# Introduction "street-level bureaucracy, populism, and democratic backsliding"

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**Abstract**

This special issue investigates the impact of populism and democratic backsliding on street-level bureaucracy (SLB) across various countries and contexts. The cooccurrence of populism and democratic erosion significantly alters public administration, particularly affecting public sector employees responsible for policy implementation. This issue explores how populist strategies differ in their application to SLBs as compared to the Civil Service, the distinctive challenges SLBs encounter due to populism and democratic backsliding, and the pressures exacerbated during crises. By examining studies from Brazil, Mexico, Poland, Czechia, Hungary, Switzerland, and the United States, the papers highlight the interplay between political pressures and frontline service delivery. The findings underscore the necessity of understanding the relationship between democratic backsliding, populism, and SLBs, proposing a research agenda to further explore these dynamics and their implications for public administration and policy implementation.

**Introduction**

Waves of democratic backsliding and populist governments' ascension to power have plagued many countries during the last decade (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019; Bauer and Becker, 2020; Bauer et al., 2021). The cooccurrence of populism and democratic erosion is not incidental. Populism, whether as an ideology or a political strategy, typically features a division between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elites,' with the exact conceptualization of the two groups distinguishing between left-, right-, and techno-populism (Mudde, 2004; Enyedi, 2020; Vachudova, 2020). As a result, populist parties assert their sole representation of "the people," which often results in anti-pluralist reforms. These changes typically undermine state institutions intended for pluralist policymaking, particularly reducing the involvement with civil society (Bauer and Becker, 2020; Yesilkagit, 2018).

Populist policymaking differs from its liberal equivalent at all stages of the policy process and along the dimensions of content, discourses and procedures (Bartha et al., 2020; Dussauge-Laguna, 2022). It is the latter element that affects the job of the public sector the most. Populist governments frequently undermine policymaking by minimizing the role of experts, prioritizing political loyalty over expertise and weakening the principle of meritocracy (Bartha et al., 2020; Christensen, 2024; Resh et al., 2023; Peci et al., 2023). Consequently, they shrink the number of veto players by limiting expert consultation (Bartha et al., 2020). Finally, democratic backsliding changes the whole machinery of democratic government to support the governments in power. Institutions at the core of a democratic state, such as the judiciary and the media, are weakened or captured, often in pursuit of executive aggrandizement (Bermeo, 2016; Peters and Pierre, 2019; Bauer et al., 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019). All this makes working for a populist government difficult for public sector workers habituated to a liberal policymaking process.

One governmental institution reshaped by the populist governments is the Civil Service (Yesilkagit et al., 2024). While in a liberal democratic state it helps formulate policy satisfying the pluralistic preferences of the public, under democratic backsliding it ends up captured, side-lined, or ignored by the governments (Bauer et al., 2021). However, while the Civil Service is crucial for policy formulation, the lower-level bureaucracy, including the street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) who constitute the public-facing part of the state, shape how policies are implemented and experienced by citizens (Lipsky, 2010). SLBs are particularly important, as

they can shift the policies constituting democratic backsliding away from their ideal realization, limit the effects of government narratives or reduce the effort they put into their jobs. Although recent studies have highlighted the relationship between bureaucracy and democratic backsliding (e.g., Bauer et al., 2021; Peters and Pierre, 2019; Rockman, 2019; Lotta et al, 2024a; Story et al., 2023), we still miss systematic knowledge about what happens at the forefront of public service delivery (Brodkin, 2021). This special issue seeks to expand upon current literature by exploring the connection between democratic backsliding and street-level bureaucracy from various perspectives.

In addition to expanding existing research to cover street-level bureaucracy, this issue contributes to the quest to widen the scope of public administration beyond familiar contexts. Public administration literature, in general, and street-level bureaucracy literature, in particular, were mostly developed within liberal democracies. Hence, by taking the corresponding institutions as given, they do not discuss sufficiently which conclusions and key theories about SLBs apply regardless of the setting and how different set ups might affect them (Eiró and Lotta, 2024). Moreover, while there is increasing interest in how street-level implementation is affected by political pressures (Hinterleitner & Wittwer, 2023; Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022), we lack an understanding of the precise mechanisms that connect the macro-level of the political environment with factors at the micro-level of frontline service delivery. Similarly, recent research in political science has been slow in recognizing SLBs as key actors in the political process, and policy implementation in particular (e.g. Hassan, 2020). Thus, this special issue also connects public administration and political science, reaching a wider audience and enriching research in both of these disciplines.

