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Serving quarreling masters: Frontline workers and policy implementation under pressure

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Abstract

How do frontline workers implement policy when it is politically contested and they face strong pressure from politicians and the media? Based on original data and a multi-method analysis of juvenile justice policy and child protection policy in Switzerland, we show that political conflict can change policy implementation when frontline workers adapt their implementation practices in response to political and media pressure. We demonstrate that frontline workers seek to limit the influence of political pressure on policy implementation to safeguard their professional autonomy and reputation. However, we observe that they may also occasionally engage in what we call "blame-avoiding policy implementation." While formally complying with the policy mandate, frontline workers exploit their street-level discretion to make policy implementation less scandal-prone and blameworthy, thereby lowering the likelihood of blame attacks. The findings have important implications for our understanding of policy implementation and the functioning of bureaucracy in more conflictual times.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The question of democratic control of the bureaucracy has occupied scholars ever since the emergence of the modern democratic state (e.g., Weber, 1978). Democratic government is often

conceptualized as a "chain of dyadic-hierarchical relations of delegation and accountability" (Olsen, 2015, p. 428). To be accountable to citizens, policy-makers need to ensure that the public administration implements policies in the spirit of their formal mandates. Because frontline workers dispose of significant discretion when adapting policies to concrete cases and situations, they often act as de facto policy-makers during policy implementation (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lipsky, 2010). But what happens to this accountability chain when political conflict over a policy intensifies and the media, individual politicians, and parts of the public put pressure on frontline workers? Do frontline workers continue to implement the policy according to its formal mandate even though doing so is widely unpopular? This article addresses these questions by examining how frontline workers implement public policy during periods of intensified political conflict and exploring the conditions under which intensified conflict systematically affects frontline workers' implementation practices.

When the political conflict over a policy intensifies, frontline workers have to implement policy under heightened public, political, and media scrutiny. Those in favor of policy change will attack the policy (and those implementing it) to increase the odds of formal change. Existing research insufficiently captures whether and how frontline workers adapt their implementation practices in response to this peculiar political constellation. Research on the political control of the bureaucracy often adopts a macro perspective that correlates bureaucratic outputs with political stimuli but that does not usually scrutinize the concrete behavioral adaptations of implementers (Meier & O'Toole, 2006). While street-level bureaucracy research analyzes the impact of political or public pressure on frontline workers' perceptions (Gilad, et al., 2018; May & Winter. 2009), less is known about how these pressures influence frontline workers' implementation decisions (but see Davidovitz & Cohen, 2021b, 2021a).

Drawing on insights from organizational reputation research and blame avoidance research, we expect that frontline workers seek to limit the influence of political pressure on policy implementation so as to safeguard their professional autonomy and reputation, but may occasionally adapt their implementation practices to protect themselves from political and media blame. While formally complying with the policy mandate, frontline workers exploit their discretion to make policy implementation less scandal-prone and blameworthy; a coping strategy that has the effect that policies veer from the spirit of their formal mandates. *Blame-avoiding policy implementation* (BAPI), as we call this phenomenon, has important implications for our understanding of policy implementation and the workings of public administrations during periods of intensified political conflict. By limiting frontline workers' discretion to assess cases on their particularities, BAPI can damage the quality and effectiveness of public service provision.

We study the implementation practices of frontline workers in two different policy areas in Switzerland that periodically experience heavy pressure for policy change on the occasion of negative "focusing events": juvenile justice policy and child protection policy. We combine qualitative in-depth interviews with frontline workers and time series cross-section analyses of implementation data in a comparative multi-method design (Seawright, 2016). While the interviews allow us to explore frontline workers' specific reactions to political pressure in detail, the quantitative analysis helps us to identify whether these reactions had a systematic impact on policy implementation. The interviews strongly confirm our theoretical expectations regarding frontline workers' reactions to pressure and show that BAPI is especially likely to occur in weakly professionalized environments. The quantitative results, which are comparatively weaker on their own, provide additional corroboration for the qualitative results and constitute an exploratory first step for developing a model that analyzes how political pressure influences frontline workers' discretionary conduct.

This article continues as follows. Section one reviews implementation literature to demonstrate that its respective research orientations omit the nexus between intensified political conflict and pressure during implementation and adaptations taken by frontline workers. The subsequent section conceptualizes this nexus by theorizing how frontline workers react to political pressure. The third section introduces the research design and data used. Sections four and five present qualitative and quantitative evidence for both cases. Section six compares the results and discusses their generalizability. Section seven concludes.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

An accountability chain that connects citizens to policy-makers and policy-makers to the bureaucracy ensures that democratic states produce democratically legitimized policy output (Olsen, 2015). Frontline workers are supposed to implement policies according to the mandates formulated by elected policy-makers (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). We are interested in whether this accountability chain holds when frontline workers have to implement policy under political and media pressure. We assume that this pressure is frequent in times of political polarization when elected policy-makers clash on a great variety of policy issues.

There is an extensive literature on the *political control of the bureaucracy* which reveals that "bureaucracies are highly responsive to political forces" (Meier & O'Toole, 2006, p. 177; Keiser & Soss, 1998). Politicians can influence policy implementation through supportive signals or direct orders to implementers (Chaney & Hall Saltzstein, 1998; Stazyk & Goerdel, 2011), political appointments in the bureaucracy (Lewis, 2008), or periodical controls of implementation practices (Whitford, 2005). While this literature shows that public administrations are very sensitive to a variety of political and societal developments (e.g., Alon-Barkat & Gilad, 2016; Erlich et al., 2021; Maor & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2013), it has a strong macro-level orientation that fails to scrutinize implementers' specific behavioral adaptations to increased political and media pressure (Meier & O'Toole, 2006, p. 177).

