

Policy entrepreneurs and policy change when politicians are absent: The inclusion of autistic individuals in the Israel Defense Forces

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Abstract

How do policy entrepreneurs achieve policy change in the absence of the direct involvement of politicians? While the public policy literature has examined the conditions under which politicians refrain from direct engagement in policy design, less attention has been paid to the strategies policy entrepreneurs employ when political actors are absent from the policy arena. We address this gap by examining how policy entrepreneurs independently advance policy change. Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews and textual analysis, and using the “Roim Rachok” (“Looking Ahead”) program, which facilitates the inclusion of individuals on the autism spectrum in the Israel Defense Forces as a case study, we have several indications of the strategies of policy entrepreneurs in the absence of political involvement. First, the policy entrepreneurs operated through institutionalized collaborative networks for funding. Second, they leveraged Israel's security challenges as a structured framework to advance change. Third, the policy entrepreneurs created an organizational infrastructure. Fourth, they used trust building as a strategy when collaborating with security organizations.

Keywords: Policy Entrepreneurs, Policy Design, Politicians, Autism

Introduction

Policy entrepreneurs are considered key actors in influencing policy outcomes. They are creative individuals (Mintrom, 2019) or small groups (Zahariadis & Exadaktylos, 2016) who

work collaboratively and capitalize on opportunities to influence public policy outcomes without having all the required resources to do so independently (Cohen, 2012; Jabotinsky & Cohen, 2020). They need to collaborate with numerous actors, both within and outside government, to promote their entrepreneurial efforts (Arnold, 2021; Mintrom & Maurya, 2020; Wenzelburger, 2025).

Scholars have studied the conditions under which politicians refrain from involvement in policy design (Mintrom, 1997; Pagliarello & Cini, 2023; Vallett, 2021). However, we know little about the role of policy entrepreneurs when politicians are absent from the policy arena (Cohen & Naor, 2017; Ye & Xue, 2025). We seek to fill this gap by illustrating the role of policy entrepreneurs in developing and promoting a policy in the absence of politicians' involvement. The literature assumes that politicians are those who design policy (Wilson, 1941). However, we maintain that policy entrepreneurs who are not politicians can also fill the role of policy designers. Thus, our research investigates the following question: *How do policy entrepreneurs succeed in promoting policy change in the absence of elected officials' involvement in the design and implementation of these changes?*

To do so, we use the case study of the "Roim Rachok" (Looking Ahead) Program, initiated by two former employees of the Israeli security system, to recruit those on the autism spectrum to serve in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) (Greenbank, Agam-Ben-Artzi, & Benjo, 2024).

This article is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework of policy entrepreneurs and their collaboration with politicians. Then, we describe our methodology and its empirical context. The following section presents our findings and our discussion of them. We conclude with the limitations of our study and suggestions for future research.

Policy Entrepreneurs, Politicians, and Policy Change

Policy Entrepreneurs

John Kingdon (1984) was the first to explore the role of policy entrepreneurs in public policy and administration. Kingdon's (1984) model underlies the current understanding of policy entrepreneurs and their strategies (Cairney, 2018). However, while Kingdon's model assumed that politicians' involvement is an integral part of making decisions about policy, it does not consider situations in which politicians might be absent from the policy arena (Zahariadis, 1999). In addition, it does not focus on policy entrepreneurs' strategies when interacting with other actors in the public sector to promote their policy entrepreneurship efforts. More specifically, it does not address the strategies for engaging with these actors, specifically bureaucrats, when politicians are not directly involved in the policy arena (Mintrom et al., 2014; Petridou et al., 2025).

A subsequent wave of research focused on the strategies that policy entrepreneurs use to influence public policy outcomes. Mintrom and Norman (2009) identified four elements of successful policy entrepreneurship: (1) exhibiting social acuity, (2) defining problems, (3) building teams, and (4) leading by example. Their contribution to the literature is particularly relevant to our research, which deals with describing and understanding the approaches policy entrepreneurs adopt when promoting a policy in the absence of politicians' involvement in the design and implementation of that policy (Meijerink & Huitema, 2010).

Policy entrepreneurs invest their time, energy, and sometimes even financial resources to shape policy outcomes in accordance with their interests (Zahariadis, 2008). These entrepreneurs work in the public, private, and non-profit sectors. Specifically, within the public sector, they can be bureaucrats, including street-level bureaucrats and bureaucrats at various hierarchical levels (Ege et al., 2024). Within the private sector, they may be founders of companies seeking to effect policy change through their entrepreneurial endeavors

(Andersen, 2010; Downs, 1957; Mintrom, 1997; Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Zahariadis, 1999).

