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Examining the Actor Coalitions and Discourse Coalitions
of the Opt-Out Movement in New York:
A Discourse Network Analysis

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Abstract

Background/Context: Since 2013, opting out of state standardized tests has become a movement—the grassroots, organized efforts to refuse to take high-stakes state standardized tests. In particular, the opt-out rates in the state of New York has been consistently fluctuating around 20%.

Purpose/Objective: This study aims to examine the actor coalitions and discourse coalitions that have propelled the opt-out movement in the state of New York—the movement’s epicenter with the highest opt-out rate in the United States.

Conceptual framework: This study is conceptually grounded in the advocacy coalition framework, a prominent conceptual lens to investigate coalition formation and their impact on policymaking. The advocacy coalition framework posits that advocacy coalitions are forged by policy actors who have similar policy preferences. By contrast, the differences in policy preferences are manifested in the discourse that serves to defend or propose coherent arguments as justifications for policy preferences held by the opposition coalitions.

Data Collection and Analysis: This study compiled the Opt-out Discourse Data Set by using the data from 323 press coverage and 52 archival documents from 2015 to 2018. Each news coverage or archival document was coded by three variables: movement actors, statements articulated by the actors, and the actors’ sentiment toward the statements. An actor-statement bipartite network, an actor coalition network, and a discourse coalition network were created, respectively. Next, Freeman degree centrality was calculated to identify major actors and their statements. The network metrics of density and connectedness of the two competing coalitions were calculated to compare the coalitions’ network structure.

Findings: In the actor coalition network, the movement advocacy coalition is clearly more dominant than the movement opposition coalition in terms of the number of actors, coalition density, and coalition connectedness. The discourse coalition network shows similar patterns: the movement advocacy coalition is dominant, as evidenced by the numbers of nodes in each coalition, and the network metrics of coalition density and connectedness.

Significance: The findings have substantial methodological and policy implications. Methodologically, this article demonstrates a network analytical approach to examine qualitative data in education research. The discourse network approach is particularly instrumental in explaining a policy output by identifying coalitions and their interactions within and across the coalitions. Regarding policy implications, this study concludes with a discussion on how the future of the opt-out movement is subject to (1) how the movement advocacy coalition continues to amass power and influence in education policymaking, and (2) how the New York State Education Department exercises its power over the ESSA implementation.

Keywords: advocacy coalition framework; Common Core State Standards; discourse network analysis; education policy; network analysis; opt-out movement; policymaking; social movement; social networks; standardized testing

Examining the Actor Coalitions and Discourse Coalitions
of the Opt-Out Movement in New York:

A Discourse Network Analysis

The purpose of this study is to examine the actor coalitions and discourse coalitions that have propelled the opt-out movement in the state of New York. Since the sweeping adoption of the Common Core State Standards in 2009 across the states, the Common Core and its implementation have met with growing resistance to high-stakes standardized testing (Hagopian, 2014). This resistance from education stakeholders (e.g., teachers, students, and parents) have grown into a movement to opt out of standardized testing (Wang, 2017). For teachers, the rise of the Badass Teachers Association was prompted by the shared belief held by those who “refuse to be blamed for the failure of our society to erase poverty and inequality, and refuse to accept assessments, tests and evaluations imposed by those who have contempt for real teaching and learning” (The Badass Teachers Association, 2013, para. 4). The students in the Portland Student Union led a campaign of opting out of standardized testing (Garcia, 2014). The parent, Jeannette Deutermann, started the Facebook group of the Long Island Opt Out Info which attracted hundreds of group members within the first week (Deutermann, 2014). On another social media website Twitter, Twitter users from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, according to over half of a million tweets with the hashtags #CommonCore and #CCSS from 2014 to 2015, expressed overwhelmingly negative sentiment towards the Common Core; the hashtag #OptOut was one of the most frequently used hashtags in their discourse of the Common Core (Wang & Fikis, 2017). Further, the 2016 PKD/Gallup poll showed that nearly half (43%) of the public school parents supported opting out, suggesting a remarkable increase from 31% in the previous year of 2015 (Phi Delta Kappa International, 2015, 2016). Nationally, over 670,000 students

opted out of high-stakes standardized tests in 2015 (FairTest, 2016). The 2017 PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools indicates that only 19% of public school parents were confident that standardized testing measured how well their children were learning, and only 13% of the public considered test scores as an extremely important indicator of school quality (Kappan, 2017). Opting out has become a movement—the grassroots, organized efforts to refuse to take high-stakes standardized tests (Bennett, 2016).

The state of New York, with the highest opt-out rate in the nation, has been the epicenter of the opt-out movement (Wang, 2017). In New York, the Common Core State Standards were adopted in 2010. New York became one of the first states to administer the Common Core-aligned tests in 2013. Then in 2014, approximately 60,000 students opted out of the state standardized tests. In 2015, unprecedentedly 20% (approximately 200,000) of eligible students in grades 3-8 opted out of the New York State Assessment (Ujifusa, 2015). This record-breaking opt-out rate was shattered again in 2016, when 21% of students (approximately 230,000) opted out of the state standardized tests (The New York State Education Department, 2016). The New York State Education Department responded to the opt-out movement by changing some policies on standardized testing, including (1) shortening state tests by cutting the number of questions, (2) removing test time limits for students, (3) having teachers review the tests, and (4) imposing a four-year moratorium on using test results to evaluate teachers and principals (The New York State Education Department, 2015). In March 2016, three new members to the state Board of Regents were elected to join the 17-member board, and the newly elected Regents Chancellor Betty Rosa even offered verbal support for the opt-out movement in 2016 by telling *The Wall Street Journal* reporter, “If I was a parent and I had a child who was taking these exams, and I looked at the conditions that exist, obviously I would say yes, I would opt out” (The New York

Daily News, 2016, para. 4). In 2017, the opt-out rate dropped to 19% in New York (Samsel, 2017). In 2018, despite a slight decline of the opt-out rate to 18%, the number of students who opted out of the New York State Assessment was still over 210,000 (Hildebrand, 2018b).

