



How Americans view the Opt Out movement

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Executive Summary

This report examines public opinion on the Opt Out movement, which came to national prominence in 2015 when 20% of public school students in New York State opted out from taking state standardized tests in mathematics and English language arts. The movement has gained considerable attention from various educational stakeholders, and now Opt Out poses a challenge to a cornerstone of federal and state education policy in the United States: standardized tests.

The findings in this report are based on a combination of two online surveys with a national sample of 2,107 adults age 18 and older. The survey was conducted in English in February and May 2017. The survey included an experimental design in which respondents were randomly assigned to three equal-size groups. The first group was asked about parents “**excusing** their children from state standardized tests,” the second group was asked about parents “**opting** their children out of state standardized tests,” and the third group was asked about parents “**boycotting** state standardized tests.” Respondents were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk and Qualtrics Panels.

Key findings include:

- ❖ Close to two-thirds of Americans (63.3%) had heard about the Opt Out movement, but only one-fifth (19.4%) had heard “a fair amount” or “a lot” about the movement.
- ❖ Regarding familiarity with the movement, the wording of the survey question made a difference. Six in 10 respondents (59.2%) reported hearing about parents “excusing their children from state standardized tests,” but higher rates of respondents reported hearing about parents “opting their children out of state standardized tests” (65.1%) or “boycotting state standardized tests” (65.4%).
- ❖ More than half (54.2%) of those surveyed who had heard at least a little about the Opt Out movement said they understood the goals of the movement either “very well” or “fairly well.”
- ❖ The Opt Out movement was perceived by respondents to be a response to the Common Core State Standards and the negative impact of standardized tests on teaching and learning. When asked about the main two reasons parents take part in the movement, more than two-fifths of respondents (44.9%) said parents oppose the Common Core State Standards and believe standardized tests force teachers to teach to the test (40.8%). More than a quarter of

respondents (26.7%) suggested that parents take part in the movement because their children do not do well on standardized tests.

- ❖ Public perception of parental motivation to take part in the Opt Out movement is incommensurate with motivations reported by Opt Out activists. In a 2016 national survey, for example, only one-quarter of Opt Out activists (25.8%) mentioned opposition to the Common Core State Standards as a reason for taking part in the movement (as compared to 44.9% of this survey's respondents).
- ❖ Three in 10 Americans (31.4%) support the Opt Out movement (combination of “strongly support” and “somewhat support”). Close to half of Americans (47.1%) oppose parents who take part in the Opt Out movement (either of “strongly oppose” and “somewhat oppose”).
 - We found no variation across sociodemographic variables, except for gender. Women showed a higher level of support for parents who take part in the Opt Out movement than men.
- ❖ Regarding support of the movement, the wording of the survey question made a difference. More than one-third of respondents (34.8%) support parents “boycotting state standardized tests.” But lower rates of respondents support parents “excusing their children from state standardized tests” (29.1%) or parents “opting their children out of state standardized tests” (30.6%).
- ❖ Why do Americans support or oppose the Opt Out movement? Using open-ended comments we found two main factors influenced support or opposition of the movement: (a) respondent’s perception of the utility and importance of standardized tests; and (b) respondent’s understanding of the locus of authority in the field of education (parents vs. schools/educators).
 - Respondents supporting the Opt Out movement expressed doubts about the efficacy of gauging student learning with standardized tests, and mentioned parents’ right to decide how to educate their children.
 - Respondents opposing the Opt Out movement stressed the importance of standardized tests to individual students *and* the general public and policy makers, and emphasized the professional authority of educators and schools.

Why this study?

Reliance on standardized testing in education policy in the United States has increased over the past two decades. The increased use of standardized testing is associated with the growing popularity of accountability policies in education. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), for example, provides an assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas. International large-scale assessments – such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – allow educational stakeholders to compare America's students with their peers abroad, and to draw policy lessons from other education systems.

The introduction of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in the mid-2000s signaled a dramatic shift in the use of standardized testing in the United States. In contrast to previous standardized testing efforts (which relied on a representative sample of schools and students), NCLB required all states to test each student each year from grades 3 through 8 in mathematics and English arts, and then once more in high school. All results were required to be reported. The introduction of the Race to the Top (RTTT) grant by the United States Department of Education furthered this shift. RTTT encouraged states to join one or more of the new assessment consortia that were developing assessments aligned with the Common Core State Standards. RTTT also supported policy makers interested in measuring teacher effectiveness using student standardized testing.

As a cornerstone of federal education policy in the United States, it is not surprising that standardized testing is at the epicenter of an emerging educational social movement, such as the Opt Out movement. Sociologists have long argued that social movements emerge against the backdrop of the modern centralized nation state.¹

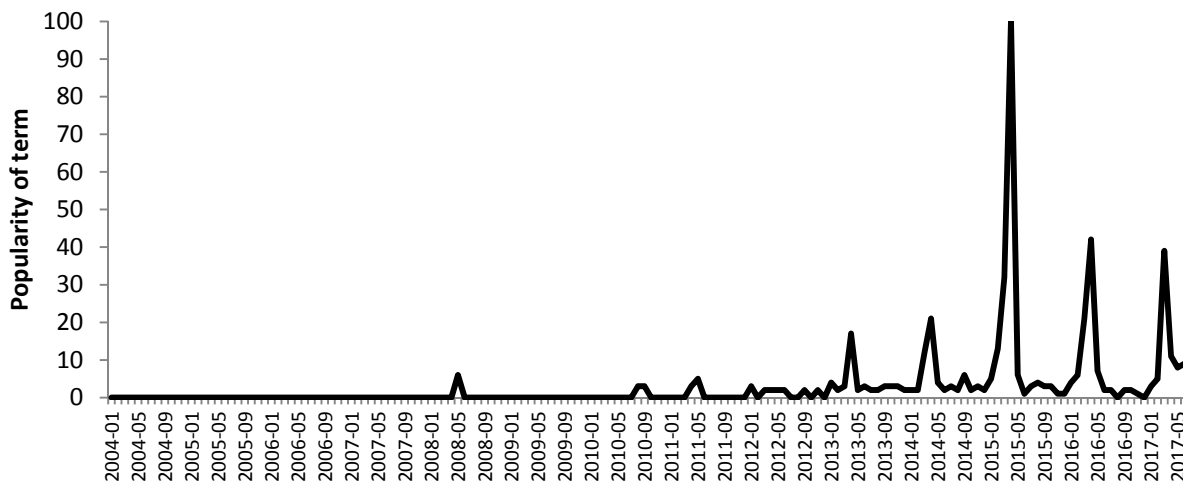
The Opt Out movement came to national prominence in 2015 when parents of 20% of New York State public school students chose to keep their children from taking state standardized tests. The same percentage of New York State students did not take the state tests again the following year (2016). Reports from other states suggest the movement is gaining momentum. Opt Out activists have used different terminology to describe the actions parents take as part of the movement. Organizations such

¹ See for example: Bright, C., & Harding, S. F. (Eds.). (1984). *Statemaking and social movements: Essays in history and theory*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

as FairTest and New York State Allies for Public Education, for example, employ the terms “boycotting” and “refusing” in an attempt to situate this action in a more ethical and political context.

The Opt Out movement continues to gain attention from parents, teachers, policy makers, and scholars alike. One way to gauge interest in the Opt Out movement is to track Google searches for information on “opt out” and related terms. Figure 1, below, illustrates this trend from 2004 through 2017, with the highest peak in the spring of 2015 and successive peaks in the spring of 2016 and 2017.² It is not surprising that interest in the Opt Out movement peaks specifically in the spring, as this is the time of year during which standardized tests take place.

