBS New York, 2014). Another parent told the *New York Times* that she was opposed to the new teacher evaluation policy in New York and she hoped that if enough children opted out the state would not have enough valid data "to close a school…or to fire a teacher" (Harris, 2015). As one OOP explained to me, it is difficult to separate testing from other education issues because "there's not one education policy that's not linked to three others [in New York]."

My survey allowed me to capture the views of district parents on standardized testing as well as three other planks of the neoliberal reform agenda: the expansion of charter schools, the implementation of the Common Core, and test-based teacher evaluation reforms. First, with regard to standardized testing, parents were asked a battery for four questions, derived from existing literature, which captured how favorably they viewed standardized testing on a summative 0 to 4 scale, where 0 represented strong opposition to testing and 4 represented strong support for testing. The four questions asked respondents 1) Whether testing had helped, hurt, or made no difference in the performance of public schools; 2) Whether there was too much, too little, or about the right amount of standardized testing in schools today; 3) Whether standardized tests are a useful way to evaluate student academic progress; and 4) Whether standardized tests are a useful way to evaluate teacher performance. (The exact language of these questions can be found in Appendix A). If the opt out movement is driven solely by a dislike of standardized

testing, we would expect to see substantial differences in the views of OOPs and NOOPs on this issue, both in terms of magnitude (large differences) and direction (one side viewing testing unfavorably and the other viewing testing favorably or at least neutrally).

Unsurprisingly, results reveal that OOPs do view testing extremely unfavorably (Table 4.1 below). The average OOP produced a summative test favorability score of just 0.5 out of 4. A whopping 91% of OOPs rated testing a 0 or 1, and only 2.5% rated testing a 3 or 4. NOOPs, on the otherhand, did exhibit a slightly higher average test favorability rating (1.1), although they too appeared largely opposed to testing. 67% of NOOPs rated testing a 0 or 1, and only 17.9% rated testing a 3 or 4.

Table 4.1:

Parent Views of Testing, by Opt Out Status

	All	OOPs	NOOPs	p-value
Mean Summative Score	0.8	0.5	1.1	0.00
Percent 0 or 1	78.9%	91%	67.1%	
Percent 3 or 4	10.4%	2.5%	17.9%	

Question 1: Effects of Testing on Public School Performance

	All	OOPs	NOOPs
Helped*	8.1%	2.1%	13.8%
Hurt	50.3%	62.8%	38.6%
No Difference	23.5%	22.6%	24.4%

Questions 2: Amount of Testing

	All	OOPs	NOOPs
Too much	60.0%	61.9%	58.1%
Not enough*	3.3%	2.1%	4.4%
About the Right Amount*	27.4%	27.2%	27.7%

Question 3: Provides Accurate View of Student Performance

	All	OOPs	NOOPs
Student Work	69.0%	72.3%	65.9%
Teacher Observation	58.4%	63.1%	54.2%
Grades	47.5%	49.1%	46.2%
Standardized Tests*	19.5%	8.9%	29.1%

Question 4: Provides Accurate View of Teacher Performance

	All	OOPs	NOOPs
Principal Observations	58.3%	62.0%	54.9%
Parent Feedback	53.5%	56.8%	50.5%
Student Feedback	58.8%	63.1%	54.9%
District Observations	42.5%	48.3%	37.1%
Standardized Tests*	18.3%	7.8%	27.8%

Notes: *Respondents who selected this answer were given 1 point in their summative score. Summative scores ranged from 0-4.

Looking beyond standardized testing to the three other elements of the neoliberal reform agenda—charter school expansion, the Common Core, and teacher evaluation—a similar pattern emerged. Table 4.2 below reports that for all three reform ideas, OOPs produced lower ratings than NOOPs, and these differences were statistically significant on two of the issues (Common Core and teacher evaluation) and marginally significant on the other (charter school expansion).

On a 1-5 scale, OOPs assigned charter expansion an average 2.2 favorability rating (compared to

2.4 for NOOPs), Common Core an average 2.0 rating (compared to 2.8 for NOOPs), and teacher

evaluation an average 1.7 rating (compared to 2.3 for NOOPs). Furthermore, when examining

the summative composite of these reform scores (3-15 scale), OOPs exhibited a significantly

lower reform favorability score (6.0) than NOOPs (7.5). These patterns were reinforced at the

district level (Table 4.3), where OOPs exhibited significantly lower summative reform ratings

and Common Core reform ratings in all four districts and significantly lower teacher evaluation

ratings in three of the four districts. No statistically significant differences emerged on the issue

of charter schools in any of the four districts. In addition, average reform ratings were

consistently lower in the two HOO districts (Danville and Commonwealth) than in the two LOO

districts (Greenville and Easton).

Table 4.2:

Mean Ratings of Reform Ideas

	All Respondents	OOPs	NOOPs	p-value
Charter Expansion	2.3	2.2	2.4	0.07
Common Core	2.4	2.0	2.8	0.00
Teacher Evaluation	2.0	1.7	2.3	0.00
Total Summative Score	6.8	6.0	7.5	0.00

Note: Respondents rated each issue on a 1 to 5 scale in which 1 was "strongly oppose", 3 was "neither favor nor oppose", and 5 was "strongly favor." Views of the three issues were summed to create a summative reform rating, which ranges from 3 to 15.

Table 4.3:

Respondent Ratings of Reform Proposals, by District

Charter Expansion (1-5)

District	All Respondents	OOPs	NOOPs	p-value
Greenville	2.3	2.5	2.3	0.58
Danville	2.2	2.1	2.3	0.41
Easton	2.7	2.7	2.7	0.79
Commonwealth	2.1	2.1	2.0	0.69

Common Core (1-5)

District	All Respondents	OOPs	NOOPs	p-value
Greenville	2.5	1.9	2.7	0.03
Danville	2.4	2.2	2.8	0.07
Easton	2.8	2.4	2.9	0.03
Commonwealth	2.0	1.8	2.6	0.00

Teacher Evaluation (1-5)

District	All Respondents	OOPs	NOOPs	p-value
Greenville	2.3	1.4	2.5	0.00
Danville	1.9	1.7	2.3	0.02
Easton	2.2	1.8	2.3	0.02
Commonwealth	1.8	1.7	2.0	0.13

Summative Reform Score (3-15)

District	All Respondents	OOPs	NOOPs	p-value
Greenville	7.2	5.8	7.5	0.01
Danville	6.4	6.0	7.4	0.01
Easton	7.7	7.0	7.9	0.03
Commonwealth	5.8	5.6	6.6	0.02

The results thus suggest that OOPs harbor harsher views of testing and other key planks of the neoliberal reform agenda. However, one striking finding in these results is that both OOPs and NOOPs appeared to be similarly opposed to these policies. Contrary to the hypothesized relationship, OOPs and NOOPs did not differ in terms of the *direction* of their issue preferences,

but only to the *degree* of their opposition. On the surface, this finding would seem to suggest one of two things about the role of these issue preferences in motivating opt out participation: either issue preferences motivate opting out only once they achieve some threshold of opposition—a threshold which OOPs have crossed but which NOOPs have not,—or issue preferences alone are an inadequate explanation for participation in the opt out movement. The first possibility, while superficially sensible, appears less tenable when we consider the fact that there are many parents opposed to testing and neoliberal reforms who do *not* opt out, and there are many parents supportive of them who *do* opt out. In my survey, I found that among those parents who rated testing a 0 or 1, 56.2% opted out and 43.8% did not opt out, and among those parents who rated testing a 2 or higher, almost a fifth (19.4%) did opt out. Similarly, among those who produced a summative reform score of less than nine, 55.2% opted out and 44.8% did not opt out. Among those who produced a summative reform score greater than nine, 17.5% opted out. As such, issue preferences vis-à-vis testing and other neoliberal reforms appear to be one predictor of a parent's decision to opt out, but they do not alone comprise a sufficient explanation for why parents opt out, and it is necessary to dig deeper to find parents' true motivations.

The Self-Reported Motivations of OOPs

Turning to my qualitative data, I found that parents' motivations for opting out are in fact wide-ranging, encompassing myriad issue preferences and evincing energetic political attitudes about education policymaking which combine in complex ways to motivate participation. From my analysis of the two most relevant sources of data—the parent focus groups and the free response survey items which asked parents why they opted out—I identified three principal sets

of motivating factors: concerns about the impact of testing on their immediate children; qualms about the use and configuration of the grade 3-8 NYS Common Core tests; and opposition to other educational developments not directly related to testing (Table 4.4 below). These sets of factors were evident in all four school districts.

Table 4.4:

OOPs' Self-Reported Motivations (Percentage of Code Applications), by Data Source and District Type

	Combined Data Sources			Survey Free Response			Focus Groups		
	All Districts	HOO	LOO	All Districts	HOO	LOO	All Districts	HOO	LOO
Impact on Immediate Children	**24.9%**	**21.8%**	**30.9%**	**29.0%**	**24.8%**	**41.9%**	**18.1%**	**14.8%**	**21.6%**
Causes stress/anxiety/feelings of failure	10.2%	8.1%	14.3%	10.8%	8.2%	19.0%	9.2%	8.1%	10.4%
Special needs child	2.9%	2.2%	4.3%	2.6%	1.3%	6.7%	3.5%	4.4%	2.4%
Child's opportunities at stake (e.g. tracking)	0.7%	0.2%	1.7%	0.7%	0.3%	1.9%	0.8%	0.0%	1.6%
Child asked me / Peer pressure	2.3%	2.4%	2.2%	3.3%	2.8%	4.8%	0.8%	1.5%	0.0%
Tests have no effect on educational career	4.2%	4.4%	3.9%	5.4%	6.0%	3.8%	2.3%	0.7%	4.0%
Other	4.4%	4.4%	4.3%	6.1%	6.3%	5.7%	1.5%	0.0%	3.2%
General Concerns re: NYS Grade 3-8 Tests	**52.0%**	**53.3%**	**49.6%**	**53.3%**	**56.1%**	**44.8%**	**50.0%**	**46.7%**	**53.6%**
Developmentally inappropriate	6.3%	5.7%	7.4%	6.4%	6.3%	6.7%	6.2%	4.4%	8.0%
Poorly designed	7.2%	7.3%	7.0%	5.4%	5.6%	4.8%	10.0%	11.1%	8.8%
Incomplete snapshot of achievement	8.0%	7.0%	9.9%	5.7%	5.3%	6.7%	11.9%	11.1%	12.8%
Provides no useful info	6.1%	8.1%	2.2%	6.1%	6.6%	4.8%	6.2%	11.9%	0.0%
Waste resources / Curriculum narrowing	10.7%	10.6%	10.9%	10.8%	11.9%	7.6%	10.4%	7.4%	13.6%
"Unfair" or "invalid"	5.8%	6.6%	4.3%	7.5%	9.4%	1.9%	3.1%	0.0%	6.4%
Privacy concerns	1.5%	0.9%	2.6%	1.4%	1.3%	1.9%	1.5%	0.0%	3.2%
Other	6.4%	7.0%	5.2%	7.5%	9.7%	10.5%	0.8%	0.7%	0.8%
Non-Test Concerns	**23.1%**	**24.9%**	**19.6%**	**17.7%**	**19.1%**	**13.3%**	**31.9%**	**38.5%**	**24.8%**
Teacher, school, or district evaluation	7.2%	7.3%	7.0%	7.3%	7.5%	6.7%	6.9%	6.7%	7.2%
Oppose Common Core	3.5%	4.2%	2.2%	2.6%	3.1%	1.0%	5.0%	6.7%	3.2%
Corporate power in education	5.7%	5.3%	6.5%	2.6%	2.8%	1.9%	10.8%	11.1%	10.4%
Send message to Albany/Washington	1.3%	1.8%	0.4%	0.5%	0.3%	1.0%	2.7%	5.2%	0.0%
Reassert local control	0.6%	0.9%	0.0%	0.9%	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Oppose one-size-fits-all education style	2.6%	2.6%	2.6%	0.9%	0.9%	1.0%	5.4%	6.7%	4.0%
Other	2.2%	2.9%	0.9%	1.4%	3.1%	1.9%	0.8%	2.2%	0.0%
Total Code Applications (n)	684	454	230	424	319	105	260	135	125

The Impact of Testing on One's Immediate Children

First, about a quarter (24.9%) of motivation code applications indicated that OOPs were concerned about the impact of testing on their own immediate children. The most common subcode in this area was the stress and anxiety that the tests cause children. Throughout my discussions, parents described the incredible trauma the Common Core tests had caused their children, some of whom have medically-diagnosed anxiety disorders and some of whom simply cannot handle the pressure of the tests. Parents described children who suffered from headaches, stomachaches, insomnia, vomiting, and fits of hysterical crying in the days leading up to test day. One of the activists I spoke to said her opt out activism began when her son physically collapsed after his teacher recommended him for a before-school test preparation program. Another OOP, a special education teacher in Commonwealth, offered the perspective of an educator dealing with severely anxious students:

> Being a special education teacher, I would love somebody from Albany to come down and sit with me while I'm giving one of my students [the test] for the third time, getting double-time six hours, and not passing it and crying after five and a half hours. And [me] saying, "You can do it! You can do it!" and knowing she's not gonna pass it. I'd like somebody else to come down and sit with her and see the torture that she's going through…I think that's the heartbreak of it all.

In the wake of this behavior, many OOPs doubted that the test was worth the "unnecessary stress, anxiety, and feelings of failure" that would inevitably arise, and they thus decided to opt out as a way to "protect" their children.

Child-centered concerns were particularly prevalent among parents of special needs children, and in fact parents of special needs children appeared to comprise a disproportionately large percentage OOPs in each of my four districts. These parents were concerned not only that

the test would cause unnecessary "psychological and physical harm" to their children, but also

that the tests would not provide an accurate reflection of their child's abilities. One Easton parent

explained:

> My child has both ADHD and a severe reading disability. These standardized tests are not geared for kids with special needs in any way, shape, or form. And they're expected to perform on these tests the same way that other kids do. And even with accommodations, extended time, it doesn't matter. She is going into that test at a disadvantage.

Another parent likewise indicated that concerns about her own special-needs child were at the

forefront of her mind when deciding to opt out:

> In the end for me, it was not so much the railing against the system, but disability-wise, I didn't think it was fair [for] my daughter. It's so funny that I have to have it specifically put in her IEP that she opts out of state testing. She is moderately disabled. Her IQ's a 50. This is something that should be a given that she can't do.

Finally, some parents revealed that their motivation to opt out stemmed from the impact

(or lack of impact) opting out would have on their children. A few parents expressed frustration

that after the previous year's tests, their children had been assigned to remedial courses that were

not necessary. For example, one parent said that his daughter had been needlessly assigned to a

remedial reading class after she performed unusually poorly on the state reading test. He has

since opted out to prevent this mistake from happening again. More common than these parents,

though, were other OOPs who argued that since the tests do not have any bearing on their child's

educational career—that is, they do not count for a grade, do not factor into tracking decisions,

and do not help teachers with lesson planning relevant to their child,—there is no obvious

rationale for their child to take them. The tests just appear to be a waste of time.

The Use and Configuration of the NYS Grade 3-8 Tests

The most frequently mentioned motivations for participation were more general concerns about the use and configuration of the NYS Grade 3-8 Common Core tests. These motivations were apparent in 53% of the code applications. One of the most commonly mentioned test-based concerns was the perception that the tests were so developmentally inappropriate that they could not possibly serve as fair and valid indicators of student achievement. One OOP used her background as an educator to authoritatively intervene on this subject:

> Being a teacher, I saw the test…It was so difficult, it was unbelievable. The reading selections were so inappropriate. Kids were crying. And I was like, "This is ridiculous." Teachers again, we're trying to solve the problems, [and we] couldn't solve them. No one knew what the right answer was, and then you were expecting that from the kids!

Another teacher in another district confirmed this behavior in her own justification for opting out: "I am an English teacher in a different school district, and I see the test. It is written well above grade level. Each year, there are several questions where the teachers debate over the correct answers."

In addition to being developmentally inappropriate, OOPs pointed to several instances where the tests appeared to be poorly written or confusing. One of the most famous examples cited by parents was the "Talking Pineapple" reading passage that was administered as part of the 2012 8th-grade ELA test. In that passage, an adaptation of Aesop's fable of the tortoise and the hare, a talking pineapple challenges a hare to a race, and other animals, suspicious that the inanimate pineapple must "have a trick up its sleeve," place bets on the pineapple to win the race. When the pineapple loses (because it cannot move), the animals eat the pineapple. The passage was so farfetched and the questions about it so subjective (i.e. "Which animal was the

wisest?" and "What would have happened if the animals had picked the hare to win?") that many parents lost faith in the tests. In the months that followed, the talking pineapple question grabbed national attention and widespread derision. Seventy-four-time *Jeopardy!* champion Ken Jennings penned an editorial in the *NY Daily News* in which he tried in vain to work through the two most confusing pineapple questions but ended up concluding that the test questions must have been "a joke" (Jennings, 2012). HBO host John Oliver likewise mocked the question during a segment on standardized testing: "We looked up [the pineapple question], and *we* couldn't work out all the answers. That pineapple item doesn't remotely work as a test question. It barely works as a Doors lyric" (Oliver, 2015). Indeed, the Commonwealth Superintendent recalled that this question had caused a great deal of consternation in his community, and he called it "wacky" and "screwy stuff." But the pineapple question was not the only question highlighted by parents. Parents in my data pointed to equally confusing math questions which appeared to omit critical information, have no right answer (or even "best" answer), or demand that students answer the question in a certain format that was not intuitive. One parent stressed that some of the questions appeared unaligned with the curriculum, describing how her third-grade student had faced a question about the state capitals even though the state capitals were not supposed to be taught until fourth grade. Another parent boasted that she and some friends had stolen a copy of the Common Core test and published it on social media:

> The tests are terribly written. I remember we put a post of this one group I was in. We got copies of test, so we're taking picture of it with our phones…We put it on Facebook…'cause it was so blatantly obvious there is no right answer. And not only that, the question doesn't even relate to the passage. I mean, the question is about oil rigs, and the passage is about butterflies. It's like, [it] doesn't make any sense!…When something is poorly written, why would you have confidence in the test at all?

Parents were also skeptical of the tests because they provide just one point-in-time snapshot of a student's performance which fails to take into consideration the myriad challenges that children bring into the classroom, such as poverty, malnutrition, undiagnosed learning disorders, limited English, or more quotidian difficulties like illness or familial strife the day of the test. Said one parent:

> You have to think about the life of an eight-year-old. So, in the morning, they may have not gotten breakfast, they may have gotten the wrong breakfast. Their cat might have died. They might have gotten into a fight with their mother, or their father, or their brother. They might be punished. There are so many other things that transpire from the time that they get up in the morning to the time they take the test that could have skewed a number of different things…So, we don't take into account any of that which happens every single day to these poor kids, and yet we're all graded the same. It's so small. That 90 minutes versus 181 days of six hours everyday. It's a very small window. Very small window.

Another parent further indicated that the snapshot approach was unfair to her *school*:

> That's the biggest reason why I'm here. The sociological aspect of this is that we're trying to make a cookie cutter standard when we're not even taking into account these children's home lives, what they're going through…If they're struggling…we're not going to get the test results that the state and the federal government is looking for. So what are we going to do? We are going to put a little bit of a ding in a good school because we're not recognizing that's there's more to this than just intelligence.

Another principal complaint OOPs had about standardized testing was the fact that test score data are not reported quickly enough or with enough detail to provide useful information for parents or teachers trying to help their children. In this way, even if parents felt the tests *were* valid indicators of student achievement, they were not able to be utilized to inform practice and substantively help children. Indeed, a quick glance at a sample test score report from the NYSED (Figures 4.1 and 4.2 below) reveals only the most superficial insight into a student's performance. In each report, the student's score is reported along with a proficiency level (1, 2, 3, or 4) and an indicator of how the student's score compares to other students in his/her district

and state. The second page shows the number of points the student earned in each content area, but it does not explain which specific skills or questions the student struggled with, nor does it provide specific, actionable information about what can be done to improve the student's performance in the future.

Figure 4.1: ELA Test Score Report (Page 1)

JANE DOE
SAMPLE MIDDLE SCHOOL

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS
2016-2017 GRADE 6 TEST RESULTS

Dear Parent/Guardian of Jane,

This report summarizes Jane's performance on the New York State Testing Program English Language Arts Assessment, administered in the spring of 2017. The test score provides one way to understand student performance; **however, this score does not tell the whole story about what Jane knows and can do. The results from the Grade 3-8 ELA and Mathematics Tests are being provided for diagnostic purposes and will not be included in Jane's official transcript or permanent student record.**

TRANSLATIONS

www.engageny.org/translate

JANE'S SCORE

THIS YEAR

X

LEVEL 3

LAST YEAR

LEVEL 3

Last year Jane received a Level 3 score on the Grade 5 ELA test.

PERFORMANCE LEVELS

JANE'S SCORE: X

MEETS STATE STANDARD

DOES NOT MEET STATE STANDARD

LEVEL 4
Students performing at this level excel in standards for their grade.

LEVEL 3
Students performing at this level are proficient in standards for their grade.

LEVEL 2
Students performing at this level are partially proficient in standards for their grade.

LEVEL 1
Students performing at this level are well below proficient in standards for their grade.

JANE MET THE STATE STANDARD

HOW JANE DID IN COMPARISON WITH OTHER STUDENTS

DISTRICT

X%

Jane did the same or better than X% of students in this grade in the district.

STATE

X%

Jane did the same or better than X% of students in this grade in the state.

BEDS: 000000000000
LOCAL ID: 000000000

NEW YORK STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

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Figure 4.2: ELA Test Score Report (Page 2)

JANE DOE
SAMPLE MIDDLE SCHOOL

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS
2016-2017 GRADE 6 TEST RESULTS

The New York State Learning Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy describe what Jane should know and be able to do at each grade level. This section shows the number of points earned on the Reading and Writing from Sources test sections.

JANE'S SCORE   MAX SCORE

X OF **X**

READING

In this section, students were asked to:
- comprehend the explicit and implicit ideas present in grade-level text and recognize how they develop over the course of the text;
- describe characters in depth, and connect ideas and events;
- understand the meaning and effects of words and figurative and connotative phrases;
- analyze the text's structure and organization, and identify how point of view is developed;
- integrate the knowledge and ideas conveyed in text using illustrations and logical connections between parts of the text.

JANE'S SCORE   MAX SCORE

X OF **X**

WRITING FROM SOURCES

In this section, students were asked to:
- make claims that show valid reasoning and sufficient textual evidence;
- write about characters and describe how they relate to each other in the text;
- compare and contrast points of view and themes in texts;
- analyze events and actions in a text;
- determine the effect of language on aspects of a text and describe the importance of story and structural elements of the text;
- communicate understanding by producing coherent writing that demonstrates grade-level English grammar and use.

Please note that students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 Accommodation Plan (504 Plan) that indicates that tests be read aloud should have been provided this testing accommodation, in accordance with the specifications in the IEP/504 Plan.

SUPPORTING JANE'S SUCCESS

> Contact Jane's teacher and ask which skills are the most challenging for Jane.

> Ask your school how you will receive regular reports on Jane's progress.

> If appropriate, seek student support services such as counseling or school guidance to help Jane be most successful.

> Review classwork and homework with Jane to see how Jane's skills are progressing.

For more information about this test, the New York State standards, and how you can help Jane, go to:
www.engageny.org/parent-and-family-resources

BEDS: 000000000000
LOCAL ID: 000000000

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Throughout my interactions with them, OOPs also bemoaned that the test score reports were not produced in a timely fashion. Students take their standardized tests in the Spring (March, April, or May) but the results are not released until August. The late release time effectively guarantees that teachers cannot use the information to inform instructional practice or offer tailored support for students in their weakest areas. Indeed, as one exchange in Danville illustrated, the uselessness of the test score data was a central motivation in the decision to opt out:

Speaker 1: She took [the test], I guess it was May or April, didn't get results until November, and what they were was just like a number. And I'm like, "What? This is not showing me anything!" It's not showing me anything to help her…At first, I had her take [the test] because I didn't believe in the theory of telling her that she should just not take something 'cause it's difficult. But then when I got the results, I'm like, "This is showing me absolutely nothing." So it's a waste of time. If they told me something I can work on with her or an area she was weak in, but it was just...

Speaker 2: A number.

Speaker 1: …Not really providing anything. So I'm like no, we're not doing it anymore, and that's why I opted out after that.

Speaker 3: You get a number, like you said, over the summer the following year. It doesn't say, "Do I know how to do this?..."

Speaker 4: Meaningless.

Speaker 3: "…Where do I need help?" It doesn't say anything about that. So, essentially, it's just garbage. Why even bother mailing it? Just save the money.

Another OOP likewise indicated on the survey that her decision to opt out was the result of frustration she felt when trying to make sense of the test score data with her school's principal to help her child:

My decision [to opt out] was due to the lag time in results (August). Then when I met with the principal regarding the final scores, I found out that we were unable to decipher what subjects in either English or Math…needed improvement. Basically, if we wanted to assist my kids in improving their grades there were no clear or substantial guidelines that the exam would offer.

While standardized test score data were deemed relatively useless, OOPs did not seem to feel that they had no reliable information to evaluate the performance of their children. In fact, most OOPs exhibited tremendous faith in what Lindblom and Cohen (1979, 12) refer to as "ordinary knowledge"—that is, experiential knowledge that "does not owe its origin, testing, degree of verification, truth status or currency to distinctive professional techniques but rather to common sense, casual empiricism or thoughtful speculation and reflection." In this way, parents scoffed at the notion that the tests were the only tool capable of providing an objective view of students' performance, and they countered that daily interactions with their children or their children's teachers were actually more reliable, timely, and useful sources of information. "The teacher, myself, and my husband are perfectly aware of my children's progress and needs," insisted one parent on the survey. Another repeated this sentiment: "No good information comes from these tests. If I wanna know how my kid's learning, I can talk to their teacher and they're gonna give me a better understanding of what they're doing and how they're doing than a standardized test that gives you a [number] six months after they took it." One survey respondent, a teacher, confirmed that she felt she was a better judge of her students' abilities through her daily interactions with them: "I've seen some very strong students score a two on the NYS ELA exam. I've been teaching for fifteen years and have a strong sense of which students need reading support. This test does not accurately identify those students."

In addition to design flaws in the tests themselves, OOPs opposed the *effects* that standardized tests were having on education in their community, especially the narrowing of the curriculum and the loss of several days of instructional time to test-taking. In the focus groups and survey free responses, the most frequently applied motivation was the narrowing of the curriculum to focus on test reparation, which garnered a total of 53 code applications. OOPs

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bemoaned that the system of standardized testing had led to a stifling, drill-and-kill educational experience that emphasized ELA and math at the expense of science, social studies, and the arts. They also lamented that teachers appeared to have their hands tied, with one parent recalling that a teacher had once complained that she could no longer teach the lengthy dinosaur unit she used to teach even though students had always loved it. Indeed, OOPs seemed to perceive a distinction between testing and authentic education. "I send my child to school to be educated," one OOP said. "These tests do not meet that goal."

Non-Test Concerns

While OOPs routinely complained about the general flaws of the NYS Grade 3-8 Common Core tests and their noxious impact on education, they also frequently mentioned public motivations not directly related to standardized testing. These motivations accounted for 23.1% of all opt out motivation code applications.

Principal among these concerns was opposition to using standardized test score data to evaluate teachers, schools, and districts. For many parents, it was one thing to mandate a poorly designed test that provides only an incomplete snapshot of student achievement; but it was quite another—"absolutely ridiculous" and "unacceptable" in the words of some OOPs—to then use that test as a basis for sanctioning teachers, schools, and districts. The tests, they pointed out, were designed to evaluate student performance, not teacher performance. For many parents, it was the linking of tests with evaluations of school and teacher performance that was the deciding factor in their decision to opt out. "If my children could take the test and not have any sort of impact on the district, on the teachers, I would totally make them," said one Danville OOP.

Beyond concerns about the mismeasure of teacher, school, and district performance, however, many OOPs further came to view their decision to opt out as a way to *actively defend* their teachers and schools against the prevailing narrative that teachers and schools everywhere are failing. Many parents felt that their teachers, whom they roundly loved, were being unjustly maligned, besieged, or otherwise "held hostage" by cynical governmental and corporate elites. Opting out was therefore one way to demonstrate solidarity and gratitude toward the teaching profession. "Why are we going to punish a teacher or the school district for something that the school district and the teacher have absolutely no control over? They do their job, they come here every day, they're 110% dedicated to the kids," insisted one Danville OOP. Another parent echoed that the tests would not accurately reflect the exemplary performance she saw from her child's teacher, saying, "My child has wonderful teachers and shouldn't have to take a test to prove that." Some OOPs went even further, believing that having their children sit for the test would make them complicit in a baseless "witch hunt for teachers' jobs." And still others, particularly parents of special-needs children, indicated that their decision to opt out was partly a product of the guilt they would feel if their child's poor performance harmed their teacher. "I do not like that my child's performance could adversely effect the evaluation of the school or teacher," lamented one parent on the survey, "Having one child who performs above her grade level and one who struggles to stay on grade level at all, I am well aware of the efforts the teacher and school put into my children's success. I would never want how they do on one test to hurt the school in any way."

No matter what one's motivation for opposing teacher evaluation, though, most OOPs could agree on one thing: they already knew how well their teachers were performing. As one

parent wrote on the survey, she opted out to make the statement that testing was entirely

superfluous in the drive for accountability:

> In NY state, the assessments are used to punish schools, teachers, and in some cases, schools are placed into receivership all in the name of holding a school 'accountable.' We already have a system in place to hold our teachers and schools accountable. We can approach the teachers, administrators, and school board ourselves if we think someone is doing a poor job and if we don't like what the school board does elect new representation. I think our teachers know better than the gov't how our kids are doing and I will continue to support them and our school by refusing to let my children taken meaningless tests designed to punish and not help.

Opposition to the Common Core was another reason that many parents decided to opt

out—although the reasons for this opposition were not monolithic. While some parents were

unshakably opposed to the Common Core in principle, others were merely confused about the

new concepts in the curriculum, especially the mathematics reasoning skills students were being

taught. More significantly, many parents expressed exasperation over the state's failure to

implement the curriculum smoothly. Indeed, many parents felt the Common Core

implementation had been a "disaster" and decided to opt out as a way to express anger about the

haphazard and reckless pace at which the curriculum and its aligned tests had been rolled out. In

some cases, students only had one year of Common Core curriculum before taking their first

Common Core standardized tests, and parents said that many teachers reported inadequate

support when it came to teaching the new curriculum. Furthermore, based on the

implementation schedule, some late-career students were tested using Common Core

standardized tests even though the majority of their educational career had not included the

Common Core curriculum. As one parent explained, "I was not opposed to the Common Core

but you can't test children on Common Core when they have not been taught the information. It

should have started with the students in kindergarten when the Common Core was rolled out and

those children should have been the first ones to take the Common Core tests [in 3rd grade]."

The Self-Reported Motivations of NOOPs

Thus, the motivations OOPs listed for their participation in the opt out movement were wide-ranging, including concerns about the impact of testing on their immediate children, general concerns about the use and configuration of the NYS Grade 3-8 Common Core tests, and qualms about the general direction of education policymaking in the state and nation.

A remarkable finding in my data, however, was that many NOOPs actually shared these same concerns in their own discussions with me, yet they did not feel moved to opt out. It is true that the discussion on these issues was not as univocal among NOOPs as among OOPs. Just as the survey indicated, there were many NOOPs in my qualitative data who expressed support for testing and other education policy developments. However, a striking degree of consensus emerged between the OOPs and NOOPs as they took stock of the current state of education policymaking in New York and the nation as a whole (Table 4.5 below). It therefore did not appear that the average NOOP was directionally different from the average OOP in terms of his/her issue preferences.

