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Political involvement in street-level policy implementation as a two-way relationship—The effect of policy capacity

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Abstract

To date, research on politicians' influence on the work of street-level bureaucrats (SLB) and the consequences for policy implementation has mainly focused on disruptive effects of political involvement—for instance, poorer social equity in public service provision or political patronage. Our study opens up this perspective and argues that the relationship between politicians and SLB is a two-way relationship shaped by capacities of the stakeholders themselves and their organisational environment. We link SLB research with policy capacity literature. We focus on the effect of *political capacity* because this type of capacity meaningfully influences whether SLB can actively control the relationship with politicians. We ask: What is the relevance of political capacity for policy implementation? We use data from Swiss social assistance where the phenomenon of interest, that is the political involvement, is institutionalised by law within the implementing agencies. We show that political capacity at the organisational and individual level has a confidence-building effect. SLB and politicians learn how to engage with each other and how to

make the most of the exchange. Politicians gain a deeper understanding and are able to politically legitimise the policy.

KEYWORDS
policy capacity, political capacity, political involvement, street-level bureaucracy, Swiss social assistance

Points for practitioners

- Existing research on politicians' influence on the work of street-level bureaucrats (SLB) has mainly focused on disruptive effects of political involvement—for instance, poorer social equity in public service provision or political patronage. We show that the relationship between SLB and political actors can actually lead to 'non-disruptive' or even positive effects on public service provision due to certain capacities of the stakeholders themselves and their institutional environment. We identify two types of capacity that foster a constructive relationship between SLB and politicians: organisational and individual political capacity.
- *Organisational political capacity*: The institutional or organisational setting within which SLB and politicians implement public policy and provide public services can promote regular exchange and cooperation between these two types of stakeholders to a greater or lesser extent—or even require it (e.g. by law). If the setting is conducive, constructive contact between SLB and politicians takes place during policy implementation. Thus, SLB and politicians know each other and know how to interact, which enhances trust among them and mutual understanding of their respective duties, challenges, and interests. *Individual political capacity* arises from this as SLB learn how to use this contact for their needs, that is to obtain and sustain political support for their policy actions. Politicians also benefit from the exchange because they gain a deeper understanding of the respective policy

and feel more confident in representing it towards the public and the politics.
- In short, the findings show how capacity at different levels may reinforce each other. The organisational context can promote political capacity through regular contact between SLB and politicians. Actors have to learn to work with each other and thereby enhance their individual political capacity.

1 | INTRODUCTION

To date, street-level bureaucracy scholarship has addressed the issue of control over street-level bureaucrats (SLB) or the ability to influence SLB's behaviour (e.g. Brehm & Gates, 1997; Brewer, 2005; Hill, 2006). Different modes of influence on SLB have been investigated (see, e.g., Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003). One of these modes focus on the (mainly disruptive) involvement of politicians in street-level policy implementation and the (mainly negative) implications on SLB's decisions, such as unequal service provision or political patronage (e.g. Keiser, 1999; Keiser & Soss, 1998; Kekez & Henjak, 2019; Langbein, 2000; May & Winter, 2009).

This study argues that previous research insufficiently considers the possible relationship between politicians and SLB and the resulting effects on policy implementation. Therefore, we aim to apply a more nuanced perspective on possible effects of politicisation on public policy implementation. We investigate the cooperation between politicians and SLB in the context of concrete policy implementation. We thereby consider SLB as individuals working at the front-line of service delivery, where the institutional and organisational context is highly relevant to their activities and interactions with politicians. We conceptualise the interplay between SLB and political actors as a two-way rather than a one-way relationship that can also lead to 'non-disruptive' or, ideally, positive effects on public service provision due to certain capacities that the stakeholders themselves have as well as the institutional structure within which they operate. Therefore, we link existing research on SLB with policy capacity literature. The policy capacity framework encompasses a 'set of skills and resources (…) necessary to perform policy functions' by SLB, the public agency where they work, and the whole political system they are part of (Wu et al., 2015, p. 166). The framework comprises three types of policy-relevant capacity, each at the individual, organisational, and systemic level: Analytical capacity includes skills, knowledge, and an environment that supports technically sound policies. Operational capacity enables the solid implementation of public policies in everyday processes and activities such as the necessary financial and personnel resources. Political capacity 'helps to obtain and sustain political support for policy actions' (Wu et al., 2015, p. 168). Examples include knowledge and experience of political processes, relationships with political actors, and negotiating skills. We argue that political capacity in particular is central to the above suggested two-way relationship between SLB and politicians and the effect on street-level policy implementation. This is because SLB's organisational context and their own political capacity meaningfully influence whether they can actively control the relationship with politicians or whether they are controlled by them in turn. In

