

The Politicization Antibody Effect: How Community-Embedded Directors Can Neutralize Library Politicization

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ABSTRACT

National debates over book challenges and culture war politics often frame rural and conservative communities as particularly likely sites of conflict with public libraries. Drawing on constructivist grounded theory interviews with public library directors in the state of Georgia, this article identifies a counterintuitive pattern: In some of these counties, directors report relatively few formal challenges or overt politicization. The article argues that, under specific conditions, these directors function as a “politicization antibody” for their communities: specifically, when a director is deeply embedded in a service area of roughly forty thousand residents or fewer. In those settings, long-standing personal relationships with influential stakeholders can quietly resolve conflicts before they escalate into public controversies. This informal protection has benefits for directors’ job embeddedness and retention, but it also depends heavily on local political alignment and long tenure. Further, it can encourage self-silencing and boundary blurring as directors adapt to the expectations of their political environment. The article contrasts these cases with communities where the antibody effect is absent, including rural systems led by nonlocal or newly appointed directors and larger urban or suburban systems where the number of stakeholders makes this kind of personal mediation infeasible. It concludes by outlining implications for local governance, state-level support, and library advocacy organizations and policy networks that view quiet communities as evidence of safety or stability.

Introduction

Public libraries have become increasingly visible sites of political conflict in the United States, serving as targets of local culture war ire while also experiencing threats to federal funding sources (American Library Association 2026; Benitez et al. 2025; Jensen n.d.; Trump 2025). National reporting and advocacy narratives often frame rural and politically conservative communities as especially vulnerable to organized challenges and legislative interventions. Demographically, many Georgia counties fit that profile: small populations, conservative electorates, and close fiscal ties between county government and the public library. Yet not all such communities experience the same degree of overt conflict. Some appear to remain comparatively calm, reporting few formal challenges and limited public controversy around library services.

This article examines that apparent calm as a substantive phenomenon rather than as an absence of politicization. Drawing on a qualitative grounded theory study of public library directors in Georgia, the analysis identifies a pattern in which some directors in small communities function as a “politicization antibody.” Under particular conditions, these directors’ deep community embeddedness and strong identification with the director role allow them to intercept, deflect, or quietly resolve conflicts before they become public disputes. At the same time, this buffering role is contingent. It depends on local context, scale, and time, and it imposes costs on the individuals who perform it.

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, it introduces the concept of the politicization antibody and describes the forms of community and role embeddedness through which it operates, situating these findings in relation to job embeddedness theory. Second, it considers cases where the antibody fails to emerge, including rural communities with new or nonlocal directors and larger systems where politicization cannot be mediated through personal relationships alone. Third, it discusses implications for directors, boards and appointing authorities, state libraries and systems, and advocacy organizations, with attention to boundary work, succession, and the limits of relying on individual embeddedness as the primary defense against politicization. The goal is not to idealize quiet communities for their lack of overt politicization; rather, it is to make visible the governance work and personal strain that often underlie an apparent absence of conflict.

Drawing on these cases, the article contributes to debates on public sector politicization by (1) conceptualizing the ‘politicization antibody’ as a form of community and role embeddedness; (2) specifying the scale and tenure conditions under which this buffering role emerges; and (3) tracing the governance implications for boards, state agencies, and advocacy organizations that currently depend on embedded directors as informal stabilizers.

Literature Review

Research on politicization¹ in public administration has shown that misalignment between political leaders and career administrators can increase pressure on managers and raise turnover intent. Politicization operates both through the broader political environment and through internal organizational dynamics, reshaping expectations of what counts as competent performance and the implications that has for who stays and who turns over (Ali 2018; Lewis 2003). In local government, relatively small groups of actors (elected officials, organized interest groups, or mobilized users) can exert outsized influence on department heads through targeted scrutiny, media attention, and board-level pressure, even when formal structures remain unchanged. Turnover and retention among public managers thus reflect not only individual preferences but also how their roles are embedded in local political and governance arrangements. This maps closely onto how public library boards and directors experience political pressure.

Within library and information science, recent work and advocacy reports have documented a sharp rise in challenges to library materials and programs, particularly those related to LGBTQ+ users, race, and diversity initiatives. National groups have supplied templates, talking points, and model policies that make it easier to translate broad culture war narratives into specific demands on local boards and administrators (American Library Association

¹ For this study, politicization is defined as volatility introduced into an organization through rapid shifts in regulation, funding, or oversight that stem from changes sought by political leaders that ultimately seek to place the administrative functions of government at the direct control of political elements (Limbocker et al. 2022).