Given New York as the opt-out movement's epicenter, this study is particularly interested in who were the movement actors, and how the actors forged coalitions through their views and beliefs about the movement documented in public discourse. To do so, this study first draws on the conceptual lens of the advocacy coalition framework, and then connects the conceptual framework to the methodological approach by applying discourses network analysis—an emerging, alternative analytical approach built on content analysis and network analysis (Leifeld, 2017)—to uncover the actor coalitions and discourse coalitions of the opt-out movement. Specifically, this study seeks to answer two research questions:

- Who were the central actors in the opt-out movement in the state of New York?
- How did the central actors' views and beliefs on the opt-out movement facilitate the formation of coalitions in the movement?

Advocacy Coalition Framework

This study is conceptually grounded in the advocacy coalition framework, a prominent conceptual lens to investigate coalition formation and their impact on policymaking (Ingold, 2011). The advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier & Weible, 2007) argues that advocacy coalitions are forged by policy actors who have similar policy preferences. Take climate change as an example. The coalitions of climate change issues emerged from the actors' consensus view of economic implications of regulating greenhouse gases and the policy instrument for regulation (Fisher, Leifeld, & Iwaki, 2013). In education, the opposition coalition of the Common Core State Standards forged around (1) views about President Obama, (2)

testing, and (3) misconceptions and negative conceptions about the standards (Polikoff, Hardaway, Marsh, & Plank, 2016). These similar policy preferences function as the “glue” holding coalitions together (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). By contrast, the differences in policy preferences are manifested in the discourse that serves to defend or propose coherent arguments as justifications for policy preferences held by the opposition coalitions (Hajer, 1993, 1995). As a result, the advocacy coalition framework views the policy process as a competition between coalitions of policy actors who advocate their beliefs about policy problems and policy solutions.

Policy actors make public statements about a policy in order to signal their policy preferences to potential allies, convince other actors to adopt their policy preferences, or reduce their uncertainty by learning from other actors. A coalition is thus emerged as policy actors share their policy preferences (Sabatier, 1998). Over time, the similar policy preferences prompt policy actors to engage in a coordinated activity (Zafonte & Sabatier, 1998). For instance, in the social networks accounting for the rise of civil society in Mexico, the coalition was established as the actors (i.e., workers, peasants, students, civic associations, and non-governmental organizations) shared their policy preferences and then co-participated in protest campaigns together (Wada, 2014). In the networks of reading curriculum policymaking, the coalition emerged as the actors (e.g., educational organizations, school districts, business or businesses associations, private reading consultants, and philanthropic foundations) shared their policy preferences, and then collaborated over the policymaking process (Song & Miskel, 2005, 2007; Song & Yong, 2008; Yong, Wang, & Lewis, 2016). In the case of the opt-out movement, the New York State Education Department and the U.S. Department of Education shared a consensus view of sanctioning districts with a high opt-out rate. Their shared view led to the coordination that the U.S. Department of Education urged the New York State Education Department to sanction local

education agencies with a high opt-out rate (i.e., exceeding 5%), and the New York State Education Department later punished the schools with the high opt-out rate by withholding grants (The Lockport Union-Sun & Journal, 2016). Moreover, the teachers' union and the Long Island Opt Out group shared a consensus view that standardized testing does not accurately reflect learning or student achievement. This shared view prompted them to engage in the coordinated activity that the teachers' union joined a Long Island Opt Out group's event and distributed the fliers about opting out (Ferrette, 2016).

Applying the advocacy coalition framework to the opt-out movement, the interdependent relationships among movement actors and their views and beliefs can be conceptualized as networks. In such networks, movement actors are connected by their articulated views and beliefs about the opt-out movement. Movement actors within the coalition tend to hold similar views and present similar arguments; those who hold divergent views and present dissimilar arguments tend to forge competing coalitions. Thus, if we can detect the groups of movement actors based on their coherent arguments as justifications for or opposition to the opt-out movement, we can then identify the coalitions in the movement.

Methods

Grounded in the advocacy coalition framework, to uncover the actor coalitions and discourse coalitions of the opt-out movement, this study used the data collected from press coverage and archival documents to conduct discourse network analysis. Here I present in detail the data collection procedures and analytic strategies used in this study.

Data sources

Data for this study came from 323 press coverage and 52 archival documents on the opt-out movement in New York from 2015 to 2018. The opt-out rate in New York has been the

highest in the country since the beginning of the movement; therefore, the movement in New York has garnered much media attention. A total of 323 press coverage is the primary data source for this study. This is because “media attention helps to define public understanding of a movement itself—who its leaders are, what it wants, and how it seeks to bring about social change” (Andrews & Caren, 2010, p. 841), rendering press coverage the well-suited data source to fulfill the purpose of this study. To collect the press coverage on the movement, the keywords “opt out,” “education,” and “New York” were used to set up Google Alerts to monitor and archive the press coverage of the movement on a daily basis from January 1, 2016 to December 31, 2018. The press coverage includes national liberal (e.g., *The New York Times*), centrist (e.g., *Cable News Network*), and conservative (e.g., *Fox News*) sources, as well as local sources such as *The Long Island Press*.

Next, the press coverage data on the opt-out movement were supplemented by 52 publicly available archival documents, adding to the reliability and credibility of the findings from this study. The documents were identified and included in this study if (1) their hyperlinks were inserted by the press coverage online, (2) the Google searches by the document names mentioned in the press coverage directed the researcher to where the documents were published online, and (3) they were germane to the opt-out movement in New York. By doing so, the archival documents were downloaded from the websites of an array of organizations (e.g., the U.S. Department of Education and the New York State Education Department) and groups (e.g., the United Opt Out, the Long Island Opt-out, and The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights). Together, the 323 press coverage and 52 archival documents make up the Opt-out Discourse Data Set.