Another research strand specifically focuses on the *behavior of frontline workers or "street-level bureaucrats"* who adapt policies to concrete cases (Hupe, 2019; Lipsky, 2010; Thomann, et al., 2018). Frontline workers usually have considerable discretion and autonomy in their daily operations, that is, they possess the freedom to "pursue their own sustained course of action as accepted by relevant others on the basis of a reputation for expertize and appropriate task fulfillment" (Hupe, 2013, p. 435). This insight spurred a wide range of research on the factors that explain how frontline workers use discretion (Gofen et al., 2019). A major finding of this research is that policy implementation occurs in a complex web of accountabilities (Hupe & Hill, 2007). While there are several categorizations of influencing factors that frontline workers are accountable to, there is an often-used distinction between micro-level and macro-level factors. Micro-level factors are the professional norms and resources held by frontline workers as well as worker-client relationships. Macro-level factors capture the organizational and political environment in which policy implementation takes place. Overall, however, implementation research "is dominated by micro-level analysis" (Gofen et al., 2019, p. 1), with studies on the political environment's influence on frontline workers being in comparatively short supply. While there are studies that explore the impact of political or public pressure on frontline workers' organizational attachment (Gilad, et al. 2018), perceptions of policy goals (May & Winter. 2009), or motivation for policy change (Gilad & Alon-Barkat, 2018), little is known about how these pressures influence frontline workers' implementation decisions. An important exception is the work by

Davidovitz and Cohen (2021a, 2021b), which shows how political rhetoric and elected officials' direct involvement affect the decision-making of frontline workers.

Even research that perceives frontline workers as working under the influence of different accountability regimes (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Thomann, et al., 2018) has a rather narrow understanding of how "politics" influences frontline workers. This research suggests that elevated political and societal pressure merely affects "the expectations of individual clients toward frontline workers" (Thomann, et al. 2018, p. 303). As we will show, this conceptualization of the influence of political pressure on frontline workers is too narrow because political pressure also directly affects them through political and media attacks. The next section conceptualizes frontline workers' reactions to political and media pressure during policy implementation.

3 | THEORY

We identify two stylized political coalitions in the conflict over a policy: one coalition wants to change the policy and bring it line with its interests and those of its supporters ("change seekers") while the other favors the status quo and opposes policy change ("status quo supporters"). Both change seekers and status quo supporters can consist of political parties, individual policy-focused politicians, organized interests, and media actors. In our conceptualization, change seekers exploit a negative focusing event to publicly undermine a policy. Media actors, acting as both "watchdogs" and "scandalization machines" (Allern & von Sikorski, 2018), usually report on a negative focusing event, which is subsequently taken up by politicians to undermine the policy at its root (Hinterleitner, 2020). Undermining a policy increases their odds of changing the public's mind about it and forming a political coalition for policy change.

Change seekers do not only attack an abstract policy, but usually scandalize concrete events or problems that signal that something is wrong with the policy. Real, or constructed, implementation problems provide "blaming opportunities" that change seekers can exploit to publicly emphasize the need for policy change (Boin, et al. 2009). In these situations, frontline workers are not shielded from political conflict if they simply implement a policy according to its formal mandate. Instead, they are likely to attract blame from change seekers for doing so. Conflicts between change seekers and status-quo supporters do not, therefore, remain in the political realm; they expose frontline workers to media and political pressure.

How do frontline workers react to situations where they have to deal with conflicting demands from two political coalitions? Recent literature on conflictual accountability shows that agency managers who experience conflicting demands from multiple stakeholders exhibit greater "strategic awareness" and think more carefully about how their actions will be interpreted by these stakeholders (Schillemans et al., 2021). Based on this research, we expect that:

E1 *Frontline workers who experience pressure from change seekers will question decision-making routines and more thoroughly consider the political implications of their decisions.*

We also know from street-level bureaucracy research that frontline workers usually hold strong professional norms (Harrits, 2019; Hupe & Hill, 2007) and that they are very motivated to implement a policy when they consider it to be meaningful (Thomann, et al. 2018, p. 585). We thus expect that frontline workers who are charged with implementing a policy that they generally support[1] will try to limit the influence of political and media pressure on their work, even if

they might agree with some of the criticisms from change seekers. The reason is that intensified political conflict threatens to constrain frontline workers' professional discretion and damage the policy they support. But how can frontline workers limit the influence of intensified conflict on their implementation practices?

The literature on organizational reputation shows that bureaucratic actors actively cultivate their reputation vis à vis specific audiences to preserve their bureaucratic autonomy (Carpenter, 2010). Reputation cultivation encompasses the preparation for, and adaptation to, reputational threats, that is, events or developments that may tarnish the positive reputation of the bureaucratic actor such as public allegations or negative media coverage (Gilad et al., 2015; Maor & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2013). While this literature primarily focuses on the actions of agency managers, we assume that frontline workers will also take steps to protect their reputation, such as by communicating with the media and by explaining their work to the public. A professional reputation can be expected to provide frontline workers with credibility in their use of discretion and thereby protect them from criticism to some degree. We thus expect that:

E2 *Frontline workers will try to resist pressure from change seekers and limit their influence on policy implementation by employing reputation-management strategies.*

However, this expectation includes the possibility that frontline workers succumb to pressure against their will when they lack access to reputation-management strategies and/or deem that these strategies would not be effective; for example, when critical audiences doubt the expertize underlying frontline workers' decisions (Carpenter, 2010). We argue that when frontline workers are unable to effectively employ reputation-management strategies, they can still use their discretion to engage in blame avoidance (Weaver, 1986). In our conceptualization, discretion therefore acts as a crucial enabling variable that opens policy implementation to political influences.