This special issue is composed of seven papers. They were selected to explore the above themes in a wide range of geographies and tasks. The papers cover countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Poland, Czechia, Hungary, Switzerland and the United States, and focus on SLBs, such as health workers, professionals in Child and Adult Protection Agencies, SLBs in a parabureaucracy, and other implementing actors, such as federal workers and city governments.

In the paper "Thorns in the side: Strategies of populist parties against local public administrations", Eliska Drapalova explores the political tensions between the central and

subnational administrative levels in three capitals: Prague, Warsaw and Budapest. The paper examines how populist leaders at the national level exert pressure on political figures and local administrations at sub-national levels through various tactics, such as increasing responsibilities and oversight, reducing budget allocations, and creating administrative obstacles to gain control over them.

"Parabureaucracy: The case of Mexico's Servants of the Nation" by Alejandro González-Vázquez and Rik Peeters examines how democratic regression exploits existing weaknesses in public administration, especially in environments with limited state capabilities and a politicized civil service. The study focuses on Mexico's "Servants of the Nation," street-level bureaucrats who are former party members employed to provide services directly. The authors describe these individuals as a form of "parabureaucracy" intended to bypass formal administrative structures and enhance political control at the ground level.

In "Populism and Administrative Dysfunction: The Impact of U. S. Government Shutdowns on Personnel and Policy Implementation" by William Resh, Yongjin Ahn and Donald Moynihan, the authors examine how the U.S. government shutdowns caused by anti-statist populist leadership affect employee's morale, causing durable negative impact on the organizations. Therefore, the paper contributes to an understanding of both the immediate and long-term dynamics of government shutdowns on policy implementation.

Bettina Stauffer, Fritz Sager and Johanna Kuenzler, in the paper "Public Agency Resilience in Times of Democratic Backsliding: Structure, Collaboration and Professional Standards", analyze the impact of three factors (organizational structure, collaboration, and professional standards) on the resilience of public agencies in the face of adversity, using the Swiss Child and Adult Protection Agencies (CAPA) as a case study. The findings reveal that these three factors are interconnected and enhance resilience by mitigating "blame-avoiding policy implementation", a strategy used by street-level bureaucrats during periods of intensified political conflict. Together, these elements improve informed decision-making through collective deliberation and increase both collective ownership and individual confidence in the accuracy of the decisions.

In "Populist Government Support and Frontline Workers' Self-Efficacy During Crisis," Lotta, Thomann, Vogler, Leandro, Fernandez, and Corrêa examine the resilience and stress management needed by frontline workers during crises, particularly when populist

governments with illiberal agendas hinder their efforts for political motives. Based on surveys of frontline workers, the paper examines how populist governments' dismantling of the administrative state affects workers, focusing on the relationship between government support, demands, resources, and workers' perceived self-efficacy. It demonstrates how a lack of federal and local government support negatively affects self-efficacy, whereas resources and managerial support have positive effects, though they cannot entirely make up for the lack of government aid.

In "Street-level Bureaucracy and Democratic Backsliding. Evidence from Poland", Barbara Maria Piotrowska argues that the extent of street-level bureaucrats' compliance with policies from "unprincipled" leaders will be a function of the extent to which the SLBs support these leaders. Analyzing SLBs' approval of the Polish opposition parties and participation in protests against democracy-undermining reforms implemented by Law and Justice (PiS), the paper shows that SLBs' support for the opposition was limited, making large-scale dissent activities unlikely.

Finally, in the conceptual paper "In the Eye of the Storm: Street-level Organizations in Circumstances of Democratic Backsliding", Anat Gofen explores the street-level organizations (SLOs) and their role within contexts of democratic backsliding. The paper identifies four SLO roles by differentiating between the policy and politics spheres and between "SLOs-as-takers" and "SLOs-as-makers". It conceptualizes SLOs' political role amid democratic backsliding and populism by exploring their alignment with or opposition to illiberal policies and differentiating between their reactive and proactive responses. Each response shows how SLOs both influence and are influenced by populism and democratic backsliding.