Table 4.5:

Examples of NOOP Statements that Correspond to OOP Motivations

Impact on Immediate Children	
Causes stress/anxiety/feelings of failure	A couple of my children, they put so much pressure on themselves to do well [on the tests] that if they don't, it really is challenging for them…It affects their mood, it affects their behavior, it affects their self-esteem, even though I tell them, "It doesn't count for you. It's okay."
Special needs child	My personal experience, my child is dyslexic…some learners actually need more attention than others.
Child's opportunities at stake	When [the school is] telling a child, "You're not gonna get in the academic enrichment program if you don't score a four and above on your test," that's a bad thing to say to a child, and that has happened.
Child asked me / Peer pressure	My kids don't opt out, so my daughter cries and tells me that there were 30 people in the classroom taking the test with her. There are 400 in her grade.
No effect on child's educational career	It is immaterial to me what their score is on this test and [it] isn't, as I understand it, applied to their student transcript.
General Concerns re: NYS Grade 3-8 Tests	
Developmentally inappropriate	When you look at the expectation of where a typical third grader should be and then where that test actually is, it's very inappropriate for her age. It's not appropriate at all.
Poorly designed	Standardized testing in schools is most effective in criterion-referenced tests based on information previously taught. They should not be deceptive or discriminatory.
Incomplete snapshot of achievement	I'm not a supporter of standardized testing. I never have been. I think that there are too many variables. Everybody has a bad day. I can think of times where I went to school and took a test, and didn't feel well, but I went because I had a test, and I didn't necessarily do my best.
Provides no useful info	I absolutely oppose standardized testing !! It really gives the parent no feedback and it makes teachers teach to the test.
Waste of instructional resources	I think [testing] ebbs away from what really good teachers could deliver for their students. And *that* I struggle with, 'cause just being a teacher and in that position at times where it's like, "Oh, we gotta cancel the play. We gotta stop this 'cause we gotta practice for the ELA test." And I think it can subtract some of the creativity and the wonderful things that some teachers go into it for. So that's what I think it can kind of mess up that balance.
"Unfair" or "invalid"	Standardized tests, to me, are baloney. Even if it were possible to come up with a fair, equitable test that is free of bias…there would still be the problem of the impossibility of accurately evaluating anything meaningful given the inflexibility of the standardized test environment.
Non-Test Concerns	
Teacher, school, or district evaluation	I don't like that it's used as a teacher's evaluation. I think that's why we have principals. And I do believe it is the job of the principals. I don't believe it's the job of the administration here. I believe it's the job of the principals of each school, primarily, to evaluate the teachers.
Oppose Common Core	A lot of the problems that we have in the testing arena in recent years has been [due to] the roll out of the Common Core and then the force of the new test, without giving teachers and even students...adequate time to prepare.
Corporate power in education	Standardized tests MUST come from public educational professionals and NOT private educational firms.
Oppose one-size-fits-all education style	Standardized testing is not always the best answer. Students learn differently, test differently, and it doesn't always show their strengths.

However, while OOPs and NOOPs frequently overlapped in their concerns about these issues, the discussions of these issues appeared qualitatively different from each other, and NOOPs offered their own justifications for why they did not opt out. Figure 4.3 below illustrates the motivations NOOPs offered on the survey for their own decision to *not* opt out. Although many NOOPs spoke unhappily about testing and other educational developments, they appeared reluctant to opt out for two main reasons: 1) they conceived of testing as a natural part of life about which nothing could or should be done, or 2) they felt that the tests had some redeeming informational value—if not for themselves, then for the parents and educational professionals around them.

Figure 4.3: Motivations for Not Opting Out (% of Code Applications, Survey Free Response)
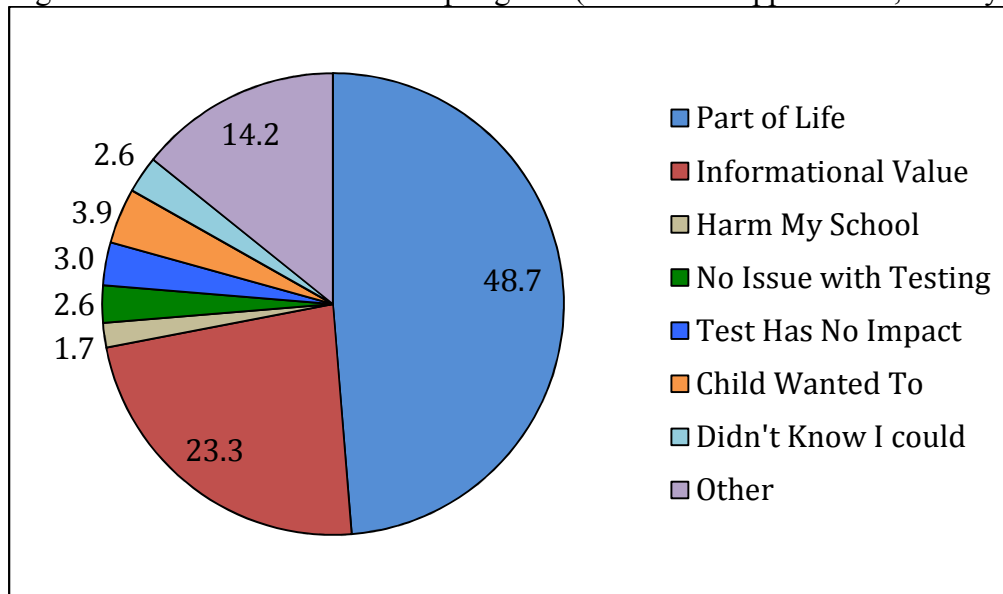
Testing as a Part of Life

Almost 50% of NOOPs believed that, regardless of their own feelings on the subject, standardized testing was an inescapable feature of life and that by opting out their child they would deprive their child of important test-taking practice or life skills. They thus argued that testing was simply a part of life about which nothing could or should be done politically. In fact, the phrases "testing is a part of life" and "you can't opt out of life" appeared regularly in my data. In offering these lines, parents acknowledged that while children had the right to opt out, their lives would be full of standardized tests they could not get out of—tests to graduate from high school (the Regents Exams), gain admission to college (the SAT), become a lawyer (the bar exam), or even just obtain a driver's license. As one NOOP in Greenville said:

> I have mixed feelings on [testing]. I make my kids take the test. They're gonna have to take tests their whole lives, whether it's the Regents, whether it's to get their driver's license, whether it's for going to college. You're gonna need to take what's considered a high stakes test at every point in your life. So, if you just get used to that, that's just part of what you have to do.

Another parent in Commonwealth echoed: "I do not agree with the amount of testing, nor do I think the tests are appropriate, quality tests. But since it seems that they will need test-taking skills to navigate the current educational system I have had them take the tests for experience and practice."

In addition to providing students with valuable test-taking experience, many NOOPs felt that standardized testing teaches kids important *life* skills, such as how to handle uncomfortable situations and "do things you don't like." "In life there are times when we have to do things we don't love to do," said one NOOP, "I think it is an important lesson to teach my children to do their best, even though it may be difficult and undesirable. I feel it is a life lesson to have to do

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things you really don't want to do." Others expressed concern that opting out would signal to their children that it was okay to be "a quitter," to "take the easier route" and refuse to "rise up to the challenge[s]" that life will present. As one parent wrote in the survey, "Having my children take the tests teaches them that life isn't always about get[ting] to do what you want to do. Opting in is a life lesson rather than opting out! Opting out is the easy answer—but life isn't supposed to be easy." One Danville parent even linked his opt out decision to the character traits promoted by his religion:

> My religious beliefs as a Christian and my convictions as an American are to honor authority and trust God. I don't feel it accomplishes anything to teach my child to refuse to take a test. I am teaching her to be a strong woman who has honor and believes she is capable of anything she sets her mind to! Struggle and failure is sometimes part of the journey, but it's okay to have setbacks. It makes us stronger.

In all of these ways parents expressed concern that opting out would leave children characterologically unequipped for the unpleasant, and often senseless, rigors and toils of life. To ensure children would be able to cope with the real world, children needed to take the tests.

The Informational Value of Tests

A significant portion of NOOPs (23.3%) also indicated on the survey that they did not opt out because they felt the standardized tests contained some informational value—if not for them, then for others in their community. Some parents asserted that the tests help provide valuable insight into their children's abilities and identify areas where they are struggling. During the Easton focus group, one NOOP described in great detail the way she uses data from all types of tests her children take:

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> It gives me as a parent a perspective, 'cause you can dive into the test data and you can get a really rich understanding of the things that your child's doing well and things that they're not doing well…It doesn't matter what test they took. We always come home and say what happened? It just helps us know our child's strengths and weaknesses and whether I can get the resources in school or out of school to help them.

In response, another parent described a time where she felt standardized test data had painted an inaccurate picture of her child's performance but nevertheless allowed the school to provide some remedial resources just to confirm that her child was okay. While she no longer puts much stock in the test data, she feels the data are still valuable for those around her:

> My daughter, in third grade, received a level two in reading comprehension. Now she's an avid reader. She has absolute understanding of what she reads and she engages in thoughtful discussion and conversation about it. So I know that her ability to read and comprehend is great. So when we see this two and my daughter cries about it, I say not to worry. Then we receive a letter that says she'll get special help. She'll be pulled out. And I say, "You know what? Maybe you do need a little help. Maybe I've missed something. I'm not an educator. I'm your mother." Get her into fourth grade the teacher says, "I don't pay attention to that. I'll evaluate her and I'll let you know." And within the first or second week she says, "She doesn't any help." I said, "I didn't think she did." So that's my story, but I do think in many instances these tests are able to…inform parents to where your challenges are.

Similarly, other parents who found little personal value in the test data also indicated that they believe it is at least important information for educational professionals to have, and they expressed concern that if too many people opted out, the test data would be invalidated and it would not be possible to receive an accurate view of school and district performance. "The test score doesn't mean anything to us," said one Greenville NOOP in a focus group, "[but] we know it's important data for the teachers and district to have." Furthermore, even among those parents who principally argued that "tests are a part of life" over a quarter of them (26%) simultaneously indicated that testing has some form of informational value.

Motivational Comparisons with OOPs

Altogether, there appeared to be a sense among NOOPs that while testing was imperfect, it was an inescapable fact of life and a necessary evil that possessed some value for themselves, their children, or their community. As such, NOOPs appeared to construct their concerns with testing as a private matter, not a public one demanding political action that would have a community-wide impact. As one NOOP explained, "I think that [testing] is for the greater good in a way. As much as I think the testing has its issues, I feel…if it's the best we have, then everyone should have to take it."

In contrast, OOPs tended to construct their concerns as *public* problems (even if their own children were at the forefront of their minds), and they believed collective political action was necessary to fix the problem. As one Easton OOP exclaimed, her concerns about testing went beyond just her own children: "[When I opt out] I'm thinking about all [my daughter's] friends, that English is not their first language, and they're having to take it, and their parents have no clue that their kids are gonna have to take this. And these kids are stressed to the max, crying hysterically, in third and second grade. I tell them, 'You don't have to take the test, no.'" Another OOP in Danville likewise described the calling she felt to advocate for those children who do not have reliable advocates at home:

> I think probably even if I didn't have a kid that had extra needs, I would still be involved because…I see the kids with the different needs and I sometimes realize, especially where I teach, the poverty is huge. There's kids that, when I look at their parental information and who they're with now and who they're going to, and then in and out of different homes and moving from district to district, I think a lot of times, unless you've been inside of it and dealing with it regularly, it's hard to advocate for those kids that don't have an advocate in their home. So as a teacher and as a parent I feel like, not only that I want to be involved, that I have to, because you gotta be the voice for the people that are not able to [have one]. That's the biggest reason why I'm here.

Like the opt out activists described by Ferman (2017) in her study of the Philadelphia suburbs, the OOPs in my data appeared to make the personal political. Their initial decision to opt out may have been based on the experiences of their own children, but they soon came to see themselves as part of a collective struggle that transcended their household, their school, their district, and even their state.

Political Attitudes

Not only were OOPs more likely to view their concerns as public problems demanding political action, but they were also less likely to believe these problems would be fixed through the natural workings of conventional politics. In this way, the decision to opt out (or not opt out) appeared deeply colored by political attitudes—namely, feelings of political efficacy, trust, and estrangement. I found that these attitudes were important independent motivators of participation that interacted powerfully with issue preferences; however, the relationship between these attitudes and participation ran contrary to the predictions of existing political participation literature.

Political Interest

One of the most significant attitudes correlated with participation in existing literature is political interest. Individuals who are more interested in politics are more likely to participate (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Contrary to the expectations of literature, however, I did not find that OOPs were any more interested in politics than NOOPs at any level of government,

and OOPs actually exhibited lower political interest than NOOPs when it comes to interest in

national politics (Table 4.6 below). At the same time, there did not appear to be any major

differences between OOPs and NOOPs in the relative importance they assigned to the issue of

education. In the survey, parents rated (on a 1-5 scale) how important education was to them as

a political issue. On average, OOPs (4.64) did not care about education any more than NOOPs

(4.61), and both sets of parents reported that education is a highly important issue for them.

94.7% of OOPs and 94.6% of NOOPs identified education as a "very important" or "extremely

important" political issue.

Table 4.6:

Political Interest of OOPs and NOOPs

	All	OOPs	NOOPs	p-value
Total Interest (3-12)	9.65	9.51	9.77	0.15
Local Interest (1-4)	3.47	3.52	3.43	0.14
State Interest (1-4)	3.08	3.01	3.14	0.11
National Interest (1-4)	3.10	2.98	3.21	0.00

Note: Respondents were asked a variation of this question for each level of government: "How interested are you in national/state/local politics and affairs—Very interested (4), somewhat interested (3), slightly interested (2), or not at all interested (1)?" The total interest score was derived by summing the local, state, and federal interest scores.

Political Efficacy, Estrangement, and Trust

Whereas significant differences did not emerge between OOPs and NOOPs along the

attitude of political interest, differences did emerge when it came to three other political

attitudes: efficacy (i.e. the belief that you can influence what government does), trust (i.e. the

belief that policymakers can be trusted to do the right thing), and estrangement (i.e. the feeling

that the government is not yours). In general, OOPs exhibited significantly lower levels of

political efficacy and trust and higher levels of political estrangement than NOOPs. These differences were especially evident at the state and federal levels, and they run counter to the predictions of a great deal of existing empirical literature, which generally deems efficacy a positive force for participation, trust a mixed force for participation, and estrangement a negative force for participation (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Schwartz, 1973).

Tables 4.7, 4.8, and 4.9 report the differences between OOPs and NOOPs on the attitudes of political efficacy, estrangement, and trust. Aggregated across all three levels of government, the average efficacy score for OOPs (12.88, on a 6-24 scale) was lower than the average efficacy score for NOOPs (12.36). Much of this difference appeared to be driven by differences at the state level, where OOPs exhibited an efficacy score of 3.89 (on a 2-8 scale) compared to 4.16 for NOOPs (p=0.02). Given these results, it is not surprising that OOPs also exhibited higher levels of political estrangement than NOOPs. More OOPs reported feeling estranged from the state government (59%) and federal government (63%) than NOOPs (40% and 54% respectively). This pattern was further maintained when estrangement was aggregated across all three levels of government (p=0.00). Finally, OOPs also demonstrated lower levels of political trust. While existing literature has identified a complex and inconsistent relationship between political trust and political participation (Citrin & Stoker, 2018), my data suggest that, at least in the context of the opt out movement, OOPs were much less trusting of state and federal policymakers than NOOPs. They were also significantly *more* trusting of local officials.

Table 4.7:

Political Efficacy of OOPs and NOOPs

	All	OOPs	NOOPs	p-value
Total Efficacy (6-24)	12.63	12.36	12.88	0.06
Local Efficacy (2-8)	5.36	5.32	5.39	0.54
State Efficacy (2-8)	4.03	3.89	4.16	0.02
Federal Efficacy (2-8)	3.24	3.15	3.32	0.13

Note: Efficacy for each level of government was calculated by summing responses to two survey items. The first item asked "If you had some complaint about a local/state/national government activity and took that complaint to a member of the local government council, how much attention do you think he or she would pay to it?—No attention at all (1), Very little attention (2), Some attention (3), or A lot of attention (4)." The second item asked "How much influence do you think someone like you can have over local/state/national government decisions?—None at all (1), Very little (2), Some (3), or A lot (4)?" The total efficacy score was derived by summing the local, state, and federal estrangement scores.

Table 4.8:

Political Estrangement of OOPs and NOOPs

	All	OOPs	NOOPs	p-value
Total Estrangement (0-3)	1.25	1.40	1.11	0.00
Local Estrangement (0-1)	0.18	0.19	0.18	0.91
State Estrangement (0-1)	0.49	0.59	0.40	0.00
Federal Estrangement (0-1)	0.58	0.63	0.54	0.04

Notes: Respondents were asked three variations of the following question, one for each level of government: "When I think about the federal/state/local government in Washington/Albany/[district name], I don't feel as if it is my government—Agree (1) or Disagree (0)." The total estrangement score was derived by summing the local, state, and federal estrangement scores.

Table 4.9:

Political Trust of OOPs and NOOPs

	All	OOPs	NOOPs	p-value
Total Trust (0-9)	4.03	3.97	4.09	0.27
Local Trust (0-3)	2.02	2.14	1.92	0.00
State Trust (0-3)	1.06	0.94	1.18	0.00
Federal Trust (0-3)	0.95	0.89	1.01	0.03

Notes: Respondents were asked three variations of the following question, one for each level of government: "How much of the time do you think you can trust the federal/state/local government in Washington/Albany/[district name] to do what is right—Just about always (3), Most of the time (2), Only some of the time (1), or None of the time (0)?" The total trust score was derived by summing the local, state, and federal trust scores.

Each of these three attitudes were individually correlated with the decision to opt out, but how do these attitudes interact with one another? By examining these attitudes simultaneously, it is possible to achieve a more complex understanding of how these attitudes interact with one another and shape the decision to participate (or not participate) in the opt out movement.

Figure 4.4 below visualizes the simultaneous relationships among these three attitudes by locating the propensity to opt out in a single "four-dimensional" attitude space. The North-South axis indicates high or low levels of political trust; the East-West axis indicates high or low levels of political efficacy; the color of the bars indicates the presence (red) or absence (blue) of political estrangement; and the height of the bars indicates the percentage of individuals occupying each space who have chosen to opt out.

Figure 4.4: Opt Out Rate by Trust, Efficacy, and Estrangement

Opt Out Rate by Trust, Efficacy, and Estrangement
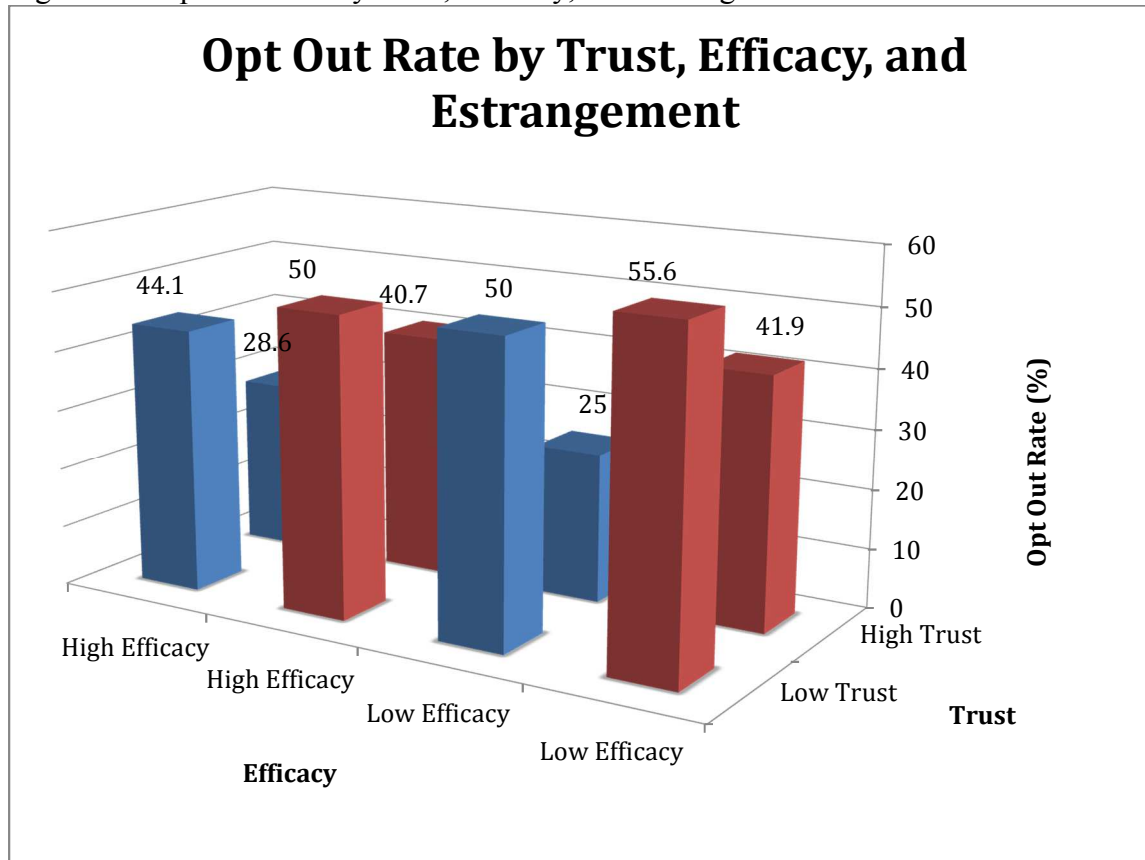
Note: Red bars indicate "estranged" and blue bars indicate "not estranged." Measures are a composite of attitudes toward *both* the state and federal levels. High trust indicates that the individual demonstrated high political trust at either the state or federal level. Low trust indicates that the individual demonstrated low trust at both levels. High efficacy indicates that the individual demonstrated high political efficacy at either the state or federal level. Low efficacy indicates that the individual demonstrated low political efficacy at both levels. Estranged indicates that the individual was estranged from at least one level of government. Not estranged indicates that the individual was not estranged from either level of government.

As the figure illustrates, individuals who are politically estranged exhibited consistently higher levels of opt out participation even when controlling for levels of trust and efficacy. Their opt out participation rates ranged from 40.7% to 55.6%. At the same time, individuals with low levels of political trust exhibited consistently higher opt out rates (ranging from 44.1% to 55.6%), and individuals with low levels of political efficacy generally, but not always, exhibited higher opt out rates when controlling for feelings of trust and estrangement. (The one exception:

Individuals with high efficacy, high trust, and no estrangement exhibited slightly higher opt out rates than individuals with low efficacy, high trust, and no estrangement). The individuals who appeared most likely to opt out were those who combined estrangement with low levels of trust and efficacy (55.6%).

Another way to examine the impact of these attitudes is to bundle them together in a composite measure of "political attachment." While I have found no record of such a composite measure in the political participation literature, my survey data suggest it is not unreasonable in the context of this study to combine feelings of political efficacy, trust, and estrangement at the state and federal levels into a single indicator (alpha=0.72, average inter-item correlation=0.31). This political attachment indicator aims to capture the extent to which an individual feels positively connected with policymaking that occurs beyond the local level. It is admittedly an unpolished indicator, but, when examined in conjunction with the other sources of evidence in this chapter, it allows for a quantitative illustration of the differences in political attitudes between OOPs and NOOPs. These differences are summarized in Table 4.10, which shows that OOPs exhibited significantly lower levels of political attachment than NOOPs ($p=0.000$).

Table 4.10:

Political Attachment, by Opt Out Status (All Districts)

All	**OOPs**	**NOOPs**	**p-value**
0.00	-0.20	0.19	0.000

Note: Political attachment is a standardized variable with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.00. It was created by summing the z-scores for feelings of trust, efficacy, and estrangement at the state and federal levels and then standardizing the resulting variable.

Furthermore, political attachment appeared to interact with parents' issue preferences in powerful ways, providing an answer to our question of why some people opposed to testing do not opt out and why others supportive of testing do opt out. Figure 4.5 below illustrates the joint

influence of standardized testing issue preferences and feelings of political attachment on opt out

participation rates. It confirms that individuals opposed to testing are much more likely to opt

out, but it also reveals that a low level of political attachment can serve as a participation

accelerator regardless of issue preferences. Among those opposed to testing, 63.2% of those

with below-average political attachment reported opting out compared to 47.6% of those with

above-average political attachment. Furthermore, parents who supported standardized testing

were nearly three times as likely to opt out if they exhibited low levels of political attachment

compared to high levels of political attachment (32.4% v. 11.1%). Thus, independent of an

individual's stance on standardized testing, feelings of political attachment appeared

significantly associated with the decision to opt out.

Figure 4.5: Opt Out Rate by Testing Views and Political Attachment

Opt Out Rate by Testing Views and Political Attachment
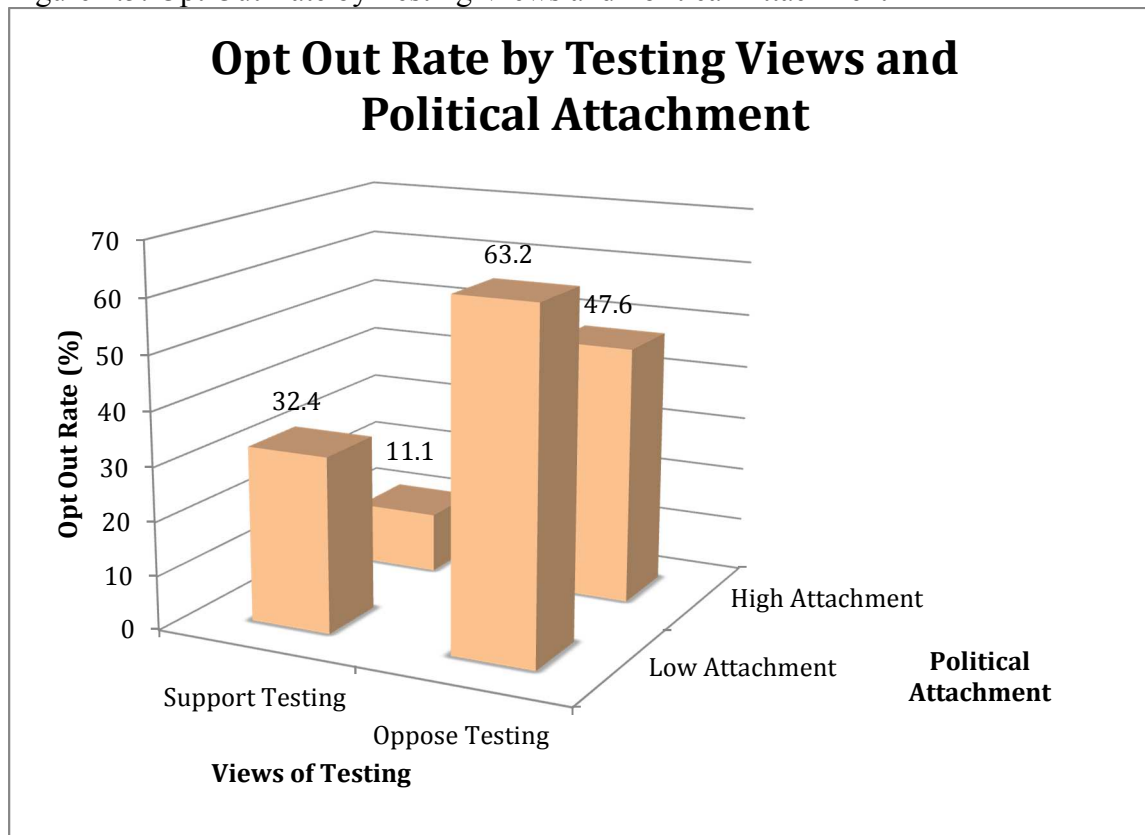
Note: High attachment indicates individuals whose political attachment score is above average (>0). Low attachment indicates individuals whose political attachment is below average (<0). Support for testing indicates individuals who rated testing a 2 or higher on the testing views scale reported earlier in the chapter. Opposition to testing indicates individual who rated testing a 0 or 1 on the testing views scale.

Finally, a logistic regression confirmed that political attachment remains negatively and statistically significantly associated with the decision to opt out even when controlling for issue preferences, political interest, previous political activity, recruitment, demographics, and district context. Specifically, the results suggest that parents who have higher levels of political attachment are 6.4% less likely to opt out than parents with lower political attachment, all else held constant (p=0.028). The results also confirm that by far the most powerful predictor of a parent's decision to opt out (other than their district of residence) is their views on testing as parents who are supportive of testing are 49.7% less likely to opt out than parents who are opposed to testing.

Table 4.11:

Estimated Effects on the Decision to Opt Out (Logistic Regression)

VARIABLES	Coeff.	SE	Odds Ratio
Political Attachment	-0.066*	0.033	0.936*
Political Interest	0.019	0.072	1.019
Testing Views	-0.687***	0.138	0.503***
Political Activity	-0.067	0.075	0.935
Recruitment Total	0.134	0.154	1.143
Nonwhite (comp. to white)	-0.420	0.459	0.657
Middle income (comp. to low income)	-0.485	0.422	0.616
Upper income (comp. to low income)	-0.477	0.408	0.620
Educator (comp. to non-educator)	0.546	0.302	1.726
Danville (comp. to Greenville)	2.337***	0.415	10.350***
Easton (comp. to Greenville)	0.569	0.385	1.766
Commonwealth (comp. to Greenville)	3.021***	0.374	20.512***
Observations	430		
Wald Chi2	124.42		
Pseudo-R2	0.315		

Notes: Constant suppressed. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

The Reasons for Low Political Attachment

When asked about their perceptions of policymakers in Albany and Washington, opt out parents produced three main insights into the reasons for their distrust, inefficacy, and estrangement: 1) corporate influence over education policymaking, 2) a lack of political voice for educators, and 3) general nonresponsiveness from elected officials. First, many opt out parents appeared intensely anxious about corporate influence in education, distrustfully believing that most policymakers in Albany are bought and sold by testing companies, corporate interests, and other unaccountable elites who have a financial stake in the neoliberal education reform agenda.

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Specifically, a significant number of OOPs viewed Common Core testing as little more than a "money grab" by corporations which were trying to "make a profit off of our children." To them, for-profit corporations like Pearson and powerful billionaires like Bill Gates had—with the assistance of politicians hungry for campaign donations—assumed outsized influence over education, and OOPs were leery that these actors could be trusted to have the best interest of children at heart. Indeed, some of the most extreme OOPs couldn't help but feel like conspiracy theorists when describing the financial incentives they saw for many of the backers of test-based reforms:

> Speaker 1: And I'll put my tin foil hat on right now, and say that the tests, there's a connection. You make the test super hard so that the kids are doing horrible and then the company that's making the tests can then turn around to the district and say, "Hey!"
>
> Speaker 2: "We gotta make a new test!"
>
> Speaker 1: "Or we've got this remediation program that we can sell you, so that you can get your kids better prepared to take their test"... Follow the money. It all boils down to who's making money, and you shouldn't be making money off of the backs of children if we're really trying to gauge their academic abilities.

Aside from the billions of dollars being made each year from the sale of tests and related materials, some OOPs even believed that the tests were purposefully designed to promote a "false narrative of educational failure" so that politicians and corporate reformers could undermine public education and push private alternatives like vouchers or charter schools. Of particular concern was the way that the norm-referenced Common Core tests in New York were designed to ensure that only around 35% of students passed, leading parents to ask what the point of the tests was if the state already knew beforehand how students were going to perform:

> Speaker 1: I don't understand why they feel that this test that they've designed [the Common Core test] is gonna make my child more college ready than I was.

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Speaker 2: It's more expensive. [chuckle]

Speaker 3: Yeah.

Speaker 2: And that's really all it comes down to.

Speaker 4: Right. And because it can fit the narrative that they wanna have.

Speaker 5: Exactly. Right.

Speaker 4: That our schools are failing our children, and they're not coming out prepared and ready.

Speaker 2: And this is why you should go to a charter school…

Speaker 1: And that's why I don't feel my children should take it...

Speaker 2: …Or a private school.

Speaker 1: 'Cause I don't want my child to help feed into that, because it's... I don't believe that it's fair.

Speaker 4: Absolutely, absolutely.

Thus, parents perceived an ironclad alliance between political and corporate elites in education, both of whom had clear financial incentives to embrace neoliberal reforms. Indeed, the political system appeared designed to advance reform ideas that would enlarge corporate profits which in turn would flow to legislators in the form of campaign donations. One parent even seemed to conflate corporate actors and governmental ones, saying "you can't trust *the government* if they're trying to *make money* off your kids' education [through] books and tests." Moreover, because of the prodigious financial resources of corporate interests, and the laxity of campaign finance laws, there was little parents could do to dislodge unfaithful officials at the ballot box and hold them accountable—a sentiment summed up by one parent in the Commonwealth focus group:

> You look at the money that [our state representative] take[s]. Well, why don't we just vote him out? I would love to vote him out, but the people that run against him don't have the ability to really run a campaign against him because he takes lots of money from the charter schools. And he constantly will show up to their rallies and tell them how much he supports them and kinda give

public education a cold shoulder. So, legislatively, you kinda get to a point…where it's like I've tried and you're not listening.

A second reason for distrust in education policymakers was a perceived lack of voice for teachers and educators in the creation of state and federal education policies. As noted above, opt out parents universally expressed love and admiration for teachers and educators and lamented that most of the educational leaders in Albany and in Washington did not have public education experience. The most powerful body in New York education, the Board of Regents, is comprised entirely of political appointees, and OOPs correctly pointed out that most of them "have absolutely no education experience whatsoever" and obtained their position primarily because they are "wealthy businessmen" and "rich donors." In discussing the Board of Regents, one OOP scoffed, "They've never walked into a classroom. They don't know what a classroom is!" The concern about a lack of educational experience was not confined to the Board of Regents, or even to the state of New York, however. As one parent put it, the lack of respect for public education experience was a national, bipartisan problem:

> It's not Republican or Democrat. Arne Duncan was the Secretary of Education under President Obama and he was an idiot, and he had no educational background. And then John King was the Commissioner [of NYSED] in New York, and he had six months education experience and he was an idiot and he knew nothing, and that got him promoted to Secretary of Education under President Obama when Arne Duncan left. And now you got Betsy DeVos, who is an idiot and knows nothing about education. The only thing she's got is millions and millions of dollars, and she's now in charge of education policy. So no, there's—Republican or Democrat—there is no trust.