Discourse Network Analysis

Discourse network analysis is a methodological advancement, offering a network analytical approach to investigate qualitative discourse data (Leifeld, 2017). A Java-based software called Discourse Network Analyzer was used to analyze the Opt-out Discourse Data Set in this study. Here I discuss in detail how the Discourse Data Set was analyzed.

Each news coverage or archival document in the Data Set was coded by three variables. First, the *actor* $a \in A = \{a_1, a_2, \dots, a_m\}$ is the person or organization who reveals their views and beliefs about the opt-out movement. According to the Opt-out Discourse Data Set, the policy actors of the opt-out movement fall into two groups: the movement supporters and opponents based on their views about the movement revealed in the Discourse Data Set.

Second, the *statement* $s \in S = \{s_1, s_2, \dots, s_n\}$ is a statement relevant to the opt-out movement articulated by the movement actors (Leifeld, 2013). For example, many movement supporters articulated the statement that “Parents’ right of opting out should be protected” (Statement 11). A full list of 15 statements coded in the Discourse Data Set is shown in the Appendix.

The third variable in each statement consists of the *agreement* relationship $r \in R = \{r_1, r_2\}$, where r is usually a dichotomous variable which captures the movement actors’ sentiment toward the statement (Leifeld, 2017). Specifically, r_1 is positive (1) if the actor refers to the statement in an affirmative way; r_2 is negative (-1) if the actor rejects the statement or uses a negative connotation. For example, regarding Statement 8 (States should sanction the districts and schools with a high opt-out rate.), the U.S. Department of Education agreed with the statement, whereas the New York State Allies for Public Education disagreed. The distinction between the positive and negative sentiment towards a statement is valuable, because it reveals

competing coalitions (e.g., the U.S. Department of Education vs. the New York State Allies for Public Education) revolving around a statement. Another example is Statement 1: Standardized testing is part of the punitive system imposed on students and teachers. Five movement supporters agreed with this statement: (1) opt-out parents, (2) Opt Out CNY group, (3) New York State United Teachers, (4) Network for Public Education, and (5) National Center for Fair and Open Testing. This statement agreement suggests a coalition was forged around the consensus view of the role of standardized testing in the opt-out movement.

After coding the above three variables for each press coverage and archival document in the Discourse Data Set, I created an actor-statement bipartite network $G_r^{affiliation} = (A, S, E_r^{affiliation})$ to connect movement actors and their statements. Each statement can be understood as a tie from a movement actor to a statement in a positive or negative way, in short $e_r^{affiliation}(a, s) \in E_r^{affiliation}$, where $E_r^{affiliation}$ denotes the ties connecting movement actors and their statements. To identify coalitions, the actor-statement bipartite network was then converted into an actor coalition network in Figure 1 and a discourse coalition network in Figure 2 by using UCINET 6 network analysis program (Borgatti & Everett, 1997; Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). In the actor coalition network in Figure 1, the nodes are the movement actors, and the ties connect the actors who articulated the same statements. For instance, five movement supporters articulated Statement 1, as noted above; therefore, there are ties connecting all five movement actors.

In the discourse coalition network in Figure 2, the nodes represent the statements; the ties connect two statements if they were articulated by the same movement actors. For instance, there is a tie connecting Statement 10 (Standardized testing is so green.) and Statement 11 (Parents'

right of opting out of standardized testing should be protected.), because both statements were articulated by opt-out parents, pro-opt-out teachers, and pro-opt-out parent teacher associations.

Once the actor coalition network and discourse coalition network were constructed, Freeman degree centrality was calculated to identify the central nodes (i.e., major movement actors and their statements). Freeman degree centrality is a measure suggesting the relative importance and influence of a node within an overall network (Freeman, 1979; Newman, 2013). Specifically, the more central a node is in the network, the more important and influential it is. Further, the network metrics of density and connectedness of the two competing coalitions were calculated to compare the coalitions' network structure.

Building on prior work using discourse network analysis (Fisher et al., 2013; McCright & Dunlap, 2003), this study sets out to apply discourse network analysis to analyze the discourse of the opt-out movement. In doing so, this study sheds light not only on who was in the actor coalitions of the movement, but also on how the actors' statements on the movement facilitated the coalition formation.

Results

Actor Coalition Network

The actor coalition network of the opt-out movement, as seen in Figure 1, is composed of two coalitions: the movement opposition coalition and the movement advocacy coalition. The opposition coalition on the left in Figure 1 is formed by nine actors who opposed to the movement (visualized as the square nodes), including education agencies (e.g., the U.S Department of Education and the New York State Education Department), the anti-opt-out Civil and Human Rights Coalition, the opposing groups (e.g., High Achievement New York, Education Trust—New York, New York Campaign for Achievement Now, and Bellwether

Education), and anti-opt-out school administrators (e.g., superintendents and school principals). The movement advocacy coalition on the right in Figure 1 is formed by 15 actors who advocated for the movement (visualized as the nodes in dots), including opt-out parents, pro-opt-out parent teacher associations, pro-opt-out teachers, teacher unions (e.g., New York State United Teachers), opting out advocacy groups (e.g., Long Island Opt Out, Opt Out CNY group, United to Counter the Core, Stop Common Core in New York State, New York State Allies for Public Education, Rethinking Testing Group, National Center for Fair and Open Testing, Class Size Matters, and Network for Public Education), and pro-opt-out legislators (e.g., New York City Councilman Daniel Dromm and Capital Region Republican Assemblyman Jim Tedisco).