Policy entrepreneurs employ various strategies to advance their interests and effect policy change (Aukes et al., 2018; Binhas & Cohen, 2021; Capano & Galanti, 2021; Reimer & Saerbeck, 2017). These strategies include process planning, defined as developing a systematic process for long-term outcomes. Other strategies involve risk-taking, defined as accepting the potential costs for promoting policy entrepreneurship, and employing salami tactics to advance ideas in differentiated and gradual stages (Frisch-Avram et al., 2020). The literature has suggested that these strategies are integral to policy entrepreneurs' work in general. However, it has not specifically addressed the strategies that policy entrepreneurs might employ in cases where politicians are not directly involved in the policy design process (Maor, 2017; Ye & Xue, 2025).

Policy entrepreneurs influence policy outcomes across various fields. Studies have documented 29 examples of policy entrepreneurship in the health sector, 31 in education, 55 in the environment, 28 in government, and 15 in defense (Frisch-Avram et al., 2020). While the literature has focused on various fields in which policy entrepreneurship has occurred, it has not specifically addressed how policy entrepreneurs can help change policies and even design policies regarding individuals with disabilities in general, and those on the autism spectrum in particular. Thus, we add to the literature on the role of policy entrepreneurship in changing policies related to those on the autism spectrum (Baker & Steuernagel, 2009; DeLeo & Chow, 2025; Lahat et al., 2023).

A significant aspect of policy entrepreneurs' work involves collaboration with politicians to promote their policy entrepreneurship. These actors are crucial in advancing policy entrepreneurship because it often necessitates adjusting their approaches to align with the politicians' interests (Anderson et al., 2020; Aviv, 2021; Becker et al., 2023; Edler &

James, 2015; Jones et al., 2021; Mintrom, 2000; Morisson & Petridou, 2023; Nouman & Cohen, 2023). The literature has suggested that policy entrepreneurs work with politicians (Baekkeskov et al., 2024; Dunlop et al., 2024; Ruvalcaba-Gomez et al., 2023; Stiglitz, 1998). However, it has not extensively explored how policy entrepreneurs work with bureaucrats and other actors, such as those in the third and private sectors, when politicians are absent from the policy arena (Bakir et al., 2021; MacKillop et al., 2023).

The public policy literature has examined various policy domains through the theoretical framework of policy entrepreneurs. We propose that certain policy fields require different considerations in the decision-making process. Thus, we contribute to the literature by drawing on the theoretical framework of policy entrepreneurs, while maintaining that policy entrepreneurs can take these considerations into account when developing their strategies and approaches (Allain & Madariaga, 2020; Arnold et al., 2023).

Policy Entrepreneurs and Strategies with Politicians

Policy entrepreneurs interact with numerous actors, including bureaucrats, interest groups, and the general public (Secchi, 2010). One of their strategies may involve collaborating with these actors to garner broad public support (Frisch-Aviram et al., 2020; Stiglitz, 1998). Furthermore, policy entrepreneurs can simultaneously occupy roles as street-level bureaucrats, potentially leveraging both positions in the decision-making process (Crow, 2010; Lavee & Cohen, 2019; Schwarz et al., 2024).

However, politicians are still one of the primary actors with whom policy entrepreneurs engage because the former are usually responsible for decisions about the policy's design. Consequently, policy entrepreneurs need to secure political support, symbolically, practically, and financially, to promote policy changes (Kath, 2007; Shen, 2025).

The literature has also addressed the possibility of the absence of political involvement. This absence may occur when bureaucrats do not receive clear, goal-oriented tasks from politicians as part of the management process (Navot & Cohen, 2015). In such situations, politicians might ignore the policy's design. Examples of their absence include policies designed to promote healthy living, such as grants for schools implementing safe sex curricula or subsidies for whole wheat bread (Zalmanovitch & Cohen, 2015). Politicians might also absent themselves from the design of policy when policy entrepreneurship has potentially high political costs (Golan-Nadir & Cohen, 2016). This situation can occur when policy entrepreneurs must take risks to achieve their goals. Such risks might lead politicians to believe that the policy entrepreneurship efforts benefit their political opponents (Ackrill et al., 2013; Golan-Nadir, 2024; Vince et al., 2022). Consequently, when policy entrepreneurship might entail major risks and political costs, it will lead to a situation where politicians withhold their support (Lasswell, 1936; Riker, 1986).

