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Coping With Political-Ideological Pressure: How Street-Level Bureaucrats Shield Policy Implementation From Politicization

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ABSTRACT

While pursuing a professional delivery of public services, street-level bureaucrats increasingly face intense political-ideological pressure. Yet, preceding scholars have barely explored how they manage to resist it. Addressing this gap, the paper presents a concept of the coping mechanisms street-level bureaucrats employ to shield their discretionary practices from becoming politicized. It is derived from an exploratory interview study with 33 case managers at German local jobcentres. Drawing on an abductive conceptualization, it identifies four distinct mechanisms which may serve either the function of moving against ideological demands (*professional superiority*, *disenchanting*) or of moving away from them (*externalizing responsibility*, *segmentation*). The paper offers novel insights into street-level bureaucrats' professional position and its relationship with political ideologies. It thereby contributes to a better understanding of how street-level bureaucracies preserve a competent execution of state acting in times when ideological conflict lines have become highly polarized.

1 | Introduction

The "fatefulness" of a professionalized bureaucracy is that it inevitably requires autonomy for deploying its distinctive technical and practical knowledge (Weber, [1921] 1972, 129). Protecting administrative acting from becoming politicized therefore pertains to its basic quests (Cooper 2018, 31). In his seminal work, Lipsky ([1980] 2010) has drawn attention to the position of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) who are expected to leverage their discretionary powers for realizing a professional delivery of public services (Cecchini and Harrits 2022; Møller et al. 2022). While SLBs determine the public benefits and sanctions citizens ultimately witness, conflicts over their policy mandate do not only flow from the legislative realm but also address their activities directly. SLBs then experience ideological demands on how to implement policies from their immediate political and societal environment, causing *political-ideological pressure* (Thomann et al. 2023). Resorting to a professional discretion use that functions independently of prevailing ideological conflicts thus requires SLBs to withstand such pressure.

This has become an ever more important task in light of the "battleground" that the current heated ideological atmosphere presents SLBs with (Peters et al. 2022, 972). While past decades have witnessed trends of political polarization and heightened public scrutiny of policy implementation, this development has recently been accompanied by a growing scandalization of administrative acting in (social) media and the undermining of trust in bureaucracy through rising populism. Taken together, this has created an environment where ideological demands

frequently translate into harsh criticism and attacks on SLBs' work (Sager and Hinterleitner 2022; Stauffer et al. 2023). Therefore, to be able to resist political-ideological pressure without compromising their professional function, SLBs need to make considerable efforts.

Yet, the street-level bureaucracy literature has hitherto not tried to explain how SLBs deal with the experienced tension resulting from prioritizing their professional function over ideological demands. Scholars interested in how SLBs assert their professional norms and expert judgments toward ideological interferences (May and Winter, 2009; Tummers et al. 2012) mainly study clashes with formally set policies while leaving aside the direct relationship between frontline implementation and its ideological environment. Meanwhile, research on the impact of SLBs' ideological dispositions and environments on street-level implementation (Bell et al. 2021; Davidovitz and Cohen 2022; Nørup and Jacobsen 2022; Petrovsky et al. 2023; Stensöta 2011; Thomann et al. 2023) typically neglects the potentially countervailing effects of SLBs' professional role. The few existing studies that address tensions between SLBs' professional position and their direct exposure to ideological discourses vividly illustrate their willingness to "limit the influence of intensified conflict" on administrative acting but have only begun to explore the underlying capacities (Hinterleitner and Wittwer 2023, 763; see also, Eiró 2022; Ellermann 2005; Stauffer et al. 2023). Tackling this gap, the paper aims to answer the research question which coping mechanisms SLBs rely on to be able to withstand political-ideological pressure as professional public servants.

Drawing on the existing coping literature (Tummers et al. 2015), I argue that when resisting political-ideological pressure SLBs may either move against or away from ideological demands. Based thereupon, I present a concept that proposes four single coping mechanisms assigned to these two families of coping. It is abductively derived from findings from an exploratory interview study with 33 case managers at German local jobcentres implementing the so-called basic income for unemployed. These SLBs consistently find themselves in the crossfire of heavy debates on reciprocity and deservingness in welfare policy. Moving against ideological demands serves to actively delegitimize them. SLBs thereby resort to the perceived supremacy of their professional position (*professional superiority*) and designate criticism of their work as being derived from distorted, polarized narratives (*disenchanting*). Moving away from ideological demands is meanwhile geared to avoid feeling personally affected by them. It includes the shifting of responsibility for the outcomes of controversial measures to legislators (*externalizing responsibility*) and the limitation of experiences of ideological controversies in private life (*segmentation*).

Supplementing existing literature on street-level professionalism and political ideologies in frontline administrations, the paper offers novel insights on how SLBs' respond to the ideologically contested contexts within which they nowadays often operate. It thereby also contributes to a better understanding of the implications of escalating ideological conflicts for SLBs as professional public servants, adding to emerging street-level bureaucracy research on recent phenomena such as populism, exacerbating media pressure or societal resistance against local policy implementation (Ellermann 2005; Hinterleitner and Wittwer 2023; Lotta et al. 2024; Stauffer et al. 2023). Moreover, it offers a novel perspective on coping in frontline public service provision which has not been systematically used to explore SLBs' relationship with their ideological outside environment.

The paper is structured as follows: First, I address the theoretical implications of political-ideological pressure for street-level bureaucracies as professionalized administrations and identify existing research gaps. Thereafter, I explain the approach of the concept and the research design of the exploratory study. Next, I present the concept and discuss its contribution and limitations, before offering a conclusion.