2026; Benitez et al. 2025; Jensen n.d.; Meehan et al. 2023). These challenges frequently target the technocratic dimensions of library work (e.g., collection development policies, reconsideration procedures, and codes of conduct) as much as individual titles. Yet much of this literature focuses on sites of visible conflict: systems experiencing waves of challenges or high-profile legislative interventions. Communities that, on paper, appear vulnerable to politicization but report few formal challenges are often treated as low-risk, with less attention to the informal governance work that may sustain that quiet or to the emotional and political costs borne by directors in doing so.

Many library directors have a low propensity for turnover, and their embeddedness in the role can be a defining factor in their retention. Job embeddedness theory and related turnover research offer tools for understanding why public employees, including library directors, stay within or leave politicized environments. Job embeddedness emphasizes links, fit, and sacrifice as key pull-to-stay forces that tie individuals to organizations and communities (Mitchell et al. 2001). More recent emotional labor scholarship underscores that managers in politicized settings also perform substantial relational and affective work that is rarely captured in formal job descriptions but can contribute to both embeddedness and strain (Gabriel et al. 2023). What remains underexplored, however, is how these forms of community and role embeddedness may function not only as retention mechanisms but also as informal buffers against politicization in communities that otherwise appear demographically at risk. This article addresses that gap by examining how long-tenured, locally rooted directors in small Georgia counties operate as a “politicization antibody” and what opportunities and vulnerabilities accompany that role for local governance and policy design.

Study Context and Methods

This study was originally conducted as doctoral research through Valdosta State University in a dissertation entitled “Retention in Increasingly Politicized Bureaucracies: A Study of Public Library Directors in the State of Georgia.” This was a constructivist grounded theory exploration of individuals employed as public library directors in Georgia between 2016 and 2023. Interviews were conducted between July and November 2024 (with approval from the Valdosta State University IRB) with a semistructured set of questions related to tenure in position, professional history, and views on current public library politicization. All seventy-eight individuals who had been public library directors in the state of Georgia during this period were invited to be interviewed; thirteen interviews were ultimately conducted using a maximum-variation approach that captured a range of geography, system size, and reported levels of politicization.

All interviews were transcribed and anonymized, with each participant receiving a gender-neutral pseudonym. Interviews were coded using an iterative, constant comparison approach consistent with constructivist grounded theory, with particular attention to themes related to politicization, community relationships, and turnover intent (Charmaz 2014). Coding proceeded until theoretical saturation was achieved and no substantially new themes were emerging around politicization, retention, and community relationships; the politicization antibody pattern discussed here was one of several categories generated through that process. While the principal focus of the study was on retention and turnover of public library directors, a corollary finding emerged regarding how some small communities experienced no library politicization despite demographics and political leanings implying that the alternative would be true.

Findings

Antibody Effect

The interviews indicated the existence of a **politicization antibody effect** (hereafter “antibody”). The antibody refers to a pattern in which a long-tenured, community-embedded public library director acts as an informal buffer between the library and its political environment. Through dense local relationships and accumulated trust, these directors intercept, deflect, or quietly resolve potential conflicts before they become visible challenges or public controversies.

The study suggests that the antibody is contingent rather than universal. It was most evident where two conditions aligned: (1) a relatively small service population (below approximately forty thousand individuals) with a limited and knowable set of influential stakeholders (community embeddedness), and (2) a director who was either locally rooted or had accrued at least five years of tenure with low turnover intent² (role embeddedness). In those settings, directors could build and maintain dense relational networks and draw on accumulated trust to address emerging concerns informally. Where either condition was absent, directors described greater exposure to politicization pressures and less ability to intervene in conflicts before they became public.