However, we know little about what happens when policy entrepreneurs act and even succeed in effecting policy change without the involvement of politicians (Mintrom & Norman, 2009). The literature has not fully considered the possibility that, given such circumstances policy entrepreneurs may assume the role of policy designers (Attwell et al., 2024; DeLeo & Chow, 2025; Silveira, Cohen & Lotta, 2024; Taylor et al., 2023). This study's contribution is in filling this gap in the literature.

The Case Study

Our case study involves the establishment of the "Roim Rachok" program to recruit individuals on the autism spectrum to serve in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). It leverages their unique capabilities to address specific military needs (De Bildt et al., 2004; Lubetsky, Handen, & McGonigle, 2011).

Autism has been the subject of extensive scholarly research from various perspectives (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001). Traditional research has generally focused on the challenges associated with autism according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (Black & Grant, 2014; Spitzer, 1994). Individuals diagnosed on the autism spectrum have difficulties in speech and language acquisition, impairments in interpersonal communication, and a lack of understanding of social and interpersonal situations (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001; Black & Grant, 2014; Bolte et al., 2013; Lubetsky et al., 2011; Salomone et al., 2015). However, this approach has been criticized, particularly by adults on the autism spectrum (Runswick-Cole, Mallett, & Timimi, 2016). Research has revealed that autistic people are concerned about mental health within the population and combating stereotypes associated with autism (Cage et al., 2024).

The "Roim Rachok" program was founded in 2012 by two former employees of the Israeli Defense Ministry. It was not a project undertaken by the Israeli government. Its goal is to include those on the autism spectrum in the IDF, specifically in military professions where the distinctive abilities of this population can address personnel shortages. Thus, the program regards integrating individuals on the autism spectrum as an operational imperative for the military rather than a charitable endeavor aimed at supporting a disadvantaged population (Greenbank et al., 2024).

Over the years, the program has evolved into an organization that not only assists those on the autism spectrum in joining the IDF but also helps them secure suitable employment that capitalizes on the advanced capabilities they developed during their military service (Greenbank et al., 2024). All of those who participate in the program have been formally diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. They benefit from comprehensive support provided by a multidisciplinary team, including occupational therapists, speech therapists, and mental health professionals (Black & Grant, 2014; De Bildt, 2021; Greenbank

et al., 2024). This extensive support network is instrumental in ensuring the participants' success and exemplifies how the program's structure reflects the current understanding of autism.

Prior to the establishment of the program, the prospects for those on the autism spectrum seeking to join the IDF were markedly different. The IDF began accepting autistic volunteers in 2008, but many of them were recruited with minimal accommodations (Greenbank et al., 2024; Lubetsky et al., 2011). For instance, autistic service members were assigned to military units close to their homes and were not permitted to carry firearms due to concerns related to the characteristics of autism (Greenbank et al., 2024; Lubetsky et al., 2011).

However, there was no comprehensive recruitment pathway or structured program tailored to the unique characteristics of autism, particularly one that leveraged the abilities this population had that could benefit the IDF's operational needs (Greenbank et al., 2024). The program transformed this situation in two ways. First, it pioneered a program devoted exclusively to recruiting those on the autism spectrum for service in the IDF. Second, it was the first to place autistic recruits within an adapted and structured environment in roles that addressed personnel shortages in the IDF and aligned with the innate capabilities of those on the autism spectrum (Greenbank et al., 2024).

Methodology

This research used a qualitative approach based on the grounded theory method. We conducted 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with those who had participated in the program in various ways. We interviewed the founders of "Roim Rachok" who promoted the policy change and were former employees of the Israeli Ministry of Defense. These founders possessed extensive professional knowledge regarding the appropriate approaches for

engaging with bureaucrats involved in the program, particularly employees from the Defense Ministry and military personnel of various ranks within the IDF. The founders were one man and one woman, with the latter also being a parent to an autistic son.

Subsequently, we interviewed other informants as follows. First, we interviewed former junior and senior commanders, managers, and staff members of the program who collaborated on the program. Second, we interviewed former soldiers on the autism spectrum using an adjusted format designed for them. Third, we interviewed bureaucrats from the public sector organizations who collaborated with the program. Examples include members of the Israeli Ministry of Defense, which backed the founders in creating the program.