2 | Frontline Public Administration Under Political-Ideological Pressure

As a distinctive feature of their position at the intersection of government and society, SLBs may become directly exposed to the ideological discourses that accompany their policy mandate, giving rise to perceptions of *political-ideological pressure* (Thomann et al. 2023). Their discretionary actions typically have immediate material consequences for citizens and further shape the degree of procedural justice the public witnesses in personal citizen-state encounters (Eckhard and Friedrich 2024). Accordingly, they may easily become the "focus of public controversy" and thus evoke considerable degrees of ideological contestation in the pursuit of their tasks (Lipsky, [1980] 2010, 8). They then attract the ideological demands of politicians, organized interests and the media (Hinterleitner and Wittwer 2023, 762) as well as of their clients and fellow citizens (Sager et al. 2021, 809, 812). These, in concert or individually, (publicly) expose them to expectations "to act in a way that facilitates outcomes that are in line with political, ideological, or ethical principles or preferences" (Thomann et al. 2023, 5), creating pressure to reconcile their discretion use with the dynamics of ongoing policy disputes.

Consequently, in their function as professional public servants SLBs are often faced with the challenge to resist such pressure so as to avoid that street-level implementation gets politicized. Their professional role requires them to exercise discretion in accordance with technical and practical expertise (Thomann et al. 2018). This does not necessarily stand at odds with meeting the interests and dispositions of outside actors. Often, effective frontline administrative acting precisely requires responsiveness toward the concerns of clients and affected communities (Thomann et al. 2018) as well as the ability of those groups to monitor SLBs' actions along "horizontally organized" informal accountability mechanisms (Hupe and Hill 2007, 290). However, politicization, by definition, occurs once SLBs behave "overly responsive" in a way that undermines the full use of their administrative expertise (Seibel 2020, 164; cf., Seibel 2019, 73; Mulgan 2007, 570 f.). This is likely to happen when they succumb to political-ideological pressure, since the demands placed upon them in the course of ideological controversies entail specific ideas of how public service outcomes are supposed to look like. As such, when guiding their discretion, those "ultimate moral ends" (du Gay, 2000, p. 54) may effectively impair

the ability of SLBs to independently apply their knowledge to their clients' situation and behavior.

Political-ideological pressure thereby crucially depends on the "discursive power to which the frontline workers are subject" (Nørup and Jacobsen 2022, 13). Resulting from a set of *informal* demands, it exists alongside the "political-administrative" pressure incumbent governments and existing legal mandates exert over SLBs by means of formal policies (Thomann et al. 2023, 5). As implementation research and policy feedback literature demonstrate, ideological conflicts do not only address the legislative realm but may extend to and are independently coined through administrative acting (Campbell 2012; Ellermann 2005). Thereby, following the above argumentation, street-level implementation can be expected to be ideologically more salient than the activities of other administrative domains. Though, this does not imply that each controversy in a given policy field will necessarily lead to the formation of political-ideological pressure, since it might not entail demands directed toward SLBs' tasks.

However, as SLBs have come to operate in an ideological atmosphere that has grown "more hostile" (Stauffer et al. 2023, 2), intense political-ideological pressure in street-level bureaucracies is an increasingly common phenomenon. While ideological lines of conflict have become more polarized over the past decades, policy controversies have gained in frequency and intensity (Castle et al. 2018). At the same time, long-lasting public sector reform movements fostering transparency and citizen participation in administrative processes have generated attentive critical audiences of policy implementation (Aucoin 2012, 181–182). More recently, these tendencies are further amplified through increasingly emoting (social) media coverage (Stauffer et al. 2023, 2) as well as populist movements fostering mistrust toward merit-based public institutions (Moynihan 2022).

3 | Extant Research (Gap) on the Politicization of Frontline Administrative Acting

The street-level bureaucracy literature, however, offers strikingly few insights on the link between SLBs' role as professional public servants and their direct exposure to prevailing ideological conflicts. As a consequence, we know little about how they manage to resist political-ideological pressure. On the one hand, tensions emerging from ideological expectations are predominantly understood as "policy-professional conflict" (Tummers et al. 2012, 1044), or, more precisely, "rule-professional dilemma" (Thomann et al. 2023, 11). In this perspective, they result from a clash between the political narratives underlying the policy directives SLBs execute and their professional values and expert judgments. As recent scholars lament, meanwhile the role of ideological demands placed upon SLBs *outside legislative channels* remains understudied (Hinterleitner and Wittwer 2023, 761; Nørup and Jacobsen 2022, 581).

On the other hand, literature examining the influence of political ideologies on street-level bureaucracies more directly devotes little attention to SLBs' position as professional public servants. Scholars show how SLBs' discretion use is driven by dominant political orientations and discourses (Keiser 1999; May and Winter, 2009; Stensöta 2011; Eiró 2022; Nørup and Jacobsen 2022). Others find that SLBs' own ideological beliefs affect their policy dispositions and their behavior (Bell et al. 2021; Davidovitz and Cohen 2022; Kallio and Saarinen 2014; Stensöta 2011) as well as their motivation to execute their policy mandate (Lee and Park 2021; Piotrowska 2023; Thomann et al. 2023). While being particularly concerned with identifying distinctive ideological patterns in street-level implementation, such studies tend to neglecting competing demands derived from their professional role.

Meanwhile, the few existing empirical accounts that explicitly address the tension between SLBs' professional role and their ideological environment amply illustrate their willingness to restrict the impact of ongoing policy disputes on their work. They report a "claim to bureaucratic independency" (Eiró 2022, 311) and how it makes SLBs "resist attempts by outside actors to intervene in case decisions" (Ellermann 2005, p. 1225; cf. Stauffer et al. 2023; Hinterleitner and Wittwer 2023). In this vein, SLBs neatly match the Weberian ideal-typical portrayal of public servants as political "non-combatants" (Overeem 2005, 317), since in doing justice to their professional position they clearly appear to shield their activities from becoming politicized. SLBs' response to political-ideological pressure is hence importantly guided by administrative professionalism in a way that it does not only impart expertise but further a normative orientation that lends the "confidence" needed to assert its use against countervailing demands (Stauffer et al. 2023, 15).