Building on the insights from these studies, we argue that democratic backsliding and populism as distinct empirical phenomena pose new questions for street-level bureaucracy research. First, we show that SLBs pose a threat to populist governments in a way that is separate from that posed by the Civil Service. Second, populism and democratic backsliding affect the work of SLBs in ways going beyond ideological and policy misalignments common in liberal democracies. Taken together, this shows us that the relationship between democratic backsliding and SLBs is dynamic and reciprocal. On the one hand, backsliding is a process with an uncertain outcome, forcing SLBs to take a side and cope with the changes and uncertainty that this process brings to their everyday work. On the other hand, SLB response,

be it resistance or support, affects the extent to which populist policies and those that weaken liberal democracies can be effectively implemented. If they side with the populist politicians, as politics-takers (Gofen, 2024), SLBs contribute to the democratic backsliding process, changing the dynamics of policy implementation. If they choose to resist, they have unique tools at their disposal, as they are the face of the state and have great influence over the citizens. Whatever the choice, being in a situation in which they have to take a side makes SLB work more stressful in the contexts of democratic backsliding and when faced with populist governments.

We conclude by offering a research agenda that calls for more attention to the relationship between democratic backsliding and populism on the one hand, and street-level bureaucracy and policy implementation on the other hand, and suggest specific research questions that would push the agenda forward.

**How populist governments affect the work of SLBs and vice versa**

Populist governments affect the work of the public sector through their governance and, specifically, weakening of the existing (administrative) institutions of the state. As mentioned above, populist governance deviates from the usual liberal policymaking norms and often leads to democratic backsliding, bringing public sector management standards closer to authoritarian contexts, with its emphasis on politicization over merit (Peters, 2023). First, populist governments dismiss experts and expertise, replacing merit with loyalty as the key value (Resh et al., 2023). Second, they often undermine the existing administrative institutions of the state and weaken the counter-majoritarian ones (González-Vázquez et al., 2023). Third, in addition to actions eroding these institutions, they adopt narratives criticizing and bashing traditional public administrative institutions as elitist, ineffective, or actively working against the wishes of the electorate (Resh et al., 2023; Caillier, 2020; Peci et al., 2023). The extent to which populist governments are anti-statist varies between types of populism. For example, technopopulism tends to focus more on output legitimacy, performance, and technocratic management (Drapalova, 2023). Hence, the trade-off between loyalty and competence and a potential replacement of state bureaucrats from the policymaking process with loyalists might be more complex (Moynihan, 2022). However, the issue of restructuring governance to match populist goals remains common to all types of populist governments. This creates an

environment of work that public sector workers can find stressful (Story et al., 2023; Lotta et al., 2024a).

The literature on SLBs in authoritarian contexts paints the picture of what the frontline might look like in non-democracies, showing the potential destination of changes associated with democratic backsliding. Despite a lot of variation between countries, several features remain common, including upward accountability and political loyalty (Peters, 2023; Zang and Musheno, 2020); prioritizing state stability over responsiveness to the clients (Xu et al., 2020); and variation in client treatment to fulfill the state's political goals (Zang and Zang, 2020). While the extent to which democratic backsliding succeeds in dismantling democracy remains an open question, understanding what frontline work looks like in authoritarian contexts helps us understand the direction of changes under democratic backsliding.

Beyond the general changes to governance, the existing literature shows that the populist governments leading democratic backsliding employ strategies in their dealing with the Civil Service,that can be described as capturing, reforming, dismantling, or sabotaging the state bureaucracy (Bauer et al., 2021; Bauer and Becker, 2020). The first two strategies are rooted in a generally positive view of the state, which aims to use the public administration for the populist government's purposes. To this end, capture means gaining control over the state institutions, while reforming signifies incremental anti-pluralist changes to public administration. On the contrary, dismantling and sabotaging are strategies rooted in an inherently negative view of the state, which sees public administration as an obstacle to be minimized in the pursuit of representing 'the people.' (Bauer and Becker, 2020). While dismantling can involve strategies such as structural centralization or abolishing parts of the institution, sabotaging includes deliberately undermining or disrupting the effective functioning of government institutions and bureaucratic processes. Additionally, when populist governments fail to secure bureaucrats' support and loyalty, they often sideline them through strategies of bashing, attack, and harassment (Story et al., 2023; Sá e Silva, 2021; Bersch and Lotta, 2024), as well as by manipulating laws in their favor to weaken and minimize bureaucrats' reactions (Lotta et al., 2024b). However, bureaucrats are not passive in this process; they often respond with various forms of resistance, such as voice, shirking, and sabotage, among others (Schuster et al., 2022; Guedes-Neto & Peters, 2021).

