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Parents' Resistance to Standardized Testing in a Highly  
Centralized System: The Emergence of an Opt-out  
Movement in Israel

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the emergence of an opt-out movement in Israel led by parent associations at local and national levels. The protest targeted the use of a national standardized test, the Meitzav. Analyzing media coverage of this movement and informed by the theoretical arguments of the Advocacy Coalition Framework, the study suggests that by forming a coalition with the Teachers' Union, parents proclaimed their right to a role in education policymaking in a highly centralized system. The coalition was successful in that it influenced the Ministry of Education to postpone the tests and form a special

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committee to reevaluate the national assessment policy. The Israeli case enhances our understanding of opt-out movements in different educational and institutional contexts.

**Keywords:** test-based accountability; standardized tests; parents; opt-out movement; Israel

### **Resistencia de los padres a las pruebas estandarizadas en un sistema altamente centralizado: El surgimiento de un movimiento de opt-out en Israel**

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza el surgimiento de un movimiento de opt-out en Israel liderado por asociaciones de padres a nivel local y nacional. La protesta tenía como objetivo el uso de una prueba nacional estandarizada, el Meitzav. Analizando la cobertura mediática de este movimiento e informado por los argumentos teóricos del Marco de la Coalición de Defensa, el estudio sugiere que, al formar una coalición con el Sindicato de Maestros, los padres proclamaron su derecho a participar en la formulación de políticas educativas en un sistema altamente centralizado. La coalición tuvo éxito en que influyó en el Ministerio de Educación para posponer las pruebas y formar una comisión especial para reevaluar la política de evaluación nacional. El caso israelí mejora nuestra comprensión de los movimientos de opt-out en diferentes contextos educativos e institucionales.

**Palabras clave:** rendición de cuentas basada en pruebas; pruebas estandarizadas; país; movimiento de opt-out; Israel

### **Resistência dos pais a testes padronizados em um sistema altamente centralizado: O surgimento de um movimento de opt-out em Israel**

**Resumo:** Este artigo discute o surgimento de um movimento de opt-out em Israel liderado por associações de pais em níveis local e nacional. O protesto visava o uso de um teste nacional padronizado, o Meitzav. Analisando a cobertura da mídia desse movimento e informado pelos argumentos teóricos do Advocacy Coalition Framework, o estudo sugere que, ao formar uma coalizão com o Sindicato dos Professores, os pais proclamaram seu direito a um papel na formulação de políticas educacionais em um sistema altamente centralizado. A coalizão teve sucesso na medida em que influenciou o Ministério da Educação a adiar as provas e formar uma comissão especial para reavaliar a política nacional de avaliação. O caso israelense aumenta nossa compreensão dos movimentos de opt-out em diferentes contextos educacionais e institucionais.

**Palavras-chave:** *accountability* baseada em testes; testes padronizados; pais; movimento de opt-out; Israel

## **Parents' Resistance to Standardized Testing in a Highly Centralized System: The Emergence of an Opt-out Movement in Israel**

The Israeli state education system is highly centralized, with the Ministry of Education controlling almost every aspect of education policy, including school funding, curricula, and assessment, as well as teacher training, hiring, promotion, and employment conditions (Nir & Bogler, 2012). The introduction of national standardized tests for elementary and middle schools in the early 2000s, as part of a neoliberal shift towards a logic of performative accountability, strengthened this centralization by enhancing the ability of inspectors and Ministry of Education directors to monitor and control the work of school staff (Feniger et al., 2016). As in many other countries (e.g., Lingard et al., 2013; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Sahlberg, 2016), academics, educators, and the media criticized these tests, focusing on their unintended negative consequences, but for

almost two decades, the criticism had little effect on the Ministry of Education's national assessment policies (Ayalon et al., 2019). This changed in late 2018 when it was revealed that during that year's national educational assessment cycle, a remarkable number of students were classified by their schools as "learning disabled" and their results excluded from the schools' mean score (Dattel, 2018). This gained much attention from the media and the Israeli public. The Ministry of Education accused teachers and school principals of fraud; in response, the elementary and middle school Teachers' Union declared a labor dispute, emphasizing the negative influences of national standardized tests and citing accountability pressures in teachers' professional environment and learning and instruction. At this point, several local parent associations, as well as the national committee of parent associations (henceforth National Parent Association), joined the Teachers' Union and called for a boycott of the 2019 cycle of tests. Parents in municipalities throughout the country responded to this call by keeping their children out of school when national standardized tests were administered (Dattel, 2019b).