4 | Coping With Political-Ideological Pressure: Moving Away and Against

Against this background, this paper aims to identify and characterize the specific *coping mechanisms* SLBs employ to preserve a professional pursuance of their tasks in the face of intense political-ideological pressure. Coping is generally used to describe SLBs' efforts "to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts" (Tummers et al. 2015, 1100). Recent work on street-level bureaucracy and bureaucratic reputation theory suggests that it also plays a pivotal role in the relationship between SLBs and ongoing ideological conflicts. Accordingly, in the currently heated ideological atmosphere experiences of political-ideological pressure are shaped by "reputational threats" inhering a given policy controversy (Hinterleitner and Wittwer 2023, 763; see also, Hinterleitner and Sager 2019; Sager and Hinterleitner 2022). From this perspective, the demands political and societal actors place upon SLBs' work are accompanied by harsh criticism and blame for alleged policy failures. Under these conditions, SLBs' professional resistance requires ways to "cope with the stress induced by (potential) blame attacks" following from an ongoing dispute (Hinterleitner and Wittwer 2023, 763). Based thereupon, I focus on the coping mechanisms SLBs employ to deal with the experienced tension resulting from withstanding, that is, not succumbing to, the demands of highly critical political and societal audiences.

To offer a nuanced understanding of how these mechanisms guide SLBs' responses to ideological demands, they are derived by means of developing a concept of coping with political-ideological pressure.[1] As the initial starting point, I take an established categorization from the general coping literature. Accordingly, there are two distinct *families of coping*, that is, *moving away from* and *moving against* certain demands. Drawing on psychology (Skinner et al. 2003), Tummers et al. (2015) characterize coping families as "higher order categories that can be used to organize ways of coping based on their function" (Tummers et al. 2015, 1103). Ways of coping as the lower order categories then constitute the single coping mechanisms, defined as "recognizable action types" (ibid.). Thereby, they identify moving away from and moving against clients as two functions of specific coping mechanisms SLBs adopt to deal with clients' demands by not catering to them. While both hence describe mechanisms aimed at restricting the impact of clients' individual concerns on service delivery, they serve different functions in such that they are either directed toward avoiding (moving away) or approaching (moving against) their demands. This distinction should be useful to structure also the ways in which SLBs seek to limit the influence of ideological demands.

This notion is supported by recent research on bureaucratic resistance against politicization in the context of democratic backsliding and populist governments, hinting at a differentiation between opposition toward and disengagement with directives from political principals. Schuster et al. (2022) find that highly public service motivated bureaucrats may either actively undermine populist policies (*voice* and *sabotage*) or avoid implementing them by leaving the organization (*exit*). Similarly, Guedes-Neto and Peters (2021) show that when being confronted with illiberal policies bureaucrats may either *sabotage* them or find ways to refrain from their execution (*shirking*). Also, in a conceptual contribution Gofen (2024) argues for categorizing frontline bureaucrats' rejection of populist reforms along "reactive" responses, when SLBs simply "do not collaborate with illiberal agenda and programs" as well as a rather "direct rejection" that implies overt disobedience (p. 11).

To further specify how these two families of coping unfold when SLBs deal with political-ideological pressure I draw on an exploratory single-case study that adopts abductive reasoning. Next, I present the research design.

5 | Research Design

5.1 | Overarching Strategy

Given the current state of research, I deemed an exploratory approach a valuable means to advance our understanding of SLBs' professional resistance against political-ideological pressure. That is because the extant literature does not offer sufficient insights for theorizing the specific ways of coping adopted in response to political-ideological pressure and to outline concrete expectations about them that can be tested through confirmatory strategies.[2] Besides the above discussed gap in the broader street-level bureaucracy literature, this also holds true for recent work on bureaucratic reputation. It shows that SLBs' ability to cope "strongly depends on their level of professionalization" (Hinterleitner and Wittwer 2023, 774) as well as how frontline administrations "become more resilient" through professional organizational structures, collaboration and norms (Stauffer et al. 2023, 2). Though, it does not systematize distinctive coping mechanisms. More comprehensive approaches on coping in street-level bureaucracies meanwhile focus mostly on pressures triggered by organizational conditions and client encounters (Van Loon and Jakobsen 2018, 437), whereas no concept is available that addresses the distinctive challenges arising from SLBs' ideological outside environment.

With respect to the existing literature on coping and its differentiation of the two families, the case study thus aims for theoretical extension into the specific context of political-ideological pressure. Such refinements, where empirical investigations explicitly build on existing theoretical approaches and propositions while simultaneously being "hypothesis-generating", are a common application of case study designs (Levy 2008, 5). The notion that coping may follow the function of moving either away or against is therefore taken as being given. The analysis then serves to specify how these functions work when SLBs deal with political-ideological pressure as it identifies the single coping mechanisms that can be assigned to them.

5.2 | Case Selection and Policy Context

As a single case with multiple observations, I focus on case managers at German local jobcentres charged with implementing the so-called basic income for unemployed (*Grundsicherung für Arbeitsuchende*).[3] This program grants a means-tested minimum income to unemployed and working needy citizens. It thereby follows a workfare logic that links the receipt of benefits to the claimants' active participation in labor market integration. The case managers assist them with finding ordinary work by performing job counseling and placement, arranging training and education measures and by supporting them with addressing personal problems. In so doing, they must also impose sanctions temporarily reducing the clients' monthly payments if they deem their efforts to (re)enter the labor market to be insufficient. Thereby, they are granted large amounts of discretion (Osiander and Steinke 2011, 154 ff.) since the entitlement to most of the labor market services (Rixen 2015, 60) as well as the issuance of sanctions is based on the case managers' assessment of the clients' individual skills, needs and behavior.[4]

The program has been at the center stage of ideological conflicts over the appropriate scope and shape of the German welfare state since its introduction. As a core element of the still highly controversial German labor market reforms of the early 2000s (*Hartz reforms*) (Bandelow and Hornung 2019, 416), it presented the transformation of a large portion of the formerly statutory, insurance-based unemployment benefits into a conditional and reciprocal tax-financed social assistance scheme (Spohr 2016, 260). By the time the study was conducted, controversies reached another peak as the German federal government had only recently launched its plans for reforming the program, envisaging a supposedly fundamental transition from the "Hartz

system" to the so-called *citizen income* (*Bürgergeld*) (for further information, see Supporting Information S1: Appendix 1).