 Insert Figure 1 here

 Insert Table 1 here

In the actor coalition network, the node size represents how central an actor is in the network. The bigger the node is, the more central the actor is in the network. Each actor's Freeman degree centrality is displayed in Table 1. In the movement advocacy coalition, the opt-out parents have the highest degree (26.000), indicating they are the most central actors whose statements on the opt-out movement were shared by many other actors (e.g., pro-opt-out parent teacher associations, teachers' unions, pro-opt-out teachers, and pro-opt-out advocacy groups). Specifically, the opt-out parents had the strongest tie (tie strength = 4) in the network, represented by the thickest tie in Figure 1, with pro-opt-out parent teacher associations. That is,

opt-out parents and pro-opt-out parent teacher associations concurrently made the largest number (4) of the same statements in the actor coalition network. These four statements include:

Statement 4 (High-stakes standardized testing does not accurately reflect learning or student achievement.), Statement 6 (Opting out of standardized testing is an act of civil disobedience.), Statement 10 (Standardized testing is so green.), and Statement 11 (Parents' right of opting out of standardized testing should be protected.).

By contrast, in the movement opposition coalition, the New York State Education Department had the strongest tie with anti-opt-out school administrators (tie strength = 3). That is, the two actors made the same three statements on the opt-out movement: Statement 7 (High-stakes standardized testing prepares students for their future.), Statement 9 (Standardized testing is the only objective measure of student progress, thereby reveals inequity in education.), and Statement 12's counterargument (The state's policy changes as a response to the opt-out movement are not a lip service.).

The movement advocacy coalition (on the right) is clearly more dominant than the movement opposition coalition (on the left), in terms of the number of actors, coalition density, and coalition connectedness (see Table 1). First, there are 15 actors in the movement advocacy coalition, but only nine actors in the movement opposition coalition. Second, the density of the movement advocacy coalition (0.173) is higher than that of the movement opposition coalition (0.097), indicating the actors in the advocacy coalition had more ties connecting the consensus view of the movement (i.e., the same statements) than those in the movement opposition coalition. Third, the connectedness of the movement advocacy coalition (0.350) is higher than that of the movement opposition coalition (0.150), denoting that the actors in the advocacy coalition were more closely connected to one another than those in the movement opposition

coalition. These network metrics suggest that the movement advocacy coalition's well-connected network structure stands in contrast with the opposition coalition's relatively fragmented network structure, explaining why the movement has gained traction and stayed relatively robust in New York to circumvent the movement opposition coalition's authority-based power over standardized testing.

Discourse Coalition Network

In the discourse coalition network (see Figure 2), each node represents a statement made by the movement actors. The bigger the node size is, the more central the statement is in the discourse network. The tie in the discourse coalition network represents that a pair of statements were made by the same actor. Therefore, the thicker the tie is, the more actors articulated the same pair of statements in the Opt-out Discourse Data Set. Statement 4 has the highest Freeman degree centrality in the discourse coalition network (see Table 2), indicating that Statement 4 (High-stakes standardized testing does not accurately reflect learning or student achievement.) is the statement that most frequently co-occur with other statements in the Opt-out Discourse Data Set. Specifically, Statement 4 frequently co-occur with Statement 3 (High-stakes standardized testing put excessive pressure on students and teachers.), Statement 1 (Standardized testing is part of the punitive system imposed on students and teachers.), Statement 6 (Opting out of standardized testing is an act of civil disobedience.), Statement 10 (Standardized testing is so green.), and Statement 11 (Parents' right of opting out of standardized testing should be protected.).

Insert Figure 2 here

Insert Table 2 here

The discourse coalition network in Figure 2 shows two competing discourse coalitions. On the left, there are Statements 7, 8, 9, 2, and 14 (visualized as the square nodes) that opposed to the opt-out movement. The statements on the right (visualized as dots) are the ones that advocated for the movement. Like the actor coalition network, in the discourse coalition network, the movement advocacy coalition (on the right) is clearly dominant, as evidenced by the numbers of nodes in each coalition, and the network metrics of coalition density and connectedness (see Table 2).

To elucidate how the statements were articulated by the movement actors to forge coalition ties with other actors, here I take a fine-grained look into the statements in the movement advocacy coalition and opposition coalition, respectively.

Discourse of the Movement Advocacy Coalition

In the discourse of the movement advocacy coalition, the most central statement is Statement 4: High-stakes standardized testing does not accurately reflect learning or student achievement. This statement was articulated by most actors in the movement advocacy coalition (e.g., opt-out parents, pro-opt-out teachers, pro-opt-out parent teacher associations, Long Island Opt Out, New York State United Teachers, Rethinking Testing Group, Network for Public Education, and Class Size Matters). For instance, a teacher said, “I read some of the test questions, and I’m, as an adult, not sure of what answer they’re looking for. Some of the readings are dreadful” (Markowicz, 2018, para. 15).” In Figure 2, closely connected to Statement 4 is Statement 1 (tie strength = 3): Standardized testing is part of the punitive system imposed on

students and teachers. The strength (3) of the tie connecting Statement 4 and 1 suggests three movement advocates articulated both statements in the Opt-out Discourse Data Set: opt-out parents, New York State United Teachers, and Network for Public Education. The strong tie between Statement 4 and 1 indicates that three movement advocates supported the opt-out movement because they believed standardized testing does not accurately reflect learning or student achievement, and they were against the policy that linked student test scores with teacher evaluation. Andy Pallotta, the president of New York State United Teachers stated, “They [test scores] are derived from a broken testing system; are rooted in standards that are no longer being taught; and—for now—are the foundation of a totally discredited teacher evaluation system” (Spector, 2017, para. 16).

Statement 4 has the strongest tie (tie strength = 4) with Statement 3 (High-stakes standardized testing put excessive pressure on students and teachers.) in the discourse network (see Figure 2). The tie strength (4) suggests four movement actors articulated both Statement 4 and 3 in the Opt-out Discourse Data Set. These four actors are opt-out parents, Network for Public Education, Rethinking Testing Group, and Long Island Opt Out. Both Statement 4 and 3 indicate that the movement aims to not to participate in the high-stakes standardized testing, because the testing fails to accurately reflect learning or student achievement (Statement 4) and it puts excessive pressure on students and teachers (Statement 3). In fact, excessive pressure on students was the primary reason that Jeanette Deutermann founded the Long Island Opt Out group on Facebook after her son suffered from test anxiety (Burris, 2015). Many educators said, “the standardized tests unnecessarily humiliate students with special needs, pushing the children to lose their already wobbly self-esteem and hinder their learning” (Finch, 2016, para. 8). Further, the anti-Common Core advocates argued, “[the] Common Core-aligned tests are too

difficult and children with disabilities shouldn't be expected to undertake the same exams” (para. 8).