Community Embeddedness

Community embeddedness in this context refers to an individual’s connectedness and attachment to the social web of their local community as it relates to the concept of relational embeddedness (Gulati and Gargiulo 1999). Directors described a pattern of dense, overlapping relationships in which the library director is firmly embedded in the local social fabric. They see residents at religious gatherings, school events, civic meetings, and local businesses; they participate in festivals and fundraisers; they are known as neighbors and volunteers as much as administrators. For these directors, strong ties and the relative absence of public controversy translated into feeling valued and integral to local civic life. They were sought out for advice by county officials, invited into local planning efforts, and publicly thanked for the library’s contributions. One director in a small county described routine, informal interactions with local officials:

They're friends, you know what I mean, or they have become friends. I'll go up to the county court, I mean, up the county offices. “Hey, [name], how you doing? Come on back.” You know that kind of thing. The mayor brings his . . . or he doesn't as much as he used to, but he used to bring his kids in once a week to the library to check out books. (C. Frost, interview with author, July 29, 2024)

These kinds of interactions not only signal personal familiarity but also provide routine, low-pressure opportunities to surface concerns and resolve minor issues before they escalate.

² Turnover intent is a self-reported measure of the “conscious and deliberate willfulness to leave the organization” (Matz et al. 2014, 234) or one’s current role within a measured time frame (typically 6–24 months), or a measure of the probability of leaving within that period (Sousa-Poza and Henneberger 2004, 116; Tett and Meyer 1993).

In places like this, residents and officials often view controversy as something that happens elsewhere. They are aware of national debates but see their own community as insulated because they personally know the local players. That perception, combined with long-standing relationships, can blunt the urge to escalate concerns into formal complaints.

Role Embeddedness

Longer tenure begets longer tenure; directors who have been in their jobs for a long time are more likely to have lower turnover intent and to remain in their current roles. These individuals have role embeddedness: a strong personal identification with the position itself, layered onto connections with the specific employer and community context. Over time, directors come to see the role as an extension of their own identity and professional narrative, as who they are as much as what they do. As one interview subject put it, “This is my mission in life, and that’s to help others” (R. Blake, interview with author, October 9, 2024). Additionally, familiarity with local procedures, long-refined routines, and accumulated tacit knowledge make the day-to-day work easier to navigate, reducing cognitive strain and uncertainty and making the position feel comparatively manageable, even under challenging external conditions. Changing positions would require rebuilding this ease from the ground up: learning new systems, norms, and relationships, and accepting a temporary loss of competence and status while doing so. Directors described this potential disruption as a significant personal cost, involving not only the practical burdens of job transition but also the loss of a role in which they feel competent, recognized, and at home.

Relationship to Job Embeddedness Theory

Job embeddedness theory (JET) offers a way to connect the low-conflict environments described by some directors with their decisions to remain in positions where they function as politicization antibodies. Rather than focusing solely on individual attitudes such as satisfaction, JET emphasizes how links, fit, and perceived sacrifices tie workers to their organizations and communities (Mitchell et al. 2001). Although JET was developed primarily to explain individual voluntary turnover in organizational settings, its components are useful for understanding how directors weigh staying or leaving in politicized governance environments and what that choice implies for ongoing organizational responses to politicization.

In the cases examined here, community embeddedness maps onto dense local links and a strong sense of fit with the community, while role embeddedness reflects the perceived sacrifice associated with leaving a position that has become central to one’s professional identity. This suggests that embeddedness in politicized environments is not simply a background condition that reduces turnover. In low-conflict, high-trust communities, community and role embeddedness reinforce each other, fostering a sense of being valued that supports long tenure. Where those ties are weak, contested, or overshadowed by hostile local politics, directors are more likely to treat their positions as precarious and to consider exit as a rational response to sustained or anticipated conflict, as the contrasting cases in the next section illustrate.

When Antibodies Fail

The dynamics described above were not present in all communities in the study. Examining cases where the politicization antibody failed to form is essential both for analytic

balance and for clarifying the conditions under which community embeddedness can and cannot buffer public libraries from politicization.

The antibody is not dependent on community characteristics alone. Several directors worked in counties that closely resembled the small communities described earlier: low populations, conservative electorates, and close formal ties between county governance and the library. However, these directors were either relatively new to their positions, not local to the area, or both. They had not yet developed dense relational networks with local power brokers, and they lacked the accumulated history that underpins the perception of being “one of us.” In these settings, the informal pathways that allowed embedded directors to address concerns quietly were largely absent, and conflicts were thus more likely to appear in the formal arena. Complaints were more likely to surface directly in board meetings or through formal channels, and directors reported feeling exposed when controversies arose because they did not yet know which allies they could rely on or how far their informal influence extended.