In their discretionary practices, the case managers specify the factual degree of "hierarchical coercion" and "cooperative support" eventually experienced by the recipients (Bähr 2023, 173) which directly exposes them to the ideological conflicts surrounding the program. While workfare policies envisage both individual assistance of the unemployed and the enforcement of compulsory measures for labor market integration, they resemble varying ideological patterns regarding the nature of welfare services (Handler 2005). This indeterminacy is reflected by the logic of "support and demand" stipulated by the basic income for unemployed (Sec. 1 and 2, Social Code II), partly passing on the final determination of how generous or restrictive the provision of the program is to the case managers.

At their extreme ends, the ideological conflict lines and the associated criticism amidst which the case managers need to perform their tasks can be roughly described as follows: the leftist political spectrum typically addresses the "severities" of the reciprocity of the program (Beckmann and Spohr 2022, 312), including sanctions and obligatory measures for qualification and job placement. Here, case managers are faced with the criticism of depriving claimants of their social rights and of forcing them into undignified working conditions (Mahn and Ließfeld 2011; Matiaske et al. 2015). The discourse is at the same time coined by negative stereotypes about beneficiaries (Gross et al. 2020). Most notably, conservatives are inclined to view the unemployed as not being worthy of the support of the welfare state (Bell et al. 2021; Keiser and Miller 2020). From this perspective, case managers are at risk of attracting criticism for incentivizing unemployment and wasting tax-payers' money when pursuing approaches that aim for addressing the clients' personal hardships rather than disciplining their behavior. Such measures may involve coaching and job counseling, organizing and financing training programs clients like to participate in or the arrangement of therapies.

In relation to the broader universe of frontline policy implementation, this context thus constitutes an extreme case, with the studied SLBs operating under a comparatively high degree of political-ideological pressure. Such cases offer the most viable grounds for generalization when they are "prototypical or paradigmatic of some phenomena of interest" because the underlying "concepts are defined by their extremes" (Gerring 2008, 653). This holds true for the topic this paper addresses, that is, intense political-ideological pressure and how SLBs deal with it.

To achieve sufficient within-case variation, I built a sample that broadly reflects the diversity of regional conditions across Germany, different groups of case managers as well as varying local implementation structures.[5] Between July 2022 and October 2022 I interviewed 33 case managers with different demographic features and responsibilities (see the list of interviewees in Supporting Information S1: Appendix 3), from a total of nine jobcentres, six states, joint and municipal organizations as well as urban and rural areas with varying unemployment rates (see Supporting Information S1: Appendix 4 for a detailed overview).

5.3 | Methodical Approach

The purpose of the case study was to obtain rich and authentic insights into case managers' daily experiences of political-ideological pressure for detecting the coping mechanisms. To this end, I sought to build directly on the interviewees' own subjective perceptions and perspectives. At the same time, the aim was to address various specific aspects that define their relationship with their ideological environment. I therefore conducted qualitative interviews in a semi-structured format. This tool leverages the "knowledge-producing potentials of dialogs by allowing [...] for following-up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee" while also enabling to focus "the conversation on issues that [the interviewer] deems important in relation to the research project" (Brinkmann 2018, 1002). It hence includes concrete questions but simultaneously gives participants ample space to report on their lived experiences and opinions in the absence of prior expectations.

Overall, the interview guideline included the following two themes (see Supporting Information S1: Appendix 2 for the entire guideline). After the case managers had provided personal and occupational information, I firstly talked with them about how they view the currently debated ideas on changing the program from the perspective of their work. Secondly, I asked them a range of questions on how they perceive ongoing debates, the single actors dictating them, as well as which role they play in their daily work. I thereby intentionally moved from implicit to more specific, potentially sensitive, questions on the relationship between ideological conflicts and case managers' work. Through this, I gave interviewees time to feel comfortable, avoiding social desirability biases triggered by their professional ethos (Hinterleitner and Wittwer 2023). Later on, interviewees were also carefully confronted with previously mentioned aspects to triangulate response patterns. Each interview lasted about between 30 and 120 min.

The analysis of the interview data then takes an interpretive stance. Eventually, the coping mechanisms are abstractions of "countless changing real-time responses people use in dealing with stressful transactions" (Skinner et al. 2003, 248). As such, they are not directly observable in a positivist fashion, and identifying them requires "to unveil [the case managers'] perspective and sensemaking of a situation and how such interpretation informs action" (Elías 2024, 3). I hence sought to detect how the case managers perceive and react to ideological conflicts in the context of their daily work and, based thereupon, to reconstruct the different behavioral and attitudinal patterns they relied on for resisting ideological demands.

For the conceptualization, I used an abductive approach where the combination of the coping mechanisms as lower order categories into a concept was guided by the existing higher order categorization of the two coping families. Abduction can be seen as a "middle ground between inductive and deductive methods" because the analysis actively engages with existing theoretical knowledge while it is still not geared toward testing predefined propositions (Thompson 2022, 1411). Instead, it serves to identify theoretical propositions from observations to "enrich theorization" where the previous theoretical understanding is

incomplete (Ashworth et al. 2019, 326). Thereby, rather than theorizing exclusively inductively from the data, it draws "inference to an explanation" by elucidating and, through this, conceptualizing observations with the help of established frameworks (Mantere and Ketokivi 2013, 72; cf., Van Hulst and Visser 2025). Specifically, the two functions associated with the families of coping (moving away and against) worked as a classification system that established a relationship between the single mechanisms. This was supposed to gain an integrated understanding of how the use of coping eventually makes SLBs withstand political-ideological pressure.