In effect, by forming a coalition with the Teachers' Union, parent associations reclaimed a significant role in education policy-making in a system that rarely considers them partners in policy formation. Furthermore, this coalition was surprisingly successful, convincing the Ministry of Education to postpone the tests in 2020 (before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic) and to create an expert committee to reevaluate the national educational assessment policy.

This analysis of the Israeli case of parental resistance to standardized testing and test-based accountability expands the body of literature on opt-out movements, which is mainly US-centered. First, it examines the phenomenon in a highly centralized system and suggests that, in such a system, parents can influence decision-making when they build an effective coalition with teachers and communicate their messages through the media. Second, in contrast to the U.S. opt-out movements that are mostly the product of grassroots initiatives, in Israel, elected parent associations played a major role in resisting governmental educational assessment policies.

In this paper, we draw on the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Sabatier, 1998; Sabatier & Weible, 2007) used in previous research on parental resistance to standardized testing (Wang, 2021). The ACF belongs to the broad field of policy process analysis, and its unique contribution to this field is its explanation of policy change through the lens of coalition formation among actors with similar beliefs and objectives. Our empirical analysis draws on national and local newspaper reports and on data collected from Facebook. In the analysis, we identified the actors involved in coalition formation, along with their reasons for resisting standardized testing. Our goal is to answer the following research questions. Who were the actors involved in the coalition formation and in the emergence of the Israeli opt-out movement? Why were they involved (goals, reasons, discourses)? What were their main strategies and modes of action? Finally, what did they achieve?

## **Parents' Resistance to Standardized Testing and the Opt-out Movement in the United States**

In the following section we provide a succinct review of research on the opt-out movement in the United States as a background for the discussion of the Israeli case, which has not been studied yet. While this study was not aimed at a comparative analysis of the United States and Israel, insights from U.S. research can help us to highlight the unique aspects of the Israeli case and to offer theoretical developments to the body of research on opt-out movements. In the United States, test-based accountability is a policy agenda promoted by both Republican and Democrat presidents and has the overwhelming support of legislators on both sides of the U.S. political system. The No Child

Left Behind (NCLB) Act, signed by President George W. Bush in 2002, introduced test-based accountability to the U.S. federal education policy and had dramatic effects on local and state education policies. In 2009, President Barack Obama's Race to the Top (RTTT) policy furthered this shift towards test-based accountability by encouraging states to rely on new assessment consortia and to evaluate teacher effectiveness using student standardized testing. The RTTT not only increased testing pressures on school staff and students, but also pushed towards the privatization of public education through the growing influence of companies involved in creating testing infrastructures (Hursh et al., 2020; Pizmony-Levi et al., 2021).

Parents in the United States have protested and boycotted standardized tests since the beginning of the 2000s. This resistance has intensified since 2014 when 45 states and the District of Columbia adopted the revised Common Core State Standards (CCSS) tests and RTTT's new assessments (McKeon & Giltomer, 2019; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2021; Rubin et al., 2017). The growing U.S. opt-out movement has drawn considerable attention among researchers. Clayton and associates (2019), for example, used data from Colorado, a state with a large decline in test participation, to examine school-level characteristics associated with decreased rates of test-taking. They found that suburban and rural schools, as well as schools with high proportions of white and affluent families, were more prone to such a decline. Pizmony-Levy and Green Saraisky (2021) reported results from two U.S. nation-wide surveys conducted in 2016 and 2018. They found both change and stability in the demographic characteristics and attitudes of participants in the opt-out movement. In general, most are white mothers from the upper middle class, but the demography of this movement is not monolithic, and it is more diverse than has been portrayed in some media reports. In both 2016 and 2018, many participants said they joined the movement because they opposed the use of standardized testing to evaluate teachers and because of the negative consequences of standardized testing on learning and instruction. Another reason cited for joining the movement was to oppose "the growing role of corporations and privatization in schools" (Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2021, p. 10).

Paquin Morel (2021) used a dataset of social media posts, posted in the United States from 2010 to 2014, to investigate discursive strategies of the opt-out movement to recruit participants. His analysis revealed that politically oriented framing (i.e., connected to broad social issues) decreased over time, while framing students' and schools' experiences with standardized testing as negative became more prominent over time. He concluded that "the use of politically neutral frames suggests that participants in the [opt-out] movement sidestepped the need to build political ideological consensus among participants" and "sought to mobilize others to participate in collective action, to get them to join in boycotts of annual tests, and thus not only convince others that testing is a problem, but that it is a problem requiring collective action" (Paquin Morel, 2021, p. 11).