Alternatively, urban and suburban directors faced a different constraint. Some had substantial tenure or local roots, but the scale and complexity of their environments made intensive personal mediation infeasible. Larger jurisdictions encompassed multiple municipalities, school systems, and community organizations, alongside a wider range of organized interest groups. Directors in these systems could cultivate strong relationships with some stakeholders, but they could not realistically maintain close ties with all significant actors. Politicization pressures were more likely to emerge through public campaigns, media coverage, or coordinated social media efforts that could not be defused through a phone call or hallway conversation. Even when directors were well embedded in particular neighborhoods or networks, that embeddedness did not translate into a systemwide antibody effect.

Across these contrasting cases, the findings reinforce that the antibody depends on both scale and time: a small, knowable stakeholder environment and a director with sufficient tenure to build deep relational capital. New or nonlocal directors have not yet built the ties that could function as an antibody, and urban or suburban directors, regardless of tenure, operate at a scale where those ties cannot encompass the full stakeholder environment. In these contexts, politicization is more likely to manifest as visible conflict (e.g., public challenges, board meeting confrontations), and directors report higher levels of stress and a greater orientation toward potential exit.

Discussion

Boundaries and Self-Silencing

Taken together, these findings suggest that the same embeddedness that enables directors to function as politicization antibodies also imposes specific forms of boundary work and self-silencing. While community and role embeddedness provide significant advantages, they also create pressures and potential costs. Directors must constantly navigate a dual role as both community members and professional leaders. Their personal beliefs may not align with the dominant political or religious views of their community, yet they are expected to manage the library in ways that fit local norms and expectations.

Some directors described consciously setting aside their own views in order to operate effectively within their political environment. One director noted that the local political climate is a key factor in deciding where to work:

I look more at what is happening in my local politics. Who is elected? What are their beliefs? Because I have seen that all it takes is one change there for your entire outlook, your beliefs, and your visions to be challenged. It is our local politics who appoint our library board members. And when that's good, that's good, but when challenges arise there that can be an incredibly stressful and . . . life-changing moment. (B. Humphrey, interview with author, October 15, 2024)

In these environments, directors often feel responsible for maintaining equilibrium between local power holders and the broader professional standards of librarianship. That boundary work can include quiet self-censorship, strategic framing of issues, or deliberate avoidance of certain public statements, all in service of preserving overall support for the library. This balancing act is a form of emotional labor that can have consequences for both work effectiveness and personal health (Gabriel et al. 2023). The same relationships that cushion against overt politicization can also make it difficult for directors to voice dissent or push for changes that they believe are professionally necessary but locally unpopular.

Recognizing the politicization antibody as a distinct pattern also has implications for how directors understand and narrate their own work. Naming the role (being able to say, in effect, “I am functioning as an antibody, and this has costs”) can make invisible labor more legible within local governance conversations and professional networks. It can also provide a basis for boundary-setting and succession planning. Directors who see themselves in this description can begin to ask what supports they require to continue in the role sustainably and what will happen to the library when they retire or leave. Framing these questions explicitly may help shift expectations away from individual sacrifice as the primary defense against politicization and toward more shared, structural forms of support.

It is also important to note that low-conflict communities do not necessarily mean the library has achieved equity for all potential users. In relatively homogeneous communities where directors and key stakeholders share similar social backgrounds and political orientations, embeddedness may dampen overt conflict by leaving some users’ concerns unheard or by discouraging dissent from staff who do not share local norms, particularly those from marginalized communities (e.g., LGBTQ+ teens, racial or ethnic minorities, or recent immigrants). This article focuses on directors’ perspectives; future research that incorporates staff and user voices is needed to assess how the benefits and burdens of the antibody are distributed.

Embeddedness can therefore be seen as both protective and constraining. It supports the library’s stability and shields staff and users from some direct conflict, but it can also place significant emotional and political strain on directors who must continually reconcile their personal and professional commitments with the expectations of local leaders and community members.

Boards and Appointing Authorities

Routine governance decisions (e.g., replacing a director, restructuring a board, altering appointment patterns) can have unanticipated effects on the library's vulnerability to politicization. A board or local authority that moves quickly to refresh leadership at the director or board level may inadvertently remove or weaken the very antibody that has kept controversy at bay.

These dynamics pose a difficult question for boards and appointing authorities: Should they explicitly value deep local embeddedness when hiring and evaluating directors, or does that reliance create its own risks? On one hand, the findings suggest that local roots and long tenure can equip directors with the relationships and tacit knowledge needed to manage conflict effectively and maintain broad-based support for the library. On the other hand, overreliance on a single, highly embedded individual can create a governance vulnerability.