Another strong tie in the movement coalition network is the one connecting Statement 4 and 11 (tie strength =3). The three movement advocates articulated both statements are: opt-out parents, pro-opt-out parent teacher associations, and New York State United Teachers. Statement 11 (Parents’ right of opting out of standardized testing should be protected.), in particular, is a response to Statement 8 (States should sanction the districts and schools with a high opt-out rate.) articulated by the movement opposition coalition. The New York City Councilman Daniel Dromm argued that the New York State Education Department “has not done an adequate job of informing parents of their rights” (Donachie, 2016, para. 3), even though the City Council approved a resolution on March 31, 2015, requesting the State Education Department to amend the Parents’ Bill of Rights and Responsibilities to include the information about how parents can opt their children out of testing. The movement advocates claimed that education officials not informing parents of their opt-out right contributed to the opt-out population skewing toward wealthy and White families. Further, the Capital Region Republican Assemblyman Jim Tedisco wrote a letter to the Regents Chancellor Betty Rosa, asking for her support for the Common Core Parental Refusal Act which codified the parents’ right to opt their children out of tests (Willard, 2016).

Moreover, the movement advocacy coalition considered the State Education Department’s policy changes as “minor, cosmetic changes” and “lip service” (Statement 12). Responding to the opt-out movement, the New York State Education Department changed some policies, including (1) imposing a four-year moratorium on using test results to evaluate teachers and principals, and (2) reducing testing time from six days to four days (Hildebrand, 2018a; The

New York State Education Department, 2015). However, these policy changes were insufficient to “restore trust and confidence in the system,” said Jolene DiBrango, executive vice president of New York State United Teachers (Hildebrand, 2018b, para. 21).

Lastly, the movement advocacy coalition framed the movement as an act of civil disobedience (Statement 6). Many opt-out parents and pro-opt-out teachers saw standardized testing as part of a corporate takeover agenda to wring profits from public education by charging districts for testing cost and by selling student data to businesses (Lederman, 2016; NBC News, 2016; Taylor, 2016). A teacher, who has proctored the exams many times, said, “The only people who benefit from the current test structure are the testing companies” (Markowicz, 2018, para.14). The hashtag #TestingIsSoGreen was thus coined on social media (Statement 10). Therefore, opting out of standardized testing is a means to resisting the flawed testing system in education.

Discourse of the Movement Opposition Coalition

In the discourse of the movement opposition coalition, the most central statement is Statement 8: States should sanction the districts and schools with a high opt-out rate. This statement has created glaring tension where the two competing coalitions clashed. On the one hand, the U.S. Department of Education sent a letter to all state school officials in December 2015, warning the potential loss of Title I funds and urging states to sanction local education agencies with a high opt-out rate by withholding funds and lower school ratings (Strauss, 2016). The high opt-out rate was again addressed in the Department of Education’s proposed regulations Section 200.15 stating,

failure to meet the 95 percent participation rate requirement is factored in the State’s accountability system in a meaningful, publicly visible manner through a significant

impact on a school's performance level or summative rating, identification for targeted support and improvement, or another equally rigorous, State determined action, thus providing an incentive for the school to ensure that all students participate in annual State assessments. (The U.S. Department of Education, 2016)

In 2016, citing the high opt-out rate, the New York State Education Department kept 99 schools off the Reward School list, and 16 New York City schools were ruled ineligible for up to \$75,000 in grant (The Lockport Union-Sun & Journal, 2016). The schools' loss of funding, according to the Regents Chancellor Betty Rose, were "unintended consequences". In 2018, the New York State Education Department proposed a plan to penalize districts with an opt-out rate over 5%. With the proposed penalties, districts and schools with a high opt-out rate will not only be placed under public school registration review which could eventually lead to school closure, but also have to set aside part of their Title 1 funding to improve test participation rates (Hawkins, 2018). After receiving about 2,000 comments from the actors in the movement advocacy coalition, the State Education Department rescinded some penalties in September 2018. In addition, some opt-out parents claimed that they and their children were harassed and intimidated for exercising their right to opt out of the state standardized tests (Statement 13). Yvonne Gasperino, founder and administrator of the Stop Common Core in New York State Facebook page, said harassment and intimidation were in the form of "favoritism ... grade extortion, personal phone calls by some teachers trying to influence the parent's decision, bribery via contests with monetary or other rewards, and exerting authority over the children who refused. ... [as well as] children being reprimanded by some school officials for decisions their parents made on their behalf" (White, 2016, para. 9).

Responding to the central statements (Statement 3 and 4) in the movement advocacy coalition, the opposition coalition articulated Statement 9 (Standardized testing is the only objective measure of student progress, thereby reveals inequity in education.) and Statement 14 (Standardized testing is necessary because it can hold schools accountable.) The New York State Education Department and some civil rights groups unequivocally asserted that standardized testing was the *only* objective measure of student progress, holding teachers and schools accountable. For instance, the New York State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elisa said, “the tests are the only objective measure to compare and measure student progress” (Stoianoff, 2016, para. 3). In a press release announcing their opposition to the opt-out movement, 12 national civil and human rights groups (The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, The American Association of University Women, Association of University Centers on Disabilities, Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, Inc., Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, League of United Latin American Citizens, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, National Council of La Raza, National Disability Rights Network, National Urban League, Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, and TASH) stated,

Our commitment to fair, unbiased, and accurate data collection and reporting resonates greatest in our work to improve education. The educational outcomes for the children we represent are unacceptable by almost every measurement. And we rely on the consistent, accurate, and reliable data provided by annual statewide assessments to advocate for better lives and outcomes for our children. These data are critical for understanding whether and where there is equal opportunity (The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, 2015, para. 3).