Hursh and associates (2020) reported that between 2015 and 2018, about 20% of third- to eighth-grade students in the state of New York did not take the tests required under RTTT because their parents opted out. This was the result of grassroots organizations of parents (mostly mothers) who saw opting out of state mandated tests as the most efficient resistance to policy makers' refusal to reconsider test-based accountability in light of parents' and educators' criticism. Hursh et al. describe in detail how two white middle-class mothers initiated an opt-out organization together with critical educators. These mothers said the experience of their children with standardized tests encouraged them to become activists in the field of education and to fight to change current testing policies. Casalaspì (2021) studied the political consequences of grassroots activism in the context of the opt-out movement in the state of New York. Using a mixed-methods comparative case study analysis of four New York school districts, he found that while the opt-out movement has not brought considerable changes in state or local testing policies, it has significantly increased parental

activism and engagement with education politics. Wang (2021) analyzed a dataset comprising press articles and archival documents from 2015 to 2018, looking specifically at the formation of actor and discourse coalitions in the opt-out movement in the state of New York. Using quantitative network analysis and conceptually building on the ACF, she found the actor network of the opt-out movement advocacy coalition is larger and denser than the network of the opposing groups who support standardized testing. This, according to Wang, can help explain why the opt-out coalition “has gained traction and stayed relatively robust in New York” (p. 4). Wang’s discourse analysis reveals an advantage for the coalition of advocacy groups. Statements such as “high-stakes standardized testing does not accurately reflect learning or student achievement” and “high-stakes standardized testing put excessive pressure on students and teachers” (Table 2, p. 5), dominate the discourse of the coalition.

While much of this literature sympathizes with the critical approach to standardized testing, Wheeler-Bell (2020) proposes the concept of “neoliberal cynicism” to understand the arguments of both advocates and opponents of the opt-out movement in the United States. He argues:

Both sides accept the normative discourse of the ability to achieve equal educational opportunity...while also acknowledging that equal educational opportunity cannot be achieved within our current system. Thus, both sides know education faces structural problems, yet they continue to act as if changing peripheral components within education will ensure that children are provided an equal educational opportunity. (p. 337)

### **Test-based Accountability in Israel**

As noted above, the Israeli state education system is highly centralized, with the Ministry of Education running most aspects: it controls the allocation of budgets, assumes responsibility for teachers’ employment, and constructs new schools. It similarly controls pedagogical aspects: it sets the national goals and evaluates them through national standardized tests (Nir & Bogler, 2012). These tests, commonly referred to as the Meitzav (a Hebrew acronym for measurement of effectiveness and school growth), were introduced in the early 2000s for elementary and middle schools. They are conducted at the second, fifth, and eighth grades, and examine language literacy, mathematics, English, science, and other school climate and pedagogical aspects. The introduction of the national standardized tests was part of a larger neoliberal reform in the Israeli education system rooted in the logic of performative accountability and influenced by international large-scale assessments such as TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) (Feniger et al., 2012; Pizmony-Levy, 2017).

The Meitzav gave the Ministry of Education more power to monitor schools and further increased its centralization. Klein (2017) used a questionnaire to survey elementary and middle school teachers on the effects of the Meitzav on their work. The study compared the Meitzav’s external tests with similar internal school tests. The external tests required much more preparation time and drew more teacher and administrator attention. They were also related, according to teachers’ reports, to more ethical deviations (such as asking low-achieving students not to attend school on the day of the test). Feniger and associates (2016) collected data from school principals using a questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The data showed the Meitzav has unintended consequences that are very similar to those found in other education systems implementing standardized testing as a major tool for school accountability. These include increased pressure on teachers and principals, diversion of resources to tested subjects, narrowed curricula, a focus on tested subjects and skills, and increased school hours teaching to the tests. The unintended

consequences were exacerbated when the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in 2012 in favor of the Israeli Movement for Freedom of Information and obliged the Ministry of Education to publish the Meitzav results for each school. This was apparently one of the reasons for Minister of Education Shai Piron's decision to postpone and reevaluate the tests. After one year of postponement, however, the Ministry of Education decided to implement them again in 2014 (Feniger et al., 2016).

Although the Meitzav tests were criticized in the Israeli media, media coverage in Israel largely focused on international tests (Yemini & Gordon, 2015). The marginalization of national assessment policy in the public discourse may help explain why criticism of the Meitzav had little effect on the Ministry of Education's standardized assessment policy. This changed in late 2018 and early 2019. In November 2018, the Israeli business newspaper *The Marker* (part of the *Haaretz* group) said an exceptionally high rate of students were reported as learning disabled; therefore, their test scores were not included in the Meitzav test means for that year. The Ministry of Education responded to mounting criticism in the media by blaming school principals of fraud and unethical behavior. Consequently, the Teachers' Union started a campaign against the Meitzav assessment method, emphasizing its negative implications for both students and teachers. The Teachers' Union also declared a labor dispute and demanded the abolishment of the Meitzav tests (Dattel, 2018, 2019a).