To construct the concept based thereupon, a coding frame was developed and applied. I firstly coded categories that capture how case managers think about and position themselves and their occupation within political and public debates. This was supposed to determine ways in which the case managers as professional SLBs relate to ideological conflicts over the basic income for unemployed.[6] These categories were then subsumed under more abstract patterns by asking how the reported attitudes and behaviors might help them resist political-ideological pressure, that is, to not cater to ideological demands. The coping mechanisms were identified from these patterns and subsequently integrated into a concept by assigning them to the two families of coping. This implied asking whether and in what way the mechanisms serve to move either against or away from ideological demands. Lastly, for improving the interpretive validity (Altheide and Johnson 2011) potentially ambiguous interview responses were reviewed by another researcher, who was not involved in the data collection, and jointly discussed.

Figure 1 illustrates the resulting concept, presented in the following section. I briefly discuss in how far the case managers were experiencing political-ideological pressure, before explaining how the two families of coping were used to organize the single mechanisms. I then present the individual coping mechanisms.[7]

6 | Results

The interviews suggest that all participants perceived considerable degrees of political-ideological pressure. All noted high attention toward their work in ongoing controversies over the basic income for unemployed and how it continuously makes them a target of harsh criticism. According to them, the term jobcentre had "become a brand name" (ID: 35) that inextricably links their tasks with the program's controversial nature. As becomes clear from the interviews, such direct exposure to the ideological atmosphere constitutes a burden for the case managers as they felt that it is "sweepingly railed at everything" they are doing (ID: 11). One, for instance, noted that "it's awful how everything is being criticized" (ID: 32) while another explained how she conducts her daily tasks under the impression that any time "hell might break loose" (ID: 17). The most frequently named actors (jointly) addressing their work were politicians and the media. Further, non-profit welfare organizations, clients as well as fellow citizens were consistently mentioned.

6.1 | The Two Families

In the context of political-ideological pressure, the two families of coping seem to operate as follows. On the one hand, the case managers move against ideological demands as they actively challenge and delegitimize the demands emerging from prevailing discourses. Such thinking, which covers exclusively cognitive ways of coping and eventually alleviates perceptions of political-ideological pressure, allows them to shield their work from ideological controversies, as they consider them not to provide reasonable standards for how they are supposed to use their discretion. On the other hand, when moving away from ideological demands, interviewees seek to evade rather than face them. Here, they rely on a cognitive and a behavioral mechanism helping them not to feel affected by these demands and the subsequent criticism.

6.2 | Moving Against

The first single coping mechanism assigned to the family of moving against is *professional superiority*. By relating to their role as professionals, the interviewees seem to hold their own view of how the basic income for unemployed needs to be implemented in higher regard than the opinions expressed by political and societal actors in ongoing controversies. This line of thinking allows them to remain unaffected by countervailing ideological demands since, from their point of view, there is no valid reason to adapt to them.

This mechanism often works through contrasting the perceived primacy of the case managers' expert knowledge to the "ignorance" (ID: 34) underlying the demands political and societal actors placed on them from outside the administration. One, for instance, referring to the prominent demand by right-leaning actors to sanction clients more rigorously, noted that "from a professional perspective this is not reasonable. Then you only boss people around instead of putting pressure on them" (ID: 35). Therefore, instead of engaging with such demands, the case

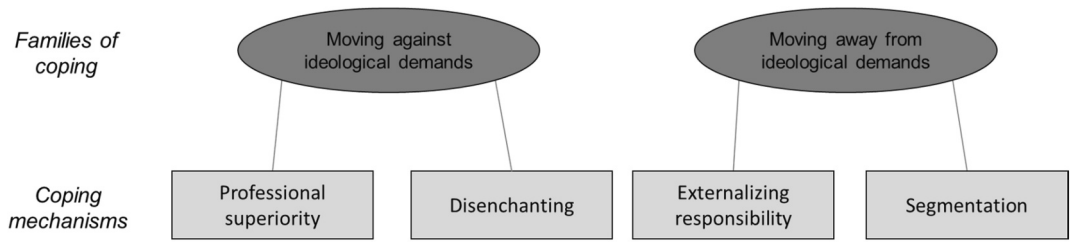

FIGURE 1 | A concept on coping with political-ideological pressure.

managers sought to derive their actions and decisions from their expertise: “As a professional I do it that way, in the sense that I do my job competently. And, against this background, I actually don't care what people out there say.” (ID: 19). This is also neatly illustrated by the following example:

> A few years ago, there was an ongoing debate in politics that some of our colleagues are pretty dumb, because they were sending clients to walks with lamas. [...] I think there is nothing to discuss about that. For some clients this can be the perfect measure to regain self-confidence. [...] A case manager will have to justify why this is an important and accurate measure and then it will be enacted
>
> (ID:13)

Thereby, many also highlighted the significance of their practical knowledge. This likewise allowed them to elevate their own perspectives when juxtaposing them with countervailing demands by critical political and societal audiences. While performing the actual delivery of the program, the interviewees claimed to possess practical insights political and societal outside actors are inherently lacking: “Currently, I disapprove of the ideas of politicians because they don't have the background knowledge” (ID: 31). In this vein, emphasizing the superiority of the case managers' practically experienced position over politicians and the media, another interviewee noted: “It might sound arrogant, but our experiences are an image of reality, not some kind of fiction.” (ID: 11).

As explained above, eventually the ideological conflict accompanying the basic income for unemployed deals with how recipients are supposed to be treated. The significance of practical knowledge thus often unfolded in response to characterizations of clients which were put forward in the course of controversies and which the case managers deemed practically uninformed: “I don't quite see through the debate because sometimes I ask myself: Is there anyone who has ever been at the jobcentre und who actually knows something about the clients? (ID: 21).” Hence, when referring to ideological demands to treat clients more harshly through the use of disciplinary measures, many interviewees emphasized that there are “clients with whom you can work very well, who are motivated. You don't have to build up pressure there” (ID: 25). On the other hand, many also rejected the idea to fully refrain from sanctions that was purported at the other end of the ideological spectrum, arguing that this perspective would neglect non-complying beneficiaries: “Some people don't know that, especially in politics, but we have clients that we don't get to move without sanctions” (ID: 37).