The evolving nature of library boards intensifies this dilemma. Historically, many local boards operated in low-conflict environments, focusing on budgets, facilities, and basic service oversight. Appointments could be made with limited attention to ideological alignment or capacity to navigate politicized disputes. As libraries have become more visible in wider culture war conflicts, board roles have shifted. Trustees are now expected to respond to challenges, interpret legal guidance, and make decisions that carry symbolic and political weight. Based on the patterns observed in this study, appointing authorities who continue to treat board seats as largely apolitical or honorary positions may be unprepared for the governance demands that accompany politicization.

Elected officials face a similar tension. Public libraries typically represent a very small share of local budgets, and it can be tempting for officials to treat them as low-salience policy arenas. The findings suggest that such approaches can be shortsighted. Decisions about director appointments, board membership, and public positioning on library issues can either reinforce existing informal antibodies or dismantle them. A more nuanced understanding from elected officials would recognize both the limited fiscal footprint of libraries and their sometimes disproportionate role in local cultural life.

For boards and appointing authorities, the practical implication is to treat embeddedness as a factor to be recognized and managed, not just celebrated or ignored. This may include deliberate succession planning for highly embedded directors, attention to how board appointment practices affect the library's informal conflict-management capacity, and explicit discussion of the trade-offs involved in prioritizing local rootedness versus bringing in external candidates. It further implies the need for more structured support of newer directors as they build community embeddedness. Governance training that frames politicization as a shared responsibility of boards and elected officials would better align local practice with the evolving political environment.

State Libraries

The politicization antibody also has implications for the work of state libraries. State-level actors are well positioned to develop monitoring, support, and research strategies that are sensitive to local context while still identifying patterns that warrant attention.

From a monitoring and early-warning perspective, state libraries can treat "quiet" and "noisy" counties as signals to be interpreted rather than as simple performance indicators. Low numbers of formal challenges may reflect an effective politicization antibody, but they may also reflect underreporting, informal pressure, or local norms that discourage formal

complaint processes. Conversely, a sudden spike in challenges or director turnover may indicate the erosion of an existing antibody or the introduction of new political actors or issues. Rather than imposing uniform thresholds, state libraries can use a combination of indicators to identify libraries where targeted support might be warranted. Crucially, this monitoring should be informed by local knowledge gathered from regional consultants and system directors.

New or nonlocal directors in small counties may benefit from help building the kinds of relationships that underpin community embeddedness: introductions to county officials, guidance on local political calendars and decision points, and opportunities to learn from peers in similarly situated jurisdictions. Directors in larger urban or suburban systems, by contrast, may need tools for managing politicization at scale where no single individual can function as an antibody for the entire system. State libraries can also provide confidential spaces for directors to discuss boundary work and self-silencing, including the limits of these strategies and when it is appropriate to seek state-level support or intervention. Such efforts are more likely to be effective if they explicitly acknowledge the unevenness of politicization across a state: Some directors will be acting as antibodies in relatively low-conflict environments; others will be working in settings where conflict is overt and continuous; still others may be in transition between the two.

In sum, the role of state libraries is not to attempt replication of the antibody at a larger scale. Rather, it is to recognize where local antibodies are operating; where they are absent or fragile; and how support, training, and research can be aligned with the specific configurations of community and role embeddedness present in different parts of the state.

Advocacy Organizations, National and Local

The politicization antibody has implications beyond local governance for how advocacy organizations and professional networks conceptualize and support nonpoliticized communities. At the national level, advocacy groups can recognize that long-tenured, locally embedded directors in small counties often function as active buffers, not simply as administrators in low-risk environments. In addition to high-visibility campaigns in crisis settings, these organizations can offer low-profile support to antibody directors who deliberately keep conflict off the public stage: confidential strategy consultations, sample talking points for quiet conversations with officials, and legal or policy guidance that can be deployed informally. Centering anonymized antibody narratives alongside more dramatic conflict cases in reports and trainings can also help external stakeholders understand that an absence of formal challenges may reflect sustained, invisible work rather than a genuine absence of politicization.

State-level organizations can use their broader vantage point to scale these insights to different local configurations. Data on director tenure, local origin, challenge patterns, and turnover can be used to anticipate the loss or erosion of antibodies (e.g., pending retirements in libraries with long-tenured directors) and to prioritize transition support and trustee education in those settings.