At this point, local and national parent associations joined the Teachers' Union in criticizing the Meitzav tests. Parent associations called on the Ministry of Education to redesign the test by establishing a committee of policymakers, teachers, and parents to cooperate for this purpose. To achieve their goal, parent associations threatened to keep their children out of school on test days (Dattel, 2019a). Thus, for the first time, Israeli parents led an organized wide-scale protest of a major component of educational policy. Throughout the year, the parents' struggle received unprecedented public attention and media coverage in both national and local newspapers. The Ministry of Education bowed to pressure, announcing that the Meitzav would be postponed in 2020, and a special committee of experts would evaluate the national assessment policy. While this committee did not include parents or representatives of the Teachers' Union, the Israeli spontaneous opt-out movement had clearly affected education policy making (Dattel, 2019a).

### **Aims of the Study and Research Questions**

This study analyzed the emergence of the Israeli opt-out movement through the theoretical lens of the ACF. Within the broad field of policy process analysis, the ACF focuses on how actors engage in politics to turn their beliefs and attitudes into policy outcomes through coalitions that allow them to coordinate their actions and organizational resources. Forming advocacy coalitions with other actors or organizations who share similar beliefs and attitudes is often used as a strategy to influence policy processes. In many policy fields, most decisions are made by a small group of government professionals; hence, policy tends towards stability. However, policy changes can occur when external events affect public opinion. Advocacy coalitions allow organizations and individuals to collaborate and drive for policy change.

The ACF has been applied in different countries and fields of policy, and numerous studies have demonstrated its theoretical utility (for the main theoretical arguments, see Sabatier, 1998; Sabatier & Weible, 2007; for recent reviews of empirical studies employing the ACF, see Weible et al., 2009; Pierce et al., 2020). Fischer (2014) argues that "coalition structures and their ability to produce policy change crucially depend on country-specific opportunity structures, i.e., the institutional context within which policy processes take place" (pp. 346–347). According to Fischer, this aspect has been overlooked in many studies, but "[t]aking the country-specific opportunity

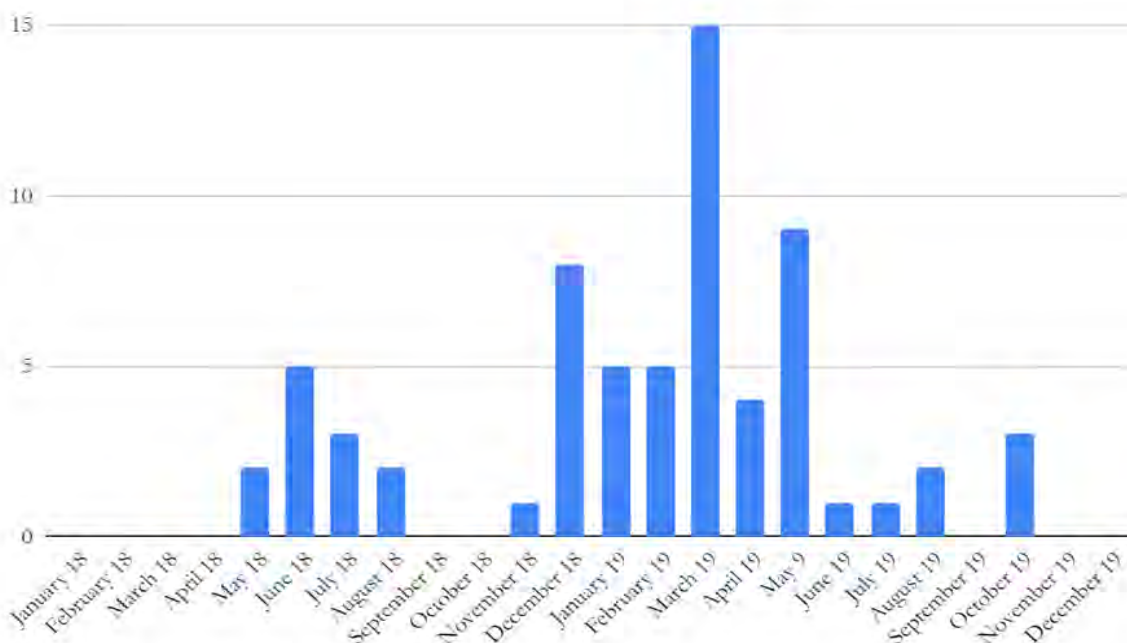
structures into account is absolutely crucial when studying coalition structures within policy processes and their ability to produce policy change” (p. 347). In this paper, we focus on a specific opportunity structure and a chain of events that led to the formation of an advocacy coalition that caused policy change.