Table 1: Characteristics of the interviewees and their positions in the program

Type of Interviewee	Number	Interview Goal	Type of Sample
Founders	2	Understanding goals and motivations in the absence of politicians	Other Interviewees-based
Program Staff Members	8	Professional perspectives	Other Interviewees-based
Former Soldiers with Autism	9	Military service perspectives	Other Interviewees-based
Bureaucrats	1	Motivations for supporting the program	Founders-based
Junior Commanders	4	Commanders' perspectives	Other Interviewees-based
Senior Commanders	5	Collaboration motivations	Other Interviewees-based
Journalists	1	Media coverage motivations	Social media contact
Total	30	-	-

The first author initiated contact with the initial participants via WhatsApp to secure preliminary consent for the research interview. We recorded the interviews and transcribed them. Both researchers reviewed the transcriptions to ensure their accuracy. In the interests of

full disclosure, we note that the first author has been diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum and was a participant in the program. During the whole process of data collecting, the first author engaged in reflexivity to ensure that his diagnosis did not influence the analysis of the data. To address ethical considerations, the first author ensured that all participants, particularly those on the autism spectrum, were able to inform the interviewer when they felt uncomfortable in any way. Additionally, the first author emphasized to the participants that the interview would be completely anonymous, meaning that, while they might be quoted, they would not be mentioned by name or any other identifying details. At the end of each interview, we asked the participants to recommend other potential interviewees.

We analyzed these interviews with Atlas.ti software to identify themes. The analytical process involved several stages. First, the interview transcripts were uploaded to the software. Second, we created thematic codes based on the interviews. Third, we coded relevant quotations from the interview transcripts and identified themes by categorizing common characteristics among the quotations. All interviewees remained anonymous in accordance with ethical guidelines. The Institutional Review Board also approved the study (Approval Number: 327/24), including the modified interview guide for autistic participants. In addition to the interviews, we also utilized the texts of Israeli legislation regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities in the IDF, and autism-related policies in general, the social media pages of the "Roim Rachok" program, and Israeli newspaper articles about the inclusion of those on the autism spectrum to the IDF.

Findings

First, we explored how the pioneering decision to integrate individuals on the autism spectrum into mandatory military service was initially made, and how the dynamics between the various actors responsible for implementing this decision operate in practice. It was clear

from the beginning that the policy entrepreneurs behind this initiative were Tal Vardi and Liora Sali, two former employees of the Israeli defense system. As one of our interviewees explained: "So basically ... there was an idea, but the establishment, Tal on one side and Liora on the completely other side, they had two very, very different ideas from each other. The moment they met, they actually came to Ono, and there they met me. ... but there wasn't a plan yet..." (*Staff Member 7*). We also discovered that these two operated in an environment where politicians were not present. These indications prompted us to investigate the objectives of the policy entrepreneurs, the barriers they encountered when trying to design their program, and the strategies they employed to advance their policy initiatives.

The Policy Change Promoted by the Policy Entrepreneurs

The policy change in this case was significant. The model that was developed included a civilian course in which the participants learned the fundamentals of military life and the functional, emotional, and social skills required for service in the IDF. Thus, they were involved in a preparatory program for several months before enlistment in the IDF, followed by recruitment and full military service with exit points based on their needs:

There was a change where everything became more demanding. Shifts changed from 8:30-17:30 to 8:00-20:00, and the workload increased. I told my commander at the time, 'I can't handle all these hours ... It's not because I'm avoiding work, I emotionally can't do it.' and I served in Tel Aviv and lived in the north. It's better to come by public transportation. (*Participant 6*)

The model adopted was adapted continuously based on the needs of the autistic soldiers and the security requirements of the various IDF units that absorbed them.

Nevertheless, the policy entrepreneurs were not satisfied with the change itself. They continued to try to enhance it. The interviews revealed that the policy entrepreneurs thought the program must continue to operate by maintaining the strategies that had proven successful and introducing new strategies not only to recruit more soldiers on the autism spectrum and help improve their lives and participation in daily life, but also to continue the policy entrepreneurship over time. These strategies led to the expansion of the program's activities. The result was the integration of those on the autism spectrum not only into military service but also into the civilian labor market, both in the private sector and in various organizations in the public sector, such as Israel Railways, the Israel Land Authority, and the Survey of Israel.

