

## **Professional neutrality at the frontlines of German welfare administration: How street-level bureaucrats resist political polarization**

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### **Abstract**

Since the 1990s at the latest, Western democracies have witnessed trends of political polarization. Yet, hitherto, the street-level bureaucracy literature offers only few insights on how frontline public servants deal with this development. This is striking since the complex relationship between street-level bureaucracies and the ideological disputes in politics and society is of central importance for the legitimacy of state acting. Street-level bureaucrats are supposed to deploy their independent professional expertise to generate fair and effective public service outcomes. At the same time, they have to respond to the directives of the legislator and the various societal needs and interests in their immediate environment. The latent tension inherent to this multifaceted web of accountabilities can be expected to intensify in the face of growing polarization where politicians and the public exert strong pressure on the work of street-level bureaucrats. Accordingly, the question arises whether and how frontline public servants secure their professional neutrality under these conditions.

In contributing towards answering this question the paper presents findings from a qualitative interview study with 36 case managers in German local jobcenters. These street-level bureaucrats continuously find themselves in the middle of heavy controversies over the proper level of social security and the appropriateness of welfare-to-work measures. The interview analysis suggests that they manage to remain largely unaffected by such discussions and further reveals different professional attitudes and values they rely on to resist the pressure polarization puts on them. The paper contributes to the literature by providing novel empirical insights into how frontline public servants respond to the exacerbating ideological conflicts in society when implementing controversial policies. Some scholars have begun to scrutinize the role of political attitudes and policy discourses in street-level decision making. However, so far, they have paid little attention to frontline workers' ability to maintain their professional neutrality.