Further, responding to Statement 6 (Opting out of standardized testing is an act of civil disobedience.) in the movement advocacy coalition, the movement opposition coalition frequently used Statement 2 (The opt-out movement is so white.) to frame the movement as White, affluent families' irresponsible behavior. Long Island's Nassau and Suffolk counties, two of the wealthiest counties in the country, have consistently had more than half of the students opted out of the state standardized tests (Franchi, 2016). Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia articulated that "it's clear higher-performing students are the ones who are opting out" (Breidenbach, 2017, para. 2), and "it's fair to assume the statewide improvement would be even better if all these kids had taken the tests" (Filler, 2017, para. 4). By contrast, less than 4% of the students in New York City opted out of the state standardized tests (Zimmerman, 2018). Charter schools and schools in urban school districts had the lowest refusal rates in the state (Spector, 2018). Nationally, approximately two-thirds of African-Americans (67%) voiced their opposition to opting out (Phi Delta Kappa International, 2016). The movement was thus described as "ridiculous, selfish, and more than a little hypocritical" (Riseman, 2016, para. 15), depriving "parents, schools and taxpayer of valuable information about how well (or badly) we are educating our kids" (Riley, 2016, para. 1). The movement was led by the "teachers' unions and far-left policy leaders to completely abolish any serious accountability within student assessments" (Bennett, 2016, para. 7), according to William Bennett, the former Secretary of Education. The opt-out parents were called "unreasonable" and the pro-opt-out teachers were called "unethical" by the New York State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia (Spotlight News, 2016). The opt-out parents were deemed as "inadvertently making a choice to undermine efforts to improve schools for every child" (Taylor, 2016, para. 2), according to a statement by a civil rights group.

Discussion

The opt-out movement in New York presents a unique case in a state that has consistently had the highest opt-out rate in the United States. This study conducted discourse network analysis to uncover the actor coalitions and discourse coalitions of the opt-out movement in New York. The actor coalition network reveals the movement actors and their coalitions. The discourse coalition network illustrates two competing coalitions and their points of contention in the opt-out movement. The findings of this study have substantial methodological and policy implications, as the movement actors translate their views and beliefs on standardized testing and the opt-out movement into substantive changes in education policy.

Methodological implications

This study demonstrates a network analytical approach to examine qualitative data in education research. Grounded in the advocacy coalition framework, this study operationalized the measurement of coalitions from the network perspective. Conceptualizing the opt-out movement as the network structures, this study considers the movement actors as the nodes which are connected by their views and beliefs on the movement. Most empirical studies grounded in the advocacy coalition framework focus on beliefs rather than network structures; whereas many network analysis studies on policymaking fail to provide sufficient information about the content of the analyzed policies (Ingold, 2011). In this article, discourse network analysis is a fitting analytical tool that uncovers not only network structure of coalitions of the opt-out movement, but also reveals how the views and beliefs became congruent and help forge coalitions among movement actors.

The discourse network analysis performed in this study provides an alternative network analytical approach to studying the opt-out movement. In Pizmony-Levy and Saraisky's (2016)

network analysis of the opt-out movement, the nodes were the opt-out related organizations in various states (e.g., FL Opt Out, GA Opt Out, and CA Opt Out), and the ties represent the organizations contacted the same survey respondent regarding the opting out. By contrast, this study first constructed an actor-statement bipartite network based on who articulated what statements in the Opt-out Discourse Data Set. The actor-statement bipartite network was then converted into an actor coalition network and a discourse coalition network. In the actor coalition network, the nodes are the movement actors, and the ties connect the actors who articulated the same statements. In the discourse coalition network, the nodes denote the statements; the ties connect two statements if they were articulated by the same movement actors. Such a network analytical approach creates an added value for education policy research.

The discourse network approach is particularly instrumental in explaining a policy output by identifying coalitions and their interactions within and across the coalitions. The movement advocacy and opposition coalitions voiced contested views and beliefs about standardized testing and the movement. The contested views across the coalitions, along with the consensus views within the coalitions, provide insight into the education policymaking on standardized testing and the movement.

Policy implications

The opt-out movement has already led to some policy changes regarding standardized testing. The policy changes include (1) shortening state tests by cutting the number of questions, (2) removing test time limits for students, (3) reducing the number of testing days from six to four, (4) hiring a new testing company, (5) changing the Common Core State Standards to the New York State Next Generation Learning Standards, (6) having teachers review the tests, and (7) imposing a four-year moratorium on using test results to evaluate teachers and principals

(Hildebrand, 2018b; The New York State Education Department, 2015). Following the advocacy coalition framework, the policy changes are not dependent on one single policy actor's decisions but on the interaction of actors' coalition. It is critical for the coalitions to seek and accumulate resources, thereby amassing power to make policies in their favor (Sabatier, 1993). Thus, one primary challenge for the movement advocacy coalition is to translate their views and beliefs on standardized testing and the opt-out movement into policy.

To overcome such a challenge, the movement advocacy coalition has already begun to amass influence and power in education policymaking. Some opt-out parents ran for school board and won seats on the districts' board of education. In one district, three Long Island Opt Out-endorsed board members won school board elections in 2015 (Franchi, 2016). In addition to amassing power at the local level, the Long Island Opt Out group was active at the state level by strongly supporting the election of Todd Kaminsky (D-Long Beach) to the State Senate, who sponsored the bill that untethered teacher evaluation from standardized testing scores (The New York State Senate, 2016). Jia Lee, a special education teacher and an opt-out movement advocate, ran for United Federation of Teachers President in 2016 and lieutenant governor in November 2017 (Veiga, 2018). Notably, many of the movement advocates remain wary as the statewide moratorium on using test results to evaluate teachers and principals will expire in June 2019. It remains to be seen whether the moratorium will continue to stay.