addition, there is limited research on the actual effects of political capacity in policy implementation. Therefore, we ask: What is the relevance of political capacity for policy implementation? We investigate the case of a Swiss social assistance policy where political involvement is institutionalised by law in the organisational setting of the implementing public agency, thereby 'forcing' SLB and politicians to (learn to) work together. Such a setting is an ideal case to investigate the role political capacity plays in the way these stakeholders engage with each other to implement public policy on the ground. In the words of Patton (2015, pp. 436–438), we apply a deductive theoretical sampling as the case at hand manifests the theoretical phenomenon of interests, that is the political involvement in street-level public policy implementation. We use original survey and interview data from 66 social assistance authorities in one canton. Swiss social assistance is implemented by local implementing agencies and monitored by political bodies. The latter are staffed with so-called militia politicians or, in other words, lay politicians. This means that they do not hold office full-time, but on a part-time, non-professional basis (see, e.g., Bundi et al., 2017). We use the terms 'lay politicians', 'politicians', and 'political actors' interchangeably when we refer to the case of Swiss social assistance policy in this paper and apply a mixed-method design with a qualitative focus.

Findings indicate that while politicians cannot fully perform their mandated monitoring role, their structured involvement in social assistance implementation fosters regular interaction between SLB and politicians (*organisational political capacity*). This interaction builds familiarity and trust. Most SLB effectively utilise this contact to secure political backing for their actions (*individual political capacity*). Similarly, politicians view the exchange as constructive, boosting their confidence in advocating policy to the public and colleagues. In summary, leveraging organisational and individual political capacity can yield positive outcomes.

By merging SLB and policy capacity literature, we not only increase our understanding of the potential positive effects of politicisation in SLB scholarship but also refine the policy capacity framework. With few exceptions (for an overview, see Wu et al., 2015), empirical investigations, especially regarding political capacity—which is considered the most influential type—remain limited. Our goal is to enhance understanding of the significance of political capacity in policy implementation. The paper is structured as follows: The next two sections locate our endeavour in the existing literature and thereby link SLB and policy capacity scholarship. This is followed by the research design including a description of the case of Swiss social assistance policy, our data, and methods. We then present and discuss our findings and conclude with some potential avenues for future research.

2 | POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT IN STREET-LEVEL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Inspired by Lipsky's (2010) seminal work, street-level bureaucracy scholarship to date has mainly focused on either the issue of discretion of street-level bureaucrats (SLB) when implementing public policies (e.g. Davidovitz et al., 2021; Hupe, 2014; Jilke & Tummers, 2018) or control over SLB or the ability to influence SLB's behaviour and decisions (e.g. Brehm & Gates, 1997; Brewer, 2005; Hill, 2006; Mavrot et al., 2023). Related to this second strand of research, scholars address different modes of influence on SLB (for an overview, see Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003). One of these modes focus on the (mainly disruptive) involvement of politicians in street-level policy implementation and the (mainly negative) implications on SLB's decisions, such as unequal service provision or political patronage (e.g. Keiser, 1999; Keiser & Soss, 1998; Kekez & Henjak, 2019; Langbein, 2000; May & Winter, 2009).

For instance, Davidovitz and Cohen (2023) examine the political influence on decision-making processes at SLB in education and social service in Israel and the resulting effects on social equity of the public services provided to citizens.[1] Another example of negative implications of political involvement is political patronage (Kekez & Henjak, 2019). Despite this focus on disruptive or negative effects, Davidovitz and Cohen (2023, p. 16) suggest that future research 'might also investigate the possibility that politicians' involvement in the implementation process could actually improve policy outcome'. Following this call, we aim to apply a more nuanced perspective on possible effects of politicisation on public policy implementation. We investigate the cooperation between politicians and SLB in the context of concrete policy implementation and conceptualise the interplay between them as a two-way rather than a one-way relationship. In other words, we assume that political involvement can indeed lead to 'non-disruptive' or, ideally, positive effects on street-level public service delivery. We argue that, for this to happen, certain capacities of the stakeholders themselves as well as the institutional structure within which they operate and implement a policy may have a meaningful effect. The policy capacity framework is a means to capture such capacities. Therefore, we link existing research on SLB with policy capacity literature. The next section presents the main premises of the policy capacity framework and elaborates on the potential effects we see of different types of capacity—in particular political capacity—for the relationship between SLB and politicians and finally for concrete policy implementation.

3 | THE ROLE OF POLITICAL CAPACITY IN STREET-LEVEL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The policy capacity framework assembles a 'set of skills and resources (…) necessary to perform policy functions' by SLB, the public agency where they work, and the whole political system they are part of (Wu et al., 2015, p. 166). The framework comprises three types of policy-relevant capacity, each at the individual (e.g. SLB or politicians), organisational (e.g. public agency), and systemic level (e.g. political system or institutional setting). First, analytical capacity enables the access and effective processing of relevant information as well as the derivation and assessment of possible courses of action and policy alternatives. In short, analytical capacity includes skills, knowledge, and an environment that enables technically sound policies. Second, operational capacity encompasses managerial skills in areas such as communication, leadership, teamwork or decision-making, and organisational settings such as a public agency's financial and personnel resources and relation with executive or legislative institutions. In short, operational capacity enables the solid implementation of public policies. Third, political capacity is about political knowledge and experience, the ability to identify relevant actors and understanding their interests, the relationship between public agencies and citizens, and the level of trust in and legitimacy of policy actors and actions (Howlett & Ramesh, 2016; Kekez et al., 2019b; Wu et al., 2015). In short, political capacity 'helps to obtain and sustain political support for policy actions' (Wu et al., 2015, p. 168).