### Data and Methods

Our main dataset comprised a body of news articles published in Israeli national and local newspapers between November 2018 and October 2019. This period begins with the news about the classification of students as “learning disabled” and their subsequent exclusion from the calculation of the mean test marks. It ends shortly after the Ministry of Education’s announcement of changes in the national assessment policy. Figure 1 shows the distribution over time of newspaper stories related to the Meitzav tests (our main search word). The figure shows peak coverage was at the start of 2019, with news items mainly related to calls to boycott the tests.

**Figure 1**

*Number of News Articles on the Meitzav, by Month*



Camphuijsen and Levatino (2021) have already shown the importance of local media to research on education policy in the era of standardized testing. Following them, we chose to include both national and local newspapers. Since the Israeli parents engaged in resistance to standardized tests mainly through their local parent associations, their actions became an issue in their municipalities. In our process of data collection, we realized local newspapers were an important source of coverage of parents’ attempts to influence national education policy. Local media in Israel usually publish both print and online articles, and unlike national media, they concentrate on local topics. Based on interviews with local media editors, Kizel and Feuerstein (2011) report that they generally see themselves as suppliers of information and stories relevant for the community they cater to.

In the first step of our search, we collected all news articles on the national standardized tests published in Hebrew (we did not cover Arabic media) in national and local newspapers during our defined time period. The keywords were: Meitzav, parents' protest, parents' struggle, and boycotting Meitzav tests. We searched for articles in Google and on the websites of all major news outlets in Israel (e.g., *Ynet*, *Haaretz*, *Maariv*, *N12*). We selected articles explicitly discussing the struggle of parents and teachers against the Meitzav. As Berkovich and Avigur-Eshel (2019) demonstrate, in Israel, as in many other countries, digital social media are a major venue for debates and protests related to education policy issues. Previous research on the U.S. opt-out movement used Facebook groups as sites for data collection (e.g., McKeon & Gitomer, 2019; Rubin et al., 2020). We therefore extended our analysis by searching this social media website. By including Facebook posts, we sought to enrich our understanding of the policy actors and their beliefs, goals, and actions. When we analyzed our data, we discovered some articles cited Facebook posts for the same purpose. Our search on Facebook focused on groups engaging with the national assessment policy; we used the keyword Meitzav. This led us to one public group established and administered by parents who led a campaign against the Meitzav in its local municipality. We also used the posts shared in the group to reach more groups and individuals. This method led us to a few posts published by individual parents on their private accounts and to several posts by local parent associations.

We performed qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) on *all* the relevant news articles and Facebook posts we found in our search. Following common conventions in qualitative content analysis, we began with an initial thematic categorization. We read the articles and marked recurring themes and speakers. Informed by ACF theoretical arguments, we were interested in who the policy actors were, what attitudes and beliefs they expressed, and which networks of actors could be identified in the data. In what follows, we first present a synchronic analysis of the data describing the policy actors and their opinions of the Meitzav. We then present a diachronic analysis that follows the development of the discourse on the Meitzav and the calls to boycott participation in the tests. This diachronic analysis uncovers the formation of an advocacy coalition of parent associations and the Teachers' Union that ultimately affected national-level policy making.

## Findings

### Actors and Attitudes

#### *Teachers' Union*

The elementary and middle school Teachers' Union is rarely involved in education policy debates not directly connected to collective agreements, work conditions, salaries, and teachers' legal rights. The Union's involvement in the movement to resist state-mandated standardized testing was thus highly unusual. As we explained above, this involvement stemmed from the Union's desire to defend school principals and teachers who were collectively blamed of fraud, or at least of unethical behavior, in that they assigned too many students to the category of learning disabled to prevent their scores from affecting the school's mean score. The Union's representatives rejected these accusations in the media. In several newspaper articles, they protested the accusations, labeled them "baseless" and "irresponsible," and said they damaged principals' work and authority. In a letter to the Ministry of Education, the head of the Union wrote: "If you do not support them [teachers and principals] and discredit them, how will the public of parents and students respect their authority?" The Union stood behind teachers and principals and called for the Minister of Education to "publicly apologize" (Hai, 2018). Furthermore, the Union said it would "no longer cooperate with



conducting the Meitzav tests” (Dattel, 2019b) and announced a labor dispute, thus expanding its protest to the arena of labor relations.