Absence of Politicians' Involvement

The interviews and textual analysis revealed that there was no direct or significant involvement of politicians in the creation of this program. The absence of their involvement was manifested in the program's funding and particularly in the absence of legislation that would allow the program to be financed through the Israeli state budget. For example, there was no legislation recognizing the program as a pre-military preparatory program. Such programs prepare young people for military service after completing their schooling. The policy entrepreneurs asked the political echelon to recognize the pre-military course that the trainees diagnosed on the autism spectrum took prior to their military service as a pre-military preparatory program under the law. An amendment to the Pre-Military Preparatory Programs Law was approved in the Israeli Parliament, but even this amendment did not bring about a substantive change in the program's status. Regarding the lack of political involvement in the program's funding, one interviewee claimed that:

Initially, we approached the 'Yesh Atid' party for funding, who connected us with former Minister Yaakov Perry. He was impressed and arranged for five ministry CEOs to allocate 900,000 NIS annually to 'Roim Rachok.' We never received these funds. (*Founder 1*)

Goals and Motivations for Promoting the Program

Despite the lack of political involvement, the policy entrepreneurs were determined to advance the policy initiative. They were guided by several motivations and goals. The overall goal was to promote the participation of individuals on the spectrum in all areas of life. This goal is important for their functioning and for developing their employment opportunities (Greenbank et al., 2024). In Israel, service in the IDF and the personal connections made there are important in social mobility, success in the labor market, and improvement in one's social status (Desvilia, 1993; Elran & Sheffer, 2015).

Interestingly, the motivation for the policy initiative was not only socio-national in terms of contributing to Israeli society and the IDF. It was also personal and emotional. It was rooted in the need of Liora Sali, one the program's founders and the mother of a child on the autism spectrum, to provide a framework for her son after he completed his schooling, and for other individuals on the autism spectrum with high abilities. This motivation also led Tal Vardi to establish a fund aimed at changing the reality of individuals on the autism spectrum by creating "a new life model for individuals on the autism spectrum" (*Founder 1*).

Obstacles to the Program's Implementation

The policy entrepreneurs encountered four barriers to implementing their policy: political, bureaucratic, security, and social. These barriers presented challenges for the policy entrepreneurs not only in designing the policy initiative but also in implementing it. The first

barrier was political. Politicians had little interest in the program or desire to promote it. Thus, there was no funding from the politicians for the program, which required a large professional staff, making it quite costly.

The second barrier was bureaucratic. There were limited organizational platforms within the IDF that were suitable for integrating individuals on the autism spectrum. One possibility was having them serve in separate units designed specifically for them, as opposed to being part of the units in which general soldiers served:

We had discussions about this. The group wasn't homogeneous – some needed the closed department togetherness, others could work independently without the closed department. We decided to keep it as a closed department for the general benefit, while connecting to the larger group through projects. This gave us both department cohesion with personalized leadership and professional connections across different departments. *(Senior Commander 1)*

The third barrier was social. The initiative raised many questions within the military framework, ranging from stigmas about autism and whether service in the IDF was suitable for individuals on the autism spectrum to whether they could be productive soldiers fulfilling the army's needs.

The fourth barrier concerned security, specifically, the ability of individuals diagnosed on the autism spectrum to maintain secrecy. Many of the specific capabilities of these individuals are related to the benefits they could provide to tasks involving security. Thus, concerns about their ability to keep secrets had to be overcome to allow them to demonstrate the benefits they could provide the IDF in this regard:

Another player was a security entity, which helped us with everything related to security clearances, which was critical because bringing autistic individuals into classified roles in the military is significant. Therefore, it was crucial.

(Founder 2)

Despite these barriers, the policy entrepreneurs found ways around them. For example, they worked with think tanks to develop strategies to help build the "Roim Rachok" program and implement it.

Strategies for Changing the Policy: Creating a Network of Collaborations to Fund the Program

The policy entrepreneurs employed numerous strategies to change the policy. These strategies included those related to costs, the organizational infrastructure, education, society, and trust building. First, given the lack of political involvement to fund the program, the policy entrepreneurs looked for alternative ways to finance it. One solution was by collaborating with bureaucrats, such as those in the Rehabilitation Division of the National Insurance Institute, and private foundations:

The Guardian General was an ally who helped us in the first two cycles of the pilot. Then we also connected with the Azrieli Foundation – they are allies in important aspects of funding. Over the years, more partners were added. The Azrieli Foundation joined later, as did JNF Australia and more entities that connected to the concept. ... After you start and you show success, it's easier to recruit new allies. Each of them, even if it was for a limited time period, had a very, very strong significance. *(Founder 2)*

Funding was necessary not only to run the program but also to reduce the IDF's costs of implementing it. Doing so improved the chances that the IDF would be happy with the program:

Because in "Roim Rachok" they went through a certain selection process and specific training, it was getting soldiers in a better condition than they received them before. This also proved itself throughout their integration period.