What does the future hold for the opt-out movement? The implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) will have salient implications on how the opt-out movement unfolds. While ESSA does require at least 95% of public school students participating in annual state assessments of student achievement, it grants control to each state over how the 95% participation rate is factored into the statewide accountability system (ESSA, 2015). Further,

ESSA states that “Nothing in this paragraph [on assessments] shall be construed as preempting a State or local law regarding the decision of a parent to not have the parent’s child participate in the academic assessments” (ESSA, 2015, §1111.(b) (2) (K)). With the states having control over the consequences of opting out and the parents’ right of opting out, state education agencies may use threats and punishment to suppress the opt-out movement. For instance, in 2018, the New York State Education Department proposed a plan to force the districts with an opt-out rate over 5% to set aside part of their Title 1 funding to improve test participation rates (Hawkins, 2018). Such a proposed plan drew ire from the movement advocacy coalition and might harm students, because diverting Title 1 funds would deprive students, particularly minority students and students with low socioeconomic status, of equitable education. In short, the future of the opt-out movement is subject to (1) how the movement advocacy coalition continues to amass power and influence in education policymaking, and (2) how the New York State Education Department exercises its power over the ESSA implementation.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Inquiry

This study has three major limitations. First, the data collected for this study might not provide a full, comprehensive view of the opt-out movement in New York. The data sources for this study are press coverage and archival documents, suggesting the movement actors and coalition ties identified in this study are notable enough to be documented by media and archival documents. It is possible that some movement actors and their coalition ties are missing in the Opt-out Discourse Data Set compiled for this study. If the movement actors use private communication channels via emails, phone calls, and face-to-face conversations, then it is unknown to the researcher that some major movement actors and their coalition ties might be missing. More diverse data sources are therefore recommended for future inquiry. Second, this

study only examines one single state of New York—the state with the highest opt-out rate in the country in 2015 and 2016. While New York represents a unique case, the opt-out movement in other states merits further investigation as well. The opt-out students in New York were disproportionately White in families with relatively high socioeconomic status (Franchi, 2016; Pizmony-Levy & Saraisky, 2016); however, other states might not share the same racial, socioeconomic pattern. For instance, in Ohio there was not much disparity in the opt-out rate between White, wealthy communities and communities of color and low-income communities (Neill, 2016). Thus, further studies on the opt-out movement in multiple states are highly encouraged. Third, this study offers only a snapshot of the movement. It is of paramount importance to longitudinally examine how the coalitions evolve over time as a response to policy changes about standardized testing and the opt-out movement.

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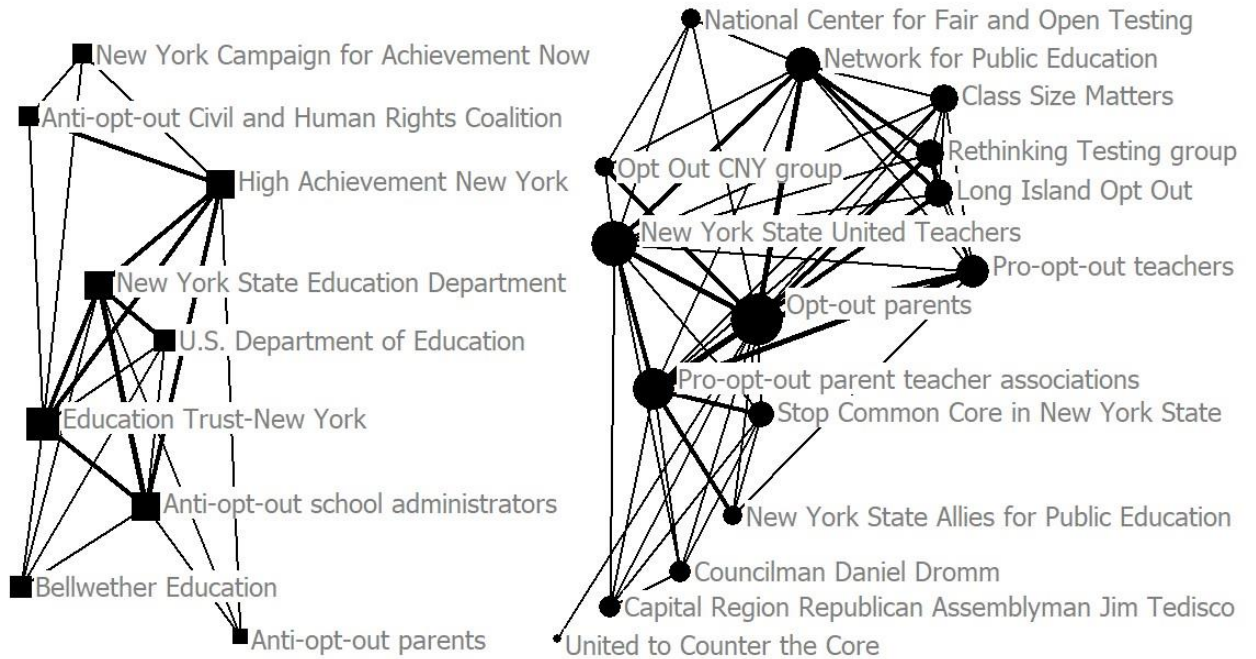


Figure 1. The actor coalition network of the opt-out movement in New York. The movement opposition coalition is on the left; the movement advocacy coalition is on the right.