In the context of local policy implementation and SLBs, some of the government strategies mirror the treatment of the Civil Service outlined above. Drapalova (2023) describes techniques of "starving the enemy", "ad-hoc accountability and naming and shaming", "putting spokes in the wheels" and ignoring requests or being selectively passive, which are close analogues of strategies towards the Civil Service. Lotta et al. (2024c) show how populists deconstruct the state by depriving SLBs of support during the pandemic. Resh et al. (2023) supply an extreme example of treatment of federal workers - federal government shutdowns. However, going beyond these examples, the characteristics of SLBs and their work are also systematically different from Civil Servants in ways that affect the feasibility and effects of government strategies.

First, street-level bureaucracies and bureaucrats are the face of the state and, therefore, when "serving as the governmental tier closest to citizens and interacting with citizens on a daily basis" (Gofen, 2024) they are directly affected by political changes and pressures (Eiró, 2022). The consequence is that they suffer all the implications of democratic backsliding and illiberal populism and their actions have profound consequences for its success, as they serve "as the finger in the dike or may facilitate and even accelerate democratic backsliding by providing illiberal and authoritarian officials tailwind support" (Gofen, 2024, p. 3).

Second, as opposed to the general Civil Service (both high and mid-level bureaucrats), SLBs cannot be portrayed as elites, as their salaries, status, and interaction with clients bring them closer to the broader population (González-Vázquez et al., 2023). Given the number of SLBs, their social network (i.e., citizens who personally know them) is significantly larger than that of Civil Servants. Moreover, the work of SLBs, as the "face of the state" translates into how citizens perceive government effectiveness (Lipsky, 2010). All this implies that populist governments could find it more difficult to portray SLBs as the enemy in conflict with the "pure people". In fact, conflict with SLBs could even backfire, reducing support for the government, relative to a similar disagreement with the Civil Service.

Third, there are too many (and different types of) SLBs to make a complete sidelining or dismantling possible. Limited resources, including staff capacity, are endemic within street-level bureaucracies, given that citizens' demand for services is unlimited and increases when government services are expanded (Lipsky, 2010). Consequently, a populist government cannot replace all doctors, teachers and social workers with loyal workers. However, this does

not render it powerless. One option used by populist governments is creating a parabureaucracy, such as the Mexican *Servants of the Nation* (González-Vázquez et al., 2023). Another is a replacement of a part of the workforce, even if the bulk remains in place. Akhtari et al. (2022) show that, in Brazil, political party turnover at the mayoral level triggers significant changes in municipal bureaucracy, increasing the share of new personnel. These shifts occur within months of a new mayor's tenure and impact various levels of the hierarchy. Notably, this turnover affects multiple sectors, including education, health, and construction (Akhtari et al., 2022). Dussauge-Laguna (2022) shows how in Mexico, the populist government increased the networks of patronage and clientelism to control policy implementation.

Fourth, since many SLBs are professionals like doctors, nurses, and judges, they rely heavily on their specialised knowledge and skills, which often become targets for populist challenges (Christensen, 2024). Consequently, governments might attempt to undermine the credibility of their expertise (Lotta et al., 2024c) and weaken their authority (González-Vázquez et al., 2023). In response, SLBs may devise strategies of resistance and subversion at the ground level (Gofen, 2014; Brehm & Gates, 1999), particularly when they adhere to professional standards and receive support from managers and colleagues (Stauffer et al., 2023).

Fifth, by definition, street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) operate in settings with limited resources, including lower salaries and often less prestige compared to Civil Servants. This makes them particularly vulnerable to budget cuts, as they are already near a breaking point (e.g., Lotta et al., 2024c) and susceptible to negative messaging about the value and worth of their work (Resh et al., 2023). This situation could widen the public service gap (Hupe & Buffat, 2014), meaning they must accomplish more with fewer resources while simultaneously facing increasing criticism.