In its essence, existing policy capacity as well as street-level bureaucracy literature relates to cooperation and collaboration among policy and political actors (e.g. Gershgoren & Cohen, 2024; Kekez et al., 2018). Previous research, for example, links the policy capacity framework with collaborative forms of governance (e.g. Kekez et al., 2019a). Davidovitz and Cohen (2023, pp. 15–16) conclude in their study on Israeli teachers and social workers that '[p]olicy implementation is a team effort that requires productive cooperation between politicians and bureaucrats'. To understand how the relationship between SLB and politicians may turn negative or positive—that is to understand the two-way relationship proclaimed here—this study focuses on the third type of

policy capacity, namely political capacity on the organisational and individual level. As the framework postulates, the three types of capacity are interlinked. Nevertheless, policy capacity literature states that, depending on the context, not all types are equally important (Howlett & Ramesh, 2016).

We argue that political capacity on the organisational and individual level is decisive in shaping the relationship between SLB and politicians constructively.

At an organisational level, existing literature links the political capacity of a public agency first of all to the degree of its access to relevant political actors. An agency with direct access to politicians that are influential in the respective policy field is likely to outperform one that lacks such access. Second, the quality of the working relationship, often termed as the 'public service bargain', between a public agency's SLB and politicians is a key component of organisational political capacity (Salomonsen & Knudsen, 2011). According to Hood (2002), ministers who maintain a professional and courteous relationship with 'their' agency heads, providing broad guidance instead of micromanaging, can anticipate increased effectiveness from their agencies. In a different context, (blinded for peer review) show that collaboration among policy implementing actors increases resilience against 'blame-avoiding policy implementation', which is another way of potentially ineffective or unequal public service provision (see Hinterleitner & Wittwer, 2023). Third, Grøn and Salomonsen (2019) show that constructive cooperation and mutual trust between political actors and the local administration depends on a stable environment for exchange. Organisational settings may support such stable exchanges by fostering an agency's relation with executive or legislative institutions or actors (Peters, 2015). According to previous research, a high level of trust among politicians in the actions of a public agency leads to politicians wanting to exert less influence on 'their' agency. This created trust in turn can lead to a conductive setting including greater political support for the policy area in question—be it vis-à-vis other political actors or the public (Carpenter, 2010; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2019). Such a setting may finally include options for a communication or dialogue between state actors and citizens that ultimately enhances the public support and legitimacy of a particular policy (Post et al., 2008; World Bank, 2009).

However, if the individual ability of relevant stakeholders to work together in a positive way is missing or if party politics or other political interests dominate, political involvement in street-level policy implementation can still lead to negative effects even within favourable organisational structures. Therefore, political capacity at the individual level is equally important. First, the core of individual political capacity is the ability to gain and maintain political support (Wu et al., 2015, p. 168). More specifically, individual political capacity encompasses SLB's ability to consider the political aspects of their agency's policy tasks and to foster political support for these tasks. For instance, SLB need knowledge of policy and political processes, such as how various actors interact in different stages, which helps them recognise the connections between their tasks and the politics of the policy process. Second, to be able to do so, policy actors need 'policy acumen' or political knowledge and experience (Wu, Ramesh, et al., 2018). This consists 'of insights about positions, interests, resources and strategies of key players in the policy process, and the practical implications of policy actions' (Wu, Howlett, et al., 2018, p. 8) and provides the basis for SLB's informed assessments about the feasibility and desirability of 'their' policies. Finally, communication skills, negotiation skills, and awareness of consensus building may be crucial for SLB because policy processes require cooperation with many stakeholders outside of the own agency, like politicians (Wu, Howlett, et al., 2018, p. 8). In short, political capacity helps SLB to manage cooperation with politicians and promotes mutual understanding of the challenges and interests of the counterpart.

To conclude, we assume that political involvement in street-level public policy implementation may have a 'non-disruptive' or even positive effect when appropriate political capacity is available. More specifically, organisational and individual political capacity may reinforce each other and lead to stable, trusting, and constructive relationships and exchange between SLB and politicians.

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

We use original survey and interview data from 66 social assistance authorities in one Swiss canton and apply a mixed-method design with a qualitative focus. The paper adopts an abductive approach by going back and forth between theoretical ideas and the empirical data collected. Abductive reasoning includes an ongoing, iterative interaction between empirical observations and existing theories (Eriksson & Lindström, 1997). Dubois and Gadde (2002) describe abduction as fostering innovative insights by blending established theoretical models with new concepts that emerge from real-world encounters. This section first introduces the case of Swiss social assistance policy followed by data and method.