While politicians and parties have been shown to employ a wide variety of strategies to protect themselves from reputation-damaging blame (Hood, 2011), frontline workers have limited options to protect themselves from blame from change seekers. On the one hand, they have to implement the policy according to the (unchanged) formal mandate, which is in itself a bone of contention in the eyes of change seekers. On the other hand, frontline workers cannot engage in active blame management because they usually lack politicians' and parties' resources and prerogatives, like privileged access to the media or speaking time in political arenas (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017). However, frontline workers can still try to stay out of a political conflict and try not to encourage it through their implementation practices. Based on these considerations, we expect that:

E3 *Frontline workers who deem themselves unable to resist pressure from change seekers make policy implementation less scandal-prone and blameworthy to lower the likelihood of blame attacks.*

Bringing policy implementation in line (at least partly) with the demands of change seekers results in what we call *blame-avoiding policy implementation* (BAPI). BAPI is a form of implementation that is significantly, if not predominantly, driven by frontline workers' motivation to shield themselves from political and media attacks. While formally complying with the policy mandate, BAPI simultaneously exploits street-level discretion to accommodate the demands of change seekers, thereby depriving the latter of occasions to blame frontline workers or to claim that policy implementation is flawed. BAPI can also be seen as a way for frontline workers to cope with the stress induced by (potential) blame attacks (Tummers et al., 2015). The following sections evaluate our theory in two different cases.

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

We examine and compare the effect of intensified political conflict on frontline workers' implementation practices in two different policy areas in Switzerland: juvenile justice policy and child protection policy. Both policies periodically found themselves in the crossfire of intensified political conflict on the occasion of negative focusing events and experienced strong pressure for change. Change seekers and status quo supporters position themselves along the so-called GAL-TAN (green-alternative-libertarian vs. traditional-authoritarian-nationalist) line, that is, the dimension of the policy space where political conflict in many advanced democracies has recently become very pronounced (Kriesi et al., 2012). It is possible to leverage the differences between the cases, namely the degree of professionalization of frontline workers and their working environments (significantly higher in juvenile justice policy than in child protection policy, see below), to create insights into the conditions that facilitate and obstruct the occurrence of BAPI (see Table 1 for basic information on the cases).

We combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies in a multi-method design (Seawright, 2016). In this design, qualitative in-depth interviews with frontline workers serve to evaluate our theoretical expectations of how frontline workers react to political pressure. The quantitative analysis subsequently provides an additional test of whether frontline workers' reactions had a systematic effect on their implementation decisions.

We conducted anonymous interviews with 21 frontline workers (who represent around two thirds of the implementation decisions analyzed in the quantitative part of our study) to understand how they experience and adapt to political and media pressure. The interviews helped us to assess whether frontline workers are primarily sensitive to political and/or media pressure and allowed us to identify their specific behavioral reactions (reputation management and/or BAPI). Moreover, the interviews provided valuable insights into how to operationalize and measure the variables included in the quantitative analyses. We follow suggestions by Bleich and Pekkanen (2013) on how to assemble a state-of-the-art "Interview Methods Appendix". Online Appendix A describes the sampling process, the interview strategy, and the detailed results of the coding procedure.

The quantitative part of the analysis leverages Switzerland's fragmentation into language regions. Switzerland features language barriers that divide it into two major public and media spaces: cantons (federal states) where the predominant language is German and cantons where it is French. Focusing events usually only resonate in the language region in which they occur and thus only affect frontline workers that operate in that region.[2] This division creates a setting where one public space receives the treatment ("pressure on frontline workers") and the other serves as a control group. We approximate the amount of political and media pressure on frontline workers by examining newspaper articles dealing with focusing events and parliamentary requests by change seekers in cantonal parliaments.[3] Time series cross-section analysis of implementation data allows us to identify changes in policy implementation following negative focusing events (Beck, 2001). Figures B1, B2, B3, and B4 in Online Appendix B illustrate the development of the implemented measures and the treatment in all cantons examined and for the language regions over time.

Each case begins with an assessment of the policy and the political conflict that intensified on the occasion of focusing events. After reporting the interview results, we present and interpret the results of the quantitative analyses in light of previous qualitative findings.

TABLE 1 Case information

	Juvenile justice policy	Child protection policy
Policy goal	Reintegrate delinquent juveniles into society	Protect and support children with difficult personal and familial circumstances
Frontline workers' objective discretion	Choose between measures with varying punishment character	Choose between measures with varying intrusiveness into children's familial circumstances
Political conflict	Conflict over the adequate treatment of delinquent juveniles (punishment vs. reintegration into society) between conservatives and progressives	Conflict over the adequate level of government intervention in family matters (low vs. high) between conservatives and progressives
Main foci in interviews	- Is political and/or media pressure present at the implementation stage? (*E1*) - Is pressure perceived as a reputational threat? (*E1*) - Are there strategies that help cope with media/political pressure? (*E2*) - Is there evidence of BAPI? (*E3*)	
Measurement of treatment in quantitative analysis	• Newspaper articles mentioning "lax" measures by frontline workers • Parliamentary requests regarding juvenile justice policy (in cantonal parliaments)	• Newspaper articles criticizing intrusive measures by frontline workers • Parliamentary requests regarding child protection policy (in cantonal parliaments)
Relevant dimension of policy output (= BAPI)	Measures' punishment character: Ambulant measure versus stationary placements (in family, group home, or jail)	Intrusiveness of measures: Revoking the parents' right to decide on the place of residence of the child versus less intrusive measure
Case-specific theoretical expectation	Intensified political conflict leads to..... a relative *decrease* in sanctions that exhibit a weak punishment character	Intensified political conflict leads to..... a relative *reduction* in intrusive measures