Figure 1: Trends in Google search of key terms “opt out” and “state test,” 2004-2015



Reactions to the Opt Out movement are well-documented in the media. In 2013, for example, former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan famously dismissed the backlash against standardized testing as “white suburban moms who — all of a sudden — their child isn’t as brilliant as they thought they were, and their school isn’t quite as good as they thought they were” in light of students’ plummeting scores on Core-aligned assessments.³ This response frames parents who take part in the Opt Out movement as responding to their children performance on standardized tests. And in 2015, the U.S. Department of Education warned of potential sanctions, in decreased funding levels and increased

² Figure 1 is based on results from Google Trends: “Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. Likewise a score of 0 means the term was less than 1% as popular as the peak.”

³ Strauss, V. (16 November, 2013). Arne Duncan: ‘White suburban moms’ upset that Common Core shows their kids aren’t ‘brilliant’. The Answer Sheet [blog post]. *The Washington Post*, online edition.

monitoring, for those states that fell under a 95% participation threshold in the annual assessment of third through eighth graders.⁴

As the Opt Out movement has gained attention, it has become a topic of public opinion research. Over the past two years (2015-2016), the Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) poll examined public support for allowing parents to “excuse” their children from taking state standardized tests. At the same time, the Education Next poll evaluated public support for letting parents decide whether to have their children take state standardized tests. By using neutral terms (e.g., “excusing”), these surveys de-politicize the movement by not describing it in terms that are associated with activism and social movements. We posit that by using neutral terms, these surveys potentially underestimate public engagement with the movement.

Public opinion is an important resource for many social movements, including the Opt Out movement.⁵ Public opinion can offer support for, and endorsement of, the challenges posed by social movements. In established democracies such as the United States, public opinion can affect public policy by signaling to elected officials where the public stand on various issues.⁶ This study, therefore, examines public opinion on the Opt Out movement and seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent is the general public in the United States engaged with the Opt Out movement?
 - a. What percentage of the general public has heard about the movement?
 - b. To what extent does the general public understand the goals of the movement?
 - c. How does the general public view parents’ motivation for taking part in the movement?
 - d. To what extent does the general public support parents who take part in the movement?
2. Does framing parents as “excusing” their children from standardized testing, as opposed to “opting out” or “boycotting,” affect public opinion of participation in the Opt Out movement?
3. Does portraying parents as exercising their parental rights by participating in the Opt Out movement affect public opinion of the Opt Out movement and its participants?

⁴ Strauss, V. (28 January, 2016). U.S. Education Department threatens to sanction states over test opt-outs. The Answer Sheet [blog post]. *The Washington Post*, online edition.

⁵ Rohrschneider, R. (1990). The roots of public opinion toward new social movements: An empirical test of competing explanations. *American Journal of Political Science*, 1-30.

⁶ Burstein, P. (1998). Bringing the public back in: Should sociologists consider the impact of public opinion on public policy? *Social Forces*, 77(1): 27-62.

What do we know about public opinion and the Opt Out movement?

Public opinion polling on the Opt Out movement is a relatively new phenomenon. Using several search engines and catalogues (e.g., Google and iPOLL / Roper Center) we found ten surveys that asked respondents about the movement. Table 1, below, presents the name of the organizations responsible for the survey, the year of data collection, the wording of the survey question, and the distribution of responses. Some of these surveys draw on national samples, while others focus on states where the Opt Out movement is strong (i.e., California, Colorado, and New York).

Public opinion towards the Opt Out movement varies across surveys and samples. For example, although both the Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) / Gallup Poll and the Education Next Poll use national samples to gauge public opinion on the movement, the surveys offer significantly different results. The 2015 Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) / Gallup Poll found that slightly more than two-fifths of respondents (41%) support “allowing parents to excuse their child from taking one or more standardized tests,” while the 2015 Education Next Poll found that only one-quarter of respondents (26%) support “letting parents decide whether to have their children take state math and reading tests.”

Public opinion towards the Opt Out movement also varies across states. In New York, about half of the public sympathizes with the parents participating in the movement. In California, however, public opinion is more critical: less than one-quarter of respondents (22%) support “letting parents decide whether to have their children take state math and reading tests.” And in Colorado the picture is more nuanced, with one-quarter of respondents (25%) supporting opting out for any reason, and slightly more than two-fifths (43%) supporting opting out in special circumstances.

Current knowledge on public opinion towards the Opt Out movement is limited in at least two ways. First, most surveys address the issue with a single question gauging public opinion towards a testing policy that allows parents to excuse their child from taking standardized tests. These surveys cannot assess the extent to which the general public engages with the Opt Out movement, or supports parents participating in it. Second, most surveys use the vague term “standardized tests,” rather than specify the target of the Opt Out movement: state standardized tests in mathematics and English arts for third through eighth graders. This is important because although Opt Out activists are relatively critical of the

use of standardized tests they still show considerable support for some kind of tests, meaning these surveys could produce data skewed in favor of standardized tests.⁷

Table 1: Summary of public opinion surveys on Opt Out movement

Organization	Year	Question	Answer	Percent
Survey USA (Colorado)	2014	Some parents of public school students are asking for the ability to opt out their children from taking standardized tests. Which of the following comes closest to your opinion? Parents should never be able to opt out their children from taking standardized tests? Parents should be able to be opt out their children from standardized tests in special circumstances? Or parents should be able to opt out of standard tests for any reason whenever they want?	Any reason / whenever In special circumstances Never be able to opt out Not sure	25 43 28 4
PACE/USC (California)	2015	To what extent do you support or oppose allowing parents to let their children skip taking state/standardized tests?	Support Oppose Unsure	22 68 10
Saint Leo University Polling Institute (Florida)	2015	Parents should have the option of allowing their own children to opt out of standardized tests used in student and school assessment.	Support Oppose Unsure	45 N/A N/A
Education Next	2015	Some people say that ALL students should take state tests in math and reading. Others say that parents should decide whether or not their children take these tests. Do you support or oppose letting parents decide whether to have their children take state math and reading tests?	Support Oppose Neither support nor oppose	26 59 16

⁷ Pizmony-Levy, O., & Green Saraisky, N. (2016). Who opts out and why? Results from a national survey on opting out of standardized tests. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Organization	Year	Question	Answer	Percent
PDK/Gallup	2015	Do you think that all parents with children in the public schools should be allowed to excuse their child from taking one or more standardized tests?	Yes No Don't know	41 44 16
PDK/Gallup	2015	Would you excuse your own child from taking one or more standardized tests?	Yes No Don't know	31 59 10
YouGov US	2015	Do you think K-12 students should be able to "opt out" of standardized testing as a form of protest?	Yes No Not sure	30 43 27
YouGov US	2015	Would you let your child choose to "opt out" of standardized testing as a form of protest?	Yes No Not sure	34 45 21
Siena College (New York)	2015	During the current round of state exams for third through eight graders, tens of thousands of parents opted out. That is, they had their children not take the state exams. Do you think it was right or wrong for parents to have their children opt out of decline to take the state exams?	Right Wrong Don't know / No opinion	50 44 6
Quinnipiac University (New York)	2015 6/4	Do you think students should or should not be allowed to refuse to take standardized tests designed to measure how well they are learning?	Should Should not Don't know	51 45 4
Quinnipiac University (New York)	2015 9/21	Do you think students should or should not be allowed to refuse to take standardized tests designed to measure how well they are learning?	Should Should not Don't know	48 47 5

Organization	Year	Question	Answer	Percent
Education Next	2016	Some people say that ALL students should take state tests in math and reading. Others say that parents should decide whether or not their children take these tests. Do you support or oppose letting parents decide whether to have their children take state math and reading tests?	Support Oppose Neither support nor oppose	25 60 15
PDK	2016	Thinking about testing – do you support or oppose allowing public school parents to excuse their children from taking standardized state tests?	Support Oppose No opinion	37 59 4

Methodology

The findings in this report are based on a combination of two online surveys with a national sample of 2,107 adults age 18 and older. We decided to use online surveys because of limited resources; the study received no funding from public or private sources. The surveys were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Teachers College, Columbia University (protocol #17-182). Respondents were presented with detailed study information that was followed by a consent form. The final survey was available in English.