4.1 | Case: Swiss social assistance policy

Switzerland's federalist structures provide cantons and municipalities with a uniquely large degree of autonomy in policy design and implementation. A system of non-professional self-administration is deeply rooted in order to maintain the small-scale nature resulting in part from these federalist structures. Thus, volunteering in the political system and the participation of lay agencies in various policy fields have a long tradition (Linder & Mueller, 2017, pp. 90–97).

Social assistance in Switzerland is the responsibility of the cantons. However, in many cantons, the municipalities are responsible for the implementation of social assistance. Although different models exist, the institutional structure in Swiss social assistance typically consists of a local or municipal political body (the social authority) and an implementing administration unit (the social service) (Federal Social Insurance Office, 2016; Swiss Conference for Social Assistance, 2019).

The social services typically consist of professional staff, in particular social workers, providing services to citizens. In the present case, these SLB work directly in the public administration. In contrast, the social authorities are composed of elected municipal politicians (a lay body of residents) who are delegated to the local department of social affairs or the social commission (depending on the municipality, the institutional body varies) and are responsible for the supervision of the social services. Thereby, the Swiss political system of volunteering of lay persons prides itself for non-training, as one of the basic ideas of this system is that the interplay of different (professional) expertise generates its own added value (Linder & Mueller, 2017, pp. 90–97)[2]. This creates a situation where professional social workers (i.e. the SLB) are faced with lay politicians who have to regularly review their work by law.

This political involvement in social service provision is *institutionalised* by law as the Social Assistance Act (SAA) of the canton of Bern—that is the sub-national unit that will be analysed in this paper—shows (Canton of Bern, 2001). The SAA stipulates the following concerning the social services: 'Each (…) municipality runs its own social service, operates a joint social service with other municipalities or joins the social service of another municipality' (Art. 18 SAA). The tasks of the social services include the provision of social assistance based on the individual circumstances

of potential beneficiaries, particularly 'preventive counselling, the clarification of personal and economic circumstances, the determination and agreement of individual goals, the provision of advice and support, the ordering of measures, and the determination and granting of benefits' (Art. 19 SAA)[3].

With regard to the social authorities, the SAA stipulates that each municipality has its own social authority, or in cases where municipalities have merged their social services, the respective social authorities also have to be merged, always resulting in a one-to-one setting (i.e. one social authority per social service) (Art. 16 SAA). The tasks of these supervisory bodies include the definition of the strategy of the social services, the oversight of the social services' organisational setup, and regular reviews of the social assistance dossiers (i.e. a check of individual social assistance decisions), and they are authorised to initiate corrective measures towards the social services in case of problems. Overall, they are expected to support social services in the implementation of social assistance and also report to their respective municipalities on important developments (Art. 17 SAA).

This case, with its specific institutional framework, is pertinent to our research question: What is the relevance of political capacity in policy implementation? In this context, politicians wield institutionalised power, presenting situations which could favour political patronage or where SLB may encounter pressure regarding the way they provide their services—that is the 'typical' disruptive effects investigated so far of political involvement in street-level public policy implementation (e.g. Davidovitz & Cohen, 2023; Kekez & Henjak, 2019)[4]. However, we aim to show that such a constellation can still lead to positive effects of politicisation of service delivery. The case illustrates the role political capacity can play in shaping the outcome of political involvement on policy implementation and thereby also manifests the two-way relationship between SLB and politicians. Therefore, and according to Patton (2015, pp. 436–438), this is a deductive theoretical case. It manifests the theoretical phenomenon of interests, that is the political involvement in street-level public policy implementation and thereby '[t]he sample becomes, by definition and selection, illuminative of the theoretical concept of interest' (Patton, 2015, p. 438). The next section presents our data.

4.2 | Data collection approach

We use survey and interview data from the canton of Bern with 66 regional and local social authorities (politicians) and social services (SLB). For the endeavour of this study, the canton of Bern can be considered a representative case for Switzerland as different institutional arrangements exist depending on the cities or municipalities. Looking outside Switzerland, we argue that this case is also comparable, especially with Western European but also Nordic countries that have similar administrative traditions and where the interaction and power relations between politicians and SLB in policy implementation on the ground are similar. We discuss this in more detail in the discussion section below.