4.1 | Juvenile justice policy

The Swiss Juvenile Justice Policy (JJP) regulates the legal handling of delinquent juveniles. The JJP is a national policy that cantonal youth advocates (frontline workers) implement. Comprehensively updated in 2003, the policy deviates from (outdated) concepts of youth offenders as ordinary criminals whose misdeeds must be punished and atoned for. Instead, its primary goals are the protection, education, and (re)integration of juvenile offenders into society, and frontline workers have ample discretion in designing and applying concrete measures that serve these goals (Aebersold, 2011).

Political conflict over the JJP has intensified considerably in recent years. Several aggravated assaults by juveniles in neighboring countries also elicited public outcry in Switzerland and prompted conservative parties to call for a "zero-tolerance" approach to juvenile offenders (Urwyler & Nett, 2012, pp. 20–25). The strongest political outcry by far in recent years occurred in August 2013 when Swiss National Television broadcasted a film about a 17-year-old notorious juvenile offender taking part in a costly therapy setting in the canton of Zurich after he had committed an almost fatal knife attack. The film triggered the so-called "Carlos" controversy, a political blame game on the adequate treatment of juvenile offenders (Hinterleitner, 2018). Conservative parties and the largest tabloid in the German-speaking part of Switzerland (change seekers) accused the responsible youth advocate and the cantonal government of Zurich (status quo supporters) of a soft, "leftish" legal practice and urged the national parliament to tighten the JJP so that juvenile offenders like "Carlos" would end up in jail. While there was heavy pressure for policy change, change seekers ultimately failed to tighten the JJP. The formal policy mandate thus remained unchanged during the examination period.

Interviews. The interviewed youth advocates indicated that they clearly feel the media pressure that develops on the occasion of controversial cases like the "Carlos" controversy and reported that they "are often accused of soft legal practice."[4] While direct interference by executive politicians (i.e., their superiors) is reportedly not a problem, frontline workers also noticed an increased interest in their work on the part of cantonal politicians (mainly parliamentarians) in the wake of the "Carlos" controversy. Some frontline workers indicated that they feel deserted by politicians on the occasion of media attacks. Instead of supporting frontline workers during periods of critical coverage, parliamentarians often "hop on media pressure." As one interviewee put it, "when politicians want to know if there are similar cases in our canton, then the whole artillery starts." These statements suggest that youth advocates come under particular pressure when politicians amplify media pressure – an observation that is in line with our theory and that suggests that politicians often take up a mediatized focusing event.

Frontline workers remarked that the "Carlos" controversy clearly damaged their agencies' reputation and that of the JJP and exacerbated their daily work. In the eyes of one interviewee, the "Carlos" controversy "has destroyed a lot, goodwill, trust in the JJP, a blow to our image." Frontline workers also indicated that their fear of media attacks creates emotional stress. One interviewee reported having "experienced phases in which pressure was huge and that can be very burdensome." Another interviewee remarked that it is "extremely difficult to continue functioning professionally in such an environment" (*these statements corroborate E1*).

Frontline workers also explained that they try to endure media and political pressure by employing a number of reputation-management strategies. Several youth advocates explicitly told us that they try to prevent the politicization of cases under their purview by proactively answering politicians' questions or giving an "explanatory interview" – which is often difficult because of their clients' relatively strict information protection rights. All the youth advocates interviewed indicated that they are aware that they have to deal with salient policy issues that are exceedingly hard to communicate once the media scandalizes them because strong emotions (about crime) are hard to counter with facts. Several frontline workers also mentioned the installation of a professional "media unit" in their canton (that seeks to take the heat off of frontline workers) and administrative "extra loops" in the form of external expert opinions (*these statements clearly confirm E2*). These measures, in addition to youth advocates' professional values and experience (i.e., their reported conviction that social measures are often more effective than punishments), their professional consensus that the JJP in its present form "works," and the

detailed guidelines on which measure to prescribe in particular situations help to limit political and media influences on their decisions.

However, only two frontline workers indicated that their professionalism and proactive communication practices allowed them to fully resist pressure. Seven frontline workers told us that political and media pressure can leave an imprint on their implementation practices. One interviewee put it succinctly: "The public can, via the media, have great influence and co-influence decisions that we make here. That's a fact." To reduce the likelihood of negative media coverage, frontline workers are less willing to put juvenile offenders in costly therapy settings or to prescribe measures that could be considered as "lax" or costly by change seekers and the media. Some frontline workers also indicated that they are now quicker to punish juvenile offenders and keep them in stationary placements for longer. Moreover, some frontline workers no longer prescribe placements with extraordinary components that could be considered as not punitive enough by change seekers (like vacation trips). One interviewee told us that "it can happen that we now keep someone in a placement for longer, so if someone is inside once, it will be difficult for him to get out again, or one is more likely to say 'this time we're not adding a social measure, this guy will simply be punished.' Frontline workers clearly confirmed that these adaptations are at odds with the policy's intended focus on re-education. As one interviewee summarized it: "I fear that we're going more on the "punishment track" in order not to burn our hands with social measures; if this happened on a wider scale, this would be the beginning of the end of the pedagogically-oriented JJP." Hence, qualitative evidence suggests that political and media pressure can influence the implementation practices of frontline workers during and after negative focusing events (*thus confirming E3*). The next section presents quantitative evidence that corroborates this conclusion.