Not only were parents less likely to have faith in political elites without educational experience, but many parents attributed the *practical* problems with testing in New York—the poor design of test questions, the slow turnaround time for results, the botched implementation of the Common Core, and the costs of testing to daily instruction—to the fact that teachers had not

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had sufficient input in the creation of the testing regime. Rather, the tests were engineered by psychometricians at Pearson and Questar who possessed advanced statistical knowledge but were not in tune with what students could reasonably accomplish. "I have friends who work for testing companies," reported one parent, "and they sit and they do metrics about 'this amount of students should get this question wrong.' That is a terrible philosophy of making a test." Another parent agreed: "There needed to be more educators involved, guidance counselors, people that knew what [students] need."

Concerns about corporate power and a lack of educator input also explain why OOPs appeared so hostile to the NYS Grade 3-8 Common Core tests yet simultaneously supported other exams like the Regents Exams. In contrast to the Common Core tests, which are designed by testing companies, the Regents Exams were, until recently, created by committees of teachers who have daily interactions with high school students. Moreover, the information from the Regents Exams is much more actionable as after the results are released, teachers are able to see which questions students missed and assist them accordingly. One parent summed up her seemingly contradictory decision to opt out of the Common Core tests but not the Regents Exams this way: "Teachers make Regents. Business people make [the Common Core] standardized testing." Similar sentiments were expressed to other forms of testing, such as local teacher-designed end-of-unit tests. The Commonwealth superintendent applauded the fact that "We don't have a single parent opting out of local, teacher-designed tests. Our parents trust the teachers."

Finally, many OOPs lacked faith in political elites due to long-standing patterns of neglect and nonresponsiveness in general. In this way, participation in the opt out movement represented an expression of frustration for parents who had long felt estranged from their

elected officials and conventional democratic politics. More than anything, OOPs just wanted to be heard and recognized. As NYSAPE leader Eric Mihelbergel put the issue in a statement to the *New York Times*: "We've been writing letters to legislators for years, until we were blue in the face, and they didn't listen. But they're listening now, now that we're opting our kids out" (Harris & Fessenden, 2015).

A clear illustration of the lack of responsiveness from public officials occurred in 2013, when New York Commissioner of Education John King embarked on a series of town-hall forums across the state to explain the Common Core to parents and quell the surging opt out resistance. In one forum in Poughkeepsie, King was booed off the stage by a raucous crowd after he lectured them for two hours about the Common Core before leaving just 20 minutes for the crowd of hundreds to ask questions. Furthermore, when parents *did* ask questions, he routinely interrupted them and returned to scripted talking points, leading the crowd to eventually shout him off the stage. In response to the contentious meeting, King cancelled the remaining stops of the tour—reinforcing the perception that public officials did not care about parent input. NYSAPE remarked that King's actions "mirrored his established pattern of ignoring the concerns of parents and educators," and in a *Washington Post* editorial, New York City educator Carol Burris wrote "The New York State Education Department has lost its moral authority…'My will be done' [is] the tone and tenor of chaotic reform in New York" (Strauss, 2013). Even district leaders criticized King for his performance. The Commonwealth superintendent, who attended one of King's town halls, derided the efforts as a "non-listening tour," and he pointed to the Poughkeepsie meeting as a prime example of the voicelessness of parents in his district:

[The situation] really had to be so extreme and blown out that the only way we could think of and the only weapon parents had [was to opt out]. Commissioner King held these listening tour meetings. 1500 people would show up at a high school in an auditorium there, and they had two minutes or three minutes each to voice their concerns, 10 people, and then he would have five minutes to respond. One after the other gets up and tells all these stories. "This is no good. It's hurting my kid. My kid hates school. They think they are failures and dummies." And then he'd get up and say, "Let me give you the recipe for rye bread." It was that disconnected! His responses were crazy! Finally it reached the breaking point in upstate New York, I forget where it was, it might have been Poughkeepsie and the parents just started screaming out, "Answer the question!" It turned into a baseball game! And he walked out of the meeting. That was the end of the non-listening tour. So there was never an attempt to listen [by state officials].

It wasn't just officials at the education department who appeared to ignore parents either. It was also state legislators and elected officials, whom parents routinely criticized for demonstrating a cavalier attitude toward their concerns. In Commonwealth, the superintendent, multiple board members, and several parents independently relayed stories about times when their local state senator had refused to hear their concerns. The Commonwealth school district is represented by two state senators, one of whom previously served as the chair of the Senate Education Committee but represents only a small geographic portion of the school district. When Commonwealth parents tried to bring their concerns about testing to him, his response was often flippant. "We have a state senator who represents a small part of [Commonwealth], [and] who is very happy to tell us that. Anytime you go to talk to him about it, he's like, 'Well, you know, I only really represent a small part of your district.' Oh okay, so I don't get representation because you just represent a small part of my district?" complained one OOP in our focus group.

Similar stories emerged in other districts, where parents told stories about how it was nearly impossible to get the attention of their representatives. One Easton parent described the years of futility and belittlement she had experienced advocating for education policy changes through conventional tactics:

My state legislators know exactly who I am…I have met with every one of them personally on more than one occasion. I've been involved in this since my two oldest were in kindergarten, first,

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second, third grade, because I thought there's something very wrong here. And so, I did letter writing campaigns for the entire district for years on end about funding and policies, and we got nowhere. I got a pat on the head and "Oh, you're such a good mommy" and bye-bye and that was it. And so you can only do that for so long before you realize, yeah, this is not gonna get me anywhere and the only way we're gonna get their attention is to essentially screw up the data…

Another OOP in Danville indicated that the opt out parents in her community were still quite active in reaching out to their representatives, but they did not expect it to yield much fruit:

I've written [my representative] many times over my concerns, and of course, obviously you get into their nice mailing system and that just aggravates the hell out of me…[Still] we are writing senators, congress people. But that's not enough, because you know what? They can pretend they never got that email. They can pretend you never got that letter. We can say that there's not a pattern, so they start ignoring you. But the one thing that is concrete evidence [is the opting out]…

Thus, OOPs appeared to be motivated not only by issue preferences regarding testing and other education reforms, but also by a deep-seated belief that the policymaking system was broken and unresponsive. OOPs deemed conventional politicking an insufficient tool to bring change, and they therefore felt compelled to participate in the opt out movement as a way to grab the attention of policymakers and undermine the operation of an ostensibly illegitimate TBA regime. In this way, motivations for opting out, while different for each individual, were primarily an amalgamation of issue preferences and pessimistic political attitudes.

A Note on Recruitment and Parent Role Construction

So far, this chapter has established that the motivations for opt out participation are a complex interaction of issue preferences and political attitudes. This sections explores two alternative motivations which are hypothesized by extant literature but appeared in my data to

have had only a marginal influence on the decision to opt out: political recruitment and parent role construction.

Political Recruitment

The literature on political participation and parent engagement indicate that parents are more likely to get involved if someone asks them to participate. My data suggest that this relationship has been maintained in the case of the opt out movement as differences in recruitment between OOPs and NOOPs were manifest within and across districts. However, recruitment did not appear to be a particularly influential predictor of opt out participation when placed alongside issue preferences and political attitudes—something confirmed by the logistic regression reported earlier. Simply put, recruitment appeared to motivate some parents some of the time, but its influence was generally inconsistent and mediated by district context as well as the social position of the recruiter.

Table 4.12:

Percentage of Parents Recruited By Each Source

	All Districts			HOO Districts			LOO Districts		
	All Parents	OOPs	NOOPs	All Parents	OOPs	NOOPs	All Parents	OOPs	NOOPs
Family Member	13.2%	19.5%	7.4%	21.5%	24.6%	12.3%	5.5%	4.5%	5.8%
Friend	27.4%	32.3%	22.8%	34.0%	37.2%	24.6%	21.2%	18.2%	22.2%
At Least 1 Family Member or Friend	**32.1%**	**38.9%**	**25.7%**	**41.4%**	**45.6%**	**29.2%**	**23.4%**	**19.7%**	**24.6%**
Teacher	7.9%	9.7%	6.3%	10.5%	10.5%	10.8%	5.5%	7.6%	4.8%
Principal	1.9%	2.3%	1.5%	3.9%	3.1%	6.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
District Official/Supt	5.7%	7.0%	4.4%	11.3%	8.9%	18.5%	0.4%	1.5%	0.0%
Teachers Union Rep	4.5%	5.8%	3.3%	7.4%	6.3%	10.8%	1.8%	4.5%	1.0%
At Least 1 Educational Professional	**12.7%**	**15.6%**	**9.9%**	**18.4%**	**16.2%**	**24.6%**	**7.3%**	**13.6%**	**5.3%**
Other	4.7%	4.7%	4.8%	5.5%	4.7%	7.7%	4.0%	4.5%	3.9%
At Least 1 Recruitment Source	**42.0%**	**48.2%**	**36.0%**	**53.9%**	**55.0%**	**50.8%**	**30.8%**	**28.8%**	**31.4%**
Mean # of Recruitment Sources	**0.65**	**0.81**	**0.5**	**0.94**	**0.95**	**0.91**	**0.38**	**0.41**	**0.38**

Table 4.12 above reports the percentage of parents who reported being recruited into the opt out movement by various sources. Across my entire survey sample, much opt out activism appeared to be spontaneous as a majority of parents (58.0%) reported no opt out recruitment, including a majority of OOPs (51.8%) and NOOPs (64.0%). Nevertheless, a sizable minority of parents (42.0%) did report being recruited by at least one source, and the average parent reported being recruited by 0.65 sources. In the aggregate as well as within each district, OOPs reported higher rates of recruitment than NOOPs. Overall, 48.2% OOPs reported being recruited by at least one source while just 36.0% of NOOPs reported the same. OOPs also reported being recruited by 0.81 sources on average compared to just 0.50 sources on average for NOOPs (p=0.00). Furthermore, parents in HOO districts reported nearly three times as many recruitment sources (0.94) as parents in LOO districts (0.38), and they were significantly more likely to report recruitment from each of the seven recruitment sources asked about on the survey (p<0.05). However, differences in recruitment between OOPs and NOOPs within these districts followed contradictory patterns. In HOO districts, slightly more OOPs reported being recruited than NOOPs (55.0% v. 50.8%), but in LOO districts, slightly fewer OOPs reported being recruited than NOOPs (28.8% v. 31.4%).

On the surface, this would suggest that recruitment played at least some role in motivating parents to get involved in the opt out movement. However, a closer analysis reveals that the influence of these recruitment sources was mediated by the social position of the recruiter as well as district context (Table 4.13 below). In HOO districts, parents who reported being recruited by a family member or friend were significantly more likely to opt out than people who were not recruited by a family member or friend (82.1% v. 69.3%, p=0.02). But in

LOO districts, parents who reported being recruited by a friend or family member were actually *slightly less* likely to opt out than parents who were not recruited by either of those sources (20.3% v. 25.4%, p=0.41).

Table 4.13:

Percentage of Parents Opting Out, by Recruitment Source

	All Parents	HOO Parents	LOO Parents
Family Member	71.4%	85.5%	20.0%
Friend	57.2%	81.6%	20.7%
At Least 1 Family Member or Friend	**58.8%**	**82.1%**	**20.3%**
Teacher	59.5%	74.1%	33.3%
Principal	60.0%	60.0%	-
District Official/Supt	60.0%	58.6%	100%
Teachers Union Rep	62.5%	63.2%	60%
At Least 1 Educational Professional	**59.7%**	**66%**	**45%**
Other	48.0%	64.3%	27.3%
At Least 1 Recruitment Source	**55.9%**	**76.1%**	**22.6%**

The reverse pattern was found concerning recruitment by educational professionals. Contrary to expectations from the parent engagement literature, recruitment from educational professionals did not appear to be universally impactful in spurring opt out activism. In HOO districts, parents who reported being asked to opt out by an educational professional were slightly less likely to opt out (66.0% v. 76.6%), although this finding was not statistically significant (p=0.13). In LOO districts, however, recruitment by educators appeared to be more influential. In those districts, 45% of parents who reported being recruited by an educational professional ultimately opted out. In comparison, among LOO parents who were *not* recruited

by an educational professional, just 22.5% opted out. This suggests that the influence of recruitment was mediated by not just the position of the recruiter, but also the political context of the district. In LOO districts, where opting out was not widespread among parents (and, as discussed in the next chapter, even socially frowned upon), having the encouragement of an educator could matter a great deal in legitimizing the decision.

Evidence from the qualitative focus group data further illuminated the role of recruitment in spurring opt out activism. As indicated by the survey, evidence of recruitment appeared quite limited in the qualitative data from the LOO districts, with both OOPs and NOOPs reporting that they usually had to rely on their own initiative to learn about the opt out movement. "I have never been approached by any person about testing. I did once do a little research on my own when I was in grad school, but it didn't go deep," said one NOOP in Easton. An OOP in Greenville likewise stated, "No group ever approached me to opt out. I read up and made the decision to opt the kids out of the 3-8 testing of my own accord." Moreover, when recruitment efforts did occur, parents in these districts tended to be skeptical of their recruiters, and recruitment didn't seem to have much influence one way or the other. In fact, one NOOP even described the skepticism she felt toward the recruitment efforts of her own mother:

> I had never heard of opting out [and so] when I heard, the first person I'm gonna call up and talk to about it is my mom… And she's all encouraging me to do it. "Opt out, opt out." She told me they stare at computer screens all day long, more pressure, there's incentives for the teachers. I feel like I'm getting a biased opinion, I'm not getting the whole truth, and Google's not gonna make it any better. It's really not a topic that I've heard of before and everything you're gonna hear is just gonna be everybody's opinion. Where do I find the facts?

Another parent empathized with her struggle:

> I think it's hard to sort through and find the information. And I think that the state and policymakers want information that they can utilize to benefit themselves. So, you get kind of slanted information from everyone. I want to have a clear cut, "Here's the facts. Here's what it's going to be used for. This is what you can do if you want to opt-out your child. This is what you can't do. This is why we are using this information." But nothing in the world seems to be this way…It needs to come from a person that's non-biased, and it's really hard to find that in anything.

In HOO districts, parents reported greater recruitment, although even in these districts a nontrivial number of parents reported that no one had asked them to opt out. Overall, a large number of HOO parents did indicate that they had received information from opt out supporters but they were reluctant to admit that these activities had swayed their decision. Said one Danville OOP:

> There was information provided from a parent group which is not affiliated with the school. It was informational. It was not like, "You're a horrible person if you make your kids suffer through this test." It was like, "Here's information…. Here's information why other parents have chosen to opt out. Here's information from an educator for twenty-five years who says how this paradigm has shifted from focus on the student to focus on the teacher and the district." I can't say that it wasn't biased. It definitely wanted to show you the other side of the coin and influence your decision, but there was nothing in there that said, "You need to opt out your student or else you're a shitty person."

Thus, unlike in LOO districts, parents generally trusted the information provided by their recruiters and incorporated it into their own decision-making process even if they themselves did not opt out. "There have been numerous groups through social media that have advocated for opting out of the exam. These did not effect my decision directly. Instead we heard both sides of the argument then made our decision," stated one Commonwealth NOOP.

Finally, in both HOO and LOO districts, recruitment from educators appeared to carry additional weight in the decision-making process. Whereas parents appeared more reluctant to discuss times that recruitment from other parents had persuaded them to opt out (or not opt out),

they readily pointed to instances where educator recruitment was influential in shaping their thinking. "When teachers I know have mentioned to me that they are opting out or have stated that they are having their children not take the test, it does affect my decision greatly," said one Danville OOP. Another NOOP in Greenville reported that while she struggled to find reliable information she felt information from educators would be more trustworthy than that provided by parents, saying, "If I wanted reliable information about opting out, I would go to the teachers." As such, the qualitative data appeared to corroborate the finding that the influence of recruitment, while marginal, was partially a function of the recruiter's social position and district context.

Parent Role Construction

The education literature on parent engagement further hypothesizes that motivation stems partly from the way parents construct their role in relation to their child's school and education. Parents who conceive of their role as complementing, reinforcing, and partnering with educators will participate more than parents who view the school and family as separate entities. From this view, it is worth asking if OOPs' motivations have merely arisen from different conceptions of their roles as parents. Perhaps OOPs have been motivated to participate in the opt out movement simply because they take a more assertive stance vis-à-vis their child's education whereas NOOPs take a more deferential one.

In my focus groups, I asked parents how they conceived of their role as a parent in relation to their child's education, from the perspective of both education policymaking and education practice. In these data, I did not find that there were significant differences in terms of

parent role construction between OOPs and NOOPs. Across all eight focus groups, themes of "partnership," "engagement," and "advocacy" were evident among virtually all parents who spoke on the issue. One Commonwealth OOP put the matter bluntly:

> We [as parents] should be involved. We should be heavily involved every step of the way. I see us all as advocates. Nobody knows our kids better than we do, and that's not just with their own classroom teachers. That's with building level, district level, and then education policy that affects everything they do in the classroom. So local, state, and federal…Pretty much every issue that can concern your child, a parent should be involved in [that].

An Easton NOOP, a former PTA mom, likewise expressed disappointment that many parents in her district seemed to adopt a narrow, hands-off view of engagement, focusing their attention on school fundraising at the expense of advocacy: "What disappointed me about the PTA when I joined is that they focused all their efforts on fundraising and not on advocating…As a parent, my job is to advocate for my kids, bottom-line, and I always tell parents that your job is to advocate for your children."

Parents across the board felt that advocacy was a natural part of their role in large part because they possess important experiential knowledge about their children's idiosyncratic gifts and challenges which are not always recognized by educators and policymakers. Even those parents who appeared more deferential to educational professionals remarked that they would get involved in "certain situations" impacting their child. One parent in Danville explained that she has fraternal twins who, even though they are the same age and raised in the same household, each pose unique challenges to educators:

> The reason I feel I need to be involved in every level I possibly can is because my kids have very different needs per kid. I have a son who falls on the autism spectrum and has OCD and ADHD and goes to a billion therapists and has gone through a whole lot in his short little life, and then I have a daughter that we call the wolf child. We can throw her to the wolves and she's still gonna

come out president. So it just depends on the kid, and I feel like a lot of times…when I listen to what federal policymakers are saying I think, "Have you ever met a child that is not typical?"

Another parent in Commonwealth felt similarly:

> I think younger me would have said let the education experts take care of it and let the people in charge of making policy. But older wiser me realizes that a lot of the time some people making policy have no idea what is in education and how education should work. So that really changed my view as far as parent involvement and being there and having a voice and making your voice heard, because they seem to like to make policies without having any idea how it impacts the kids in the classroom, or how it impacts the teachers and what they're supposed to be doing. So I think parent involvement is very important.

In this way, parents across my focus groups seemed to believe that advocacy was an important part of their role as parents, particularly when it comes to ensuring that the idiosyncratic needs of their children were being met by educators and policymakers. The differences in role construction hypothesized by the parent engagement literature were not evident between OOPs and NOOPs in my data. However, this finding is not without an important caveat. While this consensus was widespread in my focus group data, it is possible that these data do not accurately reflect the parent role constructions of all parents in the districts. Rather, this consensus could be an artifact of the participant selection process used to assemble the focus groups. As discussed in Chapter 2, participants for the focus groups were gathered from the pool of survey respondents in each district, and participation in both the survey and the focus group was voluntary. As a result, the parents in the focus group had all completed the survey and volunteered to participate in a focus group about education issues. These parents were therefore likely to represent a group that is more active and engaged in the education of their children than the average parent.

Conclusion

The results above indicate that participation in the opt out movement is motivated by a complex interaction of issue preferences (i.e. opposition to standardized testing and other neoliberal reforms) and political attitudes (i.e. feelings of political distrust, inefficacy, and estrangement toward the state and federal governments). It is true that some parents appeared motivated to opt out solely on the basis of their issue preferences as has been suggested by prior opt out research (Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016). However, my research diverges from this earlier work in that it also uncovered a hidden explanation as to why some parents participate in ways contrary to their issue preferences, such as NOOPs who oppose testing and OOPs who support it. Critical in explaining these behaviors are political attitudes—the belief that policymakers can or cannot be trusted to hear parent concerns and fix policy problems through politics as usual. Individuals who lack faith in policymakers and conventional politics were significantly more likely to opt out regardless of their issue preferences. Furthermore, while much of the motivation for opt out activism appeared to be a spontaneous product of issue preferences and political attitudes, external recruitment was also a contributing force for some parents in some circumstances, especially when recruitment was carried out by educators in LOO districts. Moreover, contrary to the expectations of literature, I did not find that motivations were a function of different parent role constructions between OOPs and NOOPs. Altogether, these findings have several important implications for our understanding of public participation with education, and grassroots education activism in particular.

The Novelty of Publicly-Oriented Motivations

One of the most important findings from this chapter is the salience of *publicly-oriented* motivations for participation in the opt out movement. While literature on political participation has consistently emphasized the importance of public, communal, and ideological forces in motivating participation, the literature on parent engagement with education has historically constructed motivations much more narrowly: Parents participate because they want what is best for *their child*. From this view, participation with education has been thought of primarily a *private* act in which parents advocate as individual consumers on behalf of their child.

While opponents of the opt out movement have been quick denounce OOPs as nothing more than selfish "helicopter parents" who care only about protecting their children's self-esteem, this did not appear to be the case in my data (Rosenfeld, 2016). Rather, the experience of the opt out movement in these four districts suggests that the dominant consumerist, privately-oriented paradigm of parent engagement may, paradoxically, be misaligned with the neoliberal era. Table 4.14 below provides one final illustration of this phenomenon drawn from the survey data. On the survey, OOPs reported (via a textbox) why they opted out, and I coded their responses for whether they mentioned of their own child (private orientation) or did not (public orientation). In these analyses, I found that public motivations far outnumbered private motivations (70.3% to 29.7%), although there was greater parity in LOO districts (50.8% v. 49.2%). In this way, parents seemed to be thinking beyond their own children when deciding to opt out, especially in HOO districts where parent concerns appeared to have been more thoroughly collectivized.

Table 4.14:

Parent Motivations for Opting Out (Survey Free Response)

	All Respondents	HOO Respondents	LOO Respondents
Private (i.e. Mentioned child)	29.7%	22.8%	49.2%
Public (i.e. Did not mention child)	70.3%	77.2%	50.8%

As such, the opt out movement potentially represents a new breed of parent engagement in which parents are motivated for public reasons that extend beyond their own children, leading them to advocate for community-wide educational changes. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of the opt out movement is the way in which some parents appeared to blend private concerns about their own children with public concerns about the educational and political health of their community—recognizing that the educational experiences of their children are inescapably bound up in the educational experiences of other people's children.

This shift in orientation portends potentially significant changes in the nature of parent engagement with education in the future as the motivations people have for participation impact not only *whether* they participate, by also *how* they participate—that is, which tactics and strategies they employ. When motivations are private, parents are liable to seek redress by contacting their teacher, principal, school board, or some other bureaucrat about their child's case. The end goal is simply to change the educational experience of one child (their own), and as such, there is rarely any incentive to engage in public politicking or otherwise disrupt educational practices that impact the rest of the community. In contrast, when motivations are public and problems are subject to the cross-pressures of higher-level democratic governance, parents can no longer expect to achieve change through private, individual, local exchanges.

Instead, parents will have to work coalitionally with others and advocate for change across different levels of government (e.g. school, district, state), in different political venues (e.g. electoral politics, legislatures, courts, bureaucracies), and with different tactics (e.g. media campaigns, lobbying, electioneering, and protesting) targeted specifically to the levels and venues selected. They also must make important decisions about how to frame their concerns in ways that motivate other parents to join them and seek out allies (e.g. other parents, organized interest groups, members of the media) who share their concerns and can lend critical political resources to their efforts. All of this suggests that in the neoliberal era, enormous new obstacles exist for parents trying to obtain what they feel is best for their child, but these same obstacles, if they lead to greater parent organizing, could also spur the production of new organizations and institutions that better express the collective voice of parents.

Trust and Political Attachment

Another significant contribution of this chapter is the discovery of a complex (albeit counterintuitive) relationship between opt out participation and political attitudes—namely feelings of trust, efficacy, and estrangement at the state and federal levels. In existing political participation literature, it has been widely established that individuals who are more politically efficacious and less politically estranged are more likely to get involved in politics (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Schwartz, 1973; Hansen & Rosenstone, 1993). Findings concerning political trust have been more mixed with some scholars concluding that individuals with low trust tend to participate less, some scholars concluding that they participate more, and other scholars concluding that they participate more only if they simultaneously possess high efficacy

(Gabriel, 2017; Levi and Stoker, 2000; Miller, 1980; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Paige, 1971; Schwartz, 1982; Muller, 1977; Uslaner & Brown, 2005; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Guterbock & London, 1983; Craig, 1980; Gamson, 1968). In this present research, however, I uncovered strong evidence that *low* feelings of trust, *low* feelings of efficacy, and *high* feelings of estrangement were associated with *greater* participation, complicating our understanding of how these attitudes influence participation—at least in the context of unconventional participation tactics like grassroots protest.

In doing so, this chapter unexpectedly adds some empirical flesh to an old yet underdeveloped theory of social movement participation: the "disaffection model," which hypothesizes that individuals who are disconnected from the political system may be less likely to participate in conventional politics (e.g. voting) but more likely to participate in contentious, system-challenging political behaviors like rioting and protesting (Dalton, 1988; Gurr, 1970; Gamson, 1968). At the same time, however, my results complicate this hypothesis in one significant way. Much scholarship in this area, which examined labor protests in Europe during the Cold War, believed disaffection to be rooted in educational and social class disadvantage (Dalton, 1988; Gurr, 1970; Gamson, 1968). This corresponds with more recent literature from the United States which has argued that political trust, efficacy, and estrangement have strong socioeconomic, racial, and partisan components (Wenzel, 2006; Smith, 2010; Uslaner, 2001; Guterbock and London, 1983; Citrin, 1974; Hetherington, 1998; Levi and Stoker, 2000; Hetherington, 2015). In contrast, though, my own data suggest that the political disaffection that motivates opt out participation is no more or less prevalent in any one demographic group. Low levels of political attachment appeared evenly distributed across the population of OOPs regardless of race, class, or partisanship, and in this way, the opt out movement may be

symptomatic of a new type of political alienation which is not bounded by existing social categories but rather exists on a more emotional and ideational level.

Aside from these theoretical contributions, the erosion of political attachment evident among OOPs in my study is also something that has *practical* consequences for education policymaking. Indeed, it is an unfortunate development that education authority has been absorbed by institutions at the state and federal levels at the same time faith in those institutions is severely diminished. Hetherington (1998) remarks that not only are political attitudes like distrust a reflection of dissatisfaction with political leaders and institutions, but they are also the *cause* of that dissatisfaction. When goodwill toward government declines, it can create a political environment in which it is difficult for those in government to succeed:

> Higher levels of trust are of great benefit to both elected officials and political institutions. More trust translates into warmer feelings for both, which in turn provides leaders more leeway to govern effectively and institutions a larger store of support regardless of the performance of those running the government (803).

Likewise, Fukuyama (2014) places political attitudes at the center of his own institutionalist theory of "political decay," arguing that feelings of trust make political systems work by begetting the autonomy bureaucrats need to craft and implement effective policies which in turn beget more trust through their positive results. Moreover, at the micro-level, citizens who do not trust government are also less likely to comply with the law (Marien & Hooghe, 2011; Feld & Frey, 2007), less likely to support policies that entail personal risk or sacrifice (Rudolph, 2017; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015), and more likely to exhibit anti-incumbent orientations (Hooghe et al, 2011; Belanger, 2017) which can undermine the personnel stability needed to ensure effective policymaking.

Thus, the urgent task confronting policymakers trying to quell the opt out movement is a two-front endeavor: reassuring parents of the value of existing policies and simultaneously taking steps to mend the fractured trust of parents. Furthermore, given the complex relationship between issue commitments and political attitudes uncovered in this chapter, it seems unlikely that one of those goals can be achieved without the other. Views on the issues are permeated by feelings of political attachment and vice versa.

While "there is no silver bullet" when it comes to restoring trust, the concerns raised by OOPs do offer something of a roadmap for what can be done (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Principal among these things is a return to retail politics—that is, a reorientation of education politics to promote regular, substantive interactions between policymakers and everyday citizens so that citizens can better understand the merits of reforms and have opportunities to influence the production of those reforms. One way to accomplish this would be to establish new institutional venues which would guarantee a permanent voice for parents in education policymaking, such as local parent forums, standing committees, *ex officio* positions on legislative committees, and mandatory referenda laws. While new institutional arrangements such as these would increase the number of voices involved in policymaking and thereby slow the pace of reform, Montpetit (2007) writes that such citizen-centered policymaking processes tend to produce policies that are more durable and democratically legitimate in the long haul, and it is a crisis of legitimacy, more than a crisis of ideas, that appeared to plague education policymakers in my data. Moreover, by incorporating the input of everyday parents, resulting policies would also likely be more effective in solving public problems since elite knowledge would have a chance to commingle with the ground-level, experiential knowledge parents bring to the table (Fischer, 2006; Lindblom & Cohen, 1979).

Second, given the high degree of respect parents demonstrated toward local officials and educators—and their related complaints that those individuals do not have enough of a voice in policymaking—state and federal policymakers would be wise to work closely with local educators if for no other reason than to improve their own credibility by association. Indeed, it would not be difficult for policymakers to devolve authority to local school districts on key issues related to curriculum and assessment or otherwise partner with them in the formulation, implementation, and framing of reforms so that constituents see these policies as the products not of distant elites but of people whom they regularly see, know, and trust. Whatever form this collaboration takes, however, it appears that some new empowerment of local officials will be necessary since the opt out movement appears driven as much by criticisms of *who* is setting policies as by *the policies themselves*. Simply enacting new policies via politics as usual will not solve any underlying legitimacy problems.

Figure 4.6: Parent Views on Educational Governance
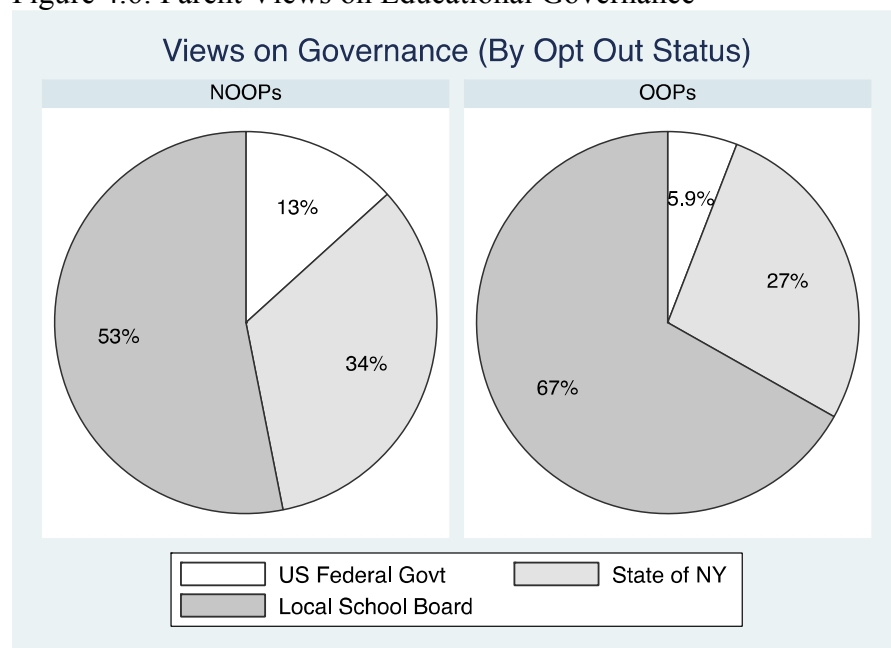
Note: Parents were asked "Which of the following should have the most influence setting policies for K-12 public education—The U.S. federal government, the state of New York, or your local school board?"

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Finally, given the concerns parents have about the corporate capture of policymaking, it will also be important to enhance governmental transparency and accessibility overall. It is not a coincidence that the opt out movement burst on to the scene just a few years before the anti-establishment campaigns of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. The same concerns about the unbridled political power of corporate elites that animated those campaigns was stridently clear in the reasons parents gave for their decision to opt out. As education governance has been absorbed by the institutions most often assailed for their elitism, opacity, and unresponsiveness, education policymaking has become infected by these same complaints. In New York too, the hasty and undemocratic process by which the Common Core was adopted and implemented, the secrecy surrounding grade 3-8 tests, and the conspicuous financial support legislators receive from charter groups have all fueled the narrative that state policymakers are up to no good when it comes to education. Fixing this perception will likely require more than the enactment of new educations policies; it will require a renewed policy commitment to good government generally. Policies like campaign finance reforms, lobbying disclosure laws, and the conversion of appointed state boards to elected ones could prove valuable in the drive to make education policies more publicly acceptable. Just as education has become infected by the same problems ailing general government, so too might it benefit from efforts to improve general government.