The first survey was conducted from February 7-8, and 22-27, 2017 (n=1,063). The main goal of the survey was to collect extensive information about public engagement with the Opt Out movement. Respondents for the first survey were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a popular crowdsourcing site that is increasingly used by behavioral science researchers because it allows researchers to easily recruit participants and administer surveys at relatively little cost. MTurk samples include only individuals who opt into the system and agree to complete surveys, leading to samples that are typically unrepresentative of the U.S. population. Researchers, however, have concluded that although the MTurk sample does not perfectly match the demographic characteristics of the U.S. population, it does not present a distorted view of the U.S. population.⁸ Further, researchers found that differences between MTurk samples and random online samples (such as the 2012 American National Election Study) “are reduced considerably when controlling for easily measurable sample features.”⁹

The second survey was conducted from May 22-31, 2017 (n=1,044). The survey had two goals: (a) to replicate the core questions from the first survey, and (b) to collect data with a more representative sample. Respondents for the second survey were recruited through Qualtrics, a marketing research firm. Qualtrics partners with a variety of online panel providers to supply a nationally representative sample. The sample is compiled using overall demographic quotas based on census percentages for representation: age, gender, ethnicity, household income, and census region. Yet, similar to MTurk, Qualtrics samples include only individuals who opt into the system and agree to complete surveys.

⁸ Berinsky, A. J., Huber, G. A., & Lenz, G. S. (2012). Evaluating online labor markets for experimental research: Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk. *Political Analysis*, 20(3), 351-368.

⁹ Levay, K. E., Freese, J., & Druckman, J. N. (2016). The demographic and political composition of Mechanical Turk samples. *Sage Open*, 6(1).

Because there is limited research on the Opt Out movement, we drew on a range of sources to inform the survey, including scholarly research, and media coverage.¹⁰ Some items were appropriated from a PEW Research Center survey on how Americans view the Black Live Matter movement and public opinion surveys (e.g., PDK/Gallup and Education Next) that previously asked respondents about opting out.¹¹

The survey instrument was divided into two sections. The first section gathered data on public engagement with the Opt Out movement, including: (a) endorsement of the movement, (b) familiarity with the movement, (c) self-reported understanding of the goals of the movement, (d) reasoning of parents' participation in the movement, and (e) familiarity with parents who participate in the movement. The second section gathered data on socio-demographic information (e.g., sex, race/ethnicity, age, education, and place of residence), political views, and partisan identification. A copy of the full survey, with indication of items included in either MTurk or Qualtrics surveys, can be found in Appendix 1.

Both surveys included a survey experiment. We manipulated two components of each survey to test for framing/wording effects.

First, we varied the terms used for describing parents who participate in the Opt Out movement. We used "parents **excusing** their children from state standardized tests" to echo similar, neutral, language that is used in other surveys. We used "parents **opting their children out** of state standardized tests" to situate the action in the common discourse and the official name of the movement. And we used "parents **boycotting** state standardized tests" to situate the action in a more political context. Table 2 presents the definition of each word from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

¹⁰ Pizmony-Levy, O., & Green Saraisky, N. (2016). Who opts out and why? Results from a national survey on opting out of standardized tests. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

¹¹ Horowitz, J. M., & Livingston, G. (2016). How Americans view the Black Lives Matter Movement. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/08/how-americans-view-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>

Table 2: Definitions of words used in survey experiment

Word	Definition (from Merriam-Webster)
Excusing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To say that (someone) is not required to do something 2. To allow (someone, such as a child) to leave 3. To grant exemption or release to
Opting / Opting out	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To choose one thing instead of another 2. To choose not to participate in something
Boycotting	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To refuse to buy, use, or participate in (something) as a way of protesting 2. To stop using goods or services until changes are made 3. To engage in a concerted refusal to have dealings with, usually to express disapproval or to force acceptance of certain conditions

Second, we varied the phrase used to describe the justification for the parents' action in opting out. We used "these parents say that **they have the right** to decide whether or not their children take these tests" to situate the discussion in the context of parental rights. We used the other phrase in the survey, "these parents say that **they should** decide whether or not their children take these tests," in an attempt to be more neutral. Overall, the manipulation of two components in this experiment yielded six versions of the survey (3 conditions × 2 conditions = 6). Each version was randomly assigned to respondents in both surveys.

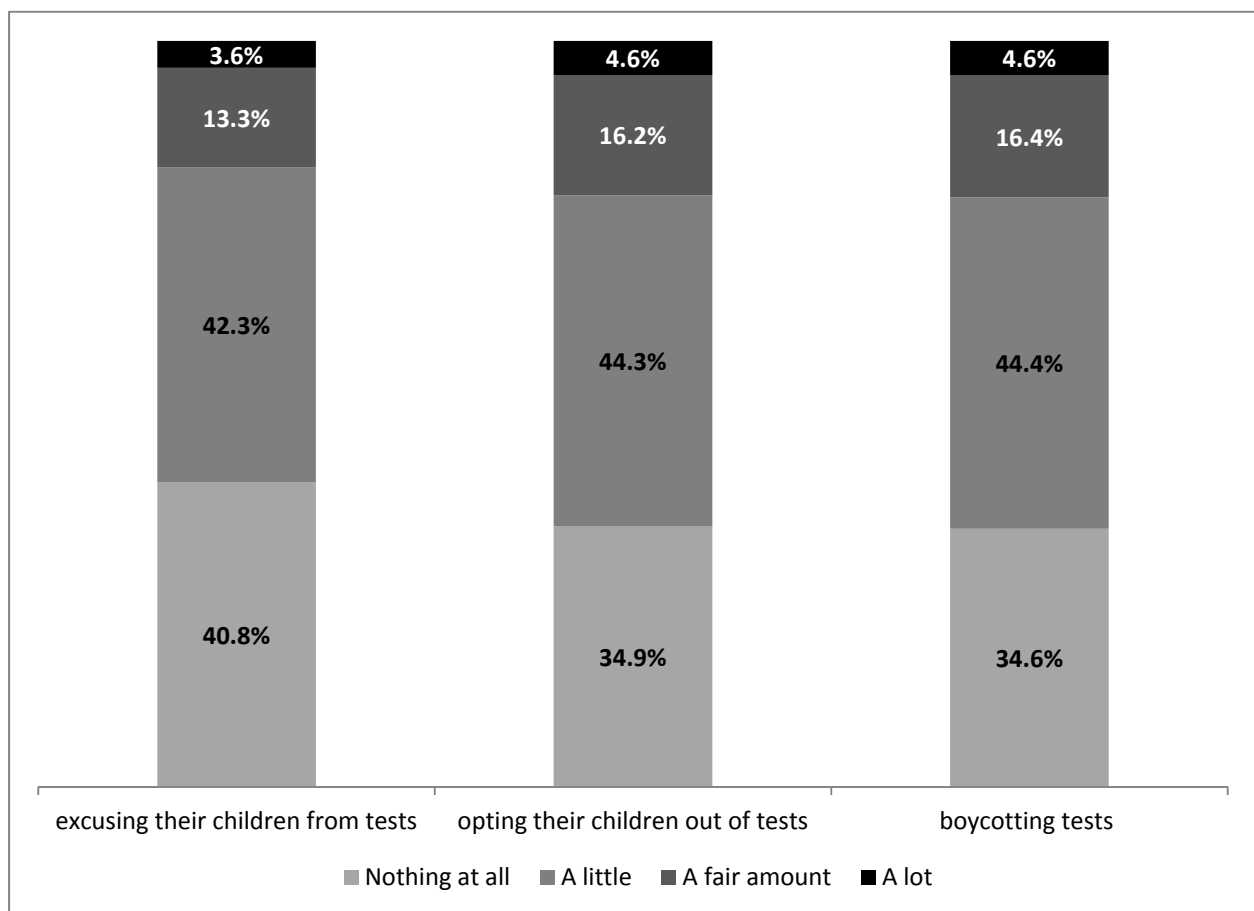
In addition to presenting aggregate descriptive statistics for different outcome variables, we also present predicted probabilities for different groups (e.g., region and political views). Predicted probabilities are calculated from multivariate analysis (ordinal logistic regression) with the following control variables: sex, race/ethnicity, age, education, income, employment status, political party identification, and region. We also examine whether there are differences between the MTurk and Qualtrics samples. Analysis was done in Stata 14. Tables for all analyses are available upon request.