(Senior Commander 4)

Creating an Organizational Infrastructure

Second, the policy entrepreneurs created an organizational infrastructure of numerous staff members, including a management team that accompanied the soldiers in the program, paralleling the chain of command of soldiers in the military. This organizational infrastructure included several stages. The first stage was a pre-military course for future soldiers on the autism spectrum held at Ono Academic College, with whom the policy entrepreneurs collaborated to establish a physical infrastructure for the program. In the second stage, the program helped place these future soldiers in a unit as civilian volunteers before enlistment so they could acclimate to life in the military. Finally, after determining which soldiers were fit for duty, they joined their unit and completed their military service.

Building a Social Coalition by a New Framing of Autism

Third, the policy entrepreneurs created a social coalition including the military, candidates for service within the program, and their parents. The terminology used by the "Roim Rachok" Program includes several components. First, the policy entrepreneurs built the program's

vision by using a new framing of autism. This framing argues that those on the autism spectrum are a national security asset rather than a vulnerable population. Second, as a part of this framing, the program uses a new terminology, which includes autism as a component of the diagnosed individual's identity:

The program ... gives legitimacy to the participants. Just as homosexuals and people in a wheelchair have legitimacy to function in society, we say to those on the autism spectrum that we love and accept you as you are. Now it's your turn to love and accept yourself as you are, and we will help you make the accommodations. If you need an accommodation of ... quiet and putting on headphones, and there's someone else who needs an accommodation of the bathrooms as unisex or one sex, just as a religious person needs to have the option to wash their hands or go to pray, accommodations are made for everyone. (*Staff Member 5*)

The use of this terminology allowed the military to resolve concerns arising from stigmas about individuals on the spectrum. In addition, it also legitimized making accommodations for these soldiers. In doing so, it allowed these soldiers to strengthen their abilities during their military service, which should help them become part of the labor market.

Trust-Building Strategies

Finally, the policy entrepreneurs also used trust-building strategies, including extensive collaboration with the Mental Health Department and the Volunteers Section in the military unit responsible for placing IDF soldiers. Being transparent about these soldiers' needs and

the possibility of accommodating them in the army helped reassure the military that finding short-term and long-term solutions was possible and desirable. This transparency, along with the program's initial positive results, created trust on both sides, particularly on the part of the IDF.

Strategies for Maintaining the Change in Policy

The policy entrepreneurs used several strategies to maintain the change in policy, including preserving existing collaborations, creating new collaborations, and promoting organizational learning. First, they invested effort in preserving existing collaborations by maintaining continuous contact with all officials involved in the creation of the program. The ongoing communication and transparent sharing of information and concerns were beneficial for the program and for those in the military who had championed it:

We addressed IDF mental health and security concerns through complete transparency and close collaboration. We shared all problems and dilemmas rather than shielding issues, working together to find solutions. This transparency built trust and facilitated their connection to us, which they explicitly acknowledged. (*Founder 2*)

Maintaining these connections was also important given the high rate of turnover in military personnel. Furthermore, retaining the trust of the military in the program prompted the IDF to see individuals on the autism spectrum as human resources that could benefit the army.

Second, the policy entrepreneurs sought to create new collaborations with additional units in the IDF to expand the range of roles available to soldiers on the autism spectrum. The policy entrepreneurs also developed new collaborations with organizations in the public

sector and organizations in the private sector to provide jobs for these soldiers once they had completed their military service. Having proven that they could function in the military and having acquired new skills through their service, the discharged soldiers had many more opportunities for employment than if they had not served in the army. Finally, the policy entrepreneurs knew that expanding the program would also help the military assess where these soldiers could best benefit the army using their unique abilities.

Third, the policy entrepreneurs engaged in organizational learning in which they refined the functioning of the program over time. For example, in the program's early years, there were two staff members who accompanied the soldiers in the unit in which they served. Today, there is only one staff member, because the program determined that one was sufficient. Similarly, the policy entrepreneurs organized training days and workshops for the program's staff to share pertinent information.