Finally, individual staff and local allies play a role in making the antibody effect more sustainable. Within libraries, staff can help spread the buffering function by cultivating relationships with users, educators, community leaders, and civic organizations, so that the capacity to defuse emerging conflicts is not located solely in the director's person. Staff and local partners can also act as an early warning system when embedded directors appear strained, face sustained pressure, or signal an intention to leave, quietly surfacing concerns to system

leaders or state-level contacts. In doing so, they help ensure that support and planning occur before a local politicization antibody fails entirely.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that shape the scope of its claims. First, the findings are based on a qualitative design focused on a single US state. The interview-based approach was appropriate for identifying and describing the antibody as an emergent pattern, but it does not support strong causal claims or statistical generalization about all public libraries. State-specific factors may influence how community and role embeddedness operate and how politicization pressures manifest. The antibody described here should therefore be understood as analytically suggestive rather than universally representative.

Second, the communities in which the antibody effect was most visible tended to be small, with relatively homogeneous staff and long employee tenures. These characteristics are themselves part of the embeddedness story, but they also limit the diversity of perspectives captured in the data. Directors in such settings often supervise staff who share similar social backgrounds, political orientations, or long-standing community ties. Larger and more heterogeneous systems, with more frequent staff turnover and more varied internal views, may experience politicization and embeddedness dynamics differently. The present study centers the perspective of directors; it does not systematically include staff-level or user perspectives on how these dynamics are experienced throughout the organization. Accordingly, the governance and policy recommendations offered here should be read as grounded in the specific patterns observed in Georgia rather than as universal prescriptions.

Future research could extend this work in several ways. A multistate qualitative study of public library directors, including both small and large systems across different regions, would help assess whether the antibody appears under similar conditions elsewhere in the United States or whether it is tightly bound to specific institutional and political contexts. Comparative designs that pair interview data with basic descriptive statistics on director tenure, local origin, staff composition, and challenge activity could deepen understanding of how embeddedness, politicization, and turnover interact over time. Finally, incorporating staff and trustee perspectives would illuminate how the burdens and benefits of the antibody effect are distributed within organizations and governance structures, informing more realistic policy and governance designs for libraries under political pressure.

Conclusion

This study has argued that in some small, politically conservative communities, long-tenured and locally embedded public library directors function as a politicization antibody. Where community embeddedness and role embeddedness intersect in specific ways, directors draw on dense local ties and strong identification with their positions to manage potential conflicts informally. Concerns that might escalate into formal challenges elsewhere are instead addressed through conversations with community leaders and longtime users. In these settings, embeddedness stabilizes leadership, protects staff and users from some of the most acute forms of politicization, and contributes to directors' decisions to remain in their roles.

At the same time, the antibody is neither universal nor costless. It depends on both scale and time. New or nonlocal directors in small counties lack the relational capital that

underpins the antibody. Directors in urban and suburban systems cannot feasibly maintain the breadth of personal relationships that would be required to mediate conflict at the system level. Even where the antibody is present, it relies on boundary work and self-silencing that can strain directors' well-being and narrow the perceived options available to them. Embeddedness is thus protective and constraining. It shields libraries from visible politicization while increasing the emotional and political burdens borne by individual directors.

These dynamics have implications for how governance and professional networks respond to politicization. For boards and appointing authorities, embeddedness should be treated as a factor to be managed rather than as an unqualified asset. Succession planning for highly embedded directors, trustee education on politicization, and more deliberate support for new leaders in small counties can help avoid abrupt losses of local antibodies. State libraries and systems can use their broader vantage point to monitor where antibodies are operating or eroding, and to tailor training and technical assistance to different local configurations rather than assuming a single best practice model. Advocacy organizations at the state and national levels can recognize antibody directors as active buffers, offer low-profile support for their work, and help prepare communities for leadership transitions in places where a single individual has long played this role.

Finally, naming the politicization antibody offers directors and their allies a way to describe and interrogate work that is often invisible. It provides language for acknowledging that keeping the peace in a politicized environment is not simply a matter of personal style but rather a form of governance that draws on and reshapes community and role embeddedness. Recognizing this pattern opens space for more realistic expectations about what individual directors can sustain and for broader, shared approaches to supporting public libraries under political pressure. Further research across additional states and organizational contexts can test the boundaries of the antibody effect and explore how its benefits and burdens are distributed within library organizations and their governing structures.

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