Survey Findings: Exposure to the Opt Out movement

We begin our examination of the survey findings by exploring the extent to which Americans had heard about the Opt Out movement. Close to two-thirds (63.2%) of respondents said they had heard about parents who participate in the movement. One-fifth (19.4%) said they had heard “a fair amount” or “a lot” about parents who participate in the movement, and slightly more than two-fifths (43.8%) said they had heard “a little” about such parents. Over one-third (36.7%) of respondents said they had not heard about the movement.

The results highlight the importance of wording on the issue, as reflected in Figure 2, below. Six of 10 (59.2%) respondents said they had heard about parents “excusing their children from state standardized tests.” But higher rates of respondents reported hearing about parents “opting their children out of state standardized tests” (65.1%) and about parents “boycotting state standardized tests” (65.4%).

Figure 2: How much, if anything, have you heard about this group of parents? By experimental condition



Additional findings:

- ❖ Parents are more likely than non-parents to have heard “a fair amount” or “a lot” about the Opt Out movement. Approximately one-fourth of parents surveyed (26.5%) had heard about the movement, but only a small share of non-parents (14.8%) had heard about the movement.
- ❖ Residents in the Northeastern region of the United States are more likely than others to have heard about the Opt Out movement. Slightly more than one-quarter of respondents living in the Northeastern region (26.4%) had heard about the movement, while less than one-fifth of respondents living in the other regions of the country had heard about the movement (Midwest – 15.5%, West – 19.4%, South – 19.0%).

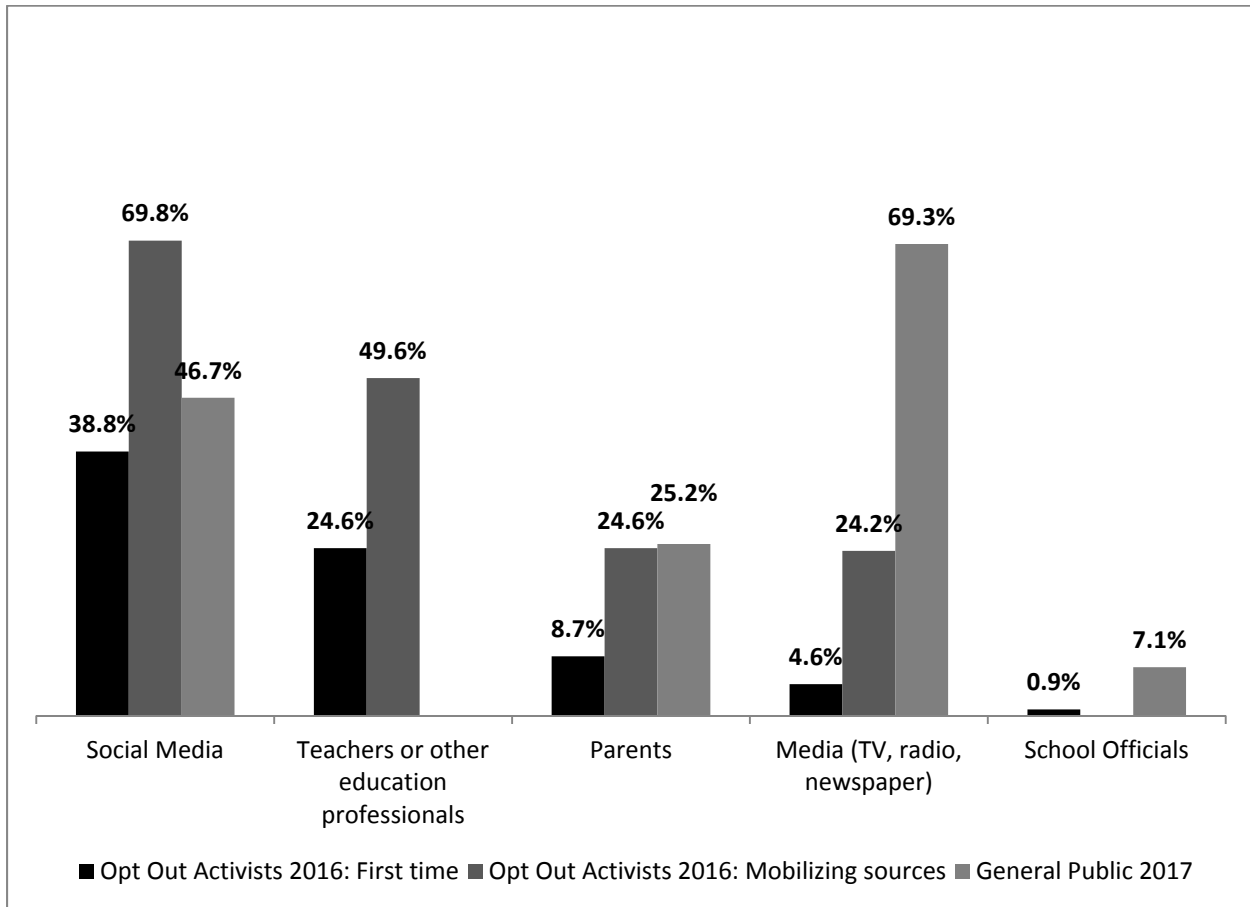
We asked respondents who had heard about the Opt Out movement to indicate the sources from which they had heard about parents who participate in the movement.¹² Slightly more than two-thirds (69.3%) of respondents said they heard about the movement through traditional media (TV, radio, and newspapers), with more respondents identifying national media rather than local media (47.3% vs. 38.4%) as the source. About half (46.7%) mentioned social media as a source for information about the movement, and less one-quarter (25.2%) mentioned parents.

The general public and Opt Out activists draw on different information sources when learning about the movement, as illustrated in Figure 3, below. Compared to the general public, Opt Out activists draw more on social media as a source of information. Two-fifths of activists (38.8%) first heard about opting out from social media (Facebook, Twitter, and blogs) and a large majority of activists (69.8%) reported social media provided information that made them want to know more about the movement and/or to participate in activities (mobilization).¹³ Also, Opt Out activists draw very little on traditional media as an initial source of information. Although traditional media seems to have a limited role in first informing activists about the Opt Out movement (only 4.6% of activists first heard about opting out from television, radio, and newspapers), it plays a larger role in mobilization, as one-quarter of the activists surveyed (24.2%) said they were mobilized by traditional media.

¹² This analysis is based on the MTurk sample (n=636).