Moreover, professional superiority draws on the case managers' perceived mission. One example is the prominent claim, expressed in ongoing discussions, to work more strongly toward direct labor market integration rather than training beneficiaries. Interviewees then often emphasized that they see it as their task to achieve sustainable labor market integration which might require additional qualification: “We don't need masses of people working in unstable conditions. [...] If someone can and should work for another 35 years, why should I stand in his way. Then training should be prioritized over work“ (ID: 12). To give another example, in response to the idea to abolish sanctions, some interviewees noted that this would thwart their efforts to get clients engaged and thus run against the aim of their work. One told that for him ”it is important to help clients, to activate them” but “expanding the comfort zone, this won't help the people” (ID: 30). Hence, while adhering to what they define as the overarching goal of their work, the case managers seem to attach only little relevance to the demands expressed in political and public discourses, as the following quotes also neatly illustrate:

> I think it is okay to shade yourself from the other things, how politicians see it, how some of the clients and the people see it. If you do a good job and have success with your cases, then this is enough
>
> (ID: 24)

> I don’t need that flattery from politicians or from the media. It is important to buckle down and say: I want to achieve something together with my clients
>
> (ID: 13)

Second, *disenchanting* is identified as a coping mechanism within the family of moving against. This mechanism describes the development of a specific dismissive attitude toward the heightened ideological conflicts accompanying the basic income for unemployed. It makes the case managers believe that public and political debates are in large parts dictated by distorted scandalizing narratives drawing a simplifying or plainly false image of their work, which serves as a potent way of delegitimizing the corresponding ideological demands. Thus, whereas professional superiority relies on the juxtaposition of the case managers' professional authority vis-à-vis public and political outsiders' lay status, disenchanting builds on an assessment of the quality of the discourse.

According to them, discourses over the program were dominated by political and societal actors' pursuit for attention and power, leading to the formation of a sensationalizing adverse assessment of jobcentres' work. One, for instance, noted the following: “I don't know a single show or report that portrays this [the jobcentres] as an actual support system. ... It's always reports about how the evil jobcentre is once again up to something. [...] This is well-exploited by the media. They make money with that” (ID: 19). With respect to politics, another one claimed that „it is now only a struggle over power. [...] It is only about gaining electoral support. Who says the loudest what everyone wants to hear?” (ID: 31). Thereby, in the eyes of the case managers, criticism of how they conduct their tasks serves as viable means to achieve such support: “The main thing is to advocate for change. [...] whether it makes sense or not.” (ID: 32). In this context, they often drew a very negative image of politicians and media actors, accusing them of exacerbating ideological conflicts to gain cheap popularity. One, for instance, pictured controversies as being driven by “a battle of recognition among a bunch of narcissists” (ID: 10).

Following from this, all interviewees were convinced that prevailing discourses had a heavy negative bias toward their work which in their eyes rendered the emerging demands generally unwarranted. For instance, they often told that when advocating less intrusive integration measures, actors from the leftist political spectrum would typically criticize jobcentres for dealing with clients too harshly. They, however, emphasized that such criticism was not reasonable because it is based on "single cases everybody always gets hung upon" (ID: 32), that is, on rare examples when clients had made bad experiences and that are subsequently scandalized in media and politics. One, for instance, explained: "There was this outcry [that the jobcentres] want to force people into work and sanction them and so on [...]. This gives a wrong impression" (ID: 35). In the same context, another one noted that "There are these single cases of clients that were treated poorly or didn't receive enough money. And this [assessment] is applied to all cases" (ID: 15). In this vein, disenchanting describes an attitude that serves to reassure the case managers that the criticism ideological demands are associated with has no valid basis because it selectively takes up idiosyncratic events, preventing a reasonable assessment of actual service outcomes:

> There are three cases a year when tough decisions have to be made. This is on the agenda [...]. But the 3,000 clients that found a new job because of us are neglected. This is being ignored
>
> (ID: 30)

Through disenchanting, the case managers thus internally counteract the assumed negative bias underlying the criticism of their work. This presupposes the claim to have a more accurate understanding of service outcomes and how clients are actually treated, allowing for a more positive assessment of their work: "I think, we are actually not that bad. It's just that nobody notices" (ID: 35). Therefore, as is the case with professional superiority, perceived practical knowledge is key to this mechanism. However, it is not used to question political and societal outsiders' ability to judge service delivery and to criticize the case managers' work based thereupon. Instead, it serves to unveil the polarizing nature through which the criticism materializes in the context of ongoing controversies, likewise disqualifying the concerning demands.

6.3 | Moving Away

The first coping mechanism assigned to the family of moving away is *externalizing responsibility*. Case managers seem to shield their work from ideological demands by not taking personal responsibility for contentious outcomes of the basic income for unemployed, in this vein disregarding their discretion. Emphasizing that they have to operate within the prescribed legal framework, they stressed that eventually it lies in the responsibility of legislators to take the burden of dealing with controversial policy choices, whereas they are only assigned with implementing them. They thus attributed the engagement with ideological conflicts to the legislative realm, so as to internally insulate their own role and position from them.

Therefore, the case managers essentially dissociate themselves from political-ideological pressure by relating to their executive position. As an example, in the conservative political spectrum it is typically criticized that by treating beneficiaries too leniently the case managers would not properly protect the program against welfare fraud. Against this background, one interviewee emphasized that he, as an implementing agent, is not responsible for finding better ways of differentiating between legit recipients and fraudsters:

> There will always be controversy. There will always be [...] social security systems you can cheat [...] and there will always be claimants that are truly in need [...]. And politics, the law, will then provide me with certain measures to deal with these people. Eventually, [...] I will implement them, it's the same as if I was a dredger operator. When my foreman tells me to dig a hole.
>
> (ID: 1)

This way, the case managers thus reassured themselves that they are not the right target of criticism: "We are still acting on the basis of a law. [...] we cannot simply interpret the law as it suits us. I can understand that some people don't like it, that they are fed up. [...] But what should *we* do about that?" (ID: 17; emphasis added). Referring to the legislative framework their activities are embedded in, many interviewees claimed that they are "not free to decide" (ID: 9) and therefore eventually not responsible for dealing with the criticism their actions may evoke in ongoing controversies.