All of the above means that, while the strategies that the populist governments adopt against dissenting SLBs are in spirit close to those levied against the Civil Service, their relative attractiveness, feasibility and costs are different when applied to SLBs. This places SLBs at the heart of democratic backsliding, making their response—whether support or resistance—crucial to the extent and success of these processes and policies (Gofen, 2024).

**In what way is democratic backsliding a unique challenge for SLBs?**

Not only do SLBs pose a unique threat to the populist government, but populism and democratic backsliding affect the work of SLBs in ways going beyond ideological and policy misalignments present in liberal democracies (Tummers, 2012; Piotrowska, 2024). We argue that street-level bureaucrats' behavior in the context of democratic backsliding may be different compared to other types of policy change and government turnover, as it questions the very paradigm of the country's institutional setting. Democratic backsliding directly affects the democratic processes, such as weakening the separation of powers, courts, or the media. Moreover, because of how they build support through polarization and clientelism (Dussauge-Laguna, 2022), the actions of these governments affect street-level bureaucrats' attitudes and behavior, going beyond formal policy change (Eiró, 2022).

First, democratic backsliding is typically a sum of policies and narratives. Note that the narratives do not necessarily have to become policies to contribute to democratic backsliding (Vachudova, 2020). Governments using hostility and bashing towards the LGBTQ community to polarize society and fire up their base can affect SLB clients (e.g., LGBTQ youth in schools and mental health services) and street-level bureaucrats' use of discretion (e.g., the extent to which they mitigate the government's negative narrative). Polarization affects how SLBs work and their capacity to deal with citizens and may generate different reactions and coping mechanisms (Eiró, 2022; Gofen, 2024). Whether street-level bureaucrats resist or support political polarisation, depends on their role conceptions, commitment to democratic values, and personal political beliefs (Eiró, 2022; Gofen, 2024).

However, ideological misalignment is not always present and should not be assumed without further evidence (Peci, 2021; Piotrowska, 2024). González-Vázquez et al. (2023) describe the *Servants of the Nation*, a parabureaucracy consisting of more than 19,000 former party members and sympathizers hired by the government to perform street-level tasks. This particular group of SLBs is almost by definition aligned with the party objectives and so unlikely to oppose the government on policy grounds. In a different setting, Piotrowska (2024) shows that SLB support for the populist government at the helm of democratic backsliding in Poland, as well as their preference for democracy, were on par with the general public opinion. Hence, while there undoubtedly was a proportion of SLBs that disagreed with the populist policies and democratic backsliding, this disagreement was not universal. Gofen (2024)

proposes an analytical model of different forms of reaction related to divergence or convergence to the political agenda, and future studies should explore these forms empirically.

Second, one key aspect of democratic backsliding is the building of a supporting elite through clientelism and patronage (Pappas, 2019; Dussauge-Laguna, 2022). This includes staffing managerial public sector positions with regime supporters based on loyalty, rather than competence (Moynihan, 2022). This, in turn, can affect the managerial style and running of offices that the SLBs work at and affect their accountability (Bauer, 2023). Hence, the exploration of a link between democratic backsliding is not only important but also novel and relevant beyond the policies that directly constitute democratic backsliding.

Third, populist governments tend to display a distinct style of policymaking that affects the procedures, bringing more uncertainty into SLBs' work. This is apparent in the case of teachers in Poland and Hungary. During its tenure between 2015 and 2023 the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) government passed rapid and mostly non-consulted education reforms, including the change in school progression, increased centralization of the curriculum and the introduction of a new controversial subject "History and Modernity". For a while, the only textbook available was criticized for its strong ideological stance, presenting a one-sided view that heavily leans towards conservative and religious value, reflecting an authoritarian educational style, and including discriminatory content, such as stigmatizing children conceived through in vitro fertilization (Ciesiołkiewicz, 2022). After an alternative became available, the vast majority of high schools (more than 90%) chose to use it, going against the recommendations of the minister of education. All these changes were accompanied by teacher strikes, which to some extent, explicitly protested the politicization of schools and centralization of control over teachers. Similar protests over politicization of education and moving away from critical thinking were happening in Hungary under Fidesz. In 2021, 700 Hungarian teachers started an indefinite strike in breach of government regulations after the Interior Ministry fired eight teachers for participation in civil disobedience actions demanding better working conditions. All this creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and SLB dissatisfaction, as apparent in the widespread strikes.