¹³ Pizmony-Levy, O., & Green Saraisky, N. (2016). *Who opts out and why? Results from a national survey on opting out of standardized tests*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Figure 3: Source of information about the Opt Out movement, by sample



Note: Analysis for the general public is based on the MTurk sample (n=619)
 Figures for Opt Out activists are from Pizmony-Levy and Green Saraisky (2016)

Survey Findings: Understanding the goals and motivations of the Opt Out movement

Public understanding of the Opt Out movement goals and parents' motivations is imperative for the mobilization of public support. More than half (54.2%) of those surveyed who had heard at least a little about the Opt Out movement said they understand the goals of the movement (combination of "very well" and "fairly well"). Approximately two-fifths (38.4%) of respondents indicated they do not understand the goals of movement well. A small share (7.4%) of respondents said they do not understand the goals of movement at all.¹⁴

Additional findings:

- ❖ Parents report a higher level of understanding of the Opt Out movement's goals than other respondents (combination of "very well" and "fairly well"). Six of 10 parents (60.0%) said they understand the goals of the movement, whereas less than half of non-parents (48.1%) said they do.

In order to further explore this issue, we asked respondents about their understandings of the reasons motivating parents to take part in the Opt Out movement.¹⁵ Survey respondents attributed parental participation in the movement to the following six reasons: "they oppose the Common Core State Standards" (46.9%), "they believe standardized tests force teachers to teach to the test" (44.5%), "their children don't do well on standardized tests" (19.5%), "they oppose using students' performance on standardized tests to evaluate teachers" (18.7%), "they believe standardized tests take away too much instructional time" (14.7%), and "they oppose the growing role of the federal government in schools" (13.1%). These figures are consistent among respondents from different levels of understanding of the goals of the Opt Out movement.

¹⁴ Analysis of the whole sample (including those who have not heard about the Opt Out movement) demonstrates the importance of wording on the issue. Slightly more than one-third of respondents (36.0%) said they understand the goals of parents "excusing their children from state standardized tests." A higher share of respondents said that they understand the goals of parents "opting their children out of state standardized tests" (43.9%) and of parents "boycotting state standardized tests" (47.7%). These patterns are stable even when we take into account the level of exposure to the movement.

¹⁵ This analysis is based on the MTurk sample (n=619). Respondents were asked to mark the main two reasons that parents take part in the movement. Therefore, the numbers add up to more than 100%.

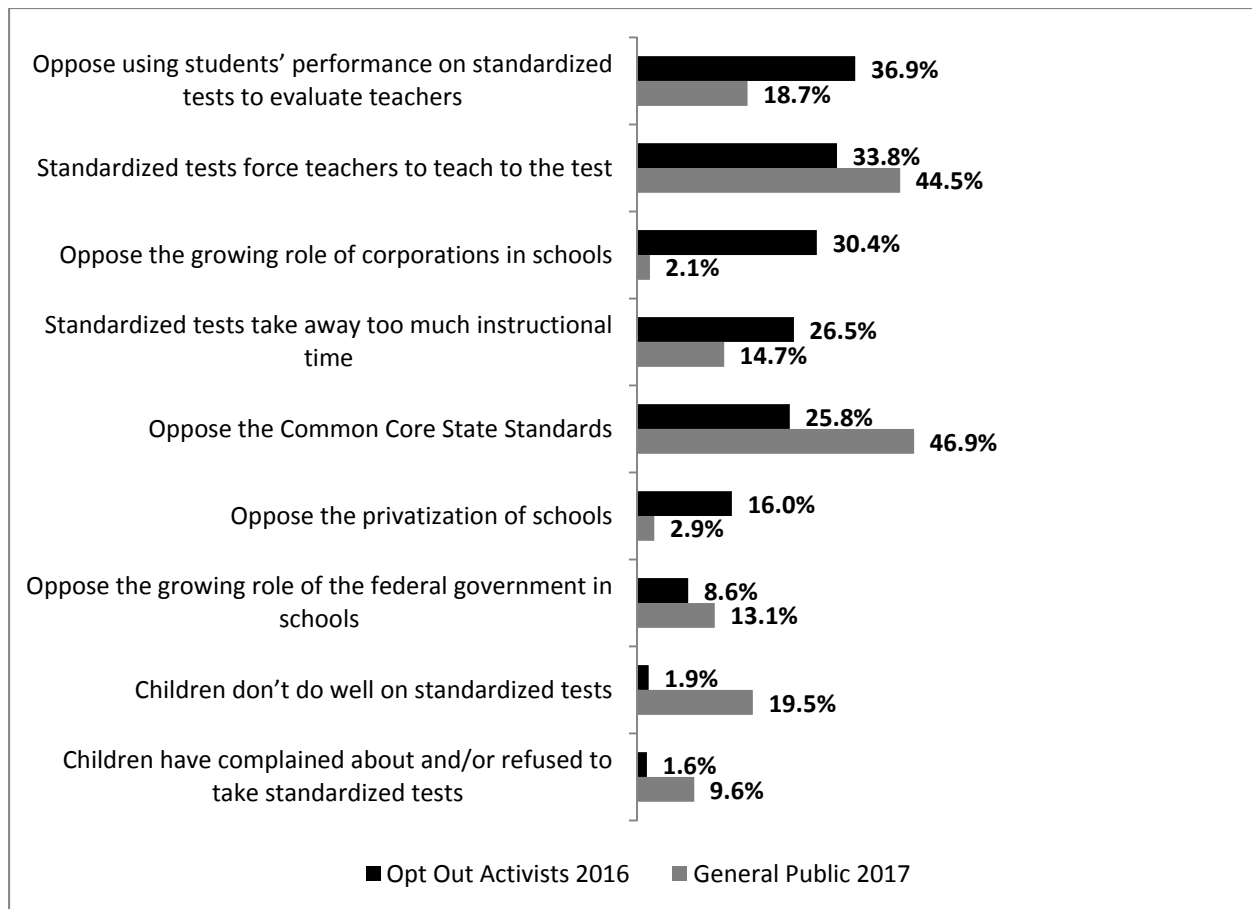
Survey respondents attributed different reasons motivating parents' behaviors, depending on the wording used to describe the parents' actions:

- ❖ The term “boycotting” appears to be associated with a critique of the negative consequences of standardized tests to teaching and learning. Slightly more than half of the respondents (52.3%) said that parents are “boycotting state standardized tests” because “they believe standardized tests force teachers to teach to the test.” Fewer respondents used this as a reason for parents “opting their children out of state standardized tests” (43.8%) or “excusing their children from state standardized tests” (37.2%).
- ❖ The term “opting out” appears to be associated with parents' concerns about children performance on standardized tests. A quarter of respondents (23.8%) said parents were “opting their children out of state standardized tests” because “their children do not do well on standardized tests.” Fewer respondents used this as a reason for parents “boycotting state standardized tests” (19.2%) or “excusing their children from state standardized tests” (15.8%).

Survey respondents' perception of parental motivations to take part in the Opt Out movement is somewhat incommensurate with the motivations reported by Opt Out activists, as illustrated in Figure 4, below. In Figure 4 we compare public perceptions of the reasons motivating parents to take part in the Opt Out movement with findings from the National Survey on Opt Out, in which activists were asked to report the reasons motivating them for action.¹⁶ Activists reported motivations that reflect a progressive critique of the negative consequences of standardized testing on schools and the role of the private sector in public education (e.g., “I oppose using students' performance on standardized tests to evaluate teachers,” “standardized tests force teachers to teach to the test,” and “I oppose the growing role of corporations in schools”). Survey respondents, however, perceived opposition to the Common Core of State Standards and the performance of children on standardized tests as key reasons for parents' participation in the Opt Out movement.