The other way of coping within this family is *segmentation*,[8] being the only behavioral mechanism in the concept. The case managers seemed to be very concerned about separating their jobs from their private lives. This also included to seek a personal distance from political and public debates addressing jobcentres: "I try to avoid this, because it is not good for me, when I deal with this in my private life as well" (ID: 37). Segmentation is therefore reflected by the case managers' attempts to reduce experiences with controversies over the basic income for unemployed in their private lives.

This mechanism seems to frequently unfold in interactions with fellow citizens. Many reported how they had discovered that the contentious reception of jobcentres translates into dealings with their friends, family members and other personal acquaintances. One typical example was that they encountered a restrictive stance on welfare policy among them that was associated with negative prejudices toward recipients. The case managers were then held responsible for distributing overtly generous, tax-financed monetary benefits to citizens who are too lazy to work on their own. They were, for instance, told that "they all have expensive smartphones and you give them the money for that" (ID: 26). Or, as another interviewee told: "'What are going to do with these people. They don't want to work anyways.' These are the keywords I am being confronted with." (ID: 4). Neatly summarizing this, another interviewee reflected on the following experience:

> I have a friend whose opinion I have to listen to every single time. [...] that we are spending so much money and that we would have to deal with this differently. [...] All the people getting the money for doing nothing and having no incentive to get out of there"
>
> (ID: 34)

While, through this, their occupation potentially exposes them to experiences of rejection and disparagement, many of them sought to keep their work out of interactions in their private environment. Specifically, they had become reticent on talking about them:

> In my private life I don't talk much about work, and I think we all do so.
>
> (ID: 2)

> When someone asks me what I do for a living, then I always say I work in the social sector. [...] In large parts, I try to avoid speaking about this
>
> (ID: 8)

> I have stopped arguing about this with my family
>
> (ID: 13)

They applied a similar behavior in response to media consumption. As should have become clear, the media played a key role in amplifying the ideological demands the case managers experienced. Therefore, while taking a distance from ongoing controversies in their private lives, many reported that they had adapted their media consumption: "To be honest, I somewhat stay out of the media, because when I'm working I have enough of it." (ID: 6). They referred to the news and political journalism as well as social study documentaries and reality shows on television which, from their point of view, all too often touch upon jobcentres and their clients:

> What is sometimes on RTL II,[9] I don't watch that. My wife used to watch it and then I always said: ‚Switch channels, I have that live every day'
>
> (ID: 35)

> There is so much on television. Shows about Hartz 4[10] and so on. I don't watch that, I have enough of it at work and I don't need it in the evening then
>
> (ID: 3)

7 | Discussion

As a first attempt to conceptualize coping in the context of political-ideological-pressure, these results hold several contributions to extant street-level bureaucracy research. Firstly, they add to literature on politics and street-level professionalism which primarily focuses on how professional demands make SLBs resist the ideological agendas underlying formally set policies, while neglecting the direct exposure of frontline administrations to ongoing ideological discourses. Secondly, exploring how SLBs shield themselves from these discourses rather engaging with them, it supplements existing empirical insights on the role of political ideologies in frontline decision-making.

Thirdly, while identifying ways in which SLBs respond to intense political-ideological pressure, the paper also opens the door to improving our understanding of the challenges that amplifying ideological conflicts pose to a competent frontline service provision. Against this background, the concept could be integrated into emerging street-level bureaucracy research on the specific phenomena accompanying a more polarized public and political atmosphere, such as populism (Lotta et al. 2024), the mediatization of administrative acting (Hinterleitner and Wittwer 2023; Stauffer et al. 2023) or societal resistance against street-level implementation (Ellermann 2005). Expanding the scope to SLBs' ideological outside environment, the concept also offers a more nuanced perspective on coping, with existing approaches being predominantly limited to the challenges emerging from client encounters and organizational conditions (Van Loon and Jakobsen 2018, 437).

However, like most empirical inquiries, the present study is not without limitations. Firstly, a single-case study raises the issue of external validity. The particular policy context as a case of extremely highly levels of political-ideological pressure was selected to draw conclusions on SLBs' reactions to this specific phenomenon. Thereby, the findings do not directly matter to the more typical contexts, where frontline bureaucrats' actions are ideologically less salient. However, as argued above, in light of the past and current developments of ideological conflicts and their relationship with public administration, this phenomenon should become ever more prevalent. Moreover, while featuring comparatively high levels of bureaucratic autonomy and professionalization (Knill 1999), the German administrative system presumably provides frontline public servants with more pronounced capacities for shielding their work from ideological conflicts than other countries. Lastly, professional identities in welfare administrations differ from those of bureaucrats conducting more regulation-oriented work that have likewise highly disputed elements, such as policing or immigrant deportation. Therefore, in sum, further research is needed to establish whether and how the identified coping mechanisms apply to different policy fields and varying systems of administrative professionalism.

Beyond this, as the research design was primarily geared toward identifying and categorizing the different coping mechanisms, it does not allow for disentangling the role of the case managers' own political ideology as well as the ideological atmosphere they were individually exposed to. Their political beliefs may affect the ways in which the case managers perceive and evaluate different demands expressed in an ongoing dispute. At worst, they might have then reported on how they shield the realization of their own ideological agendas from opposing ideological demands. However, it is worth noting that the interpretive approach allowed for critically reflecting the case managers' statements so that during the data analysis political stances could partly be distinguished from professional considerations.

Also, the occurrence and intensity of single controversies addressing the case managers' work may vary across Germany, so that study participants faced different degrees of political-ideological pressure. One should, however, bear in mind that the interview sample covered a diverse range of case managers, jobcentres, and regional conditions for which the patterns derived from the analysis are valid. Yet, future studies could systematically assess the impact of varying political-ideological pressures and different ideological dispositions on the application of the coping mechanisms.