Time-series Cross-section Analysis. The interview evidence suggests that BAPI primarily manifests itself in the duration of stationary measures/placements and in the decision of whether to prescribe ambulant or stationary measures. Stationary measures project a stronger punishment character (and are thus more in line with the demands of change seekers) than ambulant measures. While no data exists on the duration of stationary measures, the Swiss juvenile crime statistic (Federal Statistical Office (BFS) 2019) provides yearly data on the amount of stationary versus ambulant measures assigned by youth advocates from 2007 (first year with available data) to 2018 (see Table 2 for an overview). Since we expect BAPI to manifest itself in a relative decrease in ambulant measures in response to the intensified political conflict over the JJP, we assessed the percentage of ambulant versus stationary measures.[5]

We used two different measures for our treatment variable. First, we measured conflict in the media by identifying newspaper articles dealing with the "Carlos" controversy (the only focusing event during the examination period). Second, we measured the conflict in cantonal parliaments by counting parliamentary requests. The "Carlos" controversy mainly resonated in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. Media coverage was much more intense in the German-speaking part than in the French-speaking part (360 articles vs. 54 articles). Moreover, there were only parliamentary requests in German-speaking cantons (12). Since our interview evidence also suggests that frontline workers in cantons directly affected by, or close to, a focusing event experience greater pressure than those working in cantons further away or in the other language region, we weighted newspaper articles by proximity to the controversy's location.[6] To examine the effects of intensified political conflict on frontline workers' decisions over time, we estimated linear regressions with panel-corrected standard errors (Beck, 2001). All models include year fixed effects to control for time heterogeneity and common shocks. Models 1–4 use the language region as the unit fixed effect (German-speaking or French-speaking cantons) to

TABLE 2 Operationalization table

Variables	Source	Measurement	N	Mean (SD)	Range
Juvenile justice policy					
Dependent variable:					
Placement decisions of cantonal youth advocates, 2007–2018	Swiss juvenile crime statistic (BFS, 2019)	Share of ambulant measures of total measures (ambulant measures and stationary measures)	131. Years: 10–11, 13 cantons	67% (18)	8%–100%
Independent variables:					
Newspaper articles	Swissdox.ch	Number of articles about the "Carlos" controversy in 6 media outlets (3 German-speaking, 3 French-speaking)	131	26 (48.2)	0–171[a]
Newspaper articles in tabloid media	Swissdox.ch	Number of articles about the "Carlos" controversy in 2 tabloids (1 German-speaking, 1 French-speaking)	131	4 (8.9)	0–29
Parliamentary requests in cantonal parliaments	Online archives of cantonal parliaments	Cantonal parliamentary requests referring to the "Carlos" controversy	131	12 requests, 0.1 per year	0–3
Child protection policy					
Dependent variable:					
Decisions made by guardianship authorities, 2001–2012	Intercantonal database (KOKES, 2019)	Share of intrusive measures (evocation of right of residence, Art. 310 ZGB) of total measures (Art. 307, 308, 310 ZGB)	227. Years: 7–11, 21/19 cantons	14.8% (7.8)	2.7%–45%
Independent variables:					

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Variables	Source	Measurement	N	Mean (SD)	Range
Newspaper articles	Swissdox.ch	Number of articles criticizing the decisions of guardianship authorities as too intrusive in all German- and French-speaking media outlets	227	0.2 (1.2)	0–15[a]
Parliamentary requests in cantonal parliaments	Online archives of cantonal parliaments	Cantonal parliamentary requests criticizing guardianship authorities	205	12 requests, 0.05 per year	0–2

Note: See Tables B1 and B2 in Online Appendix B for additional information on all of the variables.

[a]Per year and canton.

control for different institutional settings and culture. Since cultural and institutional differences are heavily clustered by the two language regions (Linder, 2010), capturing these differences with language region-unit fixed effects offers a theoretically derived specification for controlling for unit heterogeneity. Models 5–8 include cantonal fixed effects to control for unobserved canton-specific factors that do not vary over time without explicitly theorizing unit heterogeneity.

The results reported in Table 3 (and pictured in Figure B2 for language regions and Figure B1 for cantons in Online Appendix B) indicate that BAPI occurs after parliamentary requests when including both language region and cantonal fixed effects (Models 3, 4, 7, 8). The coefficient is robust for both measures of fixed effects and also when including both measures of intensified political conflict. Likewise, tabloid articles dealing with the "Carlos" controversy were followed by BAPI when controlling for cantonal fixed effects (Model 6), and a similar tendency occurs for language region fixed effects, although the coefficient is lower and the confidence interval includes 0 on the 90% level (Model 2) and for both models, the effect disappears when controlling for parliamentary requests.[8] The quantitative results, while not particularly strong on their own, are in line with our qualitative results, suggesting that frontline workers engage in BAPI when a mediatized case is taken up by cantonal politicians and when, as a result, political pressure comes "on top" of media pressure.