Finally, the minimized expert consultations, a characteristic strategy within the populist playbook (Bartha et al., 2020), result in SLBs having a diminished influence on the formulation of policies. Active involvement in policy development significantly enhances SLB ownership

and commitment to the implemented policies (Huizinga et al., 2014; Tummers, 2013). Conversely, the lack of such involvement often leads to a pervasive sense of exclusion, which, in turn, can contribute to a broader feeling of professional isolation among SLBs (Walker & Gilson, 2004). Hence, the lack of consultation of professional bodies associated with populism can lead to exclusion of SLBs from the policy-making process, impacting their effectiveness and the quality of public service delivery.

Summing up, because of their metapolitical element and the style of policymaking, populism and democratic backsliding create a unique set of challenges for SLBs. These go beyond a simple misalignment among bureaucrats disagreeing with the government policies. Moreover, the scale and political importance of democratic backsliding and populism mean that SLBs are forced to pick a side and must cope with more uncertainty that goes with usual liberal policymaking.

**What are the factors exacerbating or mitigating the effect of democratic backsliding on SLBs?**

Importantly, the pressures created by the illiberal governance are not constant and evenly distributed: crises, institutional weakness and media landscape can exacerbate the effects of democratic backsliding and populism on SLBs. The consequences of democratic backsliding on street-level bureaucracy, especially during crises, underscore both the challenges and the critical adaptations required to maintain effective public service. In normal conditions, the relationship between street-level bureaucrats and central authorities is often strained; however, emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic greatly exacerbate these tensions. Lotta et al. (2024c) show that such crises diminish bureaucrats' self-efficacy, as they face overwhelming demands with limited resources and conflicting directives, further magnified by the backdrop of democratic erosion.

Compounding these challenges is a hostile media environment. According to Stauffer et al. (2023), media that is manipulated or influenced by populist governments can skew public perception and disrupt information flow, undermining the bureaucracy's ability to effectively serve the public. This media hostility erodes trust and strains the relationship between bureaucrats and the communities they serve, exacerbating the challenges faced by street-level bureaucrats. Research has shown how, under these conditions, street-level bureaucrats might

adapt their policy implementation to protect themselves from media and political blame (Hinterleitner & Wittwer, 2023). Decentralized organizational structure, interdisciplinary collaboration and professional standards are found to increase organizational resilience to deal with such adversities (Stauffer et al., 2023).

Finally, democratic backsliding affects SLBs differently in countries with robust state capacity, as compared to those displaying institutional weakness. González-Vázquez et al. (2024) delineate three contributing factors: reduced autonomy of bureaucracies, diminished administrative capacity, and a lack of public trust in government as a reliable service provider. These conditions foster political interference, increase susceptibility to corruption and arbitrary decision-making, and make it difficult for street-level bureaucracies to function effectively (Peeters & Campos, 2023). Under weakened institutional frameworks, the potential for meaningful resistance by bureaucrats is significantly reduced, thereby hindering their ability to mediate effectively between the government and the public.

On the other hand, federalism and decentralized governance emerge as significant mitigating factors against centralization of power. Drapalova (2023) highlights how cities and local governments can act as bulwarks against the overreach of populist regimes. Moreover, in federal states like Brazil, the robust roles of state governors and municipal mayors are critical, often implementing policies that uphold democratic norms and support bureaucratic functions at the street level (Peters et al, 2021).

Hence, the impact of democratic backsliding on street-level bureaucracy during crises reveals a complex interplay of exacerbated strains, the crucial role of decentralized powers and professionalization, and the detrimental effects of institutional vulnerabilities.

**What new questions do democratic backsliding and populism pose to street-level bureaucracy research?**

The papers included in this special issue develop new lenses through which to study street-level bureaucracy in times of political turmoil. However, as we continue to explore the evolving relationship between government actions, populist dynamics, and street-level bureaucracy, several research gaps remain. In this section, we suggest ideas for further research,

concentrating on three perspectives: those of the government, SLB responses, and the role and perceptions of society.

*Government Actions*

Starting from the perspective of populist governments, there are three aspects that remain underexplored: co-optation, heterogeneity of government narratives and strategies, and differential strategies under different types of populism.