### ***Parents***

Local and national parent associations joined the protest when the Teachers’ Union announced the labor dispute. While parents do not play a major role in most policy decision-making processes in Israeli education, in this case, they took center stage. Their participation in the debate on the Meitzav in local and national associations gave them broad legitimation and crucial media coverage. Parents used the media to criticize the Meitzav, focusing on its negative consequences for children and school personnel. They emphasized endless test preparations, a narrowed curriculum caused by diverting teaching hours from subjects not included in the tests, and increased student stress. As one member of a parent association in Bat-Yam (a city south of Tel-Aviv characterized by a middle- and lower-middle class population) explained: “Students are preparing for the tests at the expense of their learning hours. An entire class spends most of the year solving previous tests instead of engaging in meaningful learning” (Ben Zakai, 2019a). Parents also claimed the test was used as a tool to make irrelevant comparisons between schools and municipalities; thus, it did not fulfill its original purpose as a tool for improving learning and instruction. These comparisons, parents said, pushed schools to change their educational routines to achieve higher scores at the expense of deeper and more meaningful learning. A member of a parent association in Herzliya (a city north of Tel-Aviv characterized by a middle- and upper-middle-class population) explained:

The Meitzav tests distort both the scores in these tests and the educational routines in schools. Unfortunately, we witness phenomena such as: intensive teaching to the test, sometimes a year in advance and even more, which makes the tests scores irrelevant... skipping subjects that are not included in the test, particularly art and physical education, in favor of teaching to the test. . . [T]his only deepens the gaps among schools and allows schools that focus on the Meitzav to achieve better scores. (Lior-Gutman, 2019b)

Parents also raised concerns about the negative consequences for budget allocation both within schools and system wide. For example, a member of a parent association in Rishon Le’Zion (a city south of Tel-Aviv characterized by a middle-class population) said schools invest more resources in grades tested in that year’s test cycle to achieve high scores: “For the entire year, only fifth graders enjoy more resources...because of the pressure and the will to achieve high scores, all the resources are being put on one grade” (Tal, 2019). These examples suggest that in contrast to the U.S. opt-out movements, in Israel, the criticism of the Meitzav was similar in localities across the socioeconomic spectrum. Additionally, we found parents’ resistance to the tests in metropolitan areas such as Tel-Aviv and Haifa as well as in more remote localities such as Dimona in the south of Israel.

### ***Ministry of Education***

The centralized structure of the Israeli education system positions the Ministry of Education as the major, and sometimes only, actor in this policy subsystem. Since the Ministry is responsible for developing and executing national assessment policies, the criticism of the Meitzav was turned against the Ministry and its leaders. In the media coverage of the Meitzav debate in late 2018 and the first half of 2019, the Ministry’s spokespersons rejected the criticism of parents and the Teachers’ Union and emphasized the Ministry’s role as the regulator of education policies. The Ministry also emphasized that the National Labor Court ruled against the Teachers’ Union announcement of a

labor dispute based on participation in the Meitzav tests, thereby legally validating the Ministry's stance. The Ministry's emphasis on its legal status may be seen as a warning to other actors to refrain from trying to affect a policy process it controlled. Although the Ministry answered parents' requests to establish a committee to reevaluate national assessment policy, it did so in a vague way that left decisions on the committee's mandate and members to Ministry officials. Overall, the Ministry released only a few official announcements to the media about the debate, and some simply repeated previous statements. For example, in one reply to criticism of the Meitzav, a spokesperson said, "You do not throw out the baby with the bathwater [i.e., abolish the test]. We will solve the problems according to the regulations...as we did in other cases" (Dattel, 2019a).

### **Media**

We argue that the media played a central role in the protest of the Meitzav and was not just an avenue for news and opinions. First, it is important to remember that the protest began when media reports revealed schools' unethical behavior in the 2018 cycle of the Meitzav. Second, although most of the articles we found reported the developments of the protest and were not opinion pieces, the presentation of the events and the attitudes of the actors clearly favored the parents and teachers. For example, most of the articles' titles (53%) included the word "parents" combined with words such as "object," "protest," "cancellation," and "refuse." Further, most of the articles (74%) opened with a report on parents' call to boycott the Meitzav tests and went on to cover the latest developments or to interview parents. This structure put parents at the center of the coverage and positioned them as the main actors in the debate. Furthermore, by emphasizing that parents joined the teachers' protest, the articles conveyed the message that parents and teachers shared common goals and views. The Teachers' Union is generally seen as a legitimate policy actor in the education system; thus, emphasizing its close cooperation with parent associations supported the legitimacy of these associations to act as policy actors.