Table 1 Results of Network Analysis of the Actor Coalition Network of the Opt-out Movement in New York

	Freeman Degree centrality	Density	Connectedness
The movement opposition coalition: 9 actors		0.097	0.150
New York State Education Department	11.000		
High Achievement New York	10.000		
Education Trust—New York	10.000		
Anti-opt-out school administrators	10.000		
U.S. Department of Education	5.000		
Anti-opt-out Civil and Human Rights Coalition	4.000		
Bellwether Education	4.000		
Anti-opt-out parents	3.000		
New York Campaign for Achievement Now	3.000		
The movement advocacy coalition: 15 actors		0.173	0.350
Opt-out parents	26.000		
Pro-opt-out parent teacher associations	19.000		
New York State United Teachers	16.000		
Network for Public Education	14.000		
Pro-opt-out teachers	12.000		
Long Island Opt Out	10.000		
Rethinking Testing Group	10.000		
Stop Common Core in New York State	7.000		
Class Size Matters	7.000		
Opt Out CNY group	5.000		
New York State Allies for Public Education	5.000		
Councilman Daniel Dromm	5.000		
Capital Region Assemblyman Jim Tedisco	5.000		
National Center for Fair and Open Testing	4.000		
United to Counter the Core	1.000		

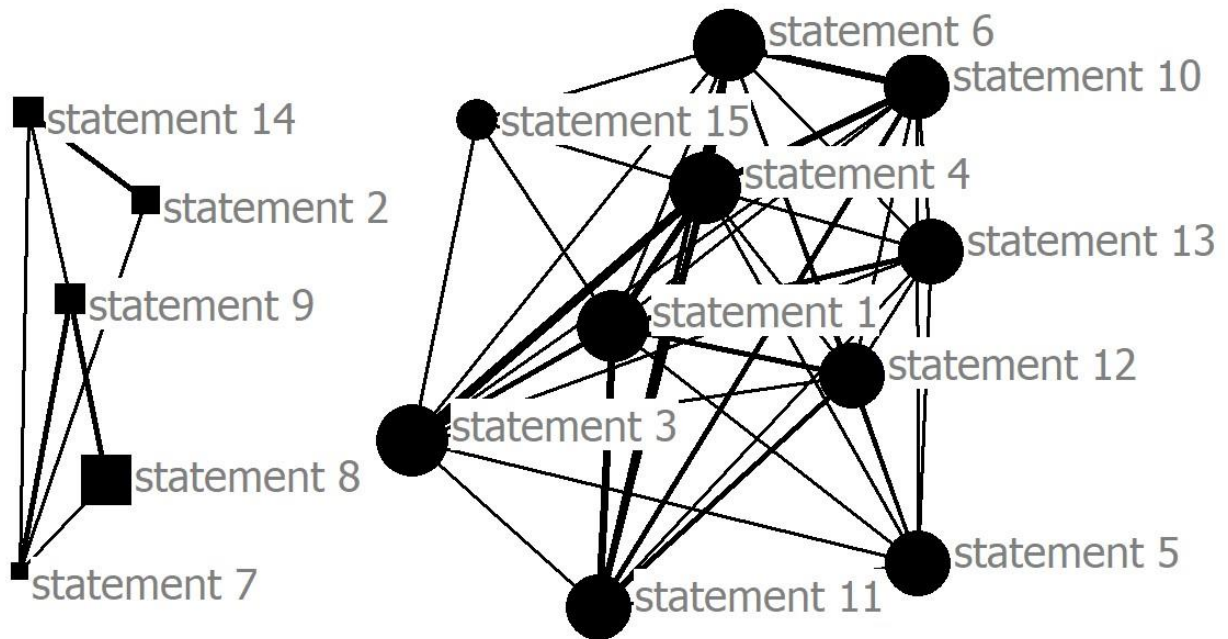


Figure 2. The discourse coalition network. The dots denote the statements articulated by the policy actors.

Table 2 Results of Network Analysis of the Discourse Coalition Network of the Opt-out Movement in New York

	Freeman Degree centrality	Density	Connectedness
The movement opposition coalition: 5 statements		0.067	0.095
Statement 8: States should sanction the districts and schools with a high opt-out rate.	7.000		
Statement 14: Standardized testing is necessary because it can hold schools accountable.	3.000		
Statement 2: The opt-out movement is so white.	2.000		
Statement 9: Standardized testing is the only objective measure of student progress, thereby reveals inequity in education.	1.000		
Statement 7: High-stakes standardized testing prepares students for their future.	1.000		
The movement advocacy coalition: 10 statements		0.381	0.429
Statement 4: High-stakes standardized testing does not accurately reflect learning or student achievement.	19.000		
Statement 3: High-stakes standardized testing put excessive pressure on students and teachers.	13.000		
Statement 1: Standardized testing is part of the punitive system imposed on students and teachers.	13.000		
Statement 6: Opting out of standardized testing is an act of civil disobedience.	12.000		
Statement 10: Standardized testing is so green.	12.000		
Statement 11: Parents' right of opting out of standardized testing should be protected.	10.000		
Statement 13: School administration pressures parents to have their children take the standardized tests.	9.000		
Statement 5: Test preparation sacrifices student learning time.	8.000		
Statement 15: Sanctioning the districts with high an opt-out rate harms students of color.	3.000		
Statement 12: The state's policy changes as a response to the opt-out movement are a lip service.	2.000		

Appendix List of Statements in the Opt-out Discourse Data Set

Statement 1: Standardized testing is part of the punitive system imposed on students and teachers.

Statement 2: The opt-out movement is so white.

Statement 3: High-stakes standardized testing put excessive pressure on students and teachers.

Statement 4: High-stakes standardized testing does not accurately reflect learning or student achievement.

Statement 5: Test preparation sacrifices student learning time.

Statement 6: Opting out of standardized testing is an act of civil disobedience.

Statement 7: High-stakes standardized testing prepares students for their future.

Statement 8: States should sanction the districts and schools with a high opt-out rate.

Statement 9: Standardized testing is the only objective measure of student progress, thereby reveals inequity in education.

Statement 10: Standardized testing is so green.

Statement 11: Parents' right of opting out of standardized testing should be protected.

Statement 12: The state's policy changes as a response to the opt-out movement are a lip service.

Statement 13: School administration pressures parents to have their children take the standardized tests.

Statement 14: Standardized testing is necessary because it can hold schools accountable.

Statement 15: Sanctioning the districts with high an opt-out rate harms students of color.