4.2 | Child protection policy

The Swiss child protection policy seeks to protect and support children with difficult personal and familial circumstances. Until January 2013, national law required local municipalities to operate guardianship authorities (Vormundschaftsbehörden; the frontline workers). From then on, a comprehensive reform of the policy took place, including the hiring of professionalized authorities responsible for cantonal children and adult protection (KESB). Guardianship authorities decided on the measures to take to protect children's wellbeing. These decisions require analyzing unique personal and familial circumstances and assessing an intervention's impact on the wellbeing of the child in question. The Swiss civil code (ZGB) allows for the prescription

TABLE 3 Results of linear regressions with panel corrected standard errors for the JJP case

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Share of ambulant measures							
Newspaper articles	−0.014 (0.015)				−0.016 (0.016)			
Newspaper articles in tabloid media		−0.125 (0.076)		−0.014 (0.096)		−0.140* (0.079)		−0.035 (0.091)
Parliamentary requests in cantonal parliaments			−7.716** (3.175)	−7.371* (4.453)			−8.132** (3.272)	−7.246* (4.369)
Language region fixed effects (1: French-speaking)	−3.127 (2.567)	−2.553 (2.355)	−3.147 (2.106)	−3.022 (2.321)				
Cantonal fixed effects					Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Intercept	49.57*** (2.287)	49.15*** (2.155)	49.58*** (2.007)	49.49*** (2.094)	48.38*** (5.706)	48.65 *** (5.697)	47.9*** (5.767)	48.09*** (5.772)
N	131	131	131	131	131	131	131	131
N years/cantons	10–11[7]/13	10–11/13	10–11/13	10–11/13	10–11/13	10–11/13	10–11/13	10–11/13
R^2	0.30	0.30	0.31	0.31	0.49	0.50	0.50	0.50

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

*$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

of four categories of measures varying in their degree of intrusiveness into children's personal and familial circumstances. Frontline workers have significant discretion in choosing between measures. They can appoint a suitable person or agency that investigates and monitors a child's familial situation (Art. 307 ZGB) or that gives parents advice (Art. 308 ZGB); they can revoke the parents' right to decide on the child's place of residence (Art. 310 ZGB), or withdraw parental responsibility altogether (Art. 311 ZGB). The measures to protect a child should be as weak as possible but as strong as necessary.

The child protection policy has been a bone of public and political contention for many years, and it nurtures a conflict about the adequate level of government intervention into family matters. While progressives support policy that provides public authorities with the means to protect disadvantaged children (status quo supporters), the conservative camp campaigns for non-intervention into the traditional family and, for this purpose, wants to reduce the guardianship authorities' influence to a minimum (change seekers). Conservatives frequently criticize individual decisions by guardianship authorities as too harsh and portray them as evidence of policy failure. For example, in the "Kirchberg" controversy of 2002, one of the four negative focusing events during the examination period, a guardianship authority placed two children, who had lost their parents in a family tragedy, in a children's home instead of putting them in relatives' care. Conservatives, led by a local citizens' initiative, sharply criticized frontline workers for this "heartless" decision and for not involving the local community in the development of a solution.

Interviews. The frontline workers we interviewed overwhelmingly described media pressure (i.e., the negative coverage of guardianship authorities and the scandalization of individual cases) as very burdensome and the form of pressure they feel the most. As one interviewee put it, "you can only hear negative news about us, the headlines are always sensational."[9] Political pressure is comparatively less of a problem and is only felt by frontline workers who operate in cantons with prominent change seekers (i.e., political blame entrepreneurs that frequently attack the guardianship authorities of their cantons). Though some frontline workers indicated that more political support during negative focusing events would be helpful, most of them said they do not feel directly pressured by politicians.

Conversely, all frontline workers interviewed indicated that media pressure complicates their daily work in a variety of ways. First, media pressure creates emotional stress because frontline workers have to operate under the constant threat that one of their cases will become scandalized, and they will be personally attacked in the media. Frontline workers are thus very sensitized about the public's interpretation of a decision. An interviewee told us that, "if you have to work under the impetus of the media, if you have to sustain this every day, then you crack under pressure after half a year" (*these statements are in line with E1*). Second, because media pressure damages the reputation of guardianship authorities, clients develop a negative attitude: "because they (clients) are skeptical toward us, we constantly have to explain ourselves, and this exacerbates our daily work." Frontline workers therefore first need to convince clients of their good intentions before they can start working on a case. Third, clients frequently threaten frontline workers with "going to the media" and making their case public in order to influence frontline workers' decision-making.

Most of the frontline workers interviewed are very aware of the fact that political conflict may influence their choice of measures and they proactively try to limit this influence in their own agencies (*thus further confirming E1*). Procedural safeguards that protect against "incorrect" decisions, such as additional expert opinions and collective discussions about decision-making biases within the guardianship authority, help frontline workers to resist pressure. Frontline

workers also indicated that they try to invest in local public relations management and professional media training to professionalize their communication with clients and the public (*these statements are in line with E2*). However, like their counterparts in the JJP case, they stressed the difficulty involved when explaining their decision-making to the public because of their clients' strict information protection rights and because of the strong emotions their decisions unavoidably trigger. Moreover, loyalty and emotional support between colleagues, and the development of professional humor and "a thick skin" help frontline workers implement the child protection policy in the spirit of the formal mandate.