¹⁶ Pizmony-Levy, O., & Green Saraisky, N. (2016). Who opts out and why? Results from a national survey on opting out of standardized tests. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Figure 4: Reasons for parents' participation in the Opt Out movement, by sample



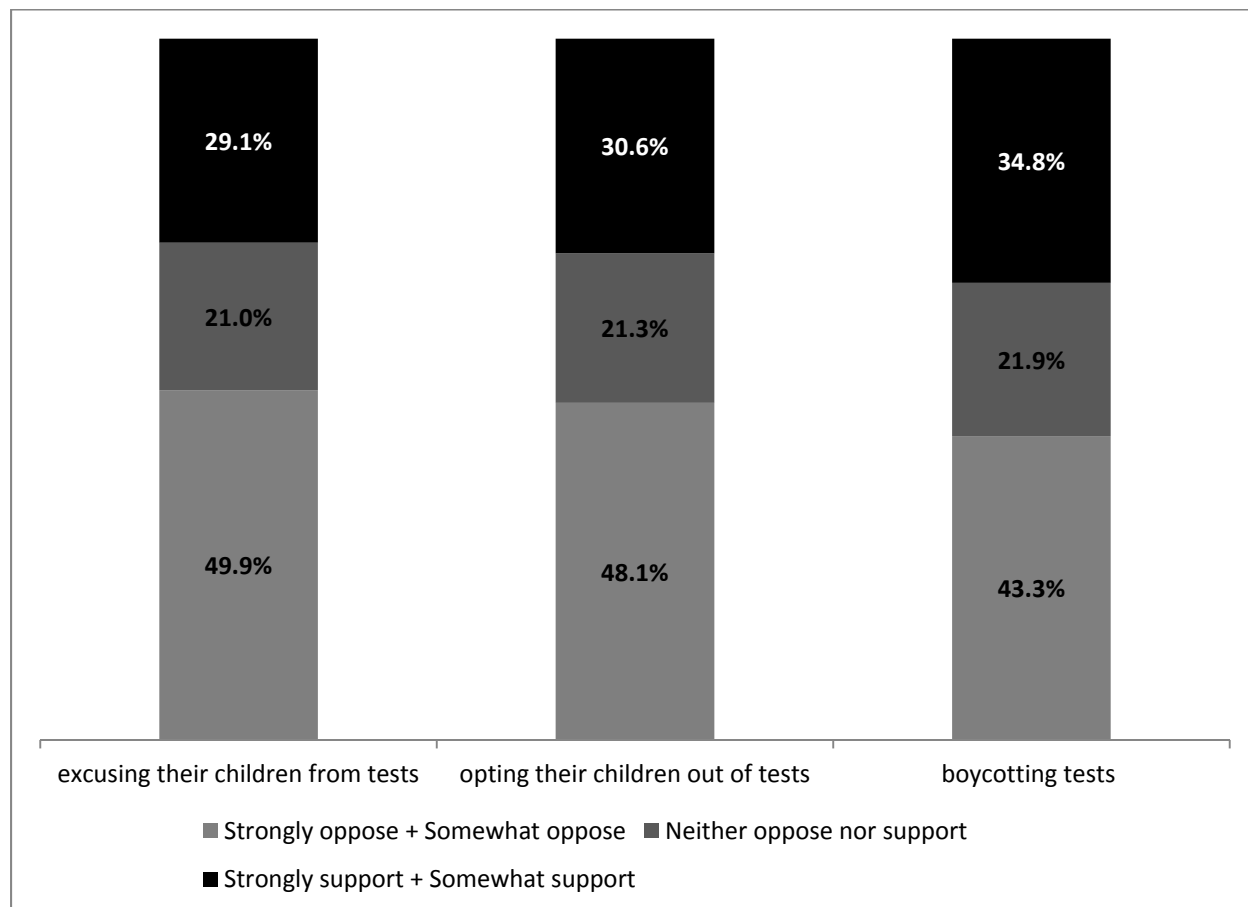
Note: Analysis for the general public is based on the MTurk sample (n=619)
 Figures for Opt Out activists are from Pizmony-Levy and Green Saraisky (2016)

Survey Findings: Support for the Opt Out movement

As noted above, public support is an important resource for many social movements, including the Opt Out movement. Roughly one-third of respondents (31.4 %) said they support parents who take part in the Opt Out movement (combination of “strongly support” [11.8 %] and “somewhat support” [19.6 %]). Fewer than half (47.1 %) of respondents said they oppose parents who take part in the Opt Out movement (combination of “strongly oppose” [17.5 %] and “somewhat oppose” [29.6 %]). A sizeable portion (21.5 %) said they “neither support nor oppose” these parents.

These results once again highlight the importance of wording on the issue, as reflected in Figure 5, below. More than one-third of respondents (34.8%) said they support parents “boycotting state standardized tests.” But lower rates of respondents said they support parents “excusing their children from state standardized tests” (29.1%) or “opting their children out of state standardized tests” (30.6%). The effect of wording is statistically significant, but the difference between the versions is not very large.

Figure 5: To what extent do you support or oppose parents? By experimental condition



Additional findings:

- ❖ Except for gender, we found no variation across other sociodemographic variables, including: education, income, region, parental status, or political party. Women, however, showed higher level of support than men (34.4% vs. 28.5%).

Respondents' support for parents who take part in the Opt Out movement was found to be associated with their understanding of the movement's goals. Among respondents who said they do not understand the movement's goals ("not at all"), only one-tenth (10.7%) support parents who take part in the Opt Out movement. This figure increases significantly for respondents who said they understand the movement's goals "fairly well" (46.9%) or "very well" (73.4%).

Analysis of the survey respondents' answers demonstrates that public support for parents who take part in the Opt Out movement is also associated with perceptions of the reasons that motivate parents to take part in the movement. Support is higher among respondents who said that parents take part in the movement because of one of the following reasons: "they oppose the Common Core State Standards" (37.9% say they "strongly support" and "somewhat support"), "they believe standardized tests force teachers to teach to the test" (37.6%), and "they believe standardized tests take away too much instructional time" (40.8%). Support is lower among respondents who said that parents take part in the movement because "their children complained about standardized tests" (21.1%) or "their children don't do well on standardized tests" (22.8%).¹⁷

In order to gain further insight on this issue, we asked respondents in the MTurk sample to explain in their own words why they support or oppose the Opt Out movement. Slightly more than one-third (35.9%; n=388) of respondents chose to explain their answers by leaving a comment. These answers are addressed below. We found no significant difference between respondents who left a comment and respondents who did not.

Why do people support the Opt Out movement?

Misgivings about applying one standardized test to all children. Approximately one-fifth (21.9%) of respondents who chose to leave comments indicated they had concerns about the efficacy of properly gauging student learning from the results of a single standardized test. These respondents noted that

¹⁷ This analysis is based on the MTurk sample (n=1,063).

having only one form of evaluation did not take into account learning-style differences, environmental factors, such as the students' mood or circumstances the day of the test, or test anxiety. This theme was more commonly expressed among women, parents, and respondents who said they understood the movement's goals. The following quotes exemplify this theme:

- "I don't believe that one test can measure a student's learning. The test may be biased toward certain races or genders. Also, some children have [test] anxiety and just do not test well. The student could also be having a bad day and not test well." (51-year-old female, American Indian/Alaskan Native, parent, Alabama).
- "Standardized tests are not helping our children. They are not improving the learning process, nor are they assisting in the retention of information, nor do they even teach helpful or useful information." (27-year-old male, White/Hispanic, parent, Texas).
- "I think standardized tests are very unfair, and are not set up in a way that benefits all children. Kids learn different ways, and some will do very poorly on a standardized test even if they know the material and would have done great on answering the questions phrased differently, in a different format." (43-year-old female, white, non-parent, Pennsylvania).