The canton of Bern has 337 political municipalities (Canton of Bern, 2023). In nearly 20 of these, there is still a purely municipal social assistance system, while all the others have been merged regionally to varying degrees, for example in municipal associations. With regard to the size of the social services in the canton, there is a quite large spectrum represented, from small services (with less than 250–500 social assistance dossiers respectively)[5] to relatively large associations of municipalities (with over 500 to about 1000 dossiers)[6]. In the context of a revision of the

canton's Social Assistance Act, we were able to collect extensive original data. We conducted a survey of all 66 social authorities and social services each and 22 semi-structured (group-)interviews with representatives from both bodies, that is politicians (seven interviews) and SLB (10 interviews), and with experts. The latter group included, for example, the most relevant employees of the responsible authority at the cantonal level in the area of social assistance, a representative of the association of municipalities, the responsible government councillor in the canton, and a renowned researcher in the field of social assistance with specific contextual knowledge. Thus, while other studies (e.g. Davidovitz & Cohen, 2023) investigating effects of political involvement on SLB only use data covering the views of the bureaucrats, we are able to cover both sides.

With regard to the surveys, 60 of 66 social service managers (91% response rate) and 39 representatives (usually the presidents) of the 66 social authorities (59% response rate) took part in the survey, representing very high shares of the total population. The survey and interviews were conducted from June to August 2022. More details on the data can be found in Supporting Information Appendix 1.

4.3 | Method

The original data for this study were collected in the context of an external consultancy mandate related to a revision of the Social Assistance Act of the canton of Bern. This setting provided us with a very good data basis, that is high response rates and a broad willingness to be interviewed.

The survey served as an encompassing data collection instrument to engage as many stakeholders as possible. Nine explorative (expert) interviews were conducted before the launch of the survey to enhance our knowledge and validate the survey questions. Thirteen interviews were conducted after the survey to validate and qualitatively deepen the findings. A large share of the questions in the interview guide were identical between the initial and later interviews in order to obtain comparable information about the functioning of the various social services and authorities. Interviews with stakeholders that were held after they had completed the survey were slightly adapted based on the survey answers to reduce redundancies and to be able to systematically collect in-depth information about particularly relevant topics raised by the respondents in the survey. The nine initial interviews additionally served to provide a preliminary overall view of the policy (e.g. existing problems in the implementation; identification of relevant issues that could not have been identified through document analysis).

Questions in the survey (both closed and open-ended) and the interviews mainly focused on the following aspects (see also Supporting Information Appendix 1)[7]: the role of the social authority in general, the management by the social authority, the contact and relationship between the social service and the social authority, the course of supervisory activities, and the public and political representation of social assistance by the social authority.

We applied qualitative content analysis following the steps proposed by Mayring (2015, p. 98): the data from the interviews along with the data form the survey were systematically coded according to a deductively created coding scheme based on the above-provided descriptions of organisational and individual political capacity—in particular, the key words listed in Figure 1. Additionally, each of the codes contained three subcategories, which reflected the three main groups of actors, that is representatives of social services, social authorities, and independent experts. This separated coding allowed us to contrast the different perspectives and to analyse different opinions where they exist. Moreover, we analysed closed-ended questions from the survey using descriptive statistics to be able to place the qualitative content in a larger picture.

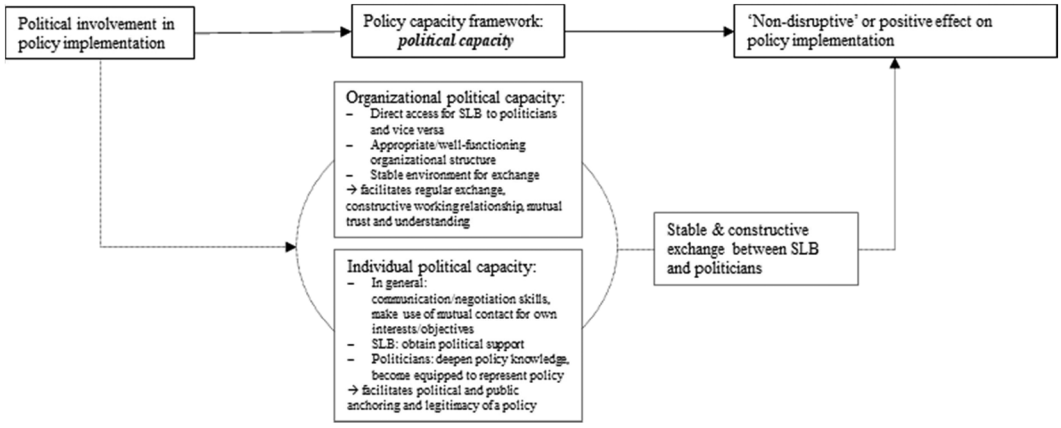

FIGURE 1 Illustration of the 'non-disruptive' or even positive effect of political capacity on political involvement in street-level public policy implementation.