In addition to reporting cooperation between parents and teachers, articles referred to other policy actors who supported parents' arguments, such as mayors and other local and national past and present stakeholders. A unique example was an op-ed written by former Minister of Education Limor Livnat, who initiated the national standardized tests. She wrote: "From a pedagogical tool, the Meitzav became a competitive tool, a goal for preparation for an entire year" (Livnat, 2019). Her support of parents' and teachers' claims strengthened their position in the public discourse and added validity to their arguments.

While parents' and teachers' arguments and actions enjoyed wide and favorable coverage, only a few articles focused on the Ministry of Education's responses. Furthermore, in most cases, the Ministry of Education's response was cited at the end of the article without any elaboration. The media coverage, then, played a significant role in supporting the coalition of parents and teachers. The media emphasized the common goals and views of parents and teachers in a way that depicted them as allies and enabled them to form strong opposition to the Ministry of Education's policy. This type of coverage gave parents public legitimacy as active policy actors and portrayed them as the driving force of the protest.

### **Emergence of an Advocacy Coalition and Its Effect on Education Policy**

As we noted earlier, the protest against the Meitzav started with an article in *The Marker* saying the Ministry of Education had postponed the publication of the 2018 Meitzav scores "after it turned out that elementary school principals tried to skew the results on a large scale" (Dattel, 2018). The article ended with an official response from the Teachers' Union, in which they rejected the Ministry of Education's accusation and emphasized their support for teachers and principals. The

next day, the popular online newspaper *Ynet* said the Teachers' Union had decided to not conduct the 2019 Meitzav tests in schools in response to the Ministry of Education's accusations. The article cited an official letter sent by the Teachers' Union CEO to the Minister of Education, in which she expressed her deep resentment of the Ministry's accusations (Hai, 2018).

Although parents criticized the Ministry of Education's assessment policy in several communicative channels, their affiliation with the Teachers' Union and the formation of an informal advocacy coalition was conceived through the media coverage. For example, one local group of parents started a Facebook group whose purpose was to criticize the Meitzav. In their first post, they included their agenda against the standardized assessment policy without referring to the Teachers' Union dispute with the Ministry of Education. However, the group and its opinions were covered by a local newspaper a few days later, with the concluding remark: "Parents joined the Teachers' Union's CEO announcement from last week, according to which elementary school principals will not take part in the Meitzav tests, in response to the Ministry of Education announcement" (Lior-Gutman, 2019a). Many of the later posts of this Facebook group shared newspaper articles covering their protest, suggesting the parents perceived the media as a site within which to form a coalition with teachers and to develop their protest.

After the first wave of coverage of the protest in national media outlets, the coverage was mainly concentrated in local newspapers. This can be explained by the central role of local parent associations. When parent associations throughout the country started to call on parents to boycott the Meitzav, the story became interesting and was covered by local media. One title read: "Published first in our newspaper: parents resist the Meitzav and threaten a strike" (Ben Zakai, 2019b). Articles in local newspapers focused on individuals from the community, such as heads of local parent associations, legal consultants for parent associations, heads of education departments, mayors and vice mayors, and city council members. In their interviews (and Facebook posts), parents emphasized the collaboration among parent associations.

During the first half of 2019, we found a difference in parents' attitudes and goals, before and after the first cycle of tests in March 2019. Before this cycle, parents emphasized the need to change the assessment policy as their main goal. For example, a member of a parent association in Herzliya said in January 2019: "There is no doubt that there should be a measurement tool; there is no debate over this. The right purpose which the Meitzav had as an evaluation tool turned into a golden calf, and this is the problem" (Lior-Gutman, 2019a). However, towards the second cycle, in May 2019, parents emphasized their demand to be part of the process of reexamining the assessment policy, following the announcement of the Ministry of Education in April that it would cancel the tests in 2020 and form a special committee to reevaluate national assessment policies. The National Parent Association, as well as local parent associations, demanded that parents be represented on the committee and recognized as partners in the policy process. The chair of the National Parent Association said: "The decision of the Ministry of Education to exclude the National Parent Association from the new committee is a clear sign that the recommendations had been set before the committee was established" (Yanko, 2019a). This clearly conveys the parents' distrust of the Ministry of Education's decision-making processes.