Parental authority. About 1 in 6 respondents who chose to leave comments (16.0%) indicated that parents have the right to decide how to educate their children. The following quotes exemplify this theme:

- "Parents have the right to say how their child is educated and what tests he or she may or may not take." (26-year-old male, white, parent, Louisiana).
- "Standardized testing can have the unintended consequence of actually reducing learning and interest in school by studying performance on a very narrow range of information. Parents should have the ability to choose whether their child is subject to these effects." (31-year-old female, white, non-parent, California).

Negative impact of standardized tests on teaching and learning. A small percentage of respondents who chose to leave comments (5.9%) mentioned negative consequences of standardized tests, such as loss of instruction time, narrowing of implemented curriculum ("teach to the test"), and morale. This theme was more commonly expressed by respondents who said they heard about the Opt Out movement and understood the movement's goals. The following quotes illustrate this theme:

- “Standardized test lead to having countless hours of class time being spent on teaching how to pass the test instead of teaching children about things they should be learning.” (39-year-old male, Hispanic, parent, Kansas).
- “I think that standardized testing encourages ‘teaching to the test’ and not actual learning. [These] tests may not accurately reflect a student’s abilities.” (31-year-old female, white, non-parent, Louisiana).
- “I’m aware of the problem of teachers having to basically teach their entire class around a test, so that their students do well and the administration is happy. I think that this is having a big negative effect on students and teachers as far as satisfaction and happiness are concerned. If enough parents opt out then the standardized testing regimen will fail.” (29-year-old male, Asian, non-parent, Missouri).

Why people oppose the Opt Out movement?

Perceived importance of standardized tests. Slightly more than one-third of respondents who chose to leave comments (35.0%) discussed the benefits and/or necessity of taking standardized exams. Some noted the importance of tests to the student, others to the school and community. This theme was more commonly expressed among men, non-parents, and respondents who said they understood the Opt Out movement’s goals. The following quotes exemplify this theme:

- “I think it is wise to not exclude/opt out your child for standardize testing, I believe it limits them. As well I would want to know how well my child does on these tests and not opt out and then later realize they had issues in math or reading. And many other things in life especially in high school and college are based on knowing what is on and how to take standardize tests. There is no reason to have your child skip them, it is foolish to make a point using ones child.” (53-year-old male, white, parent, New York).
- “Standardized testing allows each state’s progress to be meaningfully compared.” (47-year-old female, black, parent, Georgia).
- “Standardized tests are not intrinsically good or bad, it’s how they are used in schools. They can be a useful tool and should be part of school systems, properly used. Parents have legitimate concerns about standardized tests, for example, negative racial bias, but they also have some non-legitimate concerns, for example, hiding the failures of home schooling. Public education needs some standard assessments to be most successful. It has been a great advantage to the U.S. for decades, and should be strengthened. Standard assessments if used properly can help

make sure all children have fair access to quality education.” (61-year-old female, white, non-parent, Pennsylvania).

Critique of Opt Out parents. A small percentage of respondents who chose to leave comments (7.5%) were particularly critical of the parenting style of parents who take part in the Opt Out movement. This theme was more commonly expressed among younger respondents, and those who politically identify as democrats. The following quotes, provided by respondents who chose to leave comments, exemplify this theme:

- “Helicopter parenting at its very worst. I think it is a terrible precedent to set with kids that they are so special they can just opt out of things.” (27-year-old female, white, parent, California).
- “While I sometimes agree there are too many of these tests, I think these parents are being overprotective.” (38-year-old female, white, non-parent, Colorado).
- “Annoying. I can't stand these parents. Special snowflakes that are so demanding. Grow the fuck up, someday your special child is going to be at a job and they will be required to follow the company's rules and regulations, so they should get used to it now.” (37-year-old male, white, parent, New York).

Professional authority. A small percentage of respondents who chose to leave comments (6.2%) emphasized the authority of teachers and schools over parents and students. This theme came in contrast to the theme of parental authority, offered by supporters of the Opt Out movement. Some comments from respondents deferred the decision about testing to the school. Other comments stressed the need to administer standardized tests to all students, not just some, in order to hold the educational system accountable. The following quotes, provided by respondents who chose to leave comments, illustrate this theme:

- “Parents should go along with what the schools think is important and standardized tests are important to make sure students are not sliding by without learning anything.” (60-years-old male, white, parent, Minnesota).
- “Parents are not experts on school curriculum.” (26-year-old female, white, non-parent, Ohio).
- “If these are standardized tests, then either everyone should take them or nobody should.” (19-years-old female, Latina, non-parent, Texas).

In sum, respondents who support and oppose the Opt Out movement explain their opinions differently. Table 3 clearly shows the association between the themes we found in the open-ended responses and the extent to which respondents support or oppose parents who take part in the movement. For example, majority of respondents that mentioned misgivings about applying one standardized test to all children supported the movement (78.3%). And majority of respondents that commented about the importance of standardized tests oppose the movement (92.6%).

Table 3: To what extent do you support or oppose parents? By open-ended themes

Theme	Oppose (strongly and somewhat)	Neither	Support (strongly and somewhat)
Misgivings about applying one standardized test to all children	21.7	-	78.3
Parental authority	3.2	41.9	58.9
Negative impact of standardized tests on teaching and learning	10.6	4.7	84.7
Perceived importance of standardized tests	92.6	2.9	4.4
Critique of Opt Out parents	87.5	4.2	8.3
Professional authority	89.7	6.9	3.4
Uncertain / ambivalent	10.7	85.7	3.6

Vas majority of open-ended responses that included uncertain or ambivalent statements (85.7%) said that they neither support nor oppose parents who take part in the movement. The following quotes, provided by respondents who chose to leave comments, illustrate this uncertainty and ambivalence:

- “I don't really support or oppose. I do believe it is their right to make the choice, but I also understand what the point is for doing the tests.” (27-years-old female, white, non-parent, Colorado).
- “I don't have kids. But I have worked in the field of state supported standardized testing and just feel it's too complicated and don't really accomplish much so I took a neutral stance.” (52-years-old male, white, non-parent, Florida).
- “I am on the fence because it depends on which state we are talking about first. I do support that in the whole there should be a min on what a child should be able to do in math for the whole nation...but I don't think standardized testing is a good gauge in our children's levels

seeing how we are seeing more and more cases of school personal cheating to get better scores for more funding so much focus on testing encourages cheating more and focus on test taking then in actual education there has to be a good mix I feel” (36-years-old male, multiracial, parent, Alabama).

Interestingly, two fifths of respondents who mentioned parental authority in their open-ended response (41.9%) also said that they neither support nor oppose parents who take part in the movement. The following quotes, provided by respondents who chose to leave comments, illustrate this pattern:

- “Parents should have some say in the education of their child. At the same time the tests are supposed to be there to make sure the child is getting a good education. Not sure the tests are doing their job anymore though. Not sure where I stand on the subject.” (33-years-old male, white, non-parent, Missouri).
- “I neither support nor oppose their decision. I do feel maybe the parent should have the choice but I don't feel it's a fight worth fighting.” (42-years-old male, white, parent, Michigan)

To further illustrate the differences between respondents who support and oppose the Opt Out movement, we present a visual of the most common words used by survey respondents who support and oppose the Opt Out movement (Figures 6 and 7, respectively). In these “word clouds,” the most frequently used words are displayed in larger fonts.

Among the words used by supporters of the Opt Out movement, we can see more frequent use of familial language to describe young people (“child,” “children,” and “kids”). In turn, we see less frequent use of the words “student” and “students,” which emphasize the social role of young people in the education system. In addition, we see words that stress the optionality of standardized testing (“decide,” “decision,” and “choice”).