5 | RESULTS

Overall, the findings show the following: In the case at hand, the actual control function as stipulated by law cannot be fulfilled by the social authorities since they do not have the technical knowledge and expertise to supervise the professional decisions taken by the social services. However, the institutional anchoring of political involvement brings organisational political capacity to light in the sense that the institutionalisation leads to cooperation or at least regular exchange between SLB and politicians. Consequently, the stakeholders know each other and know how to deal with each other. This increases mutual trust and understanding but also the individual political capacity, in particular of SLB, as most SLB know how to use this contact for their own purposes, that is to obtain political support. At the same time, politicians gain a deeper understanding of social assistance and feel better equipped to represent the policy towards the citizens and the politics. This is a particularly important task in the policy area analysed, since social welfare expenditures are high and often subject to critical scrutiny. Legitimising this spending through politicians—often even from conservative or otherwise social spending-critical political camps—is thus a very valuable strategy to secure this area of responsibility of the public administration and make it less vulnerable to attack. Thus, we conclude that the organisational and individual political capacity reinforce each other in this case. Figure 1 illustrates and summarises the results.

The following two sub-sections present the findings from the survey and the interviews along the two analysed dimensions of organisational and individual political capacity in more detail. Supporting Information Appendix 2 provides an illustrative list of coded statements from the survey and the interviews.

5.1 | Organisational political capacity

Overall, the survey revealed that nearly 70% of the social services and social authorities are in close and regular contact. It is often mentioned that the contact is straightforward, adapts to the need, and can vary from at least twice or three times a month to weekly or even several times a

day. The survey responses indicate that effective organisational structures, active communication, mutual transparency and acceptance, and good cooperation are the main reasons cited by social authorities (politicians) for their ability to perform legal supervisory tasks.

The majority of SLB also say in the survey that the system and the collaboration work and fulfil their purposes. Examples of answers from the survey are the following: 'The current organisation and division of tasks *[between SLB and politicians]* has proven itself'. 'The current regulations are effective; the administrative structures are good and guarantee the correctness of the processes'.

While the vast majority of data confirm that the actual responsibility of a professional supervision can hardly be fulfilled because the social authorities are lay bodies, that is there is often a lack of professional expertise in social assistance[8], most survey respondents and interviewees still see a clear advantage in the regular examination of individual social assistance dossiers by the social authorities, that is politicians.

The following illustrative statements from the interviews confirm that this institutional setting opens up organisational political capacity as it fosters direct access for SLB to relevant politicians (i.e. those that are influential in social policy and/or local politics overall), and vice versa for politicians to SLB's work that would otherwise not be possible. In addition, the organisational setup allows for a stable environment for exchange between SLB and politicians and thereby facilitates good working relationships between the two types of stakeholders:

> We make sure that there is a dialog between social workers and the social authority. But they *[the social authority]* are lay people who do not have much of a clue. They can ask questions, but they cannot uncover errors. (Interviewee 4, SLB)

> The exchange is really good. The president of the social welfare authority is a local councillor. We have a meeting once a week. She understands our concerns and functionally this work is impeccable. (Interviewee 1, SLB)

> The cooperation is ongoing and lived by the social service and us [*the social authority*]. This builds trust and appreciation. (Interviewee 3, politician)

These statements are even more interesting in light of the fact that most SLB in the survey also stated that the social authorities lack professional competence and are therefore hardly in a position to fully fulfil their statutory supervisory duties (see overview of survey responses in Supporting Information Appendix 2.7). However, the next sub-section shows that the social authorities have a role other than (only) that of supervision—namely that of communicating with citizens and of politically legitimising social assistance in their municipality or region.

5.2 | Individual political capacity

Survey responses indicate that politicians value their close contact with the population, SLB, and social assistance recipients, citing this as crucial for their supervisory roles. SLB agree, highlighting that the social authority's local knowledge and political ties improve public acceptance and support of social services. One SLB wrote: 'It is important that social assistance is legitimised in the municipalities. The social authority is a very important body for this'.

The following statements from the interviews illustrate how individual political capacity of the involved stakeholders is used in practice and how it unfolds its effect. First, similar to the findings

presented above, most social services see a clear advantage in the examination of the dossiers by the social authorities as these checks provide SLB with the opportunity to get in direct contact with and present their views to relevant political actors. Specifically, many interview statements illustrate the SLB's political knowledge and communication skills. They show how the SLB act in concrete terms when dealing with politicians and how the regular exchange creates trust between the social authorities and the social services, which can be leveraged at the political level.

> We use the members of the social authority as ambassadors for social assistance, like for example Roger Federer is an ambassador for several brands and organisations. They should represent the system and be able to provide information. For example, a case is always discussed at the beginning of every meeting. So that the social authority members get an idea. (Interviewee 1, SLB)

> They [*the members of the social authority*] are very interested in our work. [...] It is also important to have advocates, because we are the second largest budget item after education and the social authority defends this expenditure to the outside. (Interviewee 4, SLB)

> We have a very committed and dynamic president [*of the social authority*] who supports us, who trusts me and who gets involved. [...] We need the social authority to defend and represent us in the municipal council [...]. (Interviewee 9, SLB)

> Yes, they [*the social authorities*] have to represent us in the municipalities. [...] the control by the social authority is about political acceptance [...]. (Interviewee 17, SLB)