First, the literature so far concentrates on instances where populist governments take a conflictual approach to the SLBs, stemming from an anti-state view (Bauer and Becker, 2020). The strategies explored above all intend to alienate or ignore the frontline workers. However, this is not always the case. For example, Donald Trump's administration signaled strong support for law enforcement with early executive orders that symbolically endorsed the "Blue Lives Matter" stance amid national debates on police practices (Lind, 2017). These orders aligned Trump with law enforcement against perceived "anti-police" reforms, reinforcing his commitment to officer safety. Hence, future research should focus on when the government chooses to co-opt, rather than be in conflict with SLBs. The police case above might suggest that the political support and alignment of different types of SLBs with the government might play a role. Law enforcement, including unions representing local police and federal immigration agents, formed a key pillar of Donald Trump's political coalition, demonstrating robust support through endorsements, public appearances, and significant backing in surveys. This support was visibly manifested in actions such as police wearing "Make America Great Again" hats and other public endorsements (Lind, 2017). Furthermore, future research could explore the different strategies of co-optation.

Second, and relatedly, future research could study the differences in the portrayal of different types of SLBs, crafting and deploying narratives that influence public and internal perceptions of SLBs. As noted above, populist governments frame their opponents as "elite" enemies of "the people". However, they also find it difficult to frame the SLBs as "elite", affecting how they craft this narrative and how this differs for different types of government workers. For example, Poland's PiS framed teachers as "lazy depravers of the youth" (Nodzyńska, 2022). Doctors, on the other hand, were portrayed as greedy, motivated by money, rather than their patients' wellbeing (TVN, 2022). Parsing out the different narratives and polarizing frames can

help us understand how different types of SLBs are portrayed, potentially affecting the perspectives and actions of SLBs and the public, linking to the two sections below.

Finally, we need to explore how different types of populism influence the interaction between governments and SLBs. So far, the bulk of analysis has concentrated on right-wing populism, defining "the people" in terms of ethnicity and religion. However, as we note above, the degree to which populist governments exhibit anti-statist tendencies differs across various forms of populism. For example, technopopulism tends to prioritize output legitimacy, performance, and a technocratic approach to governance (Drapalova, 2023). This can complicate the balance between loyalty and competence and the extent to which loyalists are favored in the policy-making process (Moynihan, 2022).Similarly, the ideology of left-wing populism might be aligned with different groups of SLBs, affecting their agreement with the policies proposed. Finally, the ideological spectrum is only one dimension distinguishing different manifestations of populism. Others include being personality-driven or based on a movement, being a national or a regional phenomenon, and emerging within or outside established political structures (Bauer and Becker, 2020). Hence, the effect of different types and dimensions of populism on the relationship between the governments and the SLBs needs more research.

*SLB Responses*

Democratic backsliding and populism as distinct empirical phenomena pose new questions to research on street-level bureaucrats too. As proposed by Gofen (2024), as the operational arm of the state, street-level bureaucrats and organizations play a key role in facilitating or inhibiting democratic backsliding. Therefore, democratic backsliding requires them to take a side. How they cope with this is still an issue to be explored by future studies.

A well-established line of research focuses on how street-level bureaucrats cope with limited resources, and conflicting demands and values (Lipsky, 2010; Tummers et al., 2015; Zacka, 2017). These studies predominantly focus on the conflicting demands that are considered inherent to the decision-making task, due to conflicting public values, or vague or ambiguous policies (e.g. Zacka, 2017). Indeed, research shows how street-level bureaucrats experience dilemmas in dealing with conflicting values that are considered to characterize good governance practices (de Graaf et al., 2016; Zacka, 2017). Future research should study

whether, when, and how democratic backsliding and populism lead to the experience of moral dilemmas by street-level bureaucrats. In addition, we need more insight into the distinct manifestations of voice, loyalty and exit (Hirschman, 1970) when street-level bureaucrats experience such dilemmas. For instance, when and how do street-level bureaucrats attempt to shape the narrative about public services under populist governments? When and how do they support governments promoting democratic backsliding, their policies and narratives? How does democratic backsliding affect who joins and leaves SLB occupations within the public sector?