In the short term, however, there remain hopeful reasons to believe that the opt out movement and other forms of grassroots education protest are not necessarily a portent of the imminent demise of education institutions so long as those protest activities remain recognized by state officials as legitimate. Tarrow (2000) writes that individuals engaged in contentious, system-challenging politics can sometimes transform their political cynicism into antagonistic, but working relationships with government officials:

> Contemporary contention allows ordinary citizens to draw on technical and relational skills that, in the past, were largely restricted to elites, political parties, and full-time public officials. It brings activists further into the realms of tolerated and prescribed politics and makes possible relations of working trust with public officials. It has produced hybrid forms of behavior that cross the boundaries of the polity and link grassroots activists to public interest groups, parties, and public officials…Less trust *about* government and more activism *interacting* with government: these may be the ingredients of a less comfortable but more robust democracy.

Tarrow may be correct, but it is unclear just how sustainable education policymaking will be (and for how long) so long as existing policies are unpopular and a vocal, organized minority of parents remains disaffected.

CHAPTER 5: POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY CONTEXTS

In their protest activities, social movements are eminently political: as such they are influenced by…the political system.
—Della Porta and Diani (2007, 196)

I support the parents… If the state is going to get upset, they can slap my hand.
—Mrs. Morrison, Danville Superintendent

Under ESSA, if our test participation is less than 95%, I have to create a corrective action plan to describe how we're going to meet the threshold. You want to know what my corrective action plan will be? It will be one sentence: "Stop making shitty tests, and we'll start taking them."
—Dr. Valvano, Commonwealth Superintendent

There's really no such thing as an opt out…We like to say that we lead Long Island in "opting in."
—Mr. Brody, Easton Superintendent

Introduction

The previous two chapters have explored the opt out movement by focusing on the individuals involved—who they are and what motivates them to participate. This chapter now shifts our attention from the level of the individual to the level of the district, addressing the question of why opt out rates are so dramatically different across the four case districts. In other words, what local sociopolitical environmental factors appear to explain district-level opt out rates?

In any comprehensive study of grassroots social movement activism, it is critical to pay attention to the environmental context which surrounds movement actors. For even if individuals have the resources and motivation needed to participate in a social movement, they are still unlikely to act unless they also perceive environmental *opportunities* to do so without being harmed (Elster, 1989; Meyer, 2004). In other words, the relative strength or weakness of a movement across localities is unlikely to arise from simple differences in aggregate political resources and motivations; rather, it will be a partial function of community-wide environmental conditions which serve to promote or repress movement activities.

In exploring the environmental conditions which affected opt out movement strength at the district level, this chapter draws upon a theoretical concept borrowed from the sociology of social movements: political opportunity context, which is defined as the aspects of the world surrounding a social movement that affect its mobilization, choice of tactics, organizational structure, and political impact (Della Porta, 2013). In brief, the political opportunity approach is an integrative framework which examines how social movement organizations interact with their political environment. As Meyer (2004, 126) puts it in his review of the this subfield:

> Activists' prospects for advancing particular claims, mobilizing supporters, and affecting influence are context-dependent. Analysts therefore appropriately direct much of their attention to the world outside a social movement, on the premise that exogenous factors enhance or inhibit a social movement's prospects for a) mobilizing, b) advancing particular claims rather than others, c) cultivating some alliances rather than others, d) employing particular political strategies and tactics rather than others, and e) affecting mainstream institutional politics and policy…Activists do not choose goals, strategies, and tactics in a vacuum.

In the past twenty years, the concept of political opportunity has become central to interpretations of social movement activities, with Goodwin and Jasper (1999) going so far as to call it "the hegemonic paradigm among social movement analysts."

The precise origins of the political opportunity approach are widely debated, although some scholars trace it back to Tocqueville's contrast between "weak states" and "strong states" in which he conjectured that weak states with strong civil societies (like the United States) will experience a steady amount of peaceful protest while strong states with weak civil societies (like France) will experience episodic, but violent protest. The first modern-day study to explicitly apply the political opportunity approach was Eisinger's (1973) study of urban rioting in the 1960s. Probing why some cities experienced riots during the 1960s and others did not, Eisinger focused his attention on the openness of various urban governments, and he reached what remains the most important conclusion of the political opportunity approach to date: the existence of a curvilinear relationship between political openness and protest. In the most open political systems, protest is likely to be preempted insofar as dissatisfied constituencies have access to the political system and are incentivized to engage in conventional political participation. At the opposite end of the spectrum—in closed systems—authorities are able to repress dissatisfied constituencies to such an extent that would-be activists cannot develop the capacity needed to protest. However, in systems that combine open and closed elements—that is, systems where constituencies are neither sufficiently advantaged to obviate the need for protest nor so completely repressed to prevent them from trying—protest is likely to emerge (see Tilly, 1995 for further support of this finding). Subsequent work has built on this insight by moving beyond just *institutional* openness. In McAdam's (1982) study of the civil rights movement, for example, the author argues that civil rights activism only emerged when noninstitutional environmental changes provided sufficient opportunity for mobilization. These changes included a shift away from the cotton economy in the south, the migration of blacks to northern cities, a decline in lynchings, statements of support for civil rights by the Kennedy and

Johnson Administrations, and the *Brown v. Board* decision, which legitimized political action and furnished African Americans with a sense of "cognitive liberation." Finally, more recent work (Kriesi et al, 1995; Tilly, 1995; Kitschelt, 1986) has highlighted the fact that political opportunity affects not only the emergence and volume of movement activity, but also the strategies and tactics employed by activists. Tilly (1995) for example, describes how political, demographic, and economic changes in twentieth-century Britain led to a shift away from short-term, localized forms of protest to long-term, nationally-organized forms of protest.

As research on political opportunity has proliferated, a lively debate has opened up over which elements of the political environment actually constitute the political opportunity context. A cursory review of the literature points to three especially critical contextual variables: political structures, configurations of actors, and the policing of protest. The most stable of these factors is political structures, including both institutional structures and cultural structures (Kriesi, 1996). Institutional structures are simply the stable elements of the political system, such as the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government; bureaucratic agencies; and advocacy coalitions. Movements are more likely to occur in open, decentralized systems in which power is distributed, governmental action is constrained, and points of access are multiple. Cultural structures, on the otherhand, include the symbolic and discursive features of the political environment which determine what kinds of ideas become visible, resonate with public opinion, and are found "legitimate" by audiences (Koopmans & Statham, 1999). Discursive opportunities have been shown to be particularly important in determining which movement framing devices are employed effectively by movement leaders (Gamson, 2004; Benford & Snow, 2000).

A second element of the political opportunity context is the presence and configuration of movement allies and opponents. Movement allies and opponents can be institutional actors (e.g.

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political parties, bureaucrats) or noninstitutional actors (e.g. nonprofits, civic organizations, journalists), and the more closed the political system is, the more important it is for movement actors to identify institutional allies in order to gain access to decision-making (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). The configuration of allies and opponents is often critical in conferring (or foreclosing) social movement access to resources, tactical knowledge, and mobilization opportunities.

A third dimension of political opportunity is the policing or repression of protest by movement opponents (Della Porta, 2006; Della Porta & Diani, 2007; Peterson & Wahlstrom, 2015). Peterson and Wahlstrom (2015) define repression as "the governance of dissent" which occurs when movement opponents attempt to steer the conduct of civil society so as not to disrupt the dominant political order. Repression can be coercive (e.g. the use of weapons and physical force to control demonstrators), persuasive (e.g. making contacts with activists and organizers to dissuade them from protesting), and informative (e.g. spying on protesters to gather information about their intentions). In thinking about the various modes of movement repression, Peterson and Wahlstrom posit a model of repression that places various acts of repression in a three-dimensional space: the scale dimension (i.e. the level at which repression occurs from the supranational level to the local level); the institutional dimension (i.e. the degree to which repression is linked to the state); and the functional dimension (i.e. the tactical form of repression, ranging from violent coercion to symbolic violence).

Table 5.1:

Peterson and Wahlstrom's Three Dimensions of Repression

Dimension	Explanation
Scale Dimension	Repression can be carried out by supranational, national, state-level, and local institutions. In addition, repression can occur within the civil society at the inter-personal level, as when movement activists are publicly mocked by everyday citizens.
Institutional Dimension	Repression can be both governmental and non-governmental. It unfolds within, above, beyond, and below the state. There is public repression carried out by the state via bureaucracies, police forces, and tax authorities; by private entities like security firms, corporations, and foundations; and by civil society units like counter-movements.
Functional Dimension	The methods of repression range from coercion to accommodation. There are overt forms of repression, such as the brutal slaughter of dissidents, and covert forms of repression, such as surveillance, intelligence gathering, harassment, and disinformation campaigns. Some movements can be repressed through confrontation and others can be repressed through accommodation and co-optation by political elites.

Furthermore, Peterson and Wahlstrom argue that it is also important to recognize that repression

is an inevitable response to activism:

> Domestic dissent unequivocally provokes repression. Governments appear compelled to govern dissent so as to protect the political and economic order from threats and disruption. Governments may be joined by private security actors and to a far lesser degree civil actors in their efforts to steer dissent in less challenging directions. But dissent *is* governed, by sheer coercive force or by less strong-arm and subtle means, in order to maintain the status quo. Social movement protest and repression are inextricably joined (645).

In other words, every action by social movement actors will result in some counter-action by opponents, and the form that that counter-action takes can subsequently influence the volume of mobilization and the tactical strategies employed by movement actors.

For all its analytic benefits, the political opportunity approach is not without its detractors. Efforts to test political opportunity hypotheses against alternative theories have so far yielded contradictory and confusing results (e.g. Goodwin, 2002; Cress & Snow, 2000; Van Dyke & Soule, 2002). Additionally, the political opportunity approach has been criticized for being too broad in its definition of key concepts and too narrow in the measure of those concepts. Della Porta and Diani (2007) criticize the approach for sometimes acting as a "trash can for any contextual dimensions which could have an effect on a social movement" and Gamson and Meyer (1996, 275) have warned that the concept of political opportunity "is in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up every aspect of the social movement environment."

Indeed, the challenges of defining political opportunity will remain evident throughout this chapter as I take an inductive approach to identifying the most salient environmental factors which promoted or hindered opt out activism in the four districts without succumbing to the temptation to explain away the powerful insights uncovered in previous chapters. Furthermore, while existing research has applied the political opportunity approach to explain a variety of dependent variables, such as mobilization (Almeida and Stearns, 1998; Tarrow, 1989; Joppke, 1993), the selection of tactics and strategies (Eisinger, 1973; Cooper, 1996), organizational structures (Minkoff, 1995), and influence on public policy (Piven & Cloward, 1977), this chapter follows the advice of Kriesi (2004) and restricts its focus to the "volume and forms" of social movement contention within and across these four districts.

The concept of political opportunity has not yet been explicitly applied to the realm of *education* activism, but there is ample reason to believe that it has merit in this area. As discussed in the introduction of the previous chapter, one of the most important predictors of parent engagement with education is the perception among parents that their participation is important and valued by their local school system (Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2001; Green et al, 2007). As such, a good deal of research has been generated exploring the behaviors and orientations of educators which promote this feeling among parents.

Generally speaking, educators, from their position of authority, trust, and professional expertise, are able to promote parent engagement by inviting parents to get involved (Henderson et al, 2007), influencing the development of parent role constructions (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 2005; Auerbach, 2009; Lareau, 1989; Green et al, 2007), and framing reforms so that local stakeholders can "make sense" of them (Spillane, 2006; Coburn, 2006; Park et al, 2011). Additionally, educational leaders can work more generally to promote a culture of open dialogue and relational trust that makes parents comfortable expressing themselves and participating in the educational life of their community (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). They can do this by establishing formal institutional structures that facilitate dialogue (like public forums, parent committees, or study groups) as well as informal interactions (like regular emails, phone calls, or home visits). Finally, the presence of educators who embrace leadership philosophies that prioritize collaboration, community building, and social justice can also lead to greater parent involvement (Auerbach, 2009; Kochan & Reed, 2005; Theoharis, 2007; Furman & Starratt, 2002).

In sum then, while the political opportunity approach has not been applied to the field of education, literature from the field of parent engagement suggests that local education contexts may in fact play an important role in spurring parent activism. In the pages below, I take up this

line of inquiry with regard to the opt out movement in the four case districts. I begin by examining cross-district differences in both the volume and forms of opt out activism, and I then proceed to explain these differences by providing in-depth, qualitative analyses of the political opportunity contexts in three of the districts: Danville, Commonwealth, and Easton.

The Volume and Form of Opt Out Activities

On the survey, OOPs were asked not only if they had opted out any of their children, but if they had participated in any of eleven different activities in support of opting out, such as attending a rally, joining a social media group, or contacting a policymaker. Table 5.2 shows the percentage of OOPs who indicated that they had participated in each activity as well as the average total number of activities reported in each district. Overall, OOPs reported an average of 2.1 activities, but unsurprisingly OOPs in HOO districts reported significantly more activities than OOPs in LOO districts. OOPs in Danville and Commonwealth reported an average of 2.1 and 2.6 activities respectively while OOPs in Greenville and Easton reported an average of 1.5 and 1.1 activities respectively. Across all four districts, the six most frequently cited opt out activities were attending a meeting (43.0%), posting on social media (38.9%), convincing others to opt out (35.5%), joining an online group (35.1%), contacting a public official (27.9%), and attending a demonstration (16.5%). Fewer parents reported donating money, raising funds, penning a letter to the editor, or calling in to a radio or television show. With the exception of donating money, HOO OOPs were more likely to perform each activity than LOO OOPs. Whereas 51.5% of HOO OOPs reported attending a meeting, only 18.8% of LOO OOPs reported the same. Similarly striking differences emerged with regard to posting on social media (42.3%

v. 29.0%), convincing others to opt out (43.4% v. 13.0%), and attending a demonstration (20.9% v. 4.3%).

Table 5.2:

Percentage of Parents Reporting Each Type of Opt Out Activity

	All Districts	Danville (HOO)	Commonwealth (HOO)	Greenville (LOO)	Easton (LOO)	HOO Combined	LOO Combined
Attend Meeting	43.0%	43.1%	55.1%	15.0%	20.4%	51.5%	18.8%
Attend Demonstration	16.6%	8.6%	26.1%	10.0%	2.0%	20.9%	4.3%
Call in to Radio/TV	1.9%	1.7%	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%	0.0%
Contact Official	27.9%	22.4%	35.5%	25.0%	14.3%	31.6%	17.4%
Donate Money	6.8%	1.7%	8.7%	10.0%	6.1%	6.6%	7.2%
Joined List	35.1%	43.1%	36.2%	30.0%	24.5%	38.3%	26.1%
Post Social Media	38.9%	44.8%	41.3%	40.0%	24.5%	42.3%	29.0%
Raise Money	2.3%	0.0%	4.3%	0.0%	0.0%	3.1%	0.0%
Letter to Editor	4.2%	1.7%	5.8%	5.0%	2.0%	4.6%	2.9%
Convince Others	35.5%	41.4%	44.2%	15.0%	12.2%	43.4%	13.0%
Other	2.3%	1.7%	3.6%	0.0%	0.0%	3.1%	0.0%
Mean Activity Total	2.1	2.1	2.6	1.5	1.1	2.5	1.2

Notes: Parents were asked "Have you ever participated in any of the following activities in support of opting out? Select all that apply." Eleven options were available for selection: attend a meeting; attend a demonstration; call in to a radio/TV show; contact an official; donate money; join an online group; post on social media; raise money; write a letter to the editor; convince others to opt out; or other. Mean activity total is the mean number of activities reported by parents.

Not only did cross-district differences emerge in the *volume* of opt out activity, there were also differences in the composition of the action repertoires employed by OOPs. Table 5.3 and Figure 5.1 illustrate the composition of opt out activity by district and district type. They show each activity type as a percentage share of total opt out activity. Across all four districts, attending a meeting comprised 20.5% of all opt out activity, posting on social media comprised 18.5%, convincing others to participate comprised 16.9%, and attending a demonstration comprised 7.9%. But once again, differences emerged between OOPs in LOO and HOO districts. OOPs in LOO districts generally reported less visible and less confrontational forms of activity than OOPs in HOO districts. In LOO districts, low-visibility activity like making donations, joining list-servs, and posting on social media comprised over 50% of all reported opt out activity (6.0%, 21.7%, and 24.2% respectively). By comparison, these activities comprised only about a third of all opt out activity in HOO districts (2.7%, 15.3%, and 16.9% respectively). In the HOO districts, more visible, face-to-face forms of activity like attending a public meeting, participating a demonstration, and convincing others to opt out comprised a larger portion of the action repertoire.

Table 5.3:

Activity Type as Percentage of Total Activity (Percentage)

	All Districts	Danville (HOO)	Commonwealth (HOO)	Greenville (LOO)	Easton (LOO)	HOO Combined	LOO Combined
Attend Meeting	20.5%	20.5%	21.2%	10.0%	18.6%	20.6%	15.7%
Attend Demonstration	7.9%	4.1%	10.0%	6.7%	1.9%	8.4%	3.6%
Call in to Radio/TV	0.9%	0.8%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%
Contact Official	13.3%	10.7%	13.7%	16.7%	13.0%	12.7%	14.5%
Donate Money	3.2%	0.8%	3.3%	6.7%	5.6%	2.7%	6.0%
Joined List	16.7%	20.5%	13.9%	20.0%	22.3%	15.3%	21.7%
Post Social Media	18.5%	21.3%	15.9%	26.7%	22.3%	16.9%	24.2%
Raised Money	1.1%	0.0%	1.7%	0.0%	0.0%	1.2%	0.0%
Letter to Editor	2.0%	0.8%	2.2%	3.3%	1.9%	1.8%	2.4%
Convince Others	16.9%	19.7%	17.0%	10.0%	11.1%	17.3%	10.9%
Other	1.1%	0.8%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%	1.2%	0.0%

Figure 5.1: The Action Repertoires of OOPs, by District Type

Activity Type as a Percentage of Total Activity

Legend:
- Other
- Convince Others
- Letter to Editor
- Raised Money
- Post Social Media
- Joined List
- Donate Money
- Contact Official
- Call in to Radio/TV
- Attend Demonstration
- Attend Meeting

Activity	All	HOO	LOO
Other	1.1	1.2	
Convince Others	16.9	17.3	10.9
Letter to Editor	2.0	1.8	2.4
Raised Money	1.1	1.2	
Post Social Media	18.5	16.9	24.2
Joined List	16.7	15.3	21.7
Donate Money	3.2	2.7	6.0
Contact Official	13.3	12.7	14.5
Call in to Radio/TV	0.9	1.0	
Attend Demonstration	7.9	8.4	3.6
Attend Meeting	20.5	20.6	15.7

Perceptions of District Support for Opting Out

The results just reported suggest that there were noticeable differences in the volume and tactics of opt out activism across districts. Parents in HOO districts witnessed much more activity—and much more *face-to-face* activity—on the issue than parents in LOO districts. However, parents are not the only actors in the political opportunity context. There are also educators, district officials, and the institutional rules and policies established by those individuals. How supportive are *they* of opting out?

On the survey, parents were asked if they felt the teachers, school board, superintendent, and teachers union in their district supported the right of parents to opt out. They were also asked if the district had communicated clear policies to parents regarding their right to opt out. It was hypothesized that parents in HOO districts would perceive greater institutional support for opting out than parents in LOO districts—something which might in turn translate to higher rates and more visible forms of activism.

This prediction was borne out dramatically in the data as enormous differences emerged between the perceptions of HOO parents and LOO parents. Whether asked about their teachers, school board, superintendent, or teachers union, huge majorities of HOO parents reported that the right to opt out was supported in their district. In the Commonwealth School District, for example, approximately nine out of ten parents felt that the teachers (89.3%), school board (92.5%), and superintendent (95.6%) supported the right to opt out. 84.9% also felt that the district had communicated clear policies regarding the right to opt out. In contrast, fewer parents in the Easton School District felt that the teachers (52.4%), school board (31.0%), and superintendent (29.0%) supported the right to opt out, and less than a third of parents (31.0%)

indicated that the district had communicated clear opt out policies to them (p=0.000).

Furthermore, the total support scores for Danville (3.1) and Commonwealth (4.4) were

significantly higher than the total support scores for Greenville (1.5) and Easton (1.8) (p=0.000).

Table 5.4:

Percentage of Parents Reporting Each Type of Opt Out Support, by District and District Type

	Danville (HOO)	Commonwealth (HOO)	Greenville (LOO)	Easton (LOO)	LOO Combined	HOO Combined
Teachers	77.8%	89.3%	41.7%	52.4%	48.1%	85.7%
School Board	68.1%	92.5%	26.0%	31.0%	29.0%	84.8%
Superintendent	61.1%	95.6%	21.9%	29.0%	26.1%	84.8%
Teachers Union	56.9%	80.5%	25.0%	40.0%	34.0%	73.2%
Clear Policies	47.2%	84.9%	39.6%	31.0%	34.4%	73.2%
Total Support Score	3.1	4.4	1.5	1.8	1.7	4.0

Notes: Parents were asked four versions of this question: "The [Actor] in my district is supportive of the right of parents to opt out of standardized testing—Agree/Disagree/Don't Know." The percentages above are the percentage of parents who selected "agree." The total support score is the average number of times parents selected "agree" across the five questions.

Moreover, perceptions of institutional support for opting out did not appear confined to

OOPs. It could be suggested that perhaps the differences between HOO and LOO districts are

due to OOPs attributing institutional support for their activism in order to justify their behavior

after the fact. When examining the data by parent opt out status, little support was found for this

hypothesis. Outside of Danville, OOPs appeared no more or less likely to report institutional

support for opting out than NOOPs (Table 5.5 below). Perceptions of district support therefore

did not appear driven by the cognitive biases of OOPs. Rather, the two HOO districts exhibited

political opportunity contexts that were definitively more supportive of opting out than in the two

LOO districts.

Table 5.5:

Mean District Support Scores, by Opt Out Status

	OOPs	NOOPs	p value
Danville (HOO)	3.5	2.1	0.003
Commonwealth (HOO)	4.4	4.4	0.891
Greenville (LOO)	1.8	1.5	0.540
Easton (LOO)	2.0	1.8	0.530

In conclusion, then, the two HOO districts exhibited environmental conditions that supported the growth of opt out activism while the two LOO districts exhibited environmental conditions that restricted it. Yet, it is not clear how this support or restraint was demonstrated to parents. Nor is it clear which other environmental factors, if any, might have promoted opt out activism. To probe this subject, I now turn to my qualitative data—particularly my parent focus groups, interviews with district officials, and collection of documents—to provide an in-depth look at the features of the political opportunity contexts in Danville (HOO), Commonwealth (HOO), and Easton (LOO) that appeared to support opt out activism or repress it.

The Opt Out Opportunity Context of Danville

Danville is a quiet rural community tucked amid the gentle, rolling hills of upstate New York. Approximately 900 students reside in the district, which spans 186 square miles and reaches into the periphery of Adirondack Park. There is one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school in Danville—all of which are connected in one large building complex that sits atop a hill just north of the town, itself a former felt manufacturing village that in the 19th century was home to the first kindergarten in New York. The residents of Danville are almost all white, protestant, and lower class, many of them having ancestral roots in the district

that span multiple generations. They are universally polite, respectful, and genial—even to outsiders like myself. At first blush, Danville, with its stereotypical small-town ethos, is not a place where one would expect to see a great deal of political protest and activism. Yet in one recent school year, Danville had among the highest district opt out rates in New York, and the *Utica Observer-Dispatch* even dubbed the district the "state capital of opting out." As I began unpacking the question of why Danville has had such high rates of opt out activism, three features of the district's opportunity context quickly stood out: the district's dense social network ties; the neutral and accommodating response of district leaders to the opt out movement; and the district's deep-seated culture of openness, honesty, and transparency in relations with the community.

A Close-Knit Community

When asked why they felt opt out rates were so prodigious in Danville, parents and district leaders offered a consistent explanation: The close-knit nature of their community, which makes it easy for potential activists to mobilize friends, accumulate allies, and amplify the power of bandwagon effects. "We're tight," said one board member, and "parents communicate well with each other." "Everybody knows everybody. We all know everybody's children…and we take care of each other," said another. What is more, the leader of the opt out movement in Danville is a lifelong resident of the district, having been valedictorian of the high school twenty-five years ago. Given how socially embedded she is in the community, she experienced little difficulty finding a receptive audience for her activism among her friends and neighbors, who in turn spoke to their own friends and neighbors about it, and so forth. Indeed, the closeness of this

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community was evident in countless interactions I had with people during my visit—whether I was eating at the local diner (where customers casually walk behind the bar to pour their own coffee), speaking with the superintendent (who on her own volition bought donuts, cookies, and coffee for my parent focus groups), or facilitating the parent focus groups (where every parent already knew every other parent, and the introductions I had planned were only for my own benefit).

Not only is Danville a close-knit community, but the school itself serves as the physical hub of the community, providing facilities and services for community members that more urbanized areas would provide elsewhere. "We are a 186 square miles and we cover multiple townships, villages, even two different counties," explained the superintendent, Mrs. Morrison,

> It's just a huge space. It is very sparsely populated. And there is absolutely nothing else that brings people together than the school. It's like the hub of the community. People are here at six o'clock in the morning to start working out in the weight room. And they're here until 10 o'clock at night after the basketball game is done, and they're here on Saturdays and Sundays for athletics, and for Girl Scout activities. It is the place where people congregate all the time.

On the Saturday I visited to conduct my focus groups, there was a football game scheduled for that afternoon, and when I asked about attendance at the games, Mrs. Morrison chuckled and said, "Everybody comes. It's too many people, really."

The centrality of the school and the closeness of the community have also combined to produce tight networks between parents and teachers—networks that in turn foster deep feelings of pride and emotional attachment to Danville schools. When asked why parents were opting out in such high numbers in her district, Morrison said she believed many parents were indignant at the low accountability rating their school had recently received ("needing improvement"), and they were hostile to the idea that some outside organization could judge their community better

than they could: "They're offended [by the rating] because they like the school, they think the school is doing well by their children, and they don't like that an outside agency is making determinations based on test scores. They think that it's so much more than just a test score." She went on to note that parents are so close with teachers that they are treated like family members. Teachers and parents regularly email and text one another, and teachers are frequently spotted on campus meeting with parents long after school hours are over. "It's like a little family, I guess," Morrison said. "And [you know] the old saying, 'Nobody says anything bad about your mother,' right? You just can't say anything bad about your mother. [The parents] really take issue with things being said about [their teachers] who they feel are almost like family members." Indeed, in my discussions with Danville parents I learned that one primary motivation of the opt out movement there is a desire to defend the integrity of local educators, whom the parents roundly trust and love.

Neutral Accommodation of OOPs

A second factor that seemed to spur opt out activism in Danville was the response of district leaders to the opt out movement, which can be fairly characterized as one of neutral accommodation. All five district elites I interviewed stated that they personally supported the right of parents to opt out, although they were all quick to qualify that they had taken great pains to remain *neutral* on the issue in their discussions with parents. From the very beginning, district leaders had adopted the stance that the decision to opt out was the parents' and the parents' alone. For example, when asked about her personal views on the opt out movement, the superintendent evaded a direct answer:

> Personally speaking, I support parents. I think the parents should be able to make certain decisions. Not all decisions, of course, but I think that, if they feel passionately about something, and they've researched it, and they know what they're talking about, and they understand it, I need to honor their ideas as a parent about what's appropriate for their child. And I try to be very neutral about it. When they'd ask me, "Well, what do you think about opting out?" I said, "I'm not gonna tell you what I think about opting out, because you're making a decision based on what you think. I don't want you to make a decision based on what I think. You make that decision for yourself and your children."

Teachers likewise were instructed to remain neutral in any discussions with parents so that they would not bias parents one way or the other:

> [We] basically told [the teachers] that it is the parents who make the decision and we're gonna be neutral. We're not going to ever express our opinion to the parents about what we think. We're gonna remain neutral. We'll answer questions truthfully if they ask us questions that we can answer in a concrete manner without inserting our opinion. But in no way, were they to encourage students to opt out. In no way, were they to encourage students to opt in. They were not to have those conversations with kids at all because it's not a child making the determination. It's the parent.

The presence of this district-wide commitment to neutrality was confirmed by parents, who reported that they never felt pressured one way or the other on this issue. In fact, one of the focus group OOPs was Mrs. Morrison's daughter, and she expressed exasperation over her inability to extract her mother's opt out position even when they were just having "mother-daughter conversations."

The neutral yet accommodating posture of the district was also manifested in the test day protocols that district leaders created to deal with the opt outs. Compared to other districts, Danville tried "very, very carefully" to create test day protocols that would not pressure parents or students. To this day, parents wishing to opt out in Danville follow a simple, self-initiated process. They send a letter to the superintendent indicating that they would like to opt out their child. In most cases, this letter is simply a brief form letter that has been circulated by the local

opt out organization on social media, although a few parents each year do take the opportunity to write more in-depth explanations for their decision. After receiving the letters, the superintendent creates a spreadsheet of the students who are opting out, noting their names, grade levels, and which tests (ELA and/or Math) they are refusing. The spreadsheet is then shared with the building principals who come up with schedules for the students. On test day, the children who are not opting out are assigned to classrooms where they can take the test while the students who are opting out are grouped in other classrooms where they complete an interdisciplinary learning activity that reviews concepts taught throughout the year. The teachers are intentional, however, in ensuring that no new material is taught during this time so that no students fall behind because of their decision. As the superintendent described it, "It [isn't] gonna be something like the kids who opt out get to see a movie." Both sets of students thus participate in some form of cumulative learning activity.

Danville's accommodation of the opt out movement has also gone beyond test day policies. On more than one occasion, district leadership has allowed opt out groups to use school facilities for meetings, including the first opt out information session in 2014 that was attended by hundreds of parents. Prior to that first meeting, the lead opt out organizer had approached the superintendent and requested to conduct a public forum about standardized testing, the Common Core, and opting out in the school's auditorium. Given the district's commitment to neutrality, as well as the school's importance as a local community center, the superintendent and school board approved the meeting without any qualms. As one board member said, "We let any group use the facilities because once you ban one group you gotta ban 'em all. You can't just pick and choose." What is more, the early opt out pioneers felt so comfortable with district leadership that

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they even invited the superintendent and school board members to attend the forum, although

only one board member I spoke to reported attending.[14]

In my own discussions with parents, parents roundly agreed that the district had been

extremely accommodating and neutral on this issue. One illustrative focus group exchange went

like this:

> Interviewer: So has [Danville] been receptive to the diverse reactions of parents on these [opt out] issues?
>
> Speaker 1: Absolutely.
>
> Speaker 2: Really neutral.
>
> Speaker 3: I was gonna say more neutral. They...
>
> Speaker 2: They've been very neutral and really...
>
> Speaker 3: They don't push one way, they don't push the other way. Nobody says anything.
>
> Speaker 4: It is what it is. If that's your choice, that's what we work with.
>
> Speaker 5: I can tell you—and I definitely am the anomaly here—I'm an out-of-district parent. My kids come from another district to come here. And I was concerned with opting out and the ramifications that the children would have in opting out, especially being an out-of-district student and not complying with the state. And I did approach [them] and they said, "We cannot tell you what to do, but nobody is going to be penalized for making a choice."
>
> Speaker 6: Not only we cannot tell you what to do, we will not.
>
> Speaker 3: And they won't. Cannot, will not.

Open and Transparent Leadership

While the decision to unblinkingly accommodate the opt out movement might seem odd

to an outsider, it in fact appeared entirely consonant with the leadership philosophy I perceived

in the district—a leadership philosophy which values above all else being open, accessible, and

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[14] Another board member reported attending an opt out forum in a neighboring district out of curiosity and seeing some Danville parents and teachers there.

responsive to community members. Indeed, Danville exhibits a unique and decades-old culture of free and open dialogue between educators and community members. The phrase "open door policy" was mentioned in three of my interviews with district elites, and Superintendent Morrison remarked that communication with parents is never limited to formal office meetings, but occurs almost daily at the supermarket, at football games, at the local diner, and on the phone.

To Danville's leaders, being open and accessible also means being candid, honest, and authentic in any dealings with their community. The response of district leaders to NYSED pressure to tamp down on opting out provides an example of how this leadership philosophy operated in practice to nurture and preserve opt out activism. Following the explosion of the opt out movement in 2015, all superintendents in the state received an "assessment toolkit" from NYSED which encouraged superintendents to undercut the opt out movement by organizing town hall discussions about testing with their local communities. The toolkit included a list of talking points that superintendents could use in those discussions with parents, addressing such questions as "Why is it important for my child to take this test?" (The answer: "Teachers need to understand how well students are progressing…Without widespread participation in the tests, school and district leaders cannot accurately provide the support and necessary resources to the students who need it."). It also included a letter superintendents could send to district teachers (Figure 5.2 below) which stated that "as educators we all have a responsibility to ensure that the greatest possible number of eligible students take the new state assessments."

Figure 5.2: NYSED Toolkit Sample Letter from Superintendent to Educators

SAM PLE
Superintendent Letter to Educators

Dear Colleagues:

In August, scores from the 2015 3-8 English Language Arts (ELA) and Math Tests were released. Overall, students across the state made slight progress, thanks in large part to the efforts of you and your colleagues. [INSERT DISTRICT SPECIFIC INFORMATION]

However, as you are already aware, many students did not participate in the 2015 tests. As educators, we all have a responsibility to ensure that the greatest possible number of eligible students take the state assessments. This school year, our district plans to work with our school community to communicate the value and importance of the exams in order to encourage participation in the 2016 tests. I invite you to take part in these conversations.