Second, and importantly, this is not a one-sided mechanism benefitting only the SLB, but politicians also value the mutual exchange, mainly facilitated through the dossier checks. They consider this supervisory task as a trust-building measure between them and the SLB. At the same time, the regular contact enables politicians to better understand social assistance as a whole and the specific duties of the SLB, which in turn better equips them to represent and legitimise social assistance in local politics. Thus, from the perspective of social authorities, the mechanism and effect of individual political capacity look as follows:

> If case presentations and dossier checks are carried out regularly, you can build up a certain amount of knowledge. Otherwise, it becomes very difficult. We get the impression that for our social service, it is very important to take us [*the social authority*] with them. We are given a good feeling. We get an insight into their specific activities. (Interviewee 6, politician)

> I represent the social service on the municipal council and argue for the expenditure. My colleagues in other municipalities do the same. This task is very important because many people have a very negative image of social assistance and the people who receive it. They are all lazy, etc. Here, too, the dossier checks help to build up a better understanding of what social assistance actually means in concrete terms. (Interviewee 16, politician)

To sum up, the data confirm our supposition. In the case at hand, political involvement in street-level public policy implementation has a 'non-disruptive', actually even a positive, effect.

This is because appropriate political capacity at the organisational and individual level can unfold its effect mainly due to a conducive interplay between the two levels. Next, we discuss the generalisability of our findings by consulting literature on different types of administrative traditions.

6 | DISCUSSION

This study asks: What is the relevance of political capacity for policy implementation? Contrary to existing research, we assume that political involvement in street-level public policy implementation may have a 'non-disruptive' or even a positive effect when stakeholders dispose of appropriate political capacity. We use survey and interview data from Swiss social assistance and show that political capacity at the organisational and individual level has a confidence-building effect. The case study highlights how institutionalised political involvement fosters collaboration and trust between SLB and politicians, enhancing mutual engagement and political legitimisation of the policy.

Our analysis is, in some parts, certainly Swiss specific. In its essence, however, we argue that a systematic investigation of policy capacity, in particular, political capacity as we conducted it here, is relevant for a deeper understanding of public policy implementation at the street level in many countries. This is because the relationship between SLB and politicians is key in many (or actually all types of) political systems. For illustration purposes, this discussion briefly focuses on administrative traditions literature.

Administrative traditions literature classifies countries into different groups, including Nordic, Westminster, Napoleonic, and Germanic. Additional established categories are Anglo-American, Southern European, Post-Colonial, Latin America, East Asia, Soviet, and Islamic (Cooper, 2021; Peters, 2021). These categories are based on several elements that include among others the relationship between civil servants and politicians as well as recruitment criteria such as educational, professional, or political background and experience.

While there exist many national variations, in a nutshell, in the Nordic and Westminster traditions, norms of merit-based recruitment, SLB's professional identity, and impartial advisory services to the government are more highly valued than in the Napoleonic and Germanic traditions where politicisation (especially of senior appointments) has historically been accepted to a greater degree (Cooper, 2018; Hood & Lodge, 2006; Painter & Peters, 2010; Peters, 2021).

Based on these findings from previous research, it is conceivable that political capacity is more important in the Nordic and Westminster traditions than in Napoleonic and German traditions. This is because in the former systems, SLB and politicians are more distant from each other due to their different perspectives, values, and priorities. In other words, SLB in these systems focus more on their professional values (and accountabilities) and less on political ones. Therefore, political capacity is important to bring the two groups of actors closer together, increase their mutual understanding of each other, and thereby enable constructive relationships and successful policy implementation. Instead, in the latter two systems, we would expect the two types of stakeholders to be 'closer' from the outset with regard to their perspectives and priorities because both are (at least to a certain level) politicised. Table 1 illustrates these assumed connections, which have to be investigated by future research though.

Our case study complements the administrative traditions perspective by shedding light on the omitted factor, namely governments' or politicians' focus. We are aware that having laypersons

TABLE 1 Administrative traditions and the role of political capacity in shaping policy implementation.

Administrative tradition	SLB's focus	Governments'/ politicians' focus	Role of political capacity
Nordic and Westminster	Professional values	Political priorities/ interests	Important role in facilitating constructive cooperation and successful policy implementation
Napoleonic and Germanic	At least certain level of political priorities/interests		Less important as stakeholders are already aligned in at least some political priorities/interests

