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**Exploring the creation of public values in the work of a public ombuds institution: empirical findings from the Austrian case**

**Abstract**

As the national public ombuds institution, the Austrian Ombudsman Board received over 18,000 individual complaints about perceived maladministration in 2018. It is one of the highest organs of the Republic of Austria and consists of three members who are elected by the National Council. The Ombudsman Board investigates, free of charge, complaints from citizens who feel they have been treated unfairly by an authority. Complaints against federal authorities can relate, for example, to potential injustices or cases of maladministration in relation to childcare allowances, police, discrimination or unequal treatment, but also to asylum procedures. Complaints about provincial and local authorities can, e.g., relate to long-term care services, the youth welfare office or building permits. As a parliamentary ombudsman institution, it acts through influence and recommendations, not through sanctions or legally binding judgments. The ombuds currently employs around 90 people, around half of whom are legal experts who deal with the cases examined. A relative rarity in an international comparison is the fact that the three ombudsmen hold regular consultation days in all nine provinces, giving citizens the opportunity to receive personal advice in their area.

While the literature on public value and public values has for a long time focused on theoretical and conceptual issues, research in this field has only recently seen an increased interest in empirical data. With this paper, we address this lack of analysis and discussion based on empirical research in the field of public values. In our study, we follow the interpretation of the value concept which focuses on the investigation and negotiation of norms that are explicitly or implicitly inscribed in the institutions of the state and their actions (Kernaghan 2003, Bannister & Connolly 2014), and understood as the legal-ethical basis of political and administrative institutions (Isensee 2014). Bozeman's approach (Jørgensen & Bozeman 2007, Bozeman 2015), where public values are conceived as a normative consensus on the relationships between citizens, the state and society that is constantly negotiated and examined, is particularly characteristic of this interpretation, which ties in with earlier value research in administration and the public sector.

In this paper, the Austrian Ombudsman Board serves as a case study to investigate the role of different public values concerning the work of the public ombuds institution. We build on the catalogue or 'inventory' of values identified by Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) to ask which values are important for the specific groups of citizens who address the ombuds. We use the integrated findings from our survey among ombuds users (n=2,074) and from semi-structured interviews with complainants (n=30) as well as ombuds staff (n=47); thereby we make a unique contribution to this field of research by applying the public values inventory to primary empirical data.

We discuss our findings along the seven value sets identified by Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007): Public sector's contribution to society, transformation of interests into decisions, relationship between public administrators and politicians, relationship between public administrators and their environment, intraorganizational aspects of public administration, behavior of public-sector employees und relationship between public administration and the citizens.