While this has been a period of transition for all of us here in [DISTRICT], tests have always served an important role in educating our students. The annual tests are just one of many indicators of performance for students and educators, but they do provide an objective measurement of progress. They indicate how our students are performing in the classroom and where they need additional support. Without widespread participation in tests, we can't accurately identify achievement gaps or make sure that all students receive the support they need to be successful. That is why it is crucial that we all work together to help parents and students understand why we test and encourage them to participate in this year's annual exams.

Both the State and our district are committed to improving our testing program so that the annual assessments are as short as possible, while still providing valuable feedback to teachers and parents about student progress. State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia has prioritized improving New York's testing program since coming on board this summer. In July, the commissioner announced a contract with a new test company, Questar Assessment. Under the new contract, nearly double the number of New York State teachers will be involved in developing future assessments. The new test vendor will also provide computer-based testing platforms that will eventually help reduce the need for stand-alone field tests and make test results available sooner.

The State has also taken steps to improve the 2016 tests. The ELA and math tests for all grades will be shorter. There will be fewer reading and writing passages on the ELA and a smaller number of multiple choice questions on the math.

In addition to working on improving the tests, the State is in the process of reviewing the current learning standards. An online survey has been launched, which allows respondents to provide feedback on any of the State's standards for prekindergarten through grade 12. The survey is available at http://www.nysed.gov/aimhighny. Feedback from the survey will help inform any changes and adjustments to the standards. Therefore, educator input is critical to this effort. Please take the time to respond to the survey. You have until Monday, November 30, to do so.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out to your school administrators.

Thank you for your continued service to our students. I look forward to seeing the wonderful teaching and learning that will happen in our classrooms this year.

Together for students,

Superintendent

After receiving the toolkit, Morrison said she simply rolled for eyes and tossed it aside. For one,

she did not believe many of the talking points to be true. It was not true, for example, that

teachers in her district used the test results to meaningfully inform instruction, and it would be an

outright lie to say that without the tests, teachers would lack a reliable understanding of student

performance. More than that, though, the toolkit, by putting words in her mouth, did not align

with her own commitment to being a transparent, honest, and authentic leader.

> Morrison: [NYSED] sent out, after the huge opt-outs the first year, they sent out a nifty little
> toolkit for us to use, with form letters to send out to parents, of all the good reasons why they
> should take the test, and all kinds of stuff. And it was very transparently awful. It was flick PR
> stuff that the parents would have looked at it and laughed, and probably, they would have seen
> right through what was trying to be attempted…
>
> Interviewer: Why did you choose not to use the recommendations that the state sent you?
>
> Morrison: Because I believe in being very authentic and honest with my parents. And how can I
> send something out that is so inauthentic? I just couldn't do it ethically. And some of the stuff that
> was in it, I just don't believe it to be true. The whole idea that, "We have to gather this data,
> because we need to know how your child is doing and how they compare, blah, blah, blah." And
> it's like, no, we have multiple measures that we're using that are far more authentic than those
> tests. I can't say that if I don't think it's true on a professional level.

Another board member, recalling a board discussion about the toolkit, likewise described her

own unwillingness to see it used in Danville:

> I could not stand up there in front of those people and say, "Oh no, this is the next best thing since
> sliced bread." I couldn't do it. I think partly because I did have three kids of my own, my mother
> was a teacher, I've been teaching 33 [years]. I understand the value of good classroom instruction,
> so I couldn't stand up there and say, "No, you're all wrong." I couldn't do it.

Furthermore, district leaders were adamant that their first responsibility was to the

parents in the district, not their superiors at the State Education Department. After all, the parents

had shown unflagging support to the school system over the years. Reflecting on the fact that the

community had not voted down a single school budget request in over two decades, one board member remarked, "Our community supports the school. And so, when the community comes out and is vocal on something, we as a school [system] then have to listen to what they say because they've been so supportive of us." As another board member said, this had just as much to do with democracy as it did with professionalism:

> We didn't know what was going to happen, if the state [was going] to cut our funding [because of our opt out rates like they threatened]. [But], let's say they did. We then could go back to our parents who are our taxpayers and say, "We supported you, you saw what happened, now you go to the state." I couldn't believe that the state was actually going to threaten financial repercussions because the taxpayer was going to voice their concern…Because this is a democracy, isn't it? Right or no? This is not Mosul. This is not Iran! I thought this was the United States. And maybe our parents made the completely wrong decision hypothetically. Let's say they made the complete wrong decision, but it was their choice to do so.

The influence of the district's commitment to honest and authentic leadership was compounded by the fact that all of the district leaders I spoke to appeared personally skeptical of standardized testing, the Common Core, and recent teacher evaluation reforms. While I did not ask district leaders directly about their personal views on these issues, in most interviews, their views emerged in the general flow of conversation. Overall, it was clear that district leaders sympathized with the issue preferences of their parents. As noted above, the superintendent refused to send out the NYSED form letter because she disagreed with its argument that the standardized tests provided clear, objective, and superior evidence of student learning. One board member likewise expressed disappointment about how long teacher evaluations took and suggested that the teacher evaluation rubric they used "doesn't prove anything." And another board member condemned the Common Core as totally unnecessary:

> And I wanna ask this. Put this in your article: How did we get to the moon without Common Core? Right? We got there. How did we get there without Common Core? 'Cause this was the '50s

and '60s. We didn't have Common Core…And I'm not against Common Core, don't get me wrong. We have more innovation, we have more copyrights, we have more trademarks in our country than any other country. And maybe we don't have the highest math scores, and maybe we don't have the highest science scores as other countries, as China and Japan, maybe we don't, but do they have the creativity side that we have? I don't know. I don't think so.

Thus, not only were district leaders publicly neutral in their position on opting out, but they also appeared, due to their leadership philosophy and personal issue preferences, unequipped and unwilling to mount any sincere defense of state reforms once these reforms fell under siege by parents. Their silence likely emboldened opt out parents beyond what would have occurred in a more contested discursive space.

The Opt Out Opportunity Context of Commonwealth

Despite the shared experience of having extremely high opt out rates, Danville and Commonwealth could not be more different in terms of their geography and culture. Commonwealth is a geographically compact, densely populated, multi-ethnic suburban district home to 3800 students who collectively attend four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The residents of Commonwealth are proud Long Islanders who, 60 miles from the bustle of Midtown Manhattan, appear to conduct their lives at a frenetic and aggressive pace. Like Danville, Commonwealth is described by some as a "very close community" in which parents regularly talk to and educate one another about school happenings.   Said one board member, "There's not a bunch of little groups that don't talk to each other. Everybody is active with each other. When we have homecoming football games, everybody's out there. Everybody's talking. Everybody's communicating. Everybody knows somebody that knows somebody else. Things really spread." The closeness of Commonwealth is not small-town, WASPy coziness of

Danville, but rather the brash intimacy of New York City expats who are unafraid to speak their mind and do so as profanely and colorfully as they please.

My examination of the opportunity context in the Commonwealth revealed some striking similarities as well as some important differences compared to Danville. Like in Danville, the opt out movement in Commonwealth appeared to benefit from the district's dense social network ties as well as the district leadership's commitment to comfortably accommodate the wishes of opt out parents. Unlike in Danville, though, the opt out movement in Commonwealth has received steadfast rhetorical encouragement from district leaders, who have relentlessly challenged the authority and credibility of state-level education policymakers over the years. In this way, district elites in Commonwealth have actively legitimized the concerns of OOPs, framed the issues in ways that mobilize parents, and constructed a discursive space that promotes opt out activism.

Accommodation of the Opt Out Movement

Like in Danville, district leaders in Commonwealth universally reported that they and their teachers are "neutral" on the opt out issue. All seven board members recognize the right of parents to opt out, with one board member explaining, "We're not one of those districts that, if you send in a letter that you're gonna refuse [the tests], we're gonna try to embarrass you into getting your kids to take the tests." Rather, parents are treated with the same respect regardless of their stance, and the district accommodates everyone's wishes equally. For the most part, parents confirmed that they did not feel any pressure from district leaders and teachers. One OOP stated that in Commonwealth "people have that freedom to have that choice, and I think

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that helps put people at ease, knowing that they can make a decision without having to worry about ridicule because of the decision they made." NOOPs also generally shared this view, although one NOOP did express anger in our focus group that his daughter had been directly asked to opt out by her teacher—a clear violation of district policies. This parent immediately contacted the superintendent who then addressed the issue with the teacher. By all reports, that teacher has stopped recruiting her students.

Whereas district officials in Danville were frustratingly coy in publicly revealing their personal views on the opt out movement, school board members in Commonwealth exhibited no qualms in divulging their opinions on the matter if asked by parents—leaving me to doubt just how "neutral" they actually were. All four board members I spoke to stated they were personally very supportive of the opt out movement and had even participated in opt out activities. The two board members who had test-age children further told me they annually opt out their own children—something that in a close-knit community would almost certainly attract the notice of parents. Nevertheless, all four board members sincerely believed that because they have never explicitly told parents to opt out (or not opt out) and because they always discuss the opt out decision in terms of their *own* children, they cannot be said to be anything less than neutral. Asserted one board member:

> We don't advocate for it…We don't necessarily say, "You shouldn't let your kids take the test," but I [myself] will say "I didn't let me kids take the test and I am not going to let my kids take the test and these are the reasons why. Now it's up to you to make the decision [for your own child]."

It did not seem to occur to any board member that this rhetorical strategy might subtly pressure parents to opt out, especially given their positions of authority within the district.

This extremely receptive opt out stance was also manifest in the test-day protocols employed in the district. Whereas parents in Danville have to initiate the opt out process themselves, in Commonwealth, the district proactively solicits a decision from parents directly. Each Fall, all parents receive a "parent decision form" in the mail and at Back-To-School Nights where they are required to indicate their opt out decision (Figure 5.3 below). This parent decision form is also posted on the district homepage for easy access. After the forms are returned, district leadership collaborates with school administrators to locate appropriate classroom space for students. On test day, the students taking the test are sequestered in testing rooms where they take the exams, and the students opting out are placed in other classrooms where they spend their time in a study hall setting. Often, students spend this time reading books, doing make-up work, receiving extra help, and reviewing earlier material. Although unstructured, district leaders are adamant that this is not "goof off time," so that no group of students feels punished. The superintendent himself has also made efforts to reassure students that, regardless of their situation, they are not being stigmatized. During the first few years of opting out, he visited every classroom on test day, telling the students who were taking the test that he was "proud of them" before moving on to the opt out students and telling them the exact same thing.

Figure 5.3: Commonwealth Parent Decision Form

PARENTAL DECISION FORM

Dear Parent or Guardian:

     In order to properly accommodate students during the upcoming State Assessments, we are requesting that you indicate your intent for your child's participation. Please mark the appropriate spaces below by checking all that apply, complete the bottom of the form, and return it to your child's classroom teacher or middle school homeroom teacher or your principal.

Grades 3-8

ELA

_____ I would like my child **to** participate in the NYS English Language Arts Assessment.

_____ I would like my child **not to** participate in the NYS English Language Arts Assessment.

MATH

_____ I would like my child **to** participate in the NYS Mathematics Assessment.

_____ I would like my child **not to** participate in the NYS Mathematics Assessment.

FIELD TESTS

_____ I would like my child **to** participate in any field test assessment provided by the State Education Department.

_____ I would like my child **not to** participate in any field test assessment provided by the State Education Department.

Only for Grades 4 & 8 (in addition to choices above)

SCIENCE

_____ I would like my child **to** participate in the NYS Science Assessment.

_____ I would like my child **not to** participate in the NYS Science Assessment.

     Students who will not be participating in an assessment will be provided an alternate setting during the course of assessment administration. Thank you in advance for your assistance with this matter.

Name of Student: _____ Grade: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Superintendent Leadership

A second important factor that has promoted opt out activism in the district—and perhaps the most important one—is the leadership of the superintendent, Dr. Valvano, who has actively legitimized the concerns of opt out parents and personally modeled the sort of activist, assertive, and defiant citizenship upon which grassroots social movement protest flourishes. As the following focus group exchange illustrates, parents felt the number one reason the opt out movement was so strong in their community was the leadership of their superintendent:

Interviewer: Why do you think the opt-out rates in [Commonwealth] have been so high? Even just compared to neighboring districts?

Speaker 1: Who wants to say it?

Speaker 2: Leadership.

Speaker 3: Because we have a superintendent and a Board of Education that has not backed down…

Speaker 1: [They're] very outspoken and not in the sense that like, "You parents should all do this. You should all do what we do," but working to educate parents so that they understand the issues. Multiple meetings all over the place, really trying to educate people so that they understand why we're saying, "Well, I'm opting my kids out. You go make your own decision, but this is why I'm doing it." And I think when you have that from the top, especially somebody like [Dr. Valvano], who is so charming and...

Speaker 4: He's a community member so he has that genuine feel.

Speaker 1: He's a teacher.

Speaker 5: Right.

Speaker 4: Very honest. He's an educator.

Speaker 3: Very honest. And people trust him.

Indeed, Dr. Valvano was credited with establishing a culture of openness, accessibility, and trust that has made parents comfortable opting out and expressing themselves in general. Parents roundly described their superintendent as "frank," "candid," "open," "blunt spoken,"

"caring," and "understanding" and they underscored the constant communication he has with parents through weekly phone calls, office hours, and daily interactions in the community. One parent marveled,

> When I moved in to this district, and [Dr. Valvano] became the superintendent, I was amazed at the fact that he called each week and leaves a little robo message. He's got office hours. You could go and talk to the superintendent anytime you want, and just have coffee and chat with him. The district I used to work in, it's like trying to get in to the see the Wizard of Oz if you wanna talk to the superintendent! It really fosters a sense of community in this area because they know that even if [Dr. Valvano] is not gonna give them the answer they wanna hear, he's there to hear them out and see what he can do to work with them.

My discussions with Dr. Valvano quickly established that he is indeed an extraordinarily candid, accessible, and outspoken individual. He speaks with a baritone Brooklyn accent, laces his conversations with light-hearted profanity, and has a rare ability to employ personal anecdotes to draw in an audience and illustrate key points.[15] He is a highly visible presence in the community, living just a block away from the high school and having sent his own children through the district schools. When asked about his approach to being a superintendent, Valvano said the most important thing any superintendent can do is listen, be accessible, and deal earnestly with people—virtues he learned through his own background as a musician (he has a BFA from Columbia) as well as through an early career stint in private industry.

> Listening is the biggest thing I have to do here. People wanna be heard. And [the second thing is]…when you make a mistake, admit it. No one's gonna kill you. It's when you start tap-dancing, it's when you start coming up with a spin, [that things get out of hand]. So I don't spin things. Every week I call them up on Sunday, and every year I have open office hours at night…Just come in, no appointment necessary because people can't leave work normally to come in to complain about something.

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[15] In one public speech on Youtube, Valvano compared the arbitrary shifting of cut scores to children's play: "When I was a kid—I grew up in Flatbush—we played what was called stickball. And depending on how many people we had, we made up the rules that day. I don't know if [the Commissioner of Education] ever played stickball, but those [changes to the passing scores] are stickball rules."

A pianist and former music teacher, Valvano further employed the analogy of a music conductor to explain his leadership style: "The conductor can't play as well as any of those people sitting in front of him. His job is to get them to play well together and that's my job as a superintendent. I'm not the soloist. I'm the conductor. And I want people to be comfortable making mistakes and improvising."

Not only does Valvano view listening as an important leadership trait, but he further believes it is his duty to publicly advocate for his parents when policymakers at the state level are unwilling to do so. He lamented that after the opt out movement broke out, the state legislators in his district "ran for the hills" and did not meet with parents even though they repeatedly reached out and rallied outside their offices. In one colorful exchange with a state senator, Valvano said he made clear his intention to fill the representation void his parents were experiencing: "One [state senator] used very foul language with me [about the opt out movement] and I responded in kind. He said, 'What the eff are you doing?' and I said, 'I'll tell you what the eff I am doing. I'm listening to your constituents, and you better get in front of this. They need to be heard!'" Moreover, Valvano believed that parents had become so used to having accessible and responsive leadership at the district level that they now felt justified in demanding the same accessibility and responsiveness from their elected legislators. "They are not used to being neglected," explained Valvano, "If I pulled that crap in my district [not listening to parents], they'd drag me out in to the middle of the street and have cars run me over. And I would deserve it!"

In the process of advocating for his parents, Valvano has exhibited no reluctance to publicly challenging state policymakers when he feels they are wrong. Two instances in particular illustrate this tendency. The first was his publication of a viral open letter to state

legislators condemning recent TBA reforms. During the 2012-2013 school year, New York

shifted to the Common Core standards, and the state assessments were revised to reflect the new

curriculum. Valvano reported that in December 2012, he received a Dear Superintendent email

from Commissioner King informing them that NYSED only expected around a third of students

to pass the new Common Core tests in the Spring. In January, Valvano received a follow-up

memo about the Common Core from Deputy Commission of Education Ken Slentz (2013), who

repeated King's prediction:

> For the 2011 school year, only 30% and 35% of New York's Grade 8 students scored proficient on the NAEP math and reading [exams], respectively…Because the new [Common Core] tests are designed to determine whether students are meeting a higher performance standard, we expect that fewer students will perform at or above grade-level Common Core expectations (i.e., proficiency) than was the case with prior–year State tests. It is likely that the statewide percentage of students at or above grade level expectations on the new tests will generally be consistent with student performance on the…NAEP scores described above.[16]

Valvano said he felt incredulous after reading the memo, wondering how anyone could possibly

know, so far in advance and with that level of precision ("30% to 35%"), how many students

would pass. "If you're that good, go buy a lotto ticket," he joked. He immediately dismissed the

memo and put it out of his mind.

That August, however, King announced that, as predicted, only a third of students had

passed the test, including only 35% of Commonwealth students. Upon hearing the news at a

regional superintendents meeting, "something snapped in [Valvano's] head." Overcome by

confusion and frustration, he stopped paying attention to the meeting and began manically

writing a letter to his representatives—writing and writing and writing until late in the evening.

The next day, he instructed his secretary to put the letter in the mail and post it on the website so

that parents could read it. The letter forcefully condemned the absurdity of state education

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[16] This memo remains publicly available online and is quoted from the source directly.

policymaking, arguing that the children of his district were being directly attacked by these nonsensical policies.

> *Dear Senator:*
>
> *Today the State Education Department released test scores for grades 3-8 ELA and Math tests administered last April. Our scores as well as the scores of students across the State have dropped significantly—30 to 35 points.*
>
> *We've all heard the expression: "If it sounds too good to be trust—IT IS!" I believe the converse is also correct: "If it sounds too BAD to be true—IT'S NOT!" And so it is with the test scores. They are not true. They are not connected to student learning in any way…*
>
> *In the 2009-2010 school year, about 90% of our [district] students were proficient in ELA and Math. During the summer of 2010, we woke up to learn that the passing scores had been changed retroactively…After the change, about 65% were proficient. Today, about 35% are proficient…*
>
> *This is hurtful to our children…If you believe [this], then please help us. We are being systematically deprived of our fundamental right as Americans to appeal. No one is listening!*
>
> *If not, then I request that on behalf of our residents—your constituents—you initiate proceedings to have me removed as Superintendent. IF this assessment is truly valid, then during my tenure as Superintendent, our students went from about 90% proficient to about 30% proficient. At best this is gross negligence. At worst, this is willful malpractice.*

Valvano never expected many people to read his letter, but after a district parent reposted his letter on Facebook, it went viral. Within a matter of hours, Valvano had become a sensation, and he was inundated with phone calls and emails from parents not just on Long Island, but across the United States—parents who claimed that he was "speaking on their behalf." Online media outlets across the US hailed him as a "hero superintendent" and "the most courageous superintendent in America" and people everywhere clamored for him to make public

appearances at education rallies and events. Valvano addressed the shocking development in his

weekly robocall with parents, doubling down on his critiques and rallying them to defend their

children.

> This past week, the state education department released the test scores that for the tests that our third through eighth graders took last April. And as they predicted, about 30% of students across New York State passed these tests. Another way to say this is that 70% of students *failed* these tests…When that happened, I felt you needed to get some word from me about what my position is on this. I've posted a couple letters on the website…My position on this is pretty simple: the implementation and the testing associated with the Common Core is *hurting our children*. I think that's clear enough. I don't know how I can possibly tell our kids "70% of you are failures" and because these tests are tied to college completion "70% of you probably aren't college material." That hurts kids. That message is *wrong*. (Commonwealth Robocall, 2013).

Immediately after the letter went viral, Valvano was approached by a Commonwealth board

member who floated the idea of hosting a rally to draw continued public attention to the

problems highlighted in his letter. He readily agreed, and on the following Saturday, a rally was

held at the high school football field attended by 2500 people, including all members of district

leadership. (Valvano in his robocall had encouraged parents to attend the rally and "make our

voices heard"). Speakers one after the other took the stage to rail against the Common Core,

standardized tests, and teacher evaluation reforms, issuing the demand that policymakers "stop it,

fix it, or scrap it"—a phrase that became the slogan of the opt out movement in Commonwealth.

Valvano followed up this rally by accepting invitations to speak at other forums and opt out

rallies across Long Island and even as far north as Westchester—approximately 40 events per

year, he estimated. While he never explicitly called for parents to opt out in any of his speeches

(something confirmed by archived video footage and media coverage of the events), his presence

at these events, and the charismatic critiques he launched against state reforms, had the effect of

legitimizing the opt out movement in the districts he visited. In one video-recorded speech, for

instance, he spoke from a podium in front of a banner emblazoned with the word "REFUSE" and declared the failure-focused testing system "abusive."

The public letter, rally, and speaking tour of the superintendent was not the only high-profile example of defiance set by Commonwealth leadership. Following the high opt out rates of the 2014 school year, in which over 80% of parents opted out, the school board, with the support of the superintendent, scheduled a public discussion about whether or not the board should consider a proposal to refuse to administer the tests that spring. When NYSED got whiff of the proposed meeting, it threatened to remove the superintendent and all seven board members if the district proceeded with the discussion. After consulting with its legal counsel, district leadership decided to table the discussion, but by this time the damage was done. The state's gag order only inflamed parents further, with many of them deeming it an affront to their basic democratic rights of expression and deliberation. As one board remember recalled, "Not just our community but communities all over Long Island were like, 'Wait a minute. You can't tell them what they can talk about!'"

In challenging state authority, Valvano and the Board of Education did not limit their critiques to the effectiveness of state policies. They also belied a deep-seated distrust of state education policymakers—reflecting, reinforcing, and legitimizing the distrust parents in their district already felt. Like many parents, several Commonwealth officials I spoke to criticized the fact that so few education policymakers in New York had meaningful public school experience, with John King emerging as a particularly noxious symbol. In response to a question about the time he first became aware of the opt out movement, one board member meandered into an attack on King:

> The original [movement] was about the Common Core…If my memory serves me correctly, there wasn't much presence from educators in the public education sector [in the creation of the Common Core]. In fact…Commissioner King himself, his exposure and experience in a public school classroom, if I'm not mistaken, is that he may have actually gone to school in one…I don't believe he ever taught in one. I don't believe he sent his children to one…That's crazy, right?...If you're gonna do anything for any trade, and you don't include people who actually work in that trade, [it's a mistake]. If they were gonna do some sort of a initiative around plumbing, I as a marketing guy don't add much to the table other than that I know how to turn on a faucet. Right? So you gotta have people who understand and are involved least be key stakeholders in it.

Second, the distrust of state leaders appeared to have more fundamental ties to a recession-era decision to cut state education funding that had never been restored. In 2009, the State of New York was faced with a severe budget deficit and the Patterson Administration pushed through legislation known as the Gap Elimination Act, which allowed the state government to borrow from the state's education fund to fill the budget deficit. Over the next four years, the state borrowed a total of $7.4 billion which had previously been pledged to school districts. School districts on Long Island were hit especially hard (to the tune of $1.2 billion), and the Commonwealth school district had suffered losses of around $20 million. While state officials time and again promised to pay the money back in the future, no money has yet been repaid. The anger district leaders continue to feel about this loss of funds was evident in my interviews, with some district leaders going so far as to say that the state had "stolen" from them. One board member argued that the Gap Elimination Act, which predated the Common Core, had planted the seeds of public distrust which ultimately blossomed in the opt out movement:

> They borrowed money from the state education fund over several years…And they always used the term "borrowed." Now, if you work out what that reduction in state aid from state education, for [Commonwealth] alone, it worked out to be north of $20 million over those six years. So that's some serious scarola for the community to have to now offset with their local tax dollars. Now, you borrow that money for six years, you've not paid a dime back. I don't know a lot, but if I lent my neighbor a rake six years ago because he asked to borrow it, he didn't borrow it, he *stole* it. So as far as I'm concerned, and I think as far as many residents are concerned based on conversations I've had with them, Albany didn't borrow this money from public education, they *stole* it. They misrepresented it as if they were borrowing it. So now you've got this underlying foundation of a lack of trust in what's going on in Albany, and then the state starts pushing this education agenda…

This same board member, whenever he attends a meeting with state policymakers where new policies are announced, brings up the money and promises the district will follow the new policies "as soon as you give us our $20 million back."

Nobody appeared more distrustful of state leadership than Dr. Valvano, however, who appeared as convinced as many district parents that state-level policymakers are mostly dishonest and corrupt. In his interview with me, he bemoaned that Governor Cuomo "receives a tremendous amount of support from the charter industry," and he expressed his personal belief that the state was intentionally peddling a false narrative of educational failure so that private alternatives like vouchers and charters would become more attractive:

> At the bottom of it all, is a desire to shake confidence in public education, so that privatization [and] for-profit becomes the solution…We manufactured the crisis. [The state has] an intent. Think about the weapons of mass destruction [in Iraq]…It's the same scenario with public education….It's hideous lying….[They] starve us for funds, create tests that are engineered to have massive number of students fail…[and] finagle the results to reach the conclusion that [they] planned on all along.

Beyond issues of corruption, Valvano also expressed frustration about the little "white lies" his district had been told by state officials over the years, including the empty threat that districts with high opt out rates would be punished:

> [Parents] were concerned at first when they opted out because the state said, "Well you must have 95% participation or the school will be labelled as a failing school. That's going to affect the teachers. That's gonna affect the community." That was a lie. I haven't had 95% participation since the test started. And, statewide, something like 90% of the districts in the state don't have 95% participation. Are they gonna close all the schools? So they lied. Now, the first rule of lying is: If you're gonna lie, lie about things you're probably not gonna get caught in. Every second grader knows that. Kids know that. I was high school principal for eight years. They were masters. They knew when to lie and when not to lie. And you certainly almost never lied about something that was really important. Kids don't. They do. But when you get that over and over and over again, then that reinforces to the parents, "They can't be trusted about anything. They don't care about my kid." That was the real issue [with opt out parents].

Beyond being distrustful, however, it is also clear from my discussions and reviews of archival material that Valvano is motivated by a profound love of messy, participatory democracy, and in many ways, he views parent engagement as critical to not just the fulfillment of his professional duties, but the realization of the American democratic ideal. While riding the lecture circuit, a recurring theme of his speeches was the declaration that "you get the government you deserve." As he said in one statement, parents needed to be active and engaged in their local districts: "You get the school board you deserve. You get the superintendent you deserve. You have the power to vote them out, and if you don't, sorry, you lose your bitching rights." He further decried superintendents who adopt closed-door policies in dealing with parents and expressed his own belief that only by engaging parents, including the most difficult ones, leaders are able to win the trust and support of their parents:

> I forget the guy that said this: "Americans have an almost divine right to complain." It's part of our DNA. It's part of who we are. So why do you wanna squash that? It's messier doing it this way. It takes more time doing it this way. But it's much better this way. It lowers the temperature. It adds credibility.

Thus, the opt out movement in Commonwealth appeared to benefit from not only the tightness of the community and the district's willingness to accommodate the desires of opt out parents, but also the rhetorical assistance and moral authority that district officials lent to the movement. In Commonwealth, unlike in Danville and (as we shall see) unlike in Easton, the opt out movement was actively legitimized and reinforced by district leaders who themselves were movement participants and helped frame education discussions in ways that promoted greater mobilization.

The Opt Out Opportunity Context of Easton

Having explored the environmental factors that facilitated prodigious rates of opt out

activism in the two HOO districts, I now turn to a district at the opposite end of the spectrum:

Easton School District, where opt out rates have historically been very low (around 14%) despite

its proximity to many high-opt out districts and efforts by the Easton teachers union to drum up

support for it. In my analyses, two features of the political opportunity context in Easton

emerged as significant explanations for the district-wide rejection of opt out activism: a weak

sense of community which has made mobilization difficult and district leaders' discouragement

of opting out through a proactive, coordinated information campaign that provided an effective

counter-narrative to the opt out movement.

A Vacation Town with a Transient Population

Unlike raucous Commonwealth and small-town Danville, Easton is a quiet seaside

community on Long Island full of multimillion-dollar vacation "cottages" that occupy reclusive,

hedge-lined neighborhoods. The downtown itself—only about one square mile in size—is

replete with small, independent boutiques, restaurants, and bed and breakfasts that cater to the

upper-class tourists who visit from New York City during the summer months. "We're a big

summer community," said one board member. People own (and pay taxes on) houses in the

district but live there only for two or three weeks out of the year, and during the winter, the

district's population shrinks by about two-thirds. Of those residents who remain behind, about

30% are nonwhite and many are low-income—mostly manual laborers and caretakers who

maintain the opulent beachside estates. About 27% of district residents do not speak English as their primary language, and while the district itself is considered wealthy because of its property tax base, 40% of its 1900 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

One of the draws of Easton (aside from its high-end retail and sparsely populated beaches) is its relative isolation from the rest of Long Island. There is no highway that runs through town, and it is a 75-minute drive to the nearest Walmart. Compared to other Long Island suburban communities, Easton lacks the retail and service outlets necessary to attract and retain residents in the lower two-thirds of the income distribution, but this is of little concern to the wealthy, politically powerful property owners. The high cost of living means that local workers can rarely afford to live in town and instead must commute from neighboring areas. One board member likened the district's housing situation to Paris where "all the workers come from the suburbs because they can't [afford to] live there," and he remarked that many teachers in Easton have round-trip commutes of over two hours every day.

This geographic isolation has also made it difficult to find steady district leadership in Easton. Whereas the district leaders I met in Danville and Commonwealth have lived in their district for over 20 years on average, including many who had lived there for their entire lives, in Easton such deep roots are rare. Prior to the hiring of Superintendent Brody seven years ago, the superintendency in Easton had been a revolving door for "strivers" and "carpetbaggers" who viewed the job as either a "stepping stone" to another position or a final career stop to secure a salary and pension boost. While the current cadre of district administrators has in fact demonstrated staying power, this stability remains a relatively new phenomenon.

In light of these circumstances, it would be a misstatement to say that there is a strong sense of community in Easton. And just as a strong sense of community facilitated the opt out

movement in Danville and Commonwealth, this lack of community in Easton (and the weak

social network ties among residents) has made it very difficult for opt out activists to grow their

movement. As indicated on the survey results (above), the opt out activism of Easton OOPs has

tended to be less visible, less organized, less personal, and more Internet-based than the activism

of Danville and Commonwealth OOPs. Indeed, many Easton OOPs reported that they had

attended opt out meetings in neighboring districts but had never heard of a meeting occurring in

Easton, and some parents even expressed discomfort at the thought of talking about the issue

with their neighbors because they were unsure where they stood. Tellingly, one OOP concluded

our focus group by saying to the group, "It was nice to meet other parents who opt out here. I've

never met another parent who opts out. I have my friends on Facebook, in my Facebook group,

but it was fun to meet a group of parents here."

Neutral Toward Opting Out, but Encouraging of "Opting In"

Aside from the weak sense of community in the district, another reason for opt out futility

has been the posture of district leaders toward the opt out movement. Like officials in the two

HOO districts, officials in Easton insisted that they were "neutral" on the opt out issue and had

consistently upheld the right of parents to opt out their children. However, none of them

personally supported opting out and some of them had even made efforts to personally

discourage it, eagerly pointing out that their *own* children had taken the tests. "I respect [opting

out]. I may not *agree* with it, but I *respect* it," remarked one school board member, who then

added that his own child has always taken the tests even though he suffers from test anxiety.

Similarly, another board member with test-age children declared that she had initially tried to

discourage parents from opting out, but she now takes a more neutral stance: "Honestly, the first year, I was a little bit trying to convince people [to not opt out by saying], 'Really? Why? It doesn't matter to your child.' But now it's sort of like everybody should have their own opinions." For his own part, Superintendent Brody affirmed that "it's definitely a parental choice" and he "would never impose [a decision] on anyone." However, he also added, "I would hope I would be able to persuade them [against it]." In another private conversation with me he delegitimized the opt out movement by repeating a line frequently advanced by state officials: "There's really no such thing as an opt out…We like to say that we lead Long Island in 'opting in' to testing."