However, eight out of twelve frontline workers also confirm that media pressure can lead to BAPI (*thus largely confirming E3*). The problem, according to these interviewees, is that media pressure leads to a decision-making situation in which the anticipated public reaction to a decision can be a decisive factor ("How will I look if this happens?") and in which they wait to prescribe intrusive measures beyond the point that would be warranted from a professional point of view. As one interviewee phrased it, "this (influence of media pressure on decisions) is the case plain and simple; our goal is to limit the number of kids placed away from the parents." Most frontline workers explicitly stated that such considerations are problematic because they tend to overshadow the child's well-being and contradict the formal policy mandate ("there's the danger that you lose the focus on the person"). Overall, frontline workers identified media pressure on the occasion of negative focusing events as a clear threat to "correct" policy implementation and mainly attributed the occurrence of BAPI to the low professionalization of guardianship authorities prior to the comprehensive reform in 2013 (which occurred after our examination period). The four interviewees who denied an influence on their implementation practices primarily credited this to their professional experience, values, and convictions. As one interviewee remarked, "I don't think there is an overt influence (on the choice of measures), I really have the feeling that we're professional enough to separate this." The next section presents quantitative results that suggest that BAPI systematically influences implementation decisions.

Time-series Cross-section Analysis. The Swiss conference for child and adult protection (KOKES, 2019) provides data on the child protection measures prescribed by guardianship authorities from 2001 to 2012.[10] Based on the interview results, we expect BAPI to manifest itself through a relative reduction in the prescription of very intrusive measures because these are most at odds with conservatives' traditional family values and thus most likely to be scandalized. Hence, as dependent variable, we used the yearly share of intrusive measures (consisting of the measure of revoking the parents' right to decide on the place of residence of the child, Art 310 ZGB) compared to all measures (excluding Art. 311 ZGB).[11] As with the previous case, we used two measures for the treatment variable "intensified political conflict": the number of articles criticizing the measures taken by guardianship authorities as too intrusive in news outlets in the German-speaking and the French-speaking cantons of Switzerland (weighted by proximity to where the controversy took place)[12], and the number of parliamentary requests regarding child protection policy at the cantonal level (see Table 2 for information on all of the variables). The parliamentary requests and the media coverage related to the four focusing events that we identified during the examination period[13] suggest that the political conflict largely remained confined to the language region in which the focusing events occurred. We estimated linear regressions with panel-corrected standard errors (Beck, 2001) and included year fixed effects and two kinds of unit dummies as unit fixed effects.

In line with the interview evidence, the quantitative results (summarized in Table 4 and pictured in Figures B3 and B4 in Online Appendix B) indicate that while parliamentary requests do not have an effect on the intrusiveness of child protection measures, media articles have a

TABLE 4 Results of linear regression with panel corrected standard errors for the child protection policy case

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Share of intrusive measures					
Newspaper articles	−0.305* (0.172)		−0.333* (0.187)	−0.026 (0.072)		−0.024 (0.072)
Parliamentary requests in cantonal parliaments		2.244 (1.443)	1.986 (1.444)		1.530 (1.383)	1.526 (1.385)
Language region fixed effects (1: French-speaking)	3.634*** (0.922)	4.033*** (0.753)	2.861*** (0.981)			
Cantonal fixed effects				Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Intercept	16.48*** (0.456)	15.71*** (0.400)	16.45*** (0.536)	15.52*** (1.114)	14.82*** (1.186)	14.86*** (1.200)
N	227	205	205	227	205	205
N Years/ Cantons	7–11/21[14]	7–11/19	7–11/19	7–11/21	7–11/19	7–11/19
R^2	0.122	0.095	0.130	0.644	0.664	0.664

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

*$p < 0.1$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

weakly significant but substantial effect. Articles that criticized intrusive action by guardianship authorities were followed by BAPI when controlling for language region fixed effects that account for regional institutional and cultural differences (Model 1).[15] The effect also holds when including both measures of intensified political conflict in Model 3. However, the confidence intervals are rather large and the coefficients become substantially lower and are not significantly different from zero when we control for cantonal fixed effects instead of language-region fixed effects (Models 4–6). Hence, while not particularly strong on their own, the quantitative results further corroborate our qualitative findings.

5 | DISCUSSION

The two cases reveal novel insights into how political conflict influences frontline workers' policy implementation practices. Intensified political conflict influences frontline workers in burdensome and stressful ways – from media actors scandalizing their decisions to politicians blaming them for bad policy implementation. Political and media pressure complicates the work of frontline workers in a variety of ways, and they perceive it as a clear reputational threat. This pressure leads to greater strategic awareness among frontline workers, as they are more likely to

question decision-making routines and potential biases. Frontline workers also employ a variety of strategies to protect their reputation from bad press and political criticism, such as proactively answering critical questions, seeking additional expert opinions to back up decisions, or improving public communication through media training. While these strategies help them resist pressure to some degree, the analysis reveals that when there is a negative focusing event, during which political and media pressure can intensify considerably, frontline workers also engage in BAPI to lower the likelihood that media and political actors will criticize and scandalize their work. While BAPI does not contradict a formal mandate, it veers from the intent of the policies analyzed and, according to frontline workers, damages their effectiveness in the long run.

Within- and cross-case evidence suggests that frontline workers' engagement in BAPI strongly depends on their level of professionalization. While the comparatively less professionalized frontline workers in the child protection case already engaged in BAPI in response to media pressure alone, highly professionalized youth advocates only seemed to engage in BAPI after political actors amplified the media pressure. We therefore conclude that a well-developed "professional accountability regime" (Hupe & Hill, 2007) helps frontline workers' resist political and media pressure. The cases also suggest that frontline workers should be more likely to engage in BAPI when they have to implement a salient policy compared to when they have to implement a non-salient policy. Moreover, frontline workers are more likely to engage in BAPI when they have limited room for communication compared to when they can explain their implementation decisions to a wider public.