hold political offices is rather an exception in international comparisons (while in Switzerland, this is the norm with some exceptions). The implication of this is that politicians do not perform their duties full-time and therefore have only limited capacity to delve into the matters of the various policies under their responsibility. As a result, they must particularly rely on the expertise within the administration—in this case, the social services—when it comes to technical questions. This, in turn, leads to a special relationship between the administration and politics. Ladner and Sager (2022, p. 321) argue, for instance, that this 'non-professional politico-administrative system [. . .] can be quite advantageous for the administration since they are better informed and politically more skilful than their political masters'. Our finding that a more systematic consideration of political capacity is central in understanding policy implementation processes is further strengthened by this specificity of the case at hand. Specifically, organisational political capacity appears to be an even more central asset for SLB operating in contexts where their knowledge advantage due to institutional frameworks (such as the professionalisation of politicians) is lower compared to our case. The lack of knowledge of the lay politicians in our case study is beneficial for SLB, and even here our findings show that political capacity is important. If SLB in other countries lack this knowledge advantage over politicians, then political capacity becomes even more relevant for both types of stakeholders, because they have to debate or even negotiate more on an equal footing from the outset and stand up for their respective priorities, values, and interests. Thus, we conclude that our approach of systematically considering policy capacity, mainly political capacity, is relevant and applicable for many countries.

Finally, some limitations have to be mentioned: The original data were collected during a revision of the Social Assistance Act in Bern, resulting in high response rates and willingness to be interviewed. However, more precise questions on policy capacity could have been formulated if we had collected data outside of an external consultancy mandate. Nevertheless, we consider the contribution of this study to be a relevant step in the empirical recording and concretisation of the still largely theoretical construct of policy capacity. In addition, the specific Swiss focus can be considered as a limitation of this study. However, we believe that we were able to demonstrate in the discussion that our approach of systematically investigating the effect of political capacity on public policy implementation at the street level is certainly relevant from the perspective of several public policy research strands and thus beyond the Swiss context. Moreover, existing empirical studies from Israel, Croatia, and Denmark focusing on political involvement in social assistance or closely related social policies show that the Swiss case is comparable with other countries as many context variables in these policy areas show considerable similarities (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2023; Kekez & Henjak, 2019; May & Winter, 2009).

7 | CONCLUSION

This study analyses the relevance of political capacity at the organisational and individual level in the relationship between SLB and politicians in street-level public policy implementation. We apply an abductive approach analysing data from the social assistance policy in the Swiss canton of Bern. Contrary to existing research, we assume that political involvement in street-level public policy implementation may have a 'non-disruptive' or even a positive effect when stakeholders dispose of appropriate political capacity. More specifically, organisational and individual political capacity may reinforce each other and lead to stable, trusting and constructive relationships and exchange between SLB and politicians. Such relationships and exchange in turn increase the mutual understanding of the others' interests. Therefore, we ask: What is the relevance of political capacity for policy implementation? We conducted a survey and semi-structured interviews and applied a mixed method design with a qualitative focus. The findings confirm our assumption. Politicians' institutionalised involvement in the implementation of social assistance on the ground leads to a regular exchange between SLB and politicians (*organisational political capacity*). As a result, SLB and politicians know each other and know how to interact. Most SLB know how to use this contact for their needs, that is to obtain and sustain political support for their policy actions (*individual political capacity*). But also, most politicians consider the exchange to be beneficial because they gain a deeper understanding in social assistance and feel more confident in representing the policy towards the public and the politics. In short, the answer to our research question is: organisational and individual political capacity can reinforce each other and can thus be positively leveraged.

In combining the SLB and the policy capacity literature, we open up the perspective for so far ignored potentially positive effects of politicisation in the SLB scholarship. We are convinced that many more two-way relationships between SLB and politicians are waiting to be explored.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data supporting this study are included within the article and the Supporting Information. Parts of data supporting this study are available on request only or cannot be shared due to ethical, legal, or commercial reasons. Please contact the author at bettina.stauffer@unibe.ch.

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ENDNOTE

[1] The concept of social equity encompasses values such as the equal distribution of public goods, the fair treatment of citizens, and the reduction of social inequalities in society through the provision of public services (Davidovitz & Cohen 2021).

[2] In the case of social assistance, Swiss universities of applied sciences actually offer a course for the lay politicians of the social authorities. However, there is no obligation to attend this course as member of a social authority (see interviewees 1, 4, and 8 in Supporting Information Appendix 2.5).

[3] Authors' translations.

[4] We separately coded statements that mentioned potential risks or negative implications of political involvement in Swiss social assistance. This is to show that there is an actual chance of these 'typical' negative effect postulate in the literature so far, although this case stands for the opposite (see Supporting Information Appendix 2.6).

[5] For example, in the regions of Thun, Oberaargau, and the Bernese Mittelland.

[6] In particular with the Jungfrau region where 23 municipalities are affiliated.

[7] As the data collection was carried out as part of a consultancy mandate for a forthcoming revision of the canton's Social Assistance Act, only some of the survey and interview questions are relevant to the specific questions of this study.

[8] The supervisory task mainly involves dossier checks, where social authorities review a random selection of social assistance dossiers, for example based on a yearly determined topic (e.g. minors, self-employed, marginalised persons) using their own guidelines or a cantonal checklist. Questions or deficiencies are clarified with the responsible SLB, followed by a report to the municipal council and the head of social services for enforcement. However, comprehensive and systematic follow-up checks are often lacking.

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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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