Conclusion

This study seeks to contribute to the small but growing research on public opinion towards the Opt Out movement. We used data from two online surveys of the adult population in the United States to expand the scope of questions on public engagement with the movement (e.g., exposure, understanding of goals, and support). In order to test whether framing/wording affects public engagement with the movement, the surveys included an experimental design.

Close to two-thirds of Americans had heard about the Opt Out movement. Slightly more than half of Americans who had heard about the movement said they understood the goals of the movement. About one-third of Americans said they supported parents who take part in the movement. These figures are better understood when contrasted with recent findings about public engagement with another contemporary social movement: Black Lives Matter (BLM). Overall the general public is more engaged with BLM than with the Opt Out movement: Approximately three-quarters have heard about BLM (73.0%), about two-thirds of those who heard about BLM say they understand the goals of the movement (64.0%), and six-in-ten say they support BLM (59.0%).¹⁸

Our analysis highlights the importance of wording on the issue. Respondents were more likely to report having heard about parental action described in ethical/political terms (“opting out” and “boycotting”) than a neutral term (“excusing”). A similar pattern appeared regarding respondents’ support for the movement. Respondents were more likely to report supporting parental action described in ethical/political terms than a neutral term. Many national public opinion surveys, however, use neutral terms when asking questions about the Opt Out movement (see Table 1). Our analysis reveals it is possible, therefore, that these surveys are underestimating public engagement with the Opt Out movement.

Notably, our analysis indicates that framing the Opt Out movement in the context of “parents’ rights” has no statistically significant effect on public engagement. Even when altering how the movement is framed (“parents say that they have the right to decide” or “parents say that they should decide”), respondents’ engagement with the Opt Out movement remains stable. It is possible that framing the

¹⁸ Horowitz, J. M., & Livingston, G. (2016). How Americans view the Black Lives Matter Movement. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/08/how-americans-view-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>

movement in the context of “parents’ rights” does not carry an effect, but it is also possible that the operationalization of this issue in our survey was too subtle to evoke an effect.

Our results show minimal variation across socio-demographic characteristics. As might be expected, parents are more engaged with the Opt Out movement than non-parents. Notably, women show higher levels of support for the movement than men. A possible explanation for this pattern relates to gender-roles and the involvement of mothers in raising children and navigating the education/school system.

A comparison between the general public and Opt Out activists yields two interesting and related findings. First, the groups appear to rely on different sources of information about the movement. The general public relies more heavily on information from traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers), whereas Opt Out activists rely more heavily on social media to get their information. Second, the general public appears to have a misconception of the motivations that drive parents to take part in the Opt Out movement, at least as compared to the motivations enumerated by Opt Out activists. The general public believes Opt Out activists oppose the Common Core and are critical of standardized testing’s impact on teachers (i.e. teaching to the test). Opt Out activists, however, report a more expansive set of motivations, including opposing using students’ performance on standardized tests to evaluate teachers, opposing the growing role of corporations in schools, and believing standardized tests take away too much instructional time. We speculate that the two groups’ reliance on different sources for information may be responsible for their different understandings of why parents opt their children out of standardized testing.

This study offered an initial comprehensive look into public engagement with the Opt Out movement. Given the possible effect of the movement on current reform movements, more research is needed to better understand this topic. Future research could develop in at least four directions. First, scholars could replicate this study using traditional modes of survey research (e.g., phone surveys). It is possible that our chosen data collection mode affected our results. Second, scholars could continue to assess public engagement with the Opt Out movement in the coming years, especially if U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos revisits past testing policy. Third, scholars could examine other frames and conditions, such as the involvement of teachers in the Opt Out movement. Fourth, scholars could use in-depth interviews with the general public to better understand the ways in which respondents make sense of different terminology and frames.

Appendix 1: Survey instrument

In this section, we are interested in your opinions and attitudes about education and schools.

Master version:

As you may know, in recent years a growing number of parents across the nation are **[excusing their children from / opting their children out of / boycotting]** state standardized tests in math and reading. These parents say that they **[have the right to decide / should decide]** whether or not their children take these tests.

Six versions:

1. As you may know, in recent years a growing number of parents across the nation are excusing their children from state standardized tests in math and reading. These parents say that they have the right to decide whether or not their children take these tests.
 2. As you may know, in recent years a growing number of parents across the nation are excusing their children from state standardized tests in math and reading. These parents say that they should decide whether or not their children take these tests.
 3. As you may know, in recent years a growing number of parents across the nation are opting their children out of state standardized tests in math and reading. These parents argue they have the right to decide whether or not their children take these tests.
 4. As you may know, in recent years a growing number of parents across the nation are opting their children out of state standardized tests in math and reading. These parents argue they should decide whether or not their children take these tests.
 5. As you may know, in recent years a growing number of parents across the nation are boycotting state standardized tests in math and reading. These parents say that they have the right to decide whether or not their children take these tests.
 6. As you may know, in recent years a growing number of parents across the nation are boycotting state standardized tests in math and reading. These parents say that they should decide whether or not their children take these tests.
1. How much, if anything, have you heard about this group of parents?
 - a. Nothing at all
 - b. A little
 - c. A fair amount
 - d. A lot
 2. If you have heard about this group of parents, where have you heard about it?

[MTurk sample only]

 - a. National Media (newspapers, television, online)
 - b. Local Media (newspapers, television, online)
 - c. Social media

- d. Parents
 - e. School officials
 - f. Other (ENTER TEXT)
 - g. I haven't heard about these parents
3. How well, if at all, do you feel you understand the goals of this group of parents?
 - a. Not at all well
 - b. Not too well
 - c. Fairly well
 - d. Very well
4. To what extent do you support or oppose parents [excusing their children from / opting their children out of / boycotting] state standardized tests in math and reading??
 - a. Strongly oppose
 - b. Somewhat oppose
 - c. Neither oppose nor support
 - d. Somewhat support
 - e. Strongly support
5. Why do you support or oppose the actions of these parents? Please use the textbox below to explain your answer.
[MTurk sample only]
6. In your opinion, what are the main two reasons that parents are [excusing their children from / opting their children out of / boycotting] state standardized tests in math and reading?
[MTurk sample only]
 - a. They oppose the Common Core State Standards
 - b. They oppose the growing role of corporations in schools
 - c. They oppose the growing role of the federal government in schools
 - d. They oppose the privatization of schools
 - e. They oppose using students' performance on standardized tests to evaluate teachers
 - f. Their children complained about standardized tests
 - g. Their children don't do well on standardized tests
 - h. They believe standardized tests force teachers to teach to the test
 - i. They believe standardized tests take away too much instructional time
 - j. Other (ENTER TEXT)
7. How many parents of school-aged children do you know who are [excusing their child or children from / opting their child or children out of / boycotting] state standardized tests?
[MTurk sample only]
 - a. None
 - b. One
 - c. Between 2 and 5
 - d. Between 6 and 10
 - e. More than 10

8. How likely is it that you will [excuse your child or children from / opt your child or children out of / boycott] state standardized tests this year or in the future?

[MTurk sample only]

- a. Very unlikely
 - b. Somewhat unlikely
 - c. Somewhat likely
 - d. Very likely
9. In the past, have you ever [excused your child or children from / opted your child or children out of / boycotted] state standardized tests?

[MTurk sample only]

- a. Yes
 - b. No
10. In general, how much confidence do you have in:

[Qualtrics sample only]

	Complete confidence	A great deal of confidence	Some confidence	Very little confidence	No confidence at all
The educational system in the U.S.					
The health care system in the U.S.					

11. In your opinion, who should have the greatest influence in deciding what is taught in the public schools here — the federal government, the state government, or the local school board?

[Qualtrics sample only]

- a. The federal government
- b. The state government
- c. The local school board