Another possible limitation concerns the method used in this study. Following their professional role, the case managers might have overstated their attempts to remain independent of prevailing ideological conflicts. However, when conducting the interviews, the interview guideline was designed to avoid such social desirability biases. Further, the interviewees were informed that the research dealt with the challenges the implementation of the program faces and with current political reform efforts, but they were not specifically told about the researcher's interest in the tension between administrative professionalism and ideological demands. Also, they were ensured complete anonymity. The study then also benefitted from its exploratory nature, where participants are not confronted with prior theoretical expectations, thus reducing social reactivity. The same can be said about the interpretive lens adopted for the study, which allowed me to derive the mechanisms from the interviewees' own accounts of ideological demands rather than by directly inquiring about how they resist them. Future studies, might, however, additionally test the prevalence of the coping mechanisms by using approaches that rely less on participants' subjective accounts, such as (quasi)experimental methods or observational data.

8 | Conclusion

Above I have presented findings from an exploratory interview study with case managers at German local jobcentres. The aim was to identify and systematize coping mechanisms frontline bureaucrats employ to shield a professional execution of their tasks from political-ideological pressure. For deriving a concept, I predefined a structure that differentiates between moving against and moving away from ideological demands. An interpretive analysis of the interview data then yielded four single mechanisms that were abductively assigned to these two families of coping. When moving against, case managers resort to their perceived professional superiority and designate ideological demands as being derived from negatively biased images of their work. When moving away, they externalize individual responsibility for their practices and dissociate contentious aspect of their work from their private lives. Given that the extant literature has done little to explore the relationship between SLBs' professional position and their immediate ideological environment, these findings importantly advance our understanding of how SLBs guard street-level implementation against politicization. This is of critical relevance in times when political and societal actors may put frontline administrations' professional function under intense political-ideological pressure and thereby threaten to impair a well-informed delivery of public services.

In conclusion, the study thereby also reveals that an ideologically highly polarized atmosphere might create a tension between professional resistance and responsiveness in frontline implementation. When being required to shield public service provision from its ideological environment, SLBs might tend to resort to a "paternalistic tendency to disregard the wishes and insights of citizen clients vis-à-vis expert knowledge" (Cecchini and Harrits 2022, 54), implying that they would give no proper weight to their participatory or societal accountability (Hupe and Hill 2007; Thomann et al. 2018). That is because the use of the identified mechanisms might coincide with the ways in which SLBs move away from or against clients, described in the concept by Tummers et al. (2015). As they delegitimize the demands by political and societal actors while moving against them, SLBs could be, for instance, also more likely to show *aggression* toward clients. In the same vein, when seeking to personally evade demands and criticism along the moving away-function, SLBs might overtly "protect themselves from having to take difficult decisions" and "follow procedures to the letter" while neglecting clients' individual needs (Evans and Harris 2004, 889, 890), resembling the mechanism *rigid rule following*.

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Ethics Statement

The empirical material underlying this article includes exploratory interviews with case managers working at German jobcentres. While the interviews contain sensitive personal data as well as internal information and statements that the case managers' superiors and organizations might deem inappropriate for publication, data protection was a major concern while conducting the interview study, analyzing and storing the data and reporting the results.

All participants were ensured complete anonymity so that single excerpts from the interviews presented in the article as well as to another researcher cannot be used to personally identify any of the case managers. Participation in the interview study was always based on informed consent, documented in the recording of each interview. The interviews were carried out and recorded via video call and subsequently transcribed by two research assistants employed by the University of Duisburg-Essen who were well-informed about the data protection requirements. The recordings and the transcripts are safely stored at a server of the University. The material was analyzed with the software MAXQDA that does not transmit or disclose analyzed data.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] According to Goertz (2006), the defining feature of a concept is that it offers "a theory of the ontology of the phenomenon under consideration" (p. 27). It thereby provides a multi-layered and -dimensional internal structure that identifies those components of the phenomenon that have "causal powers when the object interacts with the outside world" (p. 28). Thus, while the single mechanisms and the two families along which they are structured represent the components of the overall concept of coping with political-ideological pressure, they serve for explaining how coping relates to SLBs' reactions to ideological conflicts and their resistance against the ensuing demands.

[2] Exploratory and confirmatory are the two research objectives according to which "the world of social science may be usefully divided" (Gerring 2004, 349). Confirmatory strategies seek to verify or falsify predetermined theoretical propositions, whereas the aim of exploratory approaches is to generate theoretical propositions.

[3] The street-level implementation of this program through case managers thus constitutes the single case I selected, while the individual employees offer to draw on multiple observations within this case (Levy 2008).

[4] Legislation provides some specifications of which client behaviors account for non-cooperation and non-compliance. The case managers may, however, decide whether there is an "important reason" excusing them (Sec. 31, Par. 1, Cl. 2, Social Code II). Moreover, according to a verdict by the German Federal Constitutional Court of 2019, jobcentres *may* restrain from sanctions if they cause "extraordinary hardship" for clients (Federal Constitutional Court 2019). The study has been conducted prior to the reform of the program which has come into effect in January 2023. My explanations of the legal context therefore refer to the previous form.

[5] Case managers at German jobcentres share a high degree of professionalization but have different educational backgrounds and career paths. Further, they occasionally have distinct responsibilities for specific client groups.

[6] This step also served to separate perspectives drawn from their professional role from more personal political stances. Though, arguably, at some points, it may be difficult to neatly disentangle the two which accounts for an important limitation discussed in greater detail below.

[7] I report selected quotes from the interviews. Each quote is marked with an ID assigned to each interviewee (see also Supporting Information S1: Appendix 3). The quotes are translated by the author.

[8] This term is borrowed from organizational psychology (Ashforth et al. 2000). I would like to thank Reviewer 3 for making me aware of the label and concept.

[9] RTL II is a TV channel known for reality shows.

[10] This is the term used for the basic income for unemployed in everyday language, going back to the Hartz reforms (see above).

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.
Supporting Information S1: gove70052-sup-0001-suppl-data.docx.