

Politicization, Motivation, and Resistance in Germany's Bureaucracy

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Abstract: This study examines the factors that shape the resistance of German senior civil servants to undemocratic measures, focusing on the interplay of institutional, motivational and ideological influences. Using data from the 2025 Survey of Politico-Administrative Elites (PAE) in Germany and structural equation modeling, the findings reveal that public service motivation (PSM) is the most significant predictor of resistance, alongside progressive political orientations. Functional politicization plays an ambivalent role, reducing resistance in some contexts while also fostering PSM, with its effects conditioned by political ideology. This study makes a valuable contribution to resilience research by offering insights into the factors that shape civil servants' resistance and, consequently, the resilience of public administration.

Keywords: functional politicization, populism, Public Service Motivation, top civil servants, resilience

Politisierung, Motivation und Widerstand in der deutschen Ministerialverwaltung

Zusammenfassung: Diese Studie untersucht die Faktoren, die den Widerstand deutscher Spitzenbeamter gegen undemokratische Maßnahmen beeinflussen, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf dem Zusammenspiel institutioneller, motivationaler und ideologischer Einflüsse liegt. Unter Verwendung von Daten aus dem Forschungsprojekt „Politisch-Administrative Elite“ (PAE) von 2025 und struktureller Gleichungsmodelle lassen die Ergebnisse erkennen, dass neben einer progressiven politischen Orientierung die Motivation für den öffentlichen Dienst (PSM) der wichtigste Prädiktor für Widerstand ist. Die funktionale Politisierung spielt eine ambivalente Rolle. In manchen Kontexten verringert sie den Widerstand, fördert aber gleichzeitig PSM, wobei ihre Auswirkungen von der politischen Ideologie abhängig sind. Diese Studie leistet einen wertvollen Beitrag zur Resilienzforschung, indem sie Einblicke in die Faktoren gibt, die den Widerstand von Führungskräften und damit die Resilienz der öffentlichen Verwaltung prägen.

Schlagwörter: funktionale Politisierung, Populismus, PSM, Spitzenbeamte, Resilienz

1 Introduction

Populist parties have been steadily gaining influence across Europe, achieving record-high vote shares in recent years (Rooduijn et al., 2023). In Germany, this trend is particularly visible among younger voters, who are increasingly drawn to the political fringes, most notably to the right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), which currently

enjoys significant support (Die Bundeswahlleiterin, Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025). The growing influence of populist movements, and their potential for long-term political relevance raises questions about their impact on democratic institutions, particularly public administration.

Traditionally, much of the research on populism has treated public administration as a largely passive entity in this matter. However, recent scholarship (see e. g., Lotta et al., 2024a; Bauer, 2024; Piotrowska, 2024; Kucinskas & Zylan, 2023; Hollibaugh et al., 2020; Schuster et al., 2022; Kucinskas & Silveira, 2025) has shifted attention toward the administrative side, recognizing the need to examine how bureaucracies themselves experience, interpret, and respond to populist governance. This paper contributes to the existing literature by examining the bureaucratic perspective in the context of rising populism. It asks what makes public administration resilient and which characteristics enable bureaucrats to resist undemocratic measures.

This study contributes to the existing body of research investigating the factors that enable bureaucrats to resist undemocratic measures (e. g., Hollibaugh et al., 2020; Schuster et al., 2022; Guedes-Neto & Peters, 2021; Kucinskas & Silveira, 2025; Cox, 2025; Alon-Barkat et al., 2025), thereby advancing the field of resilience research. It does so by examining how the readiness of civil servants to oppose undemocratic measures is influenced by institutional and motivational factors, with a particular focus on public service motivation (PSM), functional politicization (FP) and political ideology. Using data from the Survey of Administrative Elites in the Federal Republic of Germany from 2025, and following a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis, the findings reveal that, while FP has an ambiguous effect on resistance, PSM significantly enhances it. Furthermore, the study uncovers intriguing relationships between these factors, demonstrating that the impact of FP is influenced by political ideology. This research provides valuable insights into the existing literature, particularly in the German context. Rather than viewing the bureaucracy as merely a victim of political change, the paper positions it as an active institutional actor capable of resisting, adapting to or enabling political influence. It builds on the work of scholars who have placed public administration at the center of debates on democratic backsliding.

2 The Relationship Between Politics and Administration

The rise of populism and the consequential effects on public administration highlight the century-old debate on the relationship between politics and administration (Bauer, 2024). In most iterations of this relationship, the story typically unfolds against the backdrop of the dichotomy theory. Here, bureaucracy is viewed as a neutral, apolitical instrument that implements decisions made by politicians. This idea is rooted in the works of early theorists like Wilson and Weber (Wilson, 1887; Weber, 1919). The fundamental premise is that politicians make value-based policy decisions, which are then implemented efficiently by bureaucrats without political involvement. However, critical views and different opinions have emerged, challenging this idea. For example, Svava (2001) argued that democracy occurs precisely through the combination of compliance and independence. According to this view, bureaucrats should respect political control and commitment to the public interest, show deference to