In addition to exuding skepticism toward the opt out movement, the leadership in Easton is clearly more supportive of state education reforms than the leadership in Danville and Commonwealth, and as such, they have been more equipped to mount a sincere defense of those reforms in discussions with parents. Whereas I was hard-pressed to find statements in support of state reforms in my interviews with district elites in Danville and Commonwealth, I had much less difficulty finding such statements in my interviews with district elites in Easton. For example, in the course of my interview with Mr. Brody, he expressed support for the Common Core, saying, "I don't think anybody can really have an argument with [The Common Core]. If I open up the ELA curriculum to third grade, each one of the standards is decent." Likewise, one board member remarked that while she did harbor some concerns about standardized testing "there's not…a better system right now." And yet another board member went so far as to advocate for the abolition of teacher tenure: "If I could be queen for the day, I would eliminate tenure…The system, it's controlled by unions…Half the problems are economic and familial

within households and half the problems are teachers that should have given up teaching fifteen years ago."

The implicit pressure to "opt in" to testing and embrace state reforms is further reinforced by the test day protocols the district has put in place to accommodate opt out students. Unlike in Commonwealth, where the district itself solicits an opt out decision from parents, in Easton parents must initiate the opt out process themselves by sending an email to their principal, who they know disapproves of their decision because all principals in Easton oppose opting out. The principals then identify alternative space for opt out students on test day. During the early years of the opt out movement, however, both OOPs and NOOPs reported that there had been some confusion about how opt out students should be accommodated. Parents had been told by district administration that students opting out would be allowed to read a book or sit in the library while the other students took the test, but in fact many students ended up having to endure a sit-and-stare situation. Said one NOOP:

> We had an incident here. We had it a couple of years in a row, where our district administration, our superintendent said, "Hey we're not gonna do sit-and-stare. If you opt out, you can read a book or you can go to the library." And I'll be damned if the exact opposite didn't happen. And I spoke with parents of kids who said, "My child was told to sit in his seat. He had to sit there. He wasn't allowed to read. He wasn't allowed to write. He had to sit there for four hours." So you shame a child.

In subsequent years, however, opt out students have indeed been allowed to use the library, and the sit-and-stare program has been discontinued. Whether the initial sit-and-stare incident was intentional or just a miscommunication is not clear, but the fact that it occurred does suggest that the district did not take the situation of opt out students very seriously, making parents question the impact opting out would have on their children. One OOP also pointed out that this anti-opt out pressure was applied in other ways, such as one time when her daughter had been prevented

from having some pre-test donuts with the rest of her class because she was opting out. Indeed,

parents seemed to sense that even though they had the right to opt out, it would be better for

everyone, including their children, to just go along with the testing—a sentiment illustrated by

one NOOP who on the survey justified her decision to not opt out by writing:

> I know that I made my own decision out of fear of rocking the boat. Instead, I took the path of least resistance and let the authority of the school decide for me. Any other path seemed so difficult and seemed to expose my kids to judgment (or even reprisals) from the school system. So much for my own strong moral standards and critical thinking skills!

Proactive Outreach and Consistent Counter-Framing

Beyond merely allowing the opt out process to be unappealing for parents, the district has

successfully precluded opt out activism through the use of another tool: a proactive, coordinated

information campaign that offered parents a positive, consistent vision of how standardized

testing was used in the district. More than any other reason, Superintendent Brody believed that

Easton had escaped opt out activism because it had been "proactive" and "ahead of the curve" in

addressing the issue. Following the first small wave of opt outs in April 2013, Brody and his

staff gathered together at their next administrative meeting and began conducting research on the

Common Core tests to ensure that they were in fact valid, useful indicators of student

achievement. Once they determined that they were, they "put some talking points together about

the validity of testing and how it's used in the district" and worked collaboratively to ensure that

district leaders were all on the same rhetorical page in any dealings with parents.

The main thrust of their message, as gleaned from my conversations with parents and

administrators, was two-pronged. First, the tests themselves are useful indicators of student

achievement that do inform district instructional practice and programming. Second, the tests are

admittedly imperfect, but they are just one single snapshot—a "touchstone"—of student

performance, and as such, it is important "not to make too big of a deal about the tests." The opt

out movement, in other words, was much ado about nothing. As Brody explained, this message

appeared to resonate with parents, reassuring them and even convincing some early OOPs to

return to the flock:

> This is kind of our philosophy: It doesn't give the whole picture of the kid, but why wouldn't you wanna know if you have trouble with inferences? If I know your son or daughter has trouble with inferences, if it's data-based, then I can drive my instruction in a much more meaningful fashion. So, when that talking point was explained, we actually got some people to come back into the fold and say, "Hey, it's three days out of a whole year. It's not that much. Maybe I shouldn't opt out."

Another principal focus of this outreach was ensuring that the conversations about these

issues did not become as politicized or emotional as they were in other Long Island districts like

Commonwealth. Instead, district leaders were careful to always narrowly frame their discussions

in ways that emphasized the benefits of testing for *children*, preventing more ideological, macro-

level political attitudes from poisoning the discussion. As Mr. Brody explained, district leaders

did not want this to become a discussion about Cuomo or Trump or corruption or trust. It was a

discussion about what's best for kids:

> I think once you become entrenched politically—saying, "No way, I'm not letting my kid take a test, it's like joining ISIS," or when it gets to that emotional level like you're for Trump or you're against Trump—it's hard to have a decent discussion, but I think we've escaped that luckily.

After district administrators agreed on their position, they tackled the opt out issue "head-

on" by reaching out to parents and explaining the benefits they saw in recent state reforms.

Parents reported that they had heard the district's position on opting out conveyed through

printed mailings, emails, forums, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and in the media.

Moreover, the message that testing had practical benefits for the district achieved additional

resonance because the district in fact had a long history of publicly and transparently using test scores to inform their decision-making. In other words, parents had already "seen" firsthand the good that could come out of testing. As one school board member explained:

> We talk about [our test scores] quite a bit at school board meetings. And our school board meetings are televised, and a lot of people do watch it…Every year, for maybe the past five years, before the opt out [movement] even started, we have had each building—elementary, middle, and high school—present their scores. And so, I think we had already been talking about the scores and what they meant,…and I think our community was already used to looking at that and realizing that we were already talking about it and had been. We even had, in the very beginning when we first started doing it our math scores were terrible, [but] we talked about it publicly. We implemented math labs and all sorts of changes, and changes to the curriculums. And then, in the next few years, you could see our math scores improving. So when you present [the information] that way, [the community] realize[s] that we use[d] it to identify a problem, we came up with solutions to the problem, and we implemented it, and it actually did work. I think that probably also went a long way.

Another particularly important feature of this outreach campaign was the way that district leaders leveraged the credibility of local educators—namely, principals and teachers—to convince parents of the merits of testing. Indeed, parents and district elites credited district principals, all of them well-respected veterans, with being the "real advocates for testing." As one school board member remarked: "Our administrators did a good job explaining what we use our test scores for and why they see value in it. And they really kind of held the line." Brody likewise relayed multiple stories of elementary and middle school teachers who had been active in explaining to parents the benefits of testing, such as one math teacher who liked to remind parents that this was "good practice" for the Regents. When asked about this outreach, parents agreed that the communication from educators had likely dampened opt out activism in their district, and several OOPs described the difficulty they had reconciling the admiration they felt for their local educators with the displeasure they felt about the "slanted" messages they were receiving:

Speaker 1: The middle school principal, while I love him to death, he does take a positive spin on [testing]. He's like, "We understand it gives stresses for some kids. But on the whole, it does assess us, it does help." He puts a positive spin on [it].

Speaker 2: He's not giving you the options [to opt out].

Speaker 3: No, no, no. He definitely does not give the options.

Speaker 2: At this district, they're not educating you. You go to school board meetings, and they're like, "Yeah, the tests are great, this is gonna help us. This is go, go!"

Speaker 1: Yeah, he's definitely pro [testing]. And I do love him to death. I love him as an educator and as a principal. He's awesome. But that's the one part where I was like, "Wow, he sounds like he's promoting this."

In this way, while district leaders did *allow* parents to opt out, they were able to leverage their communication tools and positions of authority to discourage it. Parents who did opt out were forced to do so knowing that their school administrators privately disapproved of the decision, and they had to be comfortable with risking that relationship or otherwise making it more awkward. Paired with the community's naturally weak social ties, which prevented parents from achieving the political strength and self-affirmation that arises from being part of a crowd, district leaders were able to bend the discursive and institutional space in their environment in ways that would lead parents to "opt in" instead of opt out.

Conclusion

The preceding sections have demonstrated that district-level opt out rates varied as a result of differences in the political opportunity contexts of the districts. Parents perceived greater institutional support for their right to opt out in Danville and Commonwealth than they did in Easton and Greenville. Moreover, these perceptions appeared to influence not just the volume of opt out activity in these districts, but the action repertoires employed by OOPs. In the two HOO districts, parents were more willing to participate in publicly visible, face-to-face

activities like rallies and meetings, while in the two LOO districts, opt out activity remained confined mostly to the Internet and other more anonymous settings. Features of these contexts that were influential in facilitating or hampering opt out activism included the density of local social network ties the behavior of district elites, who could either legitimize the opt out movement through shows of support or neutrality or repress it through active counter-framing efforts.

These findings have numerous implications for our understanding of how political opportunity contexts influence grassroots education activism. These implications are valuable for both educational leaders hoping to promote activism as well as state officials hoping to steer the conduct of civil society in ways supportive of reform.

Institutional Opportunity Structures

The political opportunity context literature has long emphasized the importance of both institutional and cultural (e.g. discursive) structures in facilitating or repressing social movement activism. In my own analysis of the opt out movement, I found that district leaders effectively facilitated or repressed opt out activism—sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally—through the institutional and discursive practices they employed in their districts. While all district leaders believed that they had been "neutral" on the opt out issue, the way this neutrality was instantiated varied dramatically across contexts.

Perhaps the most obvious cross-district difference in institutional practices was found in the opt out protocols employed by the districts. In Easton and Greenville there was a heavier burden placed upon parents who wished to opt out—burdens that signaled to them that opting

out, while permitted, was viewed unfavorably by district leadership. In both of those districts, parents who desired to opt out were required to take the initiative themselves by sending a personal email directly to their principal informing him/her of their decision, all while knowing that their principal did not approve of their opt out position. Furthermore, parents in Greenville were then required to have a follow-up phone-call with their principal so that the principal could make one final attempt to change their mind. As a result, opting out in the two LOO districts required parents to be bold enough to directly challenge the desires of educational authorities and potentially jeopardize their relationship with their child's school.

At the other end of the spectrum, parents in Danville and Commonwealth had to bear no such costs. In Danville, district leaders readily accepted form letters that had been circulated by the local opt out organization and made it very clear they did not care where parents stood. In Commonwealth, district leadership went even further by initiating the opt out process itself, directly soliciting an opt out decision from parents. In doing so, leadership not only allowed parents to opt out, but validated and affirmed their right to do so.

The test-day accommodation of opt out students was another institutional structure that influenced parents' opt out decisions. In Danville and Commonwealth, district leaders established comfortable test day alternatives for students which did not stigmatize students whether they were taking the test or not. In Easton and Greenville, however, students received less comfortable accommodations that left several parents feeling like their children had been shamed. During the early years of the opt out movement, opt out students in Easton had been required to sit silently in the test room and stare at the wall while their peers took the test, and some OOPs even reported that their children had been deprived the opportunity to participate in pre-test festivities with their classmates. While these policies were later amended to allow

children to sit in the library, Easton OOPs as late as 2017 were skeptical that these policies would actually be honored in the future. Similarly, students in Greenville have always been required to sit in the test room *with the test on their desk* as they silently read a book. In treating students this way, Easton and Greenville signaled to parents that not only did they discourage opting out, but they were largely unconcerned about ensuring that opt out students would have a meaningful and comfortable experience on test day. Parents thus had to weigh the consequences of opting out on not only their *own* relationship with their school, but also their child's relationship with the school.

Discursive Opportunity Structures, Issue Framing, and Trust

Beyond these institutional rituals, however, district leaders also played a critical role in creating discursive spaces where opt out activism was either legitimized and nurtured or delegitimized and repressed. Of critical importance here was district—and in particular, *superintendent*—leadership. In Danville, district officials legitimized the opt out movement through unwavering neutrality on the issue. They never explicitly endorsed (or discouraged) opting out, although due to their own unhappiness with state reforms, they did not appear distressed that their parents were protesting. They accordingly adopted a laissez-faire mentality with regard to the opt out movement in their district, seeking only to accommodate whatever desires their parents came to express. In practice, this approach allowed district officials to truthfully swear off any association with the opt out movement, but it also created an obvious discursive vacuum that opt out activists could exploit to mobilize their community in protest. Indeed, the silence of district leaders, and their unwillingness to provide even a modicum of

rhetorical support for the state reform agenda, meant that the only narrative parents received about these issues came from their neighbors in the opt out movement—a narrative that was legitimized by default because it was the only game in town. Furthermore, while district leaders never spoke about the opt out issue, they did lend symbolic and physical support to the movement by allowing it to use school facilities for meetings.

In Commonwealth, district leadership appeared very supportive of the opt out movement. Not only did Commonwealth leadership permit the opt out movement to grow, but it also actively and explicitly legitimized the concerns of OOPs. School board members readily told their friends and neighbors that they were opting out their own children, and they even helped organize opt out events on school property. At the same time, Superintendent Valvano was a regular speaker at opt out events across Long Island and in his remarks he regularly reinforced the anti-testing sentiment and political distrust that many parents already felt. Indeed, it is an open question as to whether or not parents would have harbored such vociferously antagonistic views toward testing and state education policymakers if he had not been so active in spreading his narrative. In addition, Valvano also personally modeled for parents the kind of energetic, defiant citizenship that is the lifeblood of grassroots social protest. He penned open letters to legislators, called out policymakers when he felt they were wrong, and labored to organize communities throughout Long Island. The example of a professional educator publicly putting his career and reputation on the line in pursuit of what he believed to be right had the effect of further invigorating local OOPs—creating an environment where parents felt safe taking the same bold, confrontational stances as their superintendent and protesting in grand, intensely visible ways. Like the activists in McAdam's (1982) scholarship on the civil rights movement, they experienced a "cognitive liberation" that spurred them to action.

In contrast, leadership in Easton managed to effectively delegitimize the opt out movement through its own proactive communications campaign which touted the benefits of standardized testing and cautioned parents against making too big of a deal about recent education reforms. Through forums, open houses, emails, phone calls, and daily interactions with parents, educators spread the message that opting out would be detrimental to the district and it was simply not worth parents' time and energy. In their discussions, they also tended to caricature OOPs in other districts as cranks or unwitting pawns of the teachers unions, whom they privately believed had astroturfed much of the movement throughout the state. Ultimately, this information campaign proved successful in diminishing opt out movement strength in Easton and simultaneously driving the remaining opt out activists underground. Whereas Danville and Commonwealth witnessed a great deal of face-to-face opt out activities, the activism in Easton was confined primarily to the Internet, ultimately becoming unorganized and mostly invisible in the district.

The divergent discursive opportunities apparent in these four districts highlight another important theme of this chapter: the role of district leaders as highly credible and influential issue framers who shape the way parents interpret state reforms. For decades, scholars of education policy have written about the challenges of translating education policies from the statehouse to the schoolhouse, arguing that education reforms often fail to be implemented with fidelity because they are divorced from the day-to-day experiences of educators or otherwise interact poorly with the cognitive sensemaking faculties of implementing agents (Spillane, 2006; Cohen et al, 2011). In the case of the opt out movement, however, TBA policies encountered difficulty on the ground not because local educators misinterpreted the reforms or tried to undermine them through their daily teaching practice—in fact, all four districts do teach the Common Core and

administer the aligned standardized tests just as they are supposed to. Rather, these reforms encountered difficulty because local officials played a key role in energizing or repressing parent opt out activism through their narrative framing of the reforms.

While framing is a largely underdeveloped subject of inquiry in education research (exceptions include Coburn, 2006; Park et al, 2011), it is central to understandings of social movement mobilization (Benford & Snow, 2000). Snow (2013) defines frames as "relatively coherent sets of action-oriented beliefs, narratives, and meanings that legitimate and inspire [collective action activities]." Frames influence the way groups of people make sense of their environment and they can lead to the establishment of collective understandings which can either mobilize or demobilize social movement actors. If they are compelling enough to their audiences—that is, if they *resonate*—frames can effectively initiate and sustain a social movement. In order for frames to resonate, however, they must be deemed credible either through their own alignment with the experiential knowledge of the targets or through the person of the frame articulator.

The data reported in this chapter suggest that, as predicted by social movement theory, public understandings of state-level TBA reforms were powerfully shaped by the issue frames advanced by district leaders. In Commonwealth, Valvano's argument that standardized testing and political corruption were hurting children helped mobilize his community to take dramatic, anti-establishment action while in Easton, district leaders' framing of state reforms as valuable to educational practice ultimately muted TBA opposition. Even in Danville, where district leaders were silent on the opt out movement itself, their statements in support of parent autonomy only encouraged opt out activists to mobilize parents and exercise their rights as the most important constituents of education.

The authority of district leaders as putative issue framers and movement (de)mobilizers appeared to arise not just from their position of institutional power (i.e. the fact that they control the educational experiences of children and have a natural public platform), but from their position of *trust*. In my data, parents universally expressed a great deal of trust in their local teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members. Their desire to assist and please these educational professionals was an important part of their decision to opt out (or not opt out). If parents felt that opting out would harm the educators in their community, they were much less likely to opt out even if they were concerned about the direction of state education policymaking. If parents felt that opting out might benefit their educators, or at least not harm them, they were more likely to indulge their desires to opt out. Illustrating this mindset, one OOP in Danville reported in our focus group that she opted out only after she had met with her teacher and obtained assurance that if she opted out, she would not be putting her teacher at risk for evaluation sanctions or otherwise be depriving her of the information she needs to adequately serve her students. Similarly, OOPs in Commonwealth justified their decision to opt out by saying that Superintendent Valvano condoned it, and because he knew what was best for kids, it was important for them to participate in the movement: "[Dr. Valvano] has our children as first and foremost in everything that he does for their education, so I trust him and I trust our Board. I don't think they would ever put us in a situation that would be detrimental to our children or their education." At the other end of the spectrum, the decision in Easton and Greenville to leverage the credibility of local administrators to dissuade parents from opting out appeared to be quite powerful in keeping opt out rates low in those districts. As one Easton board member explained, district leadership was consciously aware that local educators would be the most effective agents in restraining opt out activism: "I just think the district had not taken a negative attitude toward

[state reforms]. The community trusts the leadership, and the leadership supports [the reforms]."

In this way, the mobilization of the opt out movement in all four districts was heavily influenced by the power, trust, and deference local educators commanded in any dealings with parents. Local educational professionals, more than any other actors, were uniquely positioned to exercise moral suasion on the issue, signaling to parents the acceptability (or unacceptability) of opting out.

Openness and Accessibility

Beyond simply receiving rhetorical validation from district elites, the opt out movement in the two HOO districts also benefited from entrenched cultures of openness, transparency, and authenticity—which again owed their existence largely to the leadership of the superintendents. Whereas most of the literature on parent engagement focuses on the role of *principal* leadership in producing open and welcoming *school* environments, I found that it was actually the *superintendents* who set the opt out tone for principals to follow—either through direct orders (e.g. Morrison's insistence that her principals remain neutral) or through implicit pressure (e.g. Brody's implied unhappiness with opt out rates at some schools). As Superintendent Valvano quipped, the ability to control the conversation is one of the most powerful tools superintendents possess, and he finds it is best to let that power rest so parents can express themselves freely: "I'm the gatekeeper. I can decide what gets talked about and what doesn't, and I have no gate. That power, that control over conversation is key in most places. That's where things run into trouble." Indeed, parents in Danville and Commonwealth said they felt very comfortable talking with district leaders about almost anything, and they marveled at the easy access they had to their

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superintendent and board members. In contrast, parents in Easton and Greenville felt a great deal of discomfort discussing opt out issues with district administrators despite the leadership's assertion that it was supportive of parents' opt out rights and always had its doors open.

This finding of a positive relationship between institutional openness and parent involvement aligns with much of the existing parent engagement literature and therefore extends this relationship to the subfield of educational activism. However, this finding also *complicates* the social movement literature on political opportunity context, which generally maintains that openness is associated with less activism because potential activists have easy access to policymaking through conventional politicking and do not need to resort to unconventional forms of protest to be heard. The divergence between the social movement literature and the findings of this chapter perhaps highlights an important and unique aspect of educational activism—its interaction with the convoluted and overlapping system of education governance. Whereas most studies of social movement activism examine activism that has a clear governmental target (such as Parliament, the EPA, the Supreme Court, etc.), educational activists must aim at multiple governmental targets and grapple with multiple political opportunity contexts. In the case of the opt out movement, the activism itself has been directed at ostensibly closed policy systems in Albany and Washington, but it takes place at the district level. As such, parents work to extract changes from one level of government (the state and federal levels) while remaining leery of repression from another level of government (the local level). From this understanding, then, educational activism is perhaps most likely to emerge when one level of government (the target level) is closed and another (the mobilization level) is open.

In addition to allowing opt out activists to mobilize without fear, these cultures of openness and accessibility further undermined the *state's* ability to effectively defend its reforms

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amid grassroots protest. When state officials tried to undercut opt out activism by sending

superintendents an "assessment toolkit," none of the district leaders I spoke to felt comfortable

using it. In Danville and Commonwealth, the dismissal of the state talking points had less to do

with the fact that local officials disagreed with the content of the talking points than it did with

the fact that a regurgitation of the talking points would violate their commitment to honest and

authentic communication with their community. As Superintendent Morrison explained,

maintaining honesty and authenticity is not only a matter of personal ethics, it is critical to the

effective performance of her job: "I try to maintain an honest, positive, and respectful

relationship with parents. I want parents to have that trust in me so that when we have sensitive

discussions, such as an IEP designation, they are convinced we're talking about what's best for

their child, not some other agenda." As such, the state's ability to implement its policies, control

its message, and build coalitions of support behind its favored reforms crashed against not only

the issue preferences and sensemaking faculties of local educators, but also their professional

need to maintain trust and support with parents in their community. The district leaders I spoke

to are not value-free automatons who will thoughtlessly parrot the words of others. Rather, they

are human-beings with their own notions of right and wrong and their own sense of professional

ethics. Before leaping to the defense of state reforms, these leaders feel that their commitment to

openness and honesty requires them to actually believe in the policies or else they would put at

risk their legitimacy as both leaders and community members.

Consequently, for state policymakers, these findings suggest that not only must the state

do a better job reaching out to *parents* during the drafting, enactment, and implementation of

new policies, but it must also collaborate with local educators and officials so that those policies

ultimately align with own professional orientations and policy preferences. A deliberative

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approach to policymaking—as opposed to a hierarchical one—would seem to hold promise in ensuring that future policies have enough legitimacy, support, and frame consistency from local educators that parent-initiated narratives of resistance would be less likely to resonate. Without greater inclusion of educators, however, policies will encounter difficulty winning adequate public support because educators ultimately have the most influence over local education messaging.

Promoting Activism: Leadership for Democratic Community

Finally, from the perspective of educational leadership, the findings of this chapter indicate a few things that local education leaders can do if they wish to promote community activism and engagement. Arguably the most important thing is to simply embrace a style of leadership that is democratic and collaborative rather than technocratic and hierarchical. While some scholars (Auerbach, 2009; Theoharis, 2007) argue that a critical social justice orientation is vital in promoting community engagement, my data suggest it may be sufficient in many districts to just be committed to "plain old democracy" like the leaders in Danville and Commonwealth were. In particular, leaders would be well served to adopt the tenets Furman and Starratt's (2002) "leadership for democratic community," which Starratt (2001, 7) defines like this:

> Democratic leadership is primarily concerned with cultivating an environment that supports participation, sharing of ideas, and the virtues of honesty, openness, flexibility, and compassion. Democratic educational leadership should be focused on cultivating school environments where…richer and fuller humanity is experienced and activated by people acting in communion.

Since democratic community is processual, leaders imbued with this philosophy must attend, like Dr. Valvano, to the creation and maintenance of democratic cultures and structures that nurture

"thinking aloud together." Furthermore, like the school board members in Danville, they should recognize the interdependence of the school and its surrounding community, celebrating the assets the community offers in terms of material, social, and moral support.

Not only should activist-oriented leaders promote democratic processes and structures, but they should also attend to the work of community-building. Indeed, one of the most critical environmental factors that promoted activism in Danville and Commonwealth was the tight sense of community that existed among parents. This sense of community allowed opt out activists to draw on dense and readymade social networks to build rapid support for the opt out movement. By contrast, the lack of community in Easton and Greenville hampered the development of activism in those districts. But just because some communities have a weak sense of community does not mean that they are doomed to always remain that way. Literature from the field of community organizing (e.g. Alinsky, 1946) demonstrates the valuable role local leaders can play in bringing together different groups and organizations in ways that expand social networks, enhance social capital, and deepen relational trust.

Kochan and Reed (2005) identify three factors that facilitate the development of a community-oriented leadership approach—some of which are naturally occurring but all of which can be influenced by local educational leaders. The first is a commitment to democratic values, including a willingness to tolerate dissenting opinions, negotiate compromises, and pursue the "common good." On the surface, these values may seem unassailable, yet in practice they require a great deal of tact and patience from district leaders who may not always find convenience in pursuing them. "Many local education officials want public support without contentious public voice," Rogers (2004, 2184) once observed, and as administrators are increasingly pressed for time in the era of accountability, they are often willing to dispense with

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the ponderous trappings of democracy in order to simply keep their district moving along. Yet, the value of taking time for collective deliberation was strikingly evident in the two HOO districts. In Danville and Commonwealth, district leaders did not fear contentious public voice, and in Commonwealth it was even celebrated as a way to promote closer community relationships and more legitimate, sustainable policy outcomes.

A powerful illustration of this can be found in a budget disagreement that Valvano recalled during the course of my interview with him. Crafting the Commonwealth budget during the Great Recession, district leadership had drafted various proposals to save money by consolidating schools, altering schedules, or cutting programs—none of which were satisfactory to parents. In heated public meetings about the budget, there was one parent in particular who had been quite hostile to any of the reform changes, heckling Valvano and quixotically challenging him to find a solution. Rather than attempt to shut down this parent, Valvano embraced him and invited him to have a personal discussion in the hope of finding some common ground:

> There was one guy who was really killing me at these meetings. I'd see him walk in and I'd go, "Oh, crap." So, I finally said to him, "Look, can I see you after this meeting? We gotta talk." He came into my office. I said, "You're in charge of this now, you figure it out. I'm giving it my best shot, obviously it's no good, no hard feelings." And he said, "Alright, I'll take a crack at it." I said, "Why don't we meet again Tuesday night or whatever?" He comes up Tuesday night with two cups of coffee, and he says, "I can't figure this out." I laughed and said, "Me neither…But we gotta do something. We gotta open up schools in a couple of months." There was so much involvement in it, and now you talk to parents, and they love what we ended up doing.

Next, leaders must be aware of the power imbalance that inherently colors their interactions with parents and labor to equalize power so that a free exchange of ideas can occur. As Fine (1993) states, parents, especially historically marginalized ones, "enter the contested public sphere of public education typically with neither resources nor power." Leaders must

therefore be willing to relinquish some of their power in order to reap the benefits of a newly empowered community—just as the leaders in Danville and Commonwealth appeared to do. In neither of those districts did the elites I spoke to view themselves as unassailable experts who had a monopoly on good ideas or good topics for discussion. Instead, they encouraged and welcomed the creativity and deliberation of their parents and cultivated spaces where parents felt comfortable engaging with one another about emotional education policy issues. In contrast, leadership in Easton and Greenville created environments that, while open in the sense than anyone could speak, facilitated a deferential, structured, and hierarchical relationship with district leaders (e.g. through the use of administrator-led town halls on testing).

And finally, community-oriented leaders must devote themselves to the difficult task of promoting intimate *face-to-face* interactions among community members as these kinds of interactions have been shown to produce greater amounts of social capital and relational trust than electronic or written forms of communication (Kochan & Reed, 2005). As Kochan and Reed (2005) write, "harsh words and hurt feelings can hinder efforts [to build a democratic community], requiring that people have many opportunities to interact with one another" so that differences can be worked out and relationships can be built which make community members comfortable taking risky political stances. The value of face-to-face interactions appeared in my data to be particularly important in promoting opt out activism. In Danville and Commonwealth, a large portion of OOPs had reported attending in-person meetings and rallies, and they likewise had been active in asking those around them to join the movement. In contrast, no face-to-face meetings were reported in Easton or Greenville, and OOPs reported that the only meetings they had attended had been held outside their districts. While there remained a large amount of opt out discussion among parents in these districts, that discussion did not translate to high district

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opt out rates in large part because it took place online and semi-anonymously. OOPs in these districts were not a community, but rather an atomized assortment parents who happened to be making the same opt out decision.

In sum, district leaders in my data appeared to promote or hamper opt out activism through their leadership philosophies as well as through the institutional and discursive opportunity contexts they helped create. These differences not only impacted the volume of opt out activity in these districts, but also the form that that activity took. The opt out movement was therefore not merely the result of differences in parent resources and motivation across districts; it was also a function of the perceptions parents had of their environment, perceptions which were colored profoundly by their relationship with other community members and district educators. While the opt out movement has always been parent-led, its development in these four districts was ultimately the product of a complex negotiation among parents, educational professionals, and their environment.

CHAPTER 6: POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

*[We must] entertain the possibility that the major effects of
social movements will have little or nothing to do with the
public claims their leaders make.*
—Tilly (1999, 270).

*[The opt out movement] still hasn't changed anything. It's
still every year the test comes out and kids aren't taking
it…They're still not listening.*
—Commonwealth Parent

Introduction

We have now explored the composition of the opt out movement, the motivations people

have for participating, and the political opportunity contexts that facilitate and hamper opt out

activism. What remains is an examination of the political consequences of the opt out

movement. That is, what impact has the opt out movement had on the districts and individuals

involved, and what might this say about the political potential of grassroots social movement

protest in education more generally?[17]

This question is both an important and a timely one given the recent surge in grassroots

activism not just in education, but in American politics more generally. Indeed, Americans

today have an almost romantic fascination have with grassroots social movement protest. For

evidence of this, one need look no further than the Women's March of January 2017, which

effectively usurped the national political conversation just one day after the inauguration of a

new president. The spectacle of over four million people (or 1 in every 80 Americans) crowding

public spaces across the country to demand protections for the rights of women, immigrants,

minorities, and workers commanded media attention for days and was credited with energizing

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[17] This chapter has been adapted from a manuscript that will be published in a forthcoming edited volume about the
opt out movement.

those on the left still reeling from the 2016 election. But the Women's March is just one of many high-profile episodes of grassroots protest in recent years. Issues such as police brutality, immigration, financial regulation, school shootings, and environmental justice have become common targets for grassroots activism, and as a younger, more civically combatant generation comes to political maturity, it is not unreasonable to predict that grassroots protest will be an increasingly regular feature of American political life in the coming years (Dalton, 2016).

The allure of grassroots social movement protest lies not just in its dramaturgy, but in the potential changes it portends for future politics and policymaking. Indeed, the hope of all social movement activists is that their participation will not only draw attention to a particular cause or neglected social group, but also spark political change through the establishment of more responsive political institutions, the creation of more inclusive political cultures, or the enactment of new policies more closely aligned with public preferences. Today, we celebrate the American Revolution of 1776 not merely because it mobilized ordinary colonists against an imperious monarch, but because it culminated with the establishment of a new political order based on the idea of human equality. Likewise, the American civil rights and women's suffrage movements of the twentieth century have become mythologized for their essential roles in eradicating legal restrictions on minorities and women as well as their influence in remaking the political topography of the United States.

The potential of grassroots social movement protest to extract changes from unresponsive political institutions and inflexible elites is one reason that the opt out movement is both an appropriate and timely case for study in the realm of education politics. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, over the past forty years, the governance of education in the United States has undergone dramatic transformation in terms of institutional centralization and

ideological isomorphism, with some scholars fretting that these changes have undermined democratic control of education (Abernathy, 2005; Plank & Boyd, 1994; Trujillo & Howe, 2015; McDonnell, Timpane, & Benjamin, 2000). Whereas once 90,000 local school districts had broad autonomy in setting education policies within their borders, today institutions at the state and federal levels have consolidated power over most aspects of the educational enterprise (Henig, 2013; Manna, 2006; Manna & McGuinn, 2013). At the same time, policymakers on both the left and the right—once occupied by bitter debates over whether or not the government should play *any role at all* in education—have put this dispute to bed and instead coalesced in support of the neoliberal agenda (Apple, 2006; Porfilio & Carr, 2011). Despite broad bipartisan support for this agenda in Congress and in statehouses across the country, public support for this program appears to be waning and there is the belief among many Americans that local institutions should regain some of their power (Phi Delta Kappa, 2015).