These findings are based on the analysis and comparison of two cases, and more research is needed to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how intensified conflict about policies influences their implementation. One aspect to explore is the role of status-quo supporters, who were mostly silent in the two cases analyzed. While they opposed formal policy change, they did not vocally defend frontline workers during focusing events. However, this need not always be the case, and vocal change seekers might inject a different dynamic into policy conflicts. Moreover, the quantitative component of our multi-method analysis displays several limitations: First, in both cases, data on frontline workers' decisions is only available on a yearly basis while negative focusing events may erupt at any time during the year. This implies that we cannot assess the part of frontline workers' decisions that has already been affected by a focusing event in a year when there is one. Second, we had to exclude several cantons because they had too few implementation decisions per year. And third, as we explain in Appendix B, the analyses are sensitive to weighting decisions related to frontline workers' proximity to a focusing event. The quantitative analysis should therefore be seen as an exploratory first step for developing a model that systematically assesses the influence of political pressure on discretionary conduct. However, since the quantitative findings are strongly in line with the qualitative findings (which we deem very robust[16]), we are confident that our multi-method analysis reveals reliable insights into how frontline workers implement public policy during periods of intensified political conflict.

6 | CONCLUSION

This article shows that intensified political conflict over policies has important implications for the policy implementation practices of frontline workers. We go beyond macro-level studies that associate political factors with bureaucratic outputs and zoom in on the strategic considerations and adaptations that frontline workers make when they have to implement conflicted policies. Our multi-method analysis of the Swiss juvenile justice and child protection policies reveals frontline workers'

attempts to shield themselves from political and media pressure, and it provides insights into when intensified political conflict is most likely to influence frontline workers' implementation practices. Policy implementation is most likely to veer from the written intent of the law when frontline workers operate in weakly professionalized implementation environments, when they have to implement salient policies, or when they have limited opportunities to communicate with the public.

These findings add to our understanding of how bureaucratic actors implement policy in more conflictual times. Our study contributes to street-level bureaucracy research by highlighting how intensified political conflict can affect frontline workers' use of discretion, thus enhancing our understanding of the "political accountability regime's" influence on frontline decision-making (Thomann, et al. 2018). Moreover, we show that the concepts of blame avoidance and reputation management – which hitherto were used primarily to explain the behavior of politicians, top-level bureaucrats, and entire agencies – can also illuminate the behavior of frontline workers who operate under pressure. Future research could use these concepts to create a more comprehensive understanding of frontline workers' behavioral responses to a more conflictual and stressful climate (Tummers et al., 2015). Moreover, future research could more systematically trace the effects of these responses on specific administrative outputs to grasp their consequences for policy implementation. Exploring these issues is vital for a better understanding of the functioning of bureaucracy and of policy implementation in more conflictual times.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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ENDNOTES

[1] This is not always the case, however, as when frontline workers act as policy entrepreneurs (Cohen & Aviram, 2021).

[2] We tested this by controlling for every focusing event that occurred in each language region, whether or not it was also prominently debated in the other language region. Moreover, interview evidence suggests that negative focusing events in the other language region largely do not affect frontline workers.

[3] Parliamentary requests, which include concrete demands regarding a policy (e.g., "Child protection policy needs to be tightened!") and requests for information (e.g., "How many serious youth offenders are there in canton X?"), constitute an apt indicator of political change seekers' reaction to a mediatized controversy.

[4] The direct quotes in this section are statements that are representative of the views of several interviewed frontline workers. See Table A1 in Online Appendix A for further details and quotes.

[5] We excluded 14 cantons as there were too few cases per year.

[6] Factor 4 for the canton of Zurich where the controversy took place, factor 3 for neighbors of the canton of Zurich, factor 2 for other German-speaking cantons and factor 1 for French-speaking cantons. See Table B1, footnote 2 in Online Appendix B for a discussion of the reliability of this weighting.

[7] The canton of Zug only provides data from 2009 to 2018.

[8] Detailed interpretations of the coefficients for tabloid articles can be found in Online Appendix B (p. 22).

[9] Direct quotes are again representative statements. See Table A2 in Online Appendix A for further details and quotes.

[10] The data covers the measures imposed in each canton per year. We had to exclude five smaller cantons as there were too few cases per year.

[11] Frontline workers remarked that Art. 311 ZGB is only applied very rarely and mainly after the death of both parents. We thus excluded this measure from the quantitative analysis.

[12] See Table B2, footnote 4 in Online Appendix B for a discussion of the reliability of this weighting.

[13] We also identified media coverage relating to a fifth focusing event where articles criticized measures for not being intrusive enough. See Online Appendix B, Tables B3 and B4 for how we dealt with media coverage relating to this event (whose inclusion in the analysis does not change the results displayed in Table 4).

[14] The canton of Basel-Land (BL) only provides data from 2006 to 2012. Two cantons also dropped out in models 2, 3, 5 and 6 because of a lack of information on parliamentary requests (AR and NW).

[15] Detailed interpretations of the coefficients for tabloid articles can be found in Online Appendix B (p. 26).

[16] In Appendix A, we report (generally high) levels of saturation for each of the questions we asked frontline workers.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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