To deal with the stress associated with limited resources and conflicting demands, street-level bureaucrats could use different coping strategies in decision-making, such as rationing, routinizing and stereotyping (Lipsky, 2010; Tummers et al., 2015). In addition, they could also adopt a reductive moral disposition, which involves an emphasis on certain values over others (Zacka, 2017). This line of research should also take into account how democratic backsliding and populism exert additional pressures and demands on the work of street-level bureaucrats, possibly leading to distinct forms of coping, and specific value trade-offs. It is likely that reputational concerns become more important in such contexts, possibly leading to blame-avoiding policy implementation behaviors (Hinterleitner & Wittwer, 2023). Professional networks and standards could act as a buffer against such pressures (Stauffer et al., 2023). More research is needed on the role of professional networks in buffering or mediating the effects of democratic backsliding and populist governance on street-level bureaucrats.

*Society Responses*

Finally, future research agendas should delve into several key areas to comprehensively examine the impact of this process on citizens, including their perceptions, trust and SLBs legitimacy.

The first agenda to explore citizens' perspectives should investigate citizen perceptions of SLBs as instruments of democratic backsliding. Future research should analyze the extent to which citizens perceive SLBs as complicit in, or resistant to, authoritarian shifts in governance and how this perception affects their trust and satisfaction with SLBs. For example, if teachers resist changing the content of their classes based on political requests, would this be supported

or criticized by citizens? Would they see teachers as their enemy or as a group to be supported? Moreover, since democratic backsliding is linked to increased polarization, politicization of policy issues (Eiró, 2022), and conflicts in policy implementation (Lotta et al., 2024b), future research should examine how aligned or misaligned perceptions impact the relationship between street-level bureaucrats and citizens.

Here, scholars could investigate how much this process affects SLB legitimacy, observing how the erosion of democratic institutions affects the perceived legitimacy of street-level bureaucrats. SLB research highlights the necessity of legitimacy for street-level bureaucrats to secure citizens' compliance and adherence (de Boer, 2021). However, when facing processes related to democratic backsliding – such as bashing, for example – street-level bureaucrats may lose legitimacy in citizens' eyes. The same process can happen to citizens' satisfaction with street-level bureaucracy work. Considering the politicization of policy issues and the attacks suffered from politicians, citizens may lose trust in policies and workers, affecting their satisfaction with policies implemented. Analyzing how and to what extent politicization of public services in the form of intensified political conflicts on implementation issues, and negative narratives and frames of SLBs, affects citizens' compliance, trust and satisfaction, is a crucial research agenda for future studies. In this process, the media may have an important role in either blaming street-level bureaucrats or protecting their image. The role of both traditional and social media in street-level bureaucrats' image during processes of democratic backsliding should also be deeper explored in the future.

Finally, studies should also observe if and how processes of democratic backsliding may affect inequalities in service delivery, especially regarding minority groups. Given that one of the issues related to democratic backsliding is the construction of "us versus them" narrative, research should examine how political ideologies and resulting discriminatory practices impact access to public services, exacerbating existing inequalities and marginalizing certain segments of society.

**Conclusions**

Regardless of the type of political system, street-level bureaucrats constitute the core of governmental policy implementation. Their job is never easy. Even in the most perfect liberal

democracies, they struggle with chronic resource constraints, policy ambiguity, and public scrutiny and criticism. However, populist governments, often leading to democratic backsliding because of their inherently anti-pluralist worldview, exacerbate all these challenges and create new obstacles on the path to implementation.

The papers in this special issue address how populist governments affect the job of SLBs in ways distinct from how they influence the Civil Service, how democratic backsliding and populism present a unique challenge for the SLB, as well as factors mitigating both of the above. Altogether, they offer three lessons. First, while the strategies populist governments use against dissenting street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) are similar in nature to those used against the Civil Service, their relative attractiveness, feasibility, and costs differ when applied to SLBs. Second, due to their metapolitical aspects and policymaking style, populism and democratic backsliding present SLBs with unique challenges that go beyond mere disagreement with government policies. Finally, the impact of democratic backsliding on street-level bureaucracy during crises highlights a complex interplay of increased pressures, the essential role of decentralized powers and professionalization, and the harmful effects of institutional weaknesses. Taken together, this special issue establishes the link between populism and democratic backsliding, and SLB as an important, distinct, and fruitful research frontier.

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