While the proliferation of grassroots activism in education is an exciting development for those who favor robust public engagement in politics, a question must be asked regarding the political consequences of grassroots activism like the opt out movement. In their classic book on American political participation, Verba and Nie (1972) conceptualized the study of political participation as embracing three distinct dimensions: the process of politicization (i.e. the antecedents of political participation); the participation input (i.e. who participates, how much, and through what means); and the consequences of participation. Grassroots social movement activism, as one species of political participation, deserves study along each of these three lines of inquiry. The other chapters in this dissertation so far have focused on the first two dimensions—examining important issues of opt out movement composition, motivations, and political opportunity contexts. This chapter proceeds to examine the opt out movement with an

eye toward uncovering important insights about the political consequences of grassroots social movement activism—a topic that has seen extremely limited research even in the field of social movement studies (Amenta et al, 2010; Giugni, 1998).   Indeed, the jury is still out in terms of just how much influence social movements actually have on politics, with some scholars (e.g. Berry, 1999; Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2005; Piven, 2006) believing that social movements are politically influential and important features of politics and others (e.g. Skocpol, 2013; Burstein & Sausner, 2005; Giugni 2007) arguing that movements are rarely influential compared to other political actors, institutions, and processes. Those who have considered this question have identified three classes of potential social movement consequences meriting further exploration: policy process effects (e.g. changes in policy enactment, agenda shifts, implementation procedures), recognition and acceptance effects (i.e. an acceptance of the movement as a legitimate organization), and personal biographical effects (i.e. changes the life course of the individuals involved) (Gamson, 1990; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2005; McAdam & Su, 2002; Amenta, 2006; Kitschelt, 1986; Amenta & Caren, 2004; Della Porta & Diani, 2007). This chapter embraces this taxonomy and adds to this literature by taking up the following question: What impact has the opt out movement had on local education politics and policies? And do these effects vary across communities with different levels of opt out activism?

Political Consequences

Analyses of the data reveal that while the opt out movement has not yet produced many substantive changes in state or local TBA policies, it has significantly increased and transformed parent engagement with education politics in the four case districts. However, the magnitude of

these effects appear to vary by district context, with more substantial engagement effects occurring in HOO districts than in LOO districts. These results thus offer a tempered view of the opt out movement's impact on education policymaking while simultaneously indicating potentially significant changes in the way parents participate in education politics.

The Expansion and Transformation of Parent Political Engagement

The most significant consequence of the opt out movement in my data is the expansion and transformation of parent engagement with education politics. Table 6.1 below reports the response patterns of parents when they were asked on the survey how the opt out movement had impacted education in their local community. Across all four districts, approximately 54% of parents indicated that the movement had raised awareness of education issues in their district; 34% felt that it had brought new voices into discussions about education reforms; and 23% felt that it had mobilized parents as a political force. A smaller percentage of parents (14%) reported that the opt out movement had led to changes in local testing policies, and approximately a quarter of parents (23%) felt that the opt out movement had not produced many changes in their district at all. 54% of OOPs further agreed that the opt out movement had made them personally more engaged in politics generally.

Perceptions of these effects did not appear to be evenly distributed across districts, however, and the magnitude of the opt out movement's perceived impact on a district appeared positively correlated with the level of activism in that district. Parents in HOO districts were more likely than parents in LOO districts to indicate that the movement had raised awareness of education issues (69% v. 40%), brought new voices into the discussion about education reforms

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(48% v. 21%), and mobilized parents as a political force (36% v. 11%). Parents in HOO districts were also more likely than parents in LOO districts to perceive a reduction in testing (14% v. 3%), and they were less likely to report that the movement had had little impact on their community (13% v. 32%).

Table 6.1:

Perceived Effects of the Opt Out Movement (Survey)

Effect Category	Response Item(s)	% of Respondents (All Districts)	% of Respondents (HOO Districts)	% of Respondents (LOO Districts)
Engagement Effects	It has raised awareness of education issues	54%	69%	40%
	It has brought new voices into education conversations	34%	48%	21%
	It has mobilized parents as a political force	23%	36%	11%
Testing Policies	It has changed policies about testing	14%	18%	9%
	It has led to less focus on test preparation in schools	18%	27%	10%
	It has led to less testing	9%	14%	3%
Responsiveness	It has made district leaders more responsive to parents	21%	28%	14%
Negative Effects	It has harmed our ability to know how schools are performing	11%	10%	13%
	It has hampered the progress of important education reforms	7%	7%	8%
	It has caused a distraction for teachers	17%	22%	12%
	It has divided the community	8%	6%	9%
Null Effects	It has changed very little about education in my district	23%	13%	32%

Notes: Parents were asked the following question: "Some people say that opt out activities have changed education in [district name], sometimes in positive ways and sometimes in negative ways. In your opinion, what effects (if any) have opt out activities had in your district? Please choose up to 5 options below." Parents were required to select at least one response option. Parents could also select the option "Other" and elaborate using a textbox. Response options were randomized.

The qualitative data from interviews and focus groups likewise confirmed that the most significant impact of the opt out movement appears to have been the increased engagement of parents in education politics. In Danville, the superintendent and three of four school board members interviewed confirmed that their community appeared more politically engaged in education policy issues as a result of the opt out movement, and the superintendent even noted that this political engagement had spread to other local issues not directly related to standardized testing, such as school budgeting and prekindergarten programming. This sentiment was echoed in the parent focus groups, with one parent saying: "I think [the opt out movement] has just made me a little more involved in the school district, of really seeing what goes on in my children's classrooms…I come to the board meetings and kinda see what's going on now." In Commonwealth, the superintendent and all four school board members confirmed that their community had become more engaged in education policy issues as a result of the opt out movement. As one board member noted:

> We definitely saw an increase in people who wanted to be involved in the district overall—people who will participate in committees, budget and financing, legislative advocacy, all of those things. So there's definitely been an increase in community members and parents who wanna be involved.

In the two LOO districts, however, a less univocal narrative was presented as perceptions of increased engagement appeared mostly confined to parents and not district leaders. In focus groups, both OOPs and NOOPs indicated that the opt out movement had "gotten people more aware and involved in local and state education." However, the superintendents and board members generally felt that the movement had not significantly altered the public's degree of engagement with education politics—suggesting that much of the new parent engagement reported in those districts may have remained out of sight among district elites.

Not only did the opt out movement appear to increase the *amount* of parent engagement, but it also appeared to transform it in three important ways (Table 6.2). The first transformation was a fresh willingness among parents to challenge and critically question state and district leaders about the merits of reform proposals. One Danville board member remarked that whereas parents had once pliantly accepted new education policies handed down by state or district leadership, after the emergence of the opt out movement parents appeared more skeptical and adversarial when it came to education policymaking. "They will keep saying to us 'How is this going to benefit my child?' They want to know how [the policy] is going to benefit their child in terms of academic performance or academic programming...That's what we hear, time and time again," said one board member in describing recent conversations with parents about district testing policies. This new spirit of public skepticism was more pronounced in the HOO districts, where it was noted by both superintendents and half of the board members, but it was also reported by parents in the LOO districts as well as by the Easton superintendent.

Table 6.2:

Indicated Changes in Parent Engagement, Qualitative Data by District

Increased Parent Engagement With Education Politics

	Danville (HOO)	Commonwealth (HOO)	Greenville (LOO)	Easton (LOO)
Superintendent	YES	YES	NO	NO
# of Board Members	3/4	4/4	0/4	0/4
OOP Focus Group	YES	YES	YES	YES
NOOP Focus Group	YES	YES	YES	YES

Increased Parent Knowledge

Superintendent	YES	YES	NO	YES
# of Board Members	2/4	2/4	0/4	1/4
OOP Focus Group	YES	YES	YES	NO
NOOP Focus Group	NO	YES	NO	YES

Increased Parent Skepticism and Questioning of Authority

Superintendent	YES	YES	NO	YES
# of Board Members	2/4	2/4	0/4	0/4
OOP Focus Group	YES	YES	YES	YES
NOOP Focus Group	YES	YES	NO	NO

In addition, the opt out movement was reported to have made parents more informed and knowledgeable about education issues. 83% of OOPs in HOO districts and 44% of OOPs in LOO districts indicated on the survey that they personally felt more knowledgeable about education issues as a result of their participation in the opt out movement. As one OOP said in a focus group:

> It has made me go search out more information regarding policy. It has made me attend board meetings or read articles to get educated. I want to make sure that I have some information to offer others. I find that many people ask me about what is going on and I want to make sure that I have some information to offer.

The Danville superintendent likewise confirmed that the opt out movement had "elevated" the discussion of local education issues and that the leaders of the opt out movement in her district her had been extremely well-informed in their personal conversations with her:

> When they started the whole thing off, they came to me with a list of questions [about testing] that they'd really researched. They wanted to talk with me about all these different things and make sure that the way that they were reading things was correct, or the research was correct, because they didn't wanna give any information out that was not correct. They were thoughtful about it, very thoughtful.

Even in LOO districts where levels of opt out *activity* were low, a minority of officials and a majority of parents asserted that parents in their district appeared to be more knowledgeable about education issues. For example, several NOOPs in Easton remarked that the OOPs in their community appeared highly informed, perhaps even more than they themselves were. "I did feel they [OOPs] were well-informed and well-researched," said one NOOP, "*I* was not well-informed and well-researched and I am not still, because I just don't have an issue with it. I've read other people's perspectives and viewpoints, but I think the people who were pushing for it, yes, they backed it up with statistics and articles that I thought were from valid sources." Still, others remained more skeptical, with one NOOP in Greenville pointing out that while there was greater thirst for information among parents, the opt out movement was sometimes driven by online hearsay: "If they don't know [something], they [OOPs] might look it up on their own, whether from a reliable source or an unreliable source, and then take that information and make a decision. But I think people do research information a little bit more than maybe fifteen years ago or twenty years ago."

Furthermore, the gains in knowledge about education issues did not appear confined to OOPs; rather, there appeared to be some spillover effects in the form of increased knowledge among NOOPs too. Across all four districts, 25% of NOOPs reported personal knowledge gains

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as a result of opt out activities in their district, with similar response patterns emerging in each

district (ranging from 19% to 33%). As one Commonwealth NOOP recalled, the pressure to

engage with his neighbors on this issue spurred him to get educated: "I think that the opt out

movement has made me more knowledgeable about education issues. In the past I would just

pass articles by while reading the paper. Now I stop to absorb what's going on."

A final characteristic of this new engagement was the theme of personal empowerment,

with OOPs reporting that the opt out movement had generally left them feeling more politically

efficacious and assertive in pursuit of what they felt was best for their child. In Easton, one OOP

illustrated how the opt out movement had empowered her to be a stronger advocate for her own

child when it came to testing:

> Once I found out you could opt out, it empowered me…It empowered me because [when] my daughter didn't wanna take it, she'd get really upset, and she'd get really worried…She was freaking out the first year she took it. 'I don't wanna take it, I don't wanna take it!' And I couldn't do anything. I was like, 'I'm just following the rules. I don't want you to break the rules, so you have to do it.' [But] the second I found out she didn't have to take it, I ran up [and said], 'You don't have to take it this year, don't worry about it, no stress. It's all gone!'…It allowed me to make a decision for my own child.

In another district, a board member pointed out how his wife had experienced an activist

awakening through her involvement with the opt out movement:

> You have people like my wife…I wouldn't have necessarily considered my wife a political activist. If you had to pick somebody out of the crowd who would be attending rallies and holding signs, it wouldn't be her. But she even *spoke* at a rally, and that is totally out of the norm for my wife. She does not speak in front of large crowds. She is definitely a person who I think this started to draw more of the activism out of her. We definitely have people [like her], who it's the first time they're doing something district-wide.

Two Commonwealth school board members even indicated that their participation in the opt out

movement had inspired them to launch their political careers and seek election to the school

board.

Limited Policy Effects

Despite engendering a transformation of parent engagement with education politics, the opt out movement does not appear to have yet yielded much by way of change in local or state TBA policies. Mirroring the survey results, district leaders and parents in the interviews reported virtually no changes in testing policies aside from the establishment of a few narrowly-tailored administrative rituals, such as the creation of district protocols to accommodate parents wishing to opt out their children (discussed in the previous chapter). For example, in Commonwealth, the district leadership now mails opt out letters to all parents early in the school year so that parents can indicate their decision on the matter. Danville, Easton, and Greenville have likewise established channels through which parents can inform their building principal of their decision to opt out so that administrators have ample time to identify alternative activities and classroom space for those students.

Aside from these new protocols, however, few changes have been made to core policies around curriculum, testing, or accountability. The districts all still teach the Common Core, prepare students for the annual tests, administer the tests, and report the results just as they have always done. In no district were test scores used heavily in teacher evaluation programs prior to the emergence of the opt out movement, so no district reported any changes in that domain either. This lack of substantive policy change, while perhaps surprising given the high-profile nature of the opt out movement, appears to be attributable to two facts. The first is the reality that most testing and accountability policies are set at higher levels of government and there is little that local officials can do to alter those policies without violating state or federal

regulations. Indeed, officials in both HOO districts highlighted moments when they wished they could have done more to appease the concerns of their parents. Said one official:

> I wish that we could say that we don't have to give the state exams and that our kids don't have to take Regents exams. I wish that there were alternative assessments available or that we could use assessments that were created by our teachers in those classrooms. That would be my goal but we can't do that, we have to administer the exams, we have to offer the exams to everybody three through eight and the Regents exams.

Nevertheless, officials in one district (Commonwealth) appeared to be trying their best to accommodate the anti-testing outlook of their parents. One board member noted that the district has been working with its representative on the Board of Regents to locate an alternative to the Regents Exams that could be administered to its project-based learning pilot school. Additionally, the school board at one point considered discussing a proposal to refuse to administer the grade 3-8 tests in the district, but it withdrew the idea when state officials threatened to remove the superintendent and all seven board members if they proceeded with the discussion.

The second reason local policy changes appeared to be limited was the belief among district elites that opt out activism was not directed at them, but at officials in Albany. Consequently, some local officials felt there was little need to do much of anything other than let their constituents express themselves. As one Danville board member said:

> I think [our board] know[s] that it's a New York State problem, not really a local problem…Sort of an anti-New York sentiment really…Till it changes in Albany, it's not gonna make much difference what we do here.

In general, OOPs in all four districts readily acknowledged that local officials' hands were tied by state and federal mandates, and they almost never expressed frustration with the inability of their local leaders to deliver change on this issue. One Danville OOP summed up the

attitude of the parents in her focus group, saying, "When it comes to Danville, they've done phenomenal. But Danville can't make policy changes to state law. It's not like we can just say, 'No, we're not gonna do that.' It's just not the way it works." Another OOP in Easton noted, "They [district leaders] have all these state mandates that the state brings down to schools that they have to adhere to…I'm on a parent decision-making board for the high school, and a lot of the staff or the principal, they have ideas, but it's just difficult to do because they have to also follow certain guidelines."

While opt out-related policy change appears to have been muted at the *local* level, parents and district leaders were nevertheless quick to credit opt out activism for recent efforts by policymakers to tap the brakes on testing and accountability at the *state* level. They pointed out that in 2015 and 2016—the peak of opt out activism—the state did implement some minor changes to its TBA regime, the most significant of which was a five-year moratorium on using student test scores in teacher evaluations. Additionally, the exams themselves were shortened (from three days to two days) and students were permitted to take the tests without the pressure of time limits. At the request of a task force convened by Governor Cuomo, the state also carried out a review and revision of the Common Core to ensure that, among other things, the material was developmentally appropriate for students. To many parents, these changes were a step in the right direction, but some opt out activists argued that these changes were merely symbolic— designed to "take the wind out of the sails" of the movement so that the underlying neoliberal agenda could remain untouched. Whatever policymakers' true intentions, the universal attribution of these changes to opt out activism suggest that the movement may have had some policy impact insofar as it pressured lawmakers to at least temporarily halt the progression of

TBA policies. However, there are few signs that more substantive policy repeals and alterations are on the horizon.

Table 6.3:

Attributions of State Policy Changes to Opt Out Activism, by District

	Danville (HOO)	Commonwealth (HOO)	Greenville (LOO)	Easton (LOO)
Superintendent	YES	YES	YES	YES
# of Board Members	3	4	3	4
OOP Focus Group	YES	YES	YES	YES
NOOP Focus Group	YES	YES	YES	YES

Conclusion

From Mobilization to Policy Influence

Taken together, these findings produce a couple implications for education policy and politics moving forward. The first deals with the challenges grassroots activists face in producing substantive policy change. Simply put, the experiences of the opt out movement underscore an important conclusion of recent social movement scholarship: mobilization, while a necessary condition for political influence, does not in itself guarantee policy responsiveness (Amenta et al, 2010; Della Porta & Diani, 2007). Today, scholars suggest that social movements are most likely to exert political influence when they not only mobilize, but also 1) posit valid alternatives (Cress & Snow, 2000; Burstein & Hirsh 2007); 2) embed themselves in institutional politics through sponsorship and alliance-building (Ruzza, 2004); and 3) threaten policymakers

electorally (Amenta, 2006; McAdam & Su, 2002)—none of which currently characterize the opt out movement.

With regard to the first criteria, the opt out movement's political influence appears constrained by the fact that it is easier to identify what the movement is *against* (TBA policies) than what it is for. In conversations, local activists struggled to consistently articulate an alterative vision of education which they would support, although the most active and networked parents did emphasize the efforts they were currently taking to turn the movement toward a more positive message. However, this task is expected to be extremely difficult due to the political heterogeneity of the movement's membership as any agenda that appears to favor one segment of the movement (e.g. liberals) risks alienating another segment of the movement (e.g. conservatives) and diminishing its numerical strength.

Next, the mismatch between local grassroots activism and state-and federal-level policymaking suggests that even if the opt out movement were to settle on a positive agenda, it will be critically important for the movement to embed itself in institutional politics by locating political sponsors and forging alliances with extant interests who can advance its agenda in Albany and Washington. As education governance has been swept up into higher-level, general-purpose institutions, activists can no longer expect policy change through exclusively local organizing and protesting. Instead, they will have reimagine their activism in ways that allow it to simultaneously span different levels of government (e.g. district, state, federal), thrive in a multiplicity of political venues (e.g. the grassroots, legislatures, courts, bureaucracies), and employ a variety of tactics specific to each of those venues (e.g. media campaigns, lobbying, litigating, electioneering, protesting). This multi-tiered, multi-modal activism will inherently require new material, cultural, and organizational resources which may not be readily available

to novice grassroots activists but which could potentially be co-produced with or borrowed from experienced political sponsors and institutional allies.

Indeed, some of the most politically impactful grassroots movements of the past decade owe their success to their ability to attract political sponsors and form institutional alliances. A primary example of this can be found in the experiences of the Tea Party Movement of 2009-2012 (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). The Tea Party achieved the tremendous political influence it did not only because it effectively mobilized grassroots grievance, but because it simultaneously attracted the support of powerful sponsors in the form of right-wing media pundits (e.g. Fox News anchors), advocacy organizations (e.g. the Club for Growth), and billionaire donors (e.g. the Koch Brothers) who lent vital resources (media coverage, access, and money) to the movement. Additionally, the Tea Party was naturally co-opted by the Republican Party as almost all Tea Partiers were motivated by conservative beliefs on key policy issues like healthcare, welfare, taxes, and business regulations. In contrast, the opt out movement appears challenged on each of these fronts. Today, there are few advocacy organizations pushing alternatives to the neoliberal education agenda; there are no billionaire elites who have lent support to the movement;[18] and the ideological diversity of the movement makes it an unwieldy candidate for partisan co-optation.

This does not mean that the opt out movement must stand alone, however, and there are several natural allies which opt out activists would be well-equipped to work with, including teachers unions, PTAs, civic organizations, sympathetic journalists, and locally elected officials. Indeed, Danley and Rubin (2017) explain the success Newark activists had in wresting district control back from the Chris Christie Administration by highlighting the way that local activists

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[18] In fact, because many movement activists are motivated by antipathy to corporate influence in education, it is questionable whether such elite money would even be welcomed by activists.

formed coalitions with powerful community organizations. Furthermore, in my own data, I found evidence that local education officials are in some ways already using their positions to bring the concerns of their parents to different political venues and levels of government. In the Commonwealth school district, the superintendent has been a regular speaker at rallies and forums not just in his own district, but in neighboring districts as well, hoping to organize parents regionally so they will have greater voice in the education policymaking process. With less flash but similar diligence, the superintendent in Danville also reported that she had written numerous advocacy papers for state policymakers on issues of concern to her district. In these ways, local leaders seemed to be leveraging local governance to more widely promote the views of their parents, proving to be potentially valuable political allies in the process.

The third thing grassroots activists must do to achieve greater policy influence is to make their movement *electorally threatening* to political elites—something once again demonstrated by the Tea Party (Amenta et al 2010; Almeida and Stearns 1998; Jacobs and Helms 2001; Kane 2003; Amenta 2006; McAdam and Su, 2002). Throughout its entire life course, the Tea Party remained intensely focused on electoral organizing—mobilizing voters to throw out incumbents at all levels of government and then pressure newly elected officials to maintain hardline policy stances once they were in office (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). To date, the opt out movement has not demonstrated the same level of electoral organization, although in some districts it has emerged as an influential force in local school board elections where education is the single issue on the ballot and elections are nonpartisan (Tyrrell, 2015). Nevertheless, if the opt out movement hopes to change the direction of education policymaking in Albany and Washington, it will be critical for grassroots activists to embrace the challenges of electoral organizing as there is currently scant evidence that elected officials at the state and federal levels feel much

political incentive to help these activists, especially as they remain insulated by the structural protections of incumbency and the multi-issue nature of voting.

Civic Transformation and a Redefinition of "Success"

A second major implication of these findings is the importance of considering alternative forms of "success" for education grassroots activists. Social movement scholars who have grappled with the question of social movement consequences have generally defined social movement success along two dimensions: policy process outcomes (e.g. changes in political agendas, the enactment of new policies, or changes to institutional structures or personnel) and acceptance outcomes (e.g. the affirmation of the movement as a legitimate organization) (Gamson, 1990; Burstein et al, 1995; Kitschelt, 1986; Cress & Snow, 2000; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2005). While the opt out movement has not yet produced much by way of policy process outcomes, my research suggests that it has been much more successful in securing recognition and transforming the political landscape. Far from a nonaccomplishment, these changes may prove to be both highly significant and enduring in the long run.

As described above, the opt out movement appears to have increased and transformed parent engagement with education politics insofar as parents in my four case districts now appear more involved, informed, inquisitive, and critical than before. This represents a significant (and surprisingly rapid) shift in the political environment that policymakers will have to contend with in future rounds of policymaking. As parents have entrenched themselves as the primary stakeholders in education, policymakers can no longer expect that future policies and policy

narratives will be met with uncritical acceptance. Rather, parents will expect to be granted a greater voice in decision-making, and policymakers may be forced to include parents more intimately in the formulation, enactment, and implementation of future policies to ensure their legitimacy, perhaps by establishing new institutional venues (such as standing committees or task forces) which guarantee the representation of parent concerns.

The opt out movement has also reshaped the political landscape is by establishing a new political right for parents: the right to opt out. Seven years ago, the right of parents to block their children from taking federally mandated tests was unimaginable, but now it is widely recognized and accepted by most parents and education officials, even if they personally do not support opting out. Recent polling in New York suggests that 50% of parents statewide now support the right to opt out and 44% oppose it (Harding, 2015; for similar national results, see Phi Delta Kappa, 2015). In my own survey, I found that 71% of parents in the four districts (including 52% of NOOPs) agreed that parents have the right to opt out, and only 10% disagreed. Furthermore, every local official I spoke to acknowledged that parents have the right to opt out, although some of them, particularly in LOO districts, expressed displeasure about the parents who do so.

Thus, in estimating the political consequences of the opt out movement, it may be necessary to take a long view of this phenomenon, recognizing that the true dividends of the movement may only appear down the road as this newly transformed political environment begins to mold and reshape the policymaking process. Furthermore, even if the opt out movement fades, this political environment will likely continue to evolve and exert influence.[19] In their study of education activism in Philadelphia, Simon et al (2017) observe that recent

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[19] Grassroots movements are often characterized by periods of "activism and latency" in which they dissipate with shifting political attention but then reappear when their issue becomes a salient political topic again (Melucci, 1984; Etzioni, 1975).

activism in that city is actually built upon a culture and infrastructure of activism that was laid during the 1990s. From this perspective then, the opt out movement may serve as a foundation for even wider and more politically consequential activism in the coming years and decades as earlier rounds of education activism generate organizational infrastructures, social networks, and human, material, and cultural resources that activists can draw upon in later skirmishes with policy elites. The opt out movement's most enduring political impact may therefore be the way it has organized a corps of activist reservists prepared to mobilize, influence, and resist if policy elites again stray too far from popular demands.

CHAPTER 7: EPILOGUE

This dissertation set out to answer four key questions about the opt out movement: "who," "why," "where," and "to what effect." Those four questions have now been answered. Chapter 3 took up the question of who opts out, ultimately concluding that the opt out movement—far from being the white, wealthy, suburban phenomenon it is often portrayed to be—is in fact a highly diverse coalition of parents that has been visible across the vast majority of New York school districts. Chapter 4 explored why parents in the four case districts decided to opt out (or not opt out). It concluded that OOPs are motivated not just by policy preferences on key issues like standardized testing, but also by negative political attitudes like distrust, inefficacy, and estrangement from state and federal education policymaking. On the otherhand, NOOPs choose not to participate in the movement because they do not construct their concerns as demanding public intervention. Chapter 5 then examined the political opportunity contexts that have promoted or repressed opt out activism across the four case districts. It highlighted in particular the important role of district leadership in creating institutional and discursive spaces that have encouraged or discouraged opt out activism. Finally, Chapter 6 explored the political consequences of the opt out movement, concluding that while the opt out movement has not yet produced many changes in local testing and accountability policies, it has significantly increased and transformed the nature of parent participation with education politics.

The Future of the Opt Out Movement

Having now provided an in-depth analysis of the opt out movement as it currently operates, this final section offers some thoughts on a topic that has garnered a good deal of public discussion recently: the future of the opt out movement. Following its 2016 peak of 22%, the statewide opt out rate in New York dipped slightly in 2017—down to 19%, where it is expected to remain again in 2018. Observers in the media have pointed to this decline, along with a reduction in visible protest events like rallies and marches, to suggest that the opt out movement is fading (e.g. Harris, 2018). Some have even begun referring to the opt out movement in the past tense, and a number of policymakers have already taken credit for having "solved" the opt out problem by enacting of minor changes to state testing policies (Samsel, 2017).

Figure 7.1: District ELA Opt Out Rate Percentage Changes (2016 to 2017)

Note: The figure shows the percentage change in district opt out rates between 2016 and 2017. For example, if a school district experienced an opt out rate decline from 20% to 18% between these two years, it would have experienced a -10% change. Blue indicates a gain in opt out rate and red indicates a decline in opt out rate.

But is the opt out movement really on the verge of disappearing? And if so, what would a "disappearance" even look like? My own data suggest that the answers to these questions are not straightforward. First, my data indicate that school districts in New York can expect to see elevated opt out rates for the foreseeable future. On the survey, the vast majority of OOPs (91.8%) indicated that they are likely to opt out again in the future, and even a sizable number of NOOPs (19.4%) expressed their intention to get involved. All the while, no district leaders I spoke to expected opt out rates in their district to change dramatically in the years ahead, stating that parents appear to be "set in their ways." Whether they support opting out or not, these

leaders now recognize that opting out is a permanent feature of educational life in their district and state.

Table 7.1:

Percentage of Parents "Somewhat" or "Very Likely" to Opt Out in the Future, by District

	All Parents	OOPs	NOOPs
All Districts	54.0%	91.8%	19.4%
Danville	69.6%	94.7%	12.0%
Commonwealth	85.3%	95.7%	50.0%
Greenville	26.4%	90.0%	12.2%
Easton	33.0%	78.5%	16.1%

Notes: Parents were asked "How likely is it that you will opt out your child/children of standardized testing in the future?—Very likely, somewhat likely, somewhat unlikely, or very unlikely." Table reports the percentage of parents who selected "somewhat likely" or "very likely."

At the same time, policymakers' tone-deaf responses to the opt out movement have not provided any reason to believe that the concerns which motivate OOPs will be addressed anytime soon. As discussed in Chapter 4, OOPs are motivated not merely because they remain unconvinced of the practical benefits of standardized testing and other education reforms (although that is certainly true); rather, they also harbor intense feelings of political distrust, inefficacy, and estrangement from state and federal education policymaking. In other words, the key question animating opt out activists is not "what policy works?" but "who is represented?" Their concerns are *processual* as much as they are issue-oriented. Yet policymakers remain wedded to the misguided notion that the opt out movement is all about policy issues, and they believe that the opt out movement can be defused if they simply establish more effective policies (or otherwise do a better job explaining the benefits of policies already in existence). They do not seem to acknowledge that many parents harbor deep-seated qualms about the policymaking

process, and until they make that acknowledgement, the opt out movement, or the threat of similar grassroots activism, will likely remain.

On the otherhand, the opt out movement does face a number of immediate challenges that suggest it may ultimately have to evolve in order to remain an active presence in the state. In her edited volume on grassroots education activism, Ferman (2017) identifies five challenges grassroots activists must grapple with in their struggle against neoliberal reform: the complexity of race relations; the defensiveness of teachers unions; resource imbalances between activists and reformers; the national environment of perpetual educational crises; and the cultural predominance of the neoliberal mindset. Of these challenges, one appears in my data to be the most significant obstacle currently confronting the opt out movement: resource imbalances. Like many grassroots movements, the opt out movement has always been dependent on voluntary contributions of time, energy, and resources from its members. It has no reliable source of external funding, and it has no paid professionals to oversee its organizing efforts. This financial independence is a huge benefit to the movement insofar as it allows movement actors to credibly claim that they represent the unfiltered views of "real" parents. But it also puts the movement at a severe disadvantage in its struggle against education reformers, who themselves can count on enormous material, organizational, and political resources from philanthropists, think tanks, corporations, interest groups, and elected officials. As one activist explained, when it comes to resources, the odds are stacked against opt out parents, who must sustain themselves largely on passion alone.

> You can only sustain that passion for so long before you're tired or you just have to make some money…The other side has so much money. They have money. They have megaphones. The money buys them the megaphones, and [it] buys them some politicians. It buys them everything. And we don't have any. We have none. So it's really a David and Goliath situation. And I think we threw a lot of stones and they landed, and that was great. But that giant is just really, really big.

In addition, shifts in the national political environment have recently divided the attention of opt out parents and led many of them to put education issues on the backburner. During the opt out movement's peak in 2015 and 2016, the national political climate was relatively drama-free, and educational crises garnered significant attention because there simply were not many other crises to pay attention to. In the wake of the election of Donald Trump, however, this status quo has been violently upended and a multiplicity of more urgent and fundamental crises now present themselves—crises that require parent activists (particularly those on the left) to turn their attention away from small-fry policy issues like standardized testing and instead rally to the defense of once taken-for-granted national ideals like freedom of expression, human equality, cultural openness, and the rule of law. Parents with only limited time for activism must now pick their battles more judiciously than they have had to in the past.

Furthermore, the opt out movement is also challenged by the unique way that its primary issue—standardized testing—guarantees annual turnover in movement membership. Each year, standardized tests are given to students in grades 3-8, and each year, a cohort of eighth graders "graduates" from standardized testing. At that point, parents of those rising ninth graders no longer opt out their children, and they often lose interest in the movement. Opt out activists must therefore recruit new parents—namely, parents of incoming third graders—to replenish the ranks. This annual process of "grading out" ensures that even just *maintaining* current opt out levels is a labor-intensive endeavor. As one opt out activist explained, the movement recruits approximately 40,000 new parents in New York every year just to maintain its statewide opt out totals, and she estimated that over the past three years about 50% of the movement's rank-and-file members have turned over. For this reason, opt out activists warn not to read too much into

signs of stasis or decline in statewide opt out numbers because those numbers inherently mask the large numbers of new opt out parents who enter the ranks every year.

From a broader perspective, though, the results of this research suggest that individuals who remain fixated on the number of empty seats on test day are perhaps missing the point. While the opt out movement is indeed designed to disrupt standardized testing, its broader motivation is to reconfigure the relationship between parents and their school system. The end goal for many parents is not a particular policy change, but the establishment of a more democratically responsive and legitimate policymaking system—one that gives greater voice to parents, educators, and other community stakeholders. "We're not as concerned with the numbers [of people opting out]," explained one activist. "What we're concerned with is that everybody has informed consent." Another activist echoed this sentiment, saying the ultimate goal is to simply empower parents to be active and attentive participants in the governance of their schools:

> It's [about] getting [parents] access to the information and letting them decide for themselves. It's what do you want for your kid? Because I've always said, I don't care [so much about the tests themselves]. What is it to me if a parent lets their kid take the test? It's more that I want to make sure that that parent at least knows all the information. If they still decide this testing structure and this whole policy is what they want for their kids, that's fine, I'm not going to argue that. But, if you don't like this, I want to teach you how to do something about it…My God, don't let something go on that you don't think is good for your kids just because you don't have the tools or the knowledge, or you're just worried, or insecure, or whatever the case. I wanna make sure every parent knows that they can do something about it…I don't care what you advocate for, I just want parents to be able to do that type of advocating.