Table 2: Strategies Used by Policy Entrepreneurs in the Absence of Politicians

Strategy	Description	Example
Building Institutional Networks	Creating ongoing, cross-sector collaborations with bureaucrats, NGOs, and military actors for funding purposes	Partnerships with IDF units, the Ministry of Defense, Ono Academic College, and support from the Azrieli Foundation and the National Insurance Institute
Framing for Strategic Alignment	Reframing autism as a national security asset rather than a social welfare issue	Presenting autistic individuals' analytical strengths as valuable for military operations
Creation of an Organizational Infrastructure	Establishing support systems parallel to military hierarchies	Civilian training course; large team of therapeutic staff in the units
Building Trust with Security Bureaucracies	Transparent communication and early wins to reduce concerns among military actors	Updates to the IDF's Mental Health and Security Clearance divisions

Discussion

Our goal was to identify the issues facing policy entrepreneurs who seek to change a policy when politicians are not interested or involved in doing so. We also sought to determine the strategies these policy entrepreneurs use to achieve the outcomes they desire.

Our results contribute to theory by identifying the creation of an institutionalized policy network composed of bureaucrats, governmental actors, and non-governmental actors as a leading strategy in cases where politicians are absent from the policy arena. A policy network is a prolonged and institutionalized relationship between multiple actors in the public policy sphere (Alexander et al., 2011). Although network members may sometimes have conflicting interests, they manage to use the network to work together (Hegele, 2018). Our results indicate that establishing and maintaining the network was a leading strategy that led to the policy change that the policy entrepreneurs sought (Béland & Cox, 2016).

Our results expand the policy entrepreneurship theory in three ways. First, they indicate that policy entrepreneurs can operate not only despite the absence of politicians, but also because of their absence. Indeed, their absence creates an opportunity for flexibility, innovation, and cross-sectoral collaboration. Thus, our findings challenge the assumption that political actors are necessary for initiating and designing policy. We demonstrate how entrepreneurs create institutionalized networks with bureaucrats and civil society actors to fill this vacuum – an insight that extends and qualifies existing models such as the multiple streams approach (Kingdon, 1984).

Second, in contrast to models such as the multiple streams approach, which emphasize synchronization with elected officials, our case demonstrates how an institutionalized network of bureaucratic and non-governmental actors can replace politicians in the policy-making process. Given that politicians may support the policy entrepreneurship if it benefits them in the short term, institutionalized networks of bureaucrats and non-

governmental actors can help implement new policies over the long term (Zalmanovitch & Cohen, 2015). Thus, in our case, the policy entrepreneurs did not merely change the policy. They also maintained the change by expanding the networks they had established.

Third, we propose that the framing of a vulnerability as a resource is an example of a creative strategy for overcoming objections to a proposed policy. In our case, the policy entrepreneurs used terminology that transformed autism from a deficit to an advantage that could benefit the military as a strategy for changing the existing policy. There have been studies about leveraging the positive impact that a new policy will have on meeting national security challenges (Cohen & Naor, 2013). Our results expand this argument by presenting vulnerable populations as a resource that can contribute to national security.

Empirically, our research identified the motivations of the policy entrepreneurs who sought to integrate individuals on the autism spectrum into the IDF. We also determined the obstacles they faced in doing so and the strategies they used for success. The Israeli case represents a unique instance of integrating people on the autism spectrum into a Western military. We found that doing so might involve other considerations in the decision-making process, and that these considerations aligned with the policy entrepreneurs' motivation of integrating individuals on the autism spectrum into the IDF.

Our results did not provide reasons for the absence of politicians' involvement in the effort to integrate individuals on the autism spectrum into the IDF. However, we can speculate about some possible reasons for their absence. First, this policy cannot be implemented in the short term and therefore does not benefit politicians politically (Zalmanovitch & Cohen, 2015). Second, the IDF is an organization characterized by inflexible work patterns and also inflexibility of thought at the command level. Thus, initiatives that do not align with the IDF's thinking are usually not approved (Iannaccone, 1992; Werner & Shulman, 2015). Additional reasons include the social stigma attached to

individuals on the autism spectrum that many politicians do not see an interest in changing (Wilson, 1941). Furthermore, the literature distinguishes between politicians as policy designers and bureaucrats as policy implementers (Renwick, 1944). Numerous studies have shown that when politicians are involved, they serve as policy designers. In this study, politicians were not involved at all in the policy's design. Thus, the policy entrepreneurs collaborated with bureaucrats and other actors to develop the policy.

However, they were not satisfied merely with designing the change but were also committed to implementing and evaluating the change. As our results demonstrate, in the absence of politicians' involvement in the policy arena, policy entrepreneurs broadened their network of collaborations with both bureaucrats and governmental and non-governmental actors. Furthermore, the policy entrepreneurs created new collaborations and expanded the collaboration network they created to design a change in policy with the aim of maintaining and enhancing that change. Thus, a normative issue that emerges from our findings is whether policy entrepreneurship that does not arise from within the political system is beneficial.