In late October 2019, the Ministry of Education established a new program for national educational assessment in elementary and middle schools but did not publish the final report of the committee assigned by the Ministry to reevaluate the Meitzav tests. The new program included both in-school and external assessment tools and did not abolish the use of national standardized tests. Both the Teachers' Union and the National Parent Association rejected it, emphasizing its failure to deal with the fundamental flaws of the Meitzav. They also criticized their exclusion from the process of decision-making and the one-sided outcome. The head of the Teachers' Union said the new

program was fundamentally flawed: “It will undermine the entire education system and will cause major damages.” She added that instead of reducing the number of tests, Ministry of Education officials proved their detachment from schools’ personnel by increasing the number. The chair of the National Parent Association described the new program as “unimaginative” and said it reflected the Ministry’s inability to bring the necessary change. He also harshly criticized the lack of cooperation with parents and said parents would continue to boycott the national tests until there was a major change in assessment policy (Yanko, 2019b).

Thus, while the Israeli opt-out movement failed to force the Ministry of Education to make fundamental changes in its national assessment policy, it transformed local and national parent associations into major players whom the Ministry could no longer ignore. These last comments from the heads of the Teachers’ Union and the National Parent Association suggest the advocacy coalition against test-based accountability will continue to be significant in future debates on the use of standardized testing in Israeli schools.

## Conclusion

The Israeli case of parental resistance to test-based accountability adds an interesting comparative perspective to the growing body of literature on the opt-out movement, currently focused on the U.S. case. While not aiming at a systematic comparison of Israel and the United States, we use literature on the latter in order to show similarities and differences with the former in an effort to develop theoretical arguments. In both Israel and the United States, the ability of parents to influence education policy on test-based accountability and to bring about real change has been limited, but not negligible. In Israel, the major success of parent associations was the decision of the Ministry of Education to postpone the tests for one year and to form an expert committee to reevaluate the Meitzav. Israeli parent associations’ major failure was that they were not invited to be part of this committee, despite their demands. In Israel, as in the U.S. opt-out movement, the campaign against test-based accountability transformed parents into informed actors who aimed at becoming influential in national (in the U.S. case, national and state) education decision-making. In Israel, the transformation was rapid and dramatic, as local parent associations have historically focused on nongovernmental supplementary funds for schools, extracurricular activities, and physical conditions of schools (Nir & Bogler, 2012).

We found three important differences between the Israeli and U.S. opt-out movements. First, in the United States, the movement mainly comprises grassroots organizations of parents and educators who decide to become activists (e.g., Hursh et al. 2020; Wang, 2021), but in Israel, the campaign against test-based accountability was led by elected local parent associations and their national association. Elected parent associations may tend to be conservative in their day-to-day decision-making, but when they decide to become active in educational debates, they can enjoy much broader legitimation and support than grassroots activist organizations. Our analysis of local media coverage of the Israeli opt-out movement revealed that in several municipalities, parents decided to keep their children out of school on days when the Meitzav tests were administered. In other municipalities, parent associations decided not to boycott the tests, but local media extensively covered their criticism of the tests.

The second difference is that in Israel, the formal cooperation between the Teachers’ Union and the National Parent Association created a powerful advocacy coalition that was able to counterbalance the almost absolute power of the Ministry of Education in the highly centralized Israeli education system. The coalition forced the Ministry to respond to the mounting criticism by postponing the tests and forming a special committee to reevaluate them, but it was not strong

enough to guarantee their participation on this committee. We argue that the centralized character of the Israeli education system helped parents turn their campaign against the Meitzav into a national issue, and when the Ministry of Education decided to change its policy, it affected the entire system. This conclusion echoes Fischer's (2014) argument cited above that the country-specific political opportunity structure is crucial to the understanding of both coalition formation and the ability of coalitions to produce a policy change. The COVID-19 pandemic and the political turmoil in Israel in 2019–2021 (four elections in two years) pushed the Meitzav debate from the headlines. Nevertheless, the fact that parent associations became legitimate and active actors in this policy arena suggests that in future, the Ministry of Education will not enjoy its monopolistic tradition of policy making, at least not in the context of standardized testing.

Lastly, whereas the support for opt-out movements in the United States mainly comes from middle- and upper-middle-class parents, our data on Israeli parents' resistance to standardized tests did not reveal the same pattern. According to articles we found in local newspapers, parents from low, middle, and affluent socioeconomic municipalities were involved in protests and calls to opt-out from the 2019 cycle of tests. This finding, however, should be viewed cautiously. First, we only covered Hebrew media and are unable to draw conclusions about the Arab minority, many of whose members belong to lower socioeconomic strata. Second, our data cover opinions and actions of parent associations but not of the entire parent population. Studying previous parent protests in Israel, Berkovitch and Avigur-Eshel (2019) found they were organized and led by middle-class parents. It is possible that the Meitzav resistance was different, as our data suggest, but more research is needed to reach clearer conclusions. We hope future research will explore attitudes to the Meitzav using representative samples of both Jewish and Arab parents in Israel.

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