Indeed, the findings of Chapter 6 indicate that on this front—the transformation of parent engagement with education politics—the opt out movement has been highly consequential. As a result, it should not be alarming to opt out activists if the opt out movement slowly shifts—as all grassroots movements inevitably do—from a period of activism to a period of latency over the

next few years. For even in its dormancy, the aftershocks of the opt out movement will continue to exert political force as newly empowered and experienced parent activists turn their attention to other issues of importance to them. On the other side of the debate as well, policymakers should not become too complacent if opt out numbers do drop, for those same parents will still be keeping a watchful eye on them, armed with growing political savvy and a readymade infrastructure of activism to draw on in future battles. They will be prepared to remobilize at a moment's notice if policymakers again enact major reforms without first addressing the fundamental concerns parents have about who is making education policy, in whose interests, and for what purposes.

APPENDICES

Note: An online sample version of this survey for can be accessed at
https://msu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0fdidWtQ9U31GHr

Dear [District Name] Parent,

You are being asked to participate in a research survey about parent participation in education politics, including opting out of standardized tests. The survey is sponsored by Michigan State University, and it is being administered in several school districts across New York.

From this survey, we hope to learn more about your views on various education issues. The first portion of this survey will ask about opt out activities and the second portion will ask about political participation habits more generally. The questions in this survey are designed to be interesting and engaging, and we hope every [District Name] parent will complete this survey.

All responses on this survey will remain anonymous. No personally identifiable information will be collected and linked with your responses.

This survey should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete, and the survey will be open until [end date and time]. As a token of appreciation for your time, you will be entered into a random drawing to win one of four $25 Amazon e-giftcards. In order to be eligible for that drawing you must complete the survey in its entirety. You may exit the survey at any time and return to where you left off by simply opening the link again using the same computer or mobile device.

If you have any questions or comments about this research, please do not hesitate to contact the research team directly at EdParticipationResearch@gmail.com.

To begin the survey, click the "Next" button below.

Part I: Parent Status

Preliminary Question: How many children do you currently have enrolled in grades 3-8 in [district name]? (Textbox).

Part II: Opt Out Behavior

Instructions: *These first several questions will ask about your views on the opt out movement. As you may know, many parents in your state have begun opting out their children from standardized tests in recent years. Whether you have heard about the opt out movement or not, we are still interested in your opinions.*

1. Prior to taking this survey, had you heard about parents opting out their children from standardized tests?—Y/N.

2. (If Q1="Yes"): In the past year, have you opted out any of your children from their annual New York State English Language Arts or Mathematics standardized tests in grades 3-8?—Y/N.

3. (If Q2="Yes"): When you opted out, did you opt out all or some of your children?—I opted out all of my children, I opted out some of my children.

4. (If Q2="Yes"): Thinking about the child you have opted out the greatest number of times in their academic career, how many years in the previous five years have you opted out this child?
   - 1
   - 2
   - 3
   - 4
   - 5

5. (If Q2="Yes"): Please share with us why you chose to opt out your child/children from standardized testing. (Textbox).

6. (If Q2="No"): Please share with us why you chose not to opt out your child/children from standardized testing. (Textbox).

7. How likely is it that you will opt out your child/children of standardized testing in the future?—Very likely, Somewhat likely, Somewhat unlikely, Very unlikely.

8. Whether or not you have opted out your own children, have you ever participated in any of the following activities in support of opting out? Select all that apply. If you have not taken any of these actions, leave this question blank and hit the next button.
   o Attended a meeting
   o Taken part in a demonstration or protest (e.g., held a banner, handed out leaflets)
   o Called into a live radio or TV show to express an opinion

- o Contacted a politician or other elected official to express a view
- o Donated money to an opt out cause
- o Joined an email list, an online chat forum, or a blog
- o Posted on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)
- o Raised money for an opt out cause
- o Sent a "letter to the editor" to a newspaper or magazine
- o Signed a petition
- o Tried to convince others to get involved
- o Other (Enter Text)

9. (If Q2="Yes" or number of responses in Q8≥1): Prior to participating in opt out activities, had you ever expressed concerns about standardized testing policies to a local, state, or federal policymaker?—Y/N.

Part III: Motivations for Opt Out Behavior

10. (If Q2="Yes" or number of responses in Q8≥1): People have different reasons for opting out their children or otherwise participating in opt out activities. In this question, we are interested in the main reasons you supported opting out. Please choose up to 10 reasons. (Randomized Order).
    - o I oppose the use of the Common Core State Standards
    - o I oppose the growing role of corporations in education
    - o I oppose the growing role of the federal government in education
    - o I oppose the privatization of schools
    - o I oppose using students' performance on standardized tests to evaluate teachers
    - o Standardized tests are unfair for racial/ethnic minorities
    - o The chance to influence government policy
    - o To improve education in my community or nation
    - o My children asked if they could opt out from standardized tests
    - o My children complained about standardized tests
    - o My children don't do well on standardized tests
    - o I did not want to say no to someone who asked me to participate
    - o Standardized tests force teachers to teach to the test
    - o Standardized tests take away too much instructional time
    - o To gain knowledge of educational issues
    - o To raise awareness about public education
    - o To protect my child's privacy from unwarranted data collection
    - o I find opt out participation exciting
    - o Other (Enter Text)

11. From all the reasons you mentioned, what are the main two reasons? (Carry forth selected answers from Q10).

12. (If Q2="No" and number of responses in Q8=0): People have different reasons for not participating in opt out activities. In this question, we are interested in the main reasons you did not participate. Please choose up to 10 reasons.
    - o I didn't know I could opt out my child/children
    - o I have no problems with standardized testing
    - o My child has never complained about testing
    - o I think tests are an important part of my child's education
    - o Tests help schools/districts judge academic performance
    - o Tests help hold teachers accountable
    - o As one individual, I don't feel I can have an impact
    - o I am afraid I might get in trouble by getting involved
    - o It would be harmful to my child
    - o It would be harmful to my child's school
    - o Opting out is too complicated
    - o I just never thought about being involved
    - o I disagree with the agenda of the opt out movement
    - o I find I don't like the people in the opt out movement
    - o It is not my place to interfere with what goes on in my child's school
    - o Other (Enter Text)

13. From all the reasons you mentioned, what are the main two reasons? (Carry forth selected answers from Q12).

Political Recruitment into the Opt Out Movement

14. (If Q1="Yes"): How did you first hear about opting out?
    - Teachers or other education professionals in your community
    - Friends, neighbors, or relatives
    - Other parents at your child's school
    - School communications such as a web site, email, or newsletter
    - Media (TV, radio, newspaper, etc.)
    - Social media or online (Facebook, Twitter, blog, etc.)
    - My children or their friends
    - Public figure or organization (national, local, or state?)
    - Other (Enter Text)

15. (If Q1="Yes"): Have any of the following individuals ever directly asked you to participate in opt out activities? Select all that apply.
    - o Family member
    - o Friend
    - o Teacher in your child's school
    - o Principal in your child's school
    - o District official or superintendent
    - o Teachers union representative
    - o Other (Enter Text)

16. (If Q1="Yes"): Have you ever been contacted by an organization (like a union or interest group) and directly asked to participate in opt out activities?—Y/N.

17. (If Q16="Yes"): Which organization(s) contacted you to participate? (Textbox).

Part IV: Effects of the Opt Out Movement on Communities and Individuals

Community Effects

18. Some people say that opt out activities have changed education in [district name], sometimes in positive ways and sometimes in negative ways. In your opinion, what effects (if any) have opt out activities had in your district? Please choose up to 5 options below. (Randomized Order).
    o It has raised awareness of education issues
    o It has made district leaders more responsive to parents
    o It has brought new voices into education conversations
    o It has changed policies about testing
    o It has led to less focus on test preparation in schools
    o It has led to less testing
    o It has mobilized parents as a political force
    o It has harmed our ability to know how schools are performing
    o It has hampered the progress of important education reforms
    o It has caused a distraction for teachers
    o It has divided the community
    o It has changed very little about education in my district
    o Other (Enter Text)

Individual Effects

19. (If Q2="Yes" or number of responses in Q8≥1): I have become more politically engaged as a result of my participation in opt out activities.—Agree/Disagree.

20. If Q2="Yes" or number of responses in Q8≥1): I am more knowledgeable about education issues in my community as a result of my participation in opt out activities.—Agree/Disagree.

21. (If Q2="No" and number of responses in Q8=0): I am more knowledgeable about education issues in my community as a result of opt out activities in my district—Agree/Disagree.

Part V: Views on Education Issues

Instructions: These next several questions ask for your views on a number of education issues.

22. Compared with other political issues like taxes, healthcare, and national security, how important is the issue of education to you personally?—Extremely important, Very important, Somewhat important, Not too important, or Not important at all.

Support for Education Reforms

Using a 1 to 5 scale, where 1 is "strongly oppose," 5 is "strongly favor," and 3 is "neither favor nor oppose," please tell us how strongly you favor or oppose the following education policy proposals:

23. Charter schools receive public funding but operate under a contract that exempts them from many state regulations. How do you feel about policies to expand the number of charter schools in New York?

24. The Common Core is a set of national curriculum standards for teaching reading, writing, and math in kindergarten through 12th grade. How do you feel about having teachers in New York use the Common Core?

25. In recent years, many states have linked teacher pay with student achievement, including performance on standardized tests. How do you feel about linking teacher pay to student achievement in New York?

Views on Education Governance

26. Which of the following should have the most influence setting policies for K-12 public education—The U.S. federal government, The state of New York, or Your local school board?

Views on Standardized Testing

27. Over the last decade there has been a significant increase in testing in the public schools to measure academic achievement. In your opinion, has increased testing helped, hurt, or made no difference in the performance of the local public schools?—Helped, Hurt, Made No Difference, Don't Know.

28. In your opinion, is there too much emphasis on standardized testing in the public schools in your community, not enough emphasis on testing, or about the right amount?—Too much, Not enough, About the right amount, Don't Know.

29. In your opinion, which of the following approaches would provide the most accurate picture of a student's academic progress? Select all that apply.
    o Examples of the student's work
    o Written observations by the teacher
    o Grades awarded by the teacher
    o Scores on standardized achievement tests

o Other (Enter Text)

30. In your opinion, which of the following approaches would provide the most accurate picture of a teacher's performance? Select all that apply.
   o Principal observations
   o Parent feedback
   o Student feedback
   o Observations by a district official
   o Student scores on standardized achievement tests
   o Other (Enter Text)

31. Do you think that all parents with children in New York public schools should be allowed to opt out their children from the annual New York State English Language Arts and Mathematics standardized tests in grades 3-8?—Yes, No, Unsure/Don't know.

Part VI: Political Trust & Estrangement

Trust in Government

Instructions: These next questions ask about your views on various political institutions. These questions don't refer to particular politicians or political parties, but just to government institutions in general.

32. How much of the time do you think you can trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right—Just about always, Most of the time, Only some of the time, or None of the time?

33. How much of the time do you think you can trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right *with regard to education specifically*—Just about always, Most of the time, Only some of the time, or None of the time?

34. How much of the time do you think you can trust the state government in Albany to do what is right—Just about always, Most of the time, Only some of the time, or None of the time?

35. How much of the time do you think you can trust the state government in Albany to do what is right *with regard to education specifically*—Just about always, Most of the time, Only some of the time, or None of the time?

36. How much of the time do you think you can trust the local school board in [district name] to do what is right—Just about always, Most of the time, Only some of the time, or None of the time?

Political Estrangement

Instructions: For these next three questions, please tell us if you agree or disagree with the following statements.

37. When I think about the federal government in Washington, I don't feel as if it's my government—A/D.

38. When I think about the state government in Albany, I don't feel as if it's my government—A/D.

39. When I think about the school board in [district name], I don't feel as if it's my government—A/D.

Part VII: Political Background and Behavior

Ideological Leanings

40. How would you classify your political views? Please use a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is extremely liberal, 4 is middle of the road, and 7 is extremely conservative:
    - 1 Extremely liberal
    - 2
    - 3
    - 4 Middle of the Road
    - 5
    - 6
    - 7 Extremely conservative

41. Generally speaking do you think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent or something else?—Republican, Democrat, Independent, or Something Else.

Political Interest

42. How interested are you in national politics and national affairs?—Very Interested, Somewhat Interested, Slightly Interested, or Not At All Interested.

43. Thinking about the state of New York, how interested are you in state politics and state affairs? —Very Interested, Somewhat Interested, Slightly Interested, or Not At All Interested.

44. Thinking about your local community, how interested are you in local community politics and local community affairs?—Very Interested, Somewhat Interested, Slightly Interested, or Not At All Interested.

Political Efficacy

45. If you had some complaint about a *local government* activity and took that complaint to a member of the local government council, how much attention do you think he/she would pay to it?—No attention at all, Very little attention, Some attention, or A lot of attention.

46. If you had some complaint about a *state government* activity and took that complaint to a member of the state government, how much attention do you think he/she would pay to it?—No attention at all, Very little attention, Some attention, or A lot of attention.

47. If you had some complaint about a *national government* activity and took that complaint to a member of the national government, how much attention do you think he/she would pay to it?—No attention at all, Very little attention, Some attention, or A lot of attention.

48. How much influence do you think someone like you can have over *local* government decisions?—None at all, Very little, Some, or A lot.

49. How much influence do you think someone like you can have over *state* government decisions?—None at all, Very little, Some, or A lot.

50. How much influence do you think someone like you can have over *national* government decisions?—None at all, Very little, Some, or A lot.

Political Activity Index

51. In the past twelve months (since July 2016), have you engaged in any of the following political activities—Y/N.
    a. Voted in the 2016 presidential election, in which the candidates were Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump?
    b. Worked as a volunteer for a candidate running for national, state, or local office?
    c. Contributed money to an individual candidate, a party group, a political action committee, or any other organization that supported candidates?
    d. Been a member of or contributed money (not including union membership dues) to an organization that sometimes takes stands on public issues?
    e. Served on any official local government board or council such as a town council, a school board, a zoning board, a planning board, or the like?
    f. Attended a meeting of a local government board or council?
    g. Contacted by email, mail, phone, or in person any elected official at the federal, state, or local level?
    h. Taken part in a protest, march, or other demonstration on some national or local issue (other than activities related to opt out)?

Part VIII: Local Opt Out Context

Perceptions of Institutional Support for Opting Out

<u>Instructions</u>: *Please tell us if you agree or disagree with the following statements.*

52. The teachers in my district are supportive of the right of parents to opt out of standardized testing—Agree/Disagree/Don't Know.

53. The school board in my community is supportive of the right of parents to opt out of standardized testing—Agree/Disagree/Don't Know.

54. The superintendent in my district is supportive of the right of parents to opt out of standardized testing—Agree/Disagree/Don't Know.

55. The teachers union in my district is supportive of the right of parents to opt out of standardized testing—Agree/Disagree/Don't Know.

56. Officials in my district have articulated clear policies regarding the right of parents to opt out of standardized testing—Agree/Disagree/Don't Know.

Perceptions of Opt Out Strength

57. Just your best guess, what percentage of [district name] students in grades 3-8 opted out of their annual New York State English Language Arts or Mathematics standardized test this year?
    o   0-25%
    o   26-50%
    o   51-75%
    o   76-100%

District Responsiveness

58. How much attention do you feel the leaders in [district name] pay to what the people think when deciding what to do—Not much, Some, or A good deal?

Views of School Performance

59. On an A to F scale, what grade would you give the public school your oldest child attends?—A,B,C,D, or F.

60. On an A to F scale, what grade would you give the public schools in [district name] as a whole?—A, B, C, D, or F.

61. On an A to F scale, what grade would you give the public schools in the state of New York as a whole?—A, B, C, D, or F.

62. On an A to F scale, what grade would you give the public schools in the United States as a whole?—A, B, C, D, or F.

Part IX: Demographics

Instructions: *These last questions ask about various aspects of your demographic background. These questions are for research and classification purposes only.*

63. What is your gender?—Male/Female/Other/Prefer not to say.

64. What year were you born? (Textbox).

65. What racial/ethnic group best describes you? Select all that apply.
    o   American Indian/Alaska Native
    o   Asian
    o   Black/African American
    o   Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
    o   Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
    o   White/Caucasian
    o   Other

66. What is the primary language spoken in your home?
    - English
    - Spanish
    - Other (Enter Text)

67. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
    - Less than high school
    - High school
    - Associate/community college/nursing degree
    - Some college but not degree
    - Bachelor's degree
    - Graduate degree

68. Do you work in the K-12 education field as a teacher, educator, counselor, school administrator, or district official?—Y/N.

69. Does anyone in your close circle of family or friends work in the K-12 education field?—Y/N.

70. Considering all sources of income and salaries, what was your household's total annual income in 2016?
    - 0 - $19,999
    - $20,000 - $29,999
    - $30,000 - $39,999
    - $40,000 - $49,999
    - $50,000 - $59,999
    - $60,000 - $69,999

- $70,000 - $79,999
- $80,000 - $89,999
- $90,000 - $99,999
- $100,000 - $124,999
- $125,000 - $149,999
- $150,000 or more

Part X: Final Comments, Gift Cards, and Focus Groups

71. Are there any final comments or feedback you would like to provide prior to completing this survey? (Textbox).

72. You have reached the end of the survey. Before you exit, we would like to enter you into a raffle to win one of four $25 Amazon e-giftcards as a token of gratitude for your time. If you would like to be entered into the raffle, please enter your email address in the textbox below so we can contact you if you win. (Textbox).

73. The research team would also like to invite you to participate in a one-hour focus group discussion to be conducted in September. All participants in the focus group will receive a $50 cash award. If you would be interested in participating in this opportunity, please select the appropriate option below and provide an email address where you can be reached. A member of the research team will follow up with you sometime before August 31, 2017. In the meantime, you can always contact the research team directly at EdParticipationResearch@gmail.com.
    - Yes, I would be interested in participating in a focus group. The research team can contact me at the email address below (Textbox).
    - No, I am not interested in participating in a focus group.

APPENDIX B:
Opt Out Parent Focus Group Protocol

Hello, and welcome to today's focus group. My name is David Casalaspi from Michigan State University, and I'm going to be facilitating today's discussion. I first want to thank you all for taking the time to come out today. As you should already know, the purpose of this focus group is to better understand how parents think about various education issues here in [District Name], including standardized testing and decisions to opt out your children specifically. You've been invited here today because all of you have opted out your children in recent years, and I want to hear what you all as parents think about some of these issues. As parents, you have valuable knowledge and experiences when it comes to these issues, and I want to hear any insights you have.

Ground Rules

There are a few ground rules for today's discussion that I want to establish before we begin. The first is that I would like for you to do the talking today. I will try to stay out of the discussion as much as I can, interjecting only when I want to understand more details or need to change the topic of conversation. I also would like to hear from all of you throughout the session, so I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.

Second, for all of the questions you'll be discussing today, you are encouraged to talk about your different experiences and opinions. In fact, I want to hear your differences of opinion. So, if someone says something and you think "that's not how I feel," then please speak up. There are no wrong answers, and sometimes the differences of opinion that emerge are in fact the most helpful insights.

Third, you may have noticed the microphone on the table. I'm going to be recording this session because I don't want to miss any of your comments. People often say valuable things in these discussions and I can't write fast enough to get them all down. Because I am recording, though, it's important that we take turns talking and don't talk over each other.

Also, we will be on a first name basis here today, but I want to remind you that your names will not be used in any future reports of this focus group which will be presented to [district name] or published in any research. Your complete confidentiality is assured.

Altogether, this focus group should take about 60 minutes, after which you'll receive $50 for your participation. Due to our time constraints, there may be times where I will need to apologize and break into the conversation.

Before we get started, does anyone have any questions? If not, we can go ahead and get started.

Ice-Breaker Question

I'd like to first find out more about each of you, so if you could tell us your name and how long you've lived in [district name], that would be great.

Part I: Motivations for Participating (30 minutes)

1. What do you believe is your role as a parent with regard to the education of your children? Do you think that parents should be heavily engaged in the discussion about education policies, or do you feel that parents should leave this to policymakers and education professionals?

2. I'm curious what your views are on the issue of standardized testing. Do you tend to support standardized testing? Oppose it?
   a. Where did you get your information?
   b. The Regents exams and AP exams are standardized tests. Do you support those tests? Why or why not?

3. Why have you chosen to opt out your children?
   a. So why did you choose to opt out your children as opposed to pursue change through more traditional channels, like electing new officials or writing letters to policymakers?

4. Has any person or group ever asked you to opt out your children? If so, who? And did this affect your decision to opt out?

5. Why do you think the opt out rates in your community are so high/low compared to the rest of the state?

6. Some people say that officials at the state level can't be trusted on the issue of education. How about you? Do you feel you can generally trust policymakers in Albany to do what is right for education? Why or why not?
   a. What about the federal government? Can you trust them with regard to education?
   b. Do you feel connected to the governments in Albany and Washington? Do you tend to feel like an outsider?

Part II: Effects of the Opt Out Movement (30 minutes)

1. Do you feel that the opt out movement has changed education policies in your district? What effect do you think opting out has had on your district? On New York?

2. What effects do you think the opt out movement has had on the [district name] community? Has it brought the community together or divided it? Has it promoted greater parent engagement with education?

3. Do you feel that the opt out movement has had any impact on you personally? For example, has it helped you become more knowledgeable about education issues? Has it made you more engaged politically on education issues? Can you provide examples?

Hello, and welcome to today's focus group. My name is David Casalaspi from Michigan State University, and I'm going to be facilitating today's discussion. I first want to thank you all for taking the time to come out today. As you should already know, the purpose of this focus group is to better understand how parents think about various education issues here in [District Name], including standardized testing. You've been invited here today because all of you have chosen not to opt out your children in recent years, and I want to hear what you all as parents think about some of these issues. As parents, you have valuable knowledge and experiences when it comes to these issues, and I want to hear any insights you have.

Ground Rules

There are a few ground rules for today's discussion that I want to establish before we begin. The first is that I would like for you to do the talking today. I will try to stay out of the discussion as much as I can, interjecting only when I want to understand more details or need to change the topic of conversation. I also would like to hear from all of you throughout the session, so I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.

Second, for all of the questions you'll be discussing today, you are encouraged to talk about your different experiences and opinions. In fact, I want to hear your differences of opinion. So, if someone says something and you think "that's not how I feel," then please speak up. There are no wrong answers, and sometimes the differences of opinion that emerge are in fact the most helpful insights.

Third, you may have noticed the microphone on the table. I'm going to be recording this session because I don't want to miss any of your comments. People often say valuable things in these discussions and I can't write fast enough to get them all down. Because I am recording, though, it's important that we take turns talking and don't talk over each other.

Also, we will be on a first name basis here today, but I want to remind you that your names will not be used in any future reports of this focus group which will be presented to [district name] or published in any research. Your complete confidentiality is assured.

Altogether, this focus group should take about 60 minutes, after which you'll receive $50 for your participation. Due to our time constraints, there may be times where I will need to apologize and break into the conversation.

Before we get started, does anyone have any questions? If not, we can go ahead and get started.

Ice-Breaker Question

I'd like to first find out more about each of you, so if you could tell us your name and how long you've lived in Somerville, that would be great.

Part I: Motivations for Not Participating (30 minutes)

7. What do you believe is your role as a parent with regard to the education of your children? Do you think that parents should be heavily engaged in the discussion about education policies, or do you feel that parents should leave this to policymakers and education professionals?

8. I'm curious what your views are on the issue of standardized testing. Do you tend to support standardized testing? Oppose it?
    a. Where did you get this information?
    b. Some people see a difference between the NYS tests and other types of standardized tests, like Regents exams and AP exams. Do you see differences among the tests? Why or why not?

9. Why have you chosen not to opt out your children? According to the survey pretty much everyone had heard about opting out, so why did you all choose not to do it?

10. If you had a problem with something about education policy, how would you handle it?

11. Has any person or group ever asked you to opt out your children? If so, who? And did this affect your decision to opt out?

12. Why do you think the opt out rates in your community are so high/low compared to the rest of the state?

13. Some people say that officials at the state level can't be trusted on the issue of education. How about you? Do you feel you can generally trust policymakers in Albany to do what is right for education? Why or why not?
    a. What about the federal government? Can you trust them with regard to education?
    b. Do you feel connected to the governments in Albany and Washington? Do you tend to feel like an outsider?

Part II: Effects of the Opt Out Movement (30 minutes)

4. Do you feel that the opt out movement has changed education policies in your district? What effect do you think opting out has had on your district? On New York?

5. What effects do you think the opt out movement has had on the [district name] community? Has it brought the community together or divided it? Has it promoted greater parent engagement with education?

6. Do you feel that the opt out movement has had any impact on you personally? For example, has it helped you become more knowledgeable about education issues? Has it made you more engaged politically on education issues? Can you provide examples?

Hello, [NAME]. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. As I mentioned, this interview should take between 45 minutes and an hour. Most of these questions are going to deal with opt out activities in your district. All questions are optional, so if you don't feel like answering a question, just let me know, and we can skip it. Just as a reminder, all responses you provide today will be confidential and your name or your districts name will not be used in any reports of this work. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. First, can you briefly describe your role in [School District Name]? What is your professional background in education and how did you come to work in the district?

2. When did opt out activities first arise in your district? Or when did you first become aware of them?
    a. What happened that made you aware of them?
    b. Prior to the emergence of opt out activities, were you aware of complaints about standardized testing from parents in your district?

RQ3: Why?

1. What motivations do you think people have for participating in opt out activities? What are their goals and what are they trying to accomplish?
    a. Are people motivated primarily by individual concerns about their own children, or are they more motivated by broader political concerns about the direction of education reforms writ large?
    b. Have the goals of opt out activities changed over time?
2. Would you say that the people in your district trust the direction the leadership in Albany is taking with regard to education? Why or why not?

RQ1: Who?

1. Who would you say the main actors are in the opt out movement in your district?
2. From your perspective, what types of people participate in opt out activities?
    a. Do people who opt out of testing represent a general cross-section of your district? Or are opt out participants different from nonparticipants? That is, do different types of people tend to participate in opt out activities compared to those who do not?
        i. Follow up prompts: Are opt out activists mainly parents? Educators? Political liberals or conservatives? Members of particular demographic groups (i.e. wealthier people, poorer people)?
    b. Are opt out activists usually the same people who would be politically active in other ways in your district (like attending school board meetings, contacting the

district with concerns, etc.)? Or do they appear to be newly activated people who weren't active before?

RQ2: Where?

3. Would you say that opt out activities have been a significant presence in your district?
    c. Why do you think the opt out movement has been so [Active/Limited] in your district?
    d. What characteristics of your district, if any, do you think contribute to this active/limited engagement?

RQ4: To What Effect?

1. How have opt out parents presented their concerns to officials in your district? Have they reached out directly to district officials or attended local school board meetings? Or have they primarily been operating outside existing institutional channels?

2. What effect has opt out activism has had on education discussions and policies in your district?
    a. Has opt out activism elevated the level of discussion around education issues?
    b. Has your district implemented any new policies or programs in response to opt out activities?
        i. Are there policies you wish you could enact but can't due to state regulations?

3. Personally speaking, would you describe yourself as generally supportive of the right of parents to opt out of standardized testing, or do you tend to oppose it?
    a. Given your support, have you ever taken steps to encourage opt out activities in your district? If so, what have you done?
    b. Given your opposition, have you ever taken steps to temper opt out activities in your district? If so, what have you done?
        i. How would you prefer constituents express their concerns or opinions about education issues instead?

4. What about the teachers and administrators in your district? Are they generally supportive of the right of parents to opt out?
    a. What about the teachers union? How have they viewed opt out activities in your district?
    b. Have you advised the teachers and administrators in your district how to respond to test refusal?

5. Have you been advised by officials at the state level about how to deal with test refusal in your district? If so, how were you advised to respond to it?
    a. Did you follow that advice? Why or why not?

6. What effect has opt out activism had on education politics in the State of New York? Do you feel opt out activism has had much effect on the direction of *state* education policymaking? If yes, can you provide examples of specific changes that have occurred?

7. How, if at all, has opt out activism changed what *you* do in your professional role as [INSERT ROLE]?

8. Final question: What are your predictions about test refusal in future years? Do you anticipate it remaining a significant feature of education life in your district or do you think it will temper out?

APPENDIX E:
Parent Activist Interview Protocol

Hello, NAME. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. As I mentioned, this interview should take between 45 minutes and an hour. All of these questions will deal with your experiences as an opt out activist in [district name]. All questions are optional, so if you don't feel like answering a question, just let me know, and we can skip it. Just as a reminder, all responses you provide today will be confidential and your name won't not be used in any reports of this work that I might produce. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Part I: Personal Background

1. First, could you briefly tell me a bit about your background as it relates to education? How long have you lived in your district and what's your relationship to the school systems there?

2. When did you first get involved with the opt out movement? What motivated you to become so active on this issue?
   a. Did you decide to get involved on your own, or did someone ask you to get involved?
   b. Was there a particular moment that made you decide to get involved?
   c. Why did you decide to opt out instead of pursue change through a more traditional channels, like lobbying your assemblymen or the governor?

Part II: Motivations

3. What's your driving motivation as an opt out activist? What are you fighting for through your work with the opt out movement?
   a. Have your motivations for participation changed over time? If so, what accounts for this?

4. What would an improved education system look like to you? If you could be in charge of the education system in New York for a day, what changes would you make?

5. When you first started opting out did you find that your peers were generally supportive of your efforts, or were people skeptical at first?
   a. Have you sensed that there's a lot of pressure in your community to opt out? Is your social network generally supportive of your position?

Part III: Activities and Organization

6. What sort of activities have you organized over the past few years? Could you just give me a quick list of the array of activities you organized? This can include things like

demonstrations, letter writing campaigns, blogging, petition drives, information sessions, etc.

    a. Which activities seem to be the most effective in mobilizing people on this issue?

7. Has your organization targeted any specific outreach operations for communities of color? (African American, Hispanic, Asian)

8. Would you say that the educators in your area have been supportive of the opt out movement? Why or why not? Have you reached out to them?

    b. What about the teachers union? Have you formed any alliances with them on this issue?

9. Has your organization worked to form partnerships with any other community organizations in the region or state?

    a. How was this alliance formed?
    b. What is the current status of these alliances? Do you have plans to continue these relationships in the future?
    c. How often do you communicate with these partners?
    d. Have you reached out to policymakers?

Part IV: Community Effects

10. How have local education leaders (superintendents and school board members) in your area responded to the opt out movement? Have some been more supportive than others? Can you provide any illustrations of some people who were supportive or were not supportive? Have levels of support changed over time?

11. Do you feel that the opt out movement has influenced the political discussion around education issues in your area? If so, how?

    a. Do you feel that district officials have generally been responsive to the concerns of the opt out movement?

12. What about at the state level? Do you feel that the opt out movement has had much of an impact on education policy at the state level? What challenges do you still face?

13. Do you feel that the opt out movement has activated new community members who otherwise would not be involved in education issues? If so, why do you think it has been so effective at doing this?

Part V: Individual Effects

14. Prior to getting involved with the opt out movement, were you much of a political activist before?

    a. Were you an active member of your school community? Did you ever attend school board meetings, write letters to your local board or assemblyman, volunteer at events, etc.?

15. Today, what sort of political activities do you participate in outside of the opt out movement? Has your participation in the opt out movement motivated you to get involved in other issues or campaigns?

16. How has your involvement in the opt out movement changed you personally, if at all?
    a. Has it changed your perspective on education issues?
    b. Has it changed your relationship with your schools or government?
    c. Has it changed your notion of what engaged parenting looks like?
    d. Have you met new people?

17. What goals do you have for the opt out movement going forward? What challenges do you foresee?

APPENDIX F:
Correlations Amongst Variables (Statewide Dataset)

Table 7.2a:

Correlations Amongst Variables (State Dataset)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
ELARefuse (1)	1.000													
Enroll (2)	0.156	1.000												
Nonwhite (3)	-0.011	0.467	1.000											
FRLpct (4)	-0.365	-0.009	0.183	1.000										
Dispct (5)	-0.093	-0.037	0.183	0.228	1.000									
Grade4ELAProf (6)	0.204	0.035	-0.038	-0.746	-0.306	1.000								
Sanderspct (7)	-0.210	-0.324	-0.556	0.422	-0.001	-0.446	1.000							
Trumppct (8)	0.441	0.188	0.390	-0.271	-0.046	0.227	-0.484	1.000						
Presturnout (9)	-0.174	-0.070	-0.269	0.114	0.031	-0.133	0.442	-0.473	1.000					
Age (10)	0.054	-0.299	-0.325	-0.220	-0.107	0.156	0.092	0.041	0.094	1.000				
Homeownership (11)	0.210	-0.285	-0.419	-0.441	-0.158	0.312	-0.048	0.120	-0.109	0.524	1.000			
Marriage (12)	0.123	-0.168	-0.270	-0.549	-0.155	0.440	-0.252	0.167	-0.122	0.521	0.644	1.000		
Teachprop (13)	-0.080	-0.160	-0.188	-0.082	-0.075	0.155	0.015	-0.029	0.004	0.302	0.307	0.399	1.000	
Teachexp (14)	0.150	0.071	-0.026	-0.247	-0.207	0.284	-0.114	0.108	-0.032	0.094	0.111	0.116	-0.082	1.000

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