Conclusions

In conclusion, our results indicate that, in the absence of the involvement of politicians in the design of a policy, policy entrepreneurs employ several key strategies to ensure the enactment of the policies they desire. First, they create extensive collaborative networks with bureaucrats and other actors to secure funding for the program. Second, they maintain and expand the networks of people and organizations with which they collaborate. Third, they reframe disadvantages into advantages that can prove beneficial to the organizations in which their policy will be implemented. Fourth, they maintain transparent, trust-based connections with the organizations in which their policy will be implemented.

Despite our contributions and results, our study has several limitations. First, it is a case study, not a comparative study. Second, this research was conducted in Israel, where challenges to national security and the response that policy entrepreneurs provided to these challenges have more importance than they might in other countries. Third, unlike many other Western countries, Israel has mandatory conscription for both men and women. Service in the Israeli military and the level at which one served has a major impact on one's employment prospects. Thus, given this situation, it is possible that in other organizations there would be different dynamics between policy entrepreneurs and the other actors with whom they work to promote their policy entrepreneurship efforts.

Future research can explore similar integration programs for individuals on the autism spectrum in other conscription armies to compare them to the Israeli case. Furthermore, future research in Israel can determine whether the claim that long-term policies designed by politicians lead to better methods for delivering public services to people on the autism spectrum is indeed valid.

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Appendix: List of Interviewees and Dates of Interviews

1. Co-founder of "Roim Rachok" program 1, February 1st, 2024
2. Co-founder of "Roim Rachok" program 2, February 18th, 2024

3. Autistic former soldier and currently a bureaucrat in the Israeli Ministry of Defense, October 1st, 2024
4. Autistic former soldier and currently an employee in an Israeli high-tech company, October 1st, 2024
5. Autistic former soldier and former employee in an Israeli high-tech company, October 20th, 2024
6. Autistic former soldier and currently an undergraduate student in the humanities and social sciences, November 7th, 2024
7. Autistic former soldier and currently an undergraduate student in law, October 28th, 2024
8. Autistic former soldier and currently working in a large international high-tech company in Israel, January 14th, 2025
9. Autistic former soldier 1, December 30th, 2024
10. Autistic former soldier 2, January 14th, 2025
11. Former junior commander who commanded soldiers in the "Roim Rachok" program 1, September 29th, 2024
12. Former junior commander who commanded soldiers in the "Roim Rachok" program 2, October 15th, 2024
13. Former junior commander who commanded soldiers in the "Roim Rachok" program 3, October 13th, 2024
14. Former junior commander who commanded soldiers in the "Roim Rachok" program 4, December 4th, 2024
15. Current senior commander who directly commands soldiers in the "Roim Rachok" program 1, February 2nd, 2025

16. Former senior commander who indirectly commanded soldiers in the "Roim Rachok" program 1, November 2nd, 2024
17. Former senior commander who indirectly commanded soldiers in the "Roim Rachok" program 2, November 17th, 2024
18. Former senior commander who indirectly commanded soldiers in the "Roim Rachok" program 3, January 22nd, 2025
19. Current course manager in the "Roim Rachok" program, November 13th, 2024
20. Former therapeutic area manager in the "Roim Rachok" program, December 4th, 2024
21. Current junior manager in the therapeutic area of the "Roim Rachok" program and former therapist who assisted soldiers in Israeli military units 1, October 21st, 2024
22. Current therapeutic area manager in the "Roim Rachok" program, November 24th, 2024
23. Therapist in the "Roim Rachok" program who currently assists soldiers on the autism spectrum in Israeli military units, November 17th, 2024
24. Current junior manager in the therapeutic area of the "Roim Rachok" program and former therapist who assisted soldiers in Israeli military units 2, December 3rd, 2024
25. Former course manager in the "Roim Rachok" program, November 18th, 2024
26. Former therapist in the "Roim Rachok" program who assisted soldiers in Israeli military units, January 27th, 2025
27. Former journalist at the Israeli Broadcasting Authority, December 25th, 2024
28. Bureaucrat in the Israeli Ministry of Defense, December 16th, 2024
29. Current senior commander who indirectly commands soldiers in the "Roim Rachok" program, March 9th, 2025
30. Autistic former soldier 3, March 10th, 2025