



Minding Weber More Than Ever? The Impacts of State Capacity and Bureaucratic Autonomy on Development Goals

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Summary. — State capacity has attracted renewed interest over the last years, notably in the study of violent conflict. Yet, this concept is conceived differently depending on where the interest lies. In this article, we focus on bureaucratic autonomy as a distinct concept and discuss its connection to state capacity in detail. Using panel data over 1990–2010 and a novel indicator of autonomy, we estimate the separate effect of state capacity and bureaucratic autonomy on child mortality and tuberculosis prevalence. The evidence suggests that bureaucratic autonomy has a stronger impact than commonly used measures of state capacity or traditional macroeconomic variables. © 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the ongoing debate over the role of institutions in development, state capacity has emerged as a suggested catalyst of desirable social and economic outcomes. It has been portrayed as a potential source of strength that can fundamentally shape the implementation and final impact of policies, regardless of their ideological content and design. This line of thought has been shaped by the work of scholars from a wide array of disciplines and methodological approaches, seeking to understand both the effects of state capacity as well as its determinants. Unfortunately, as will be argued in greater detail, this literature is difficult to navigate, as the state capacity concept is poorly defined and has been filled with different meanings.¹

One of the key areas of contention and confusion concerns the role of Weberian bureaucratic attributes. These attributes are given central and almost defining roles in some of the research on state capacity, with capacity viewed as a consequence of efficient policy delegation to autonomous and professional bureaucratic bodies, while they receive limited to no attention in other parts of the literature.²

The section that follows contains a historical overview of the different strands of the state capacity literature as well as the different measurements and definitions of the concept, with particular emphasis on the importance given to bureaucratic autonomy. In the third section, we empirically assess the associations between bureaucratic autonomy and state capacity, using several of the most commonly employed measures of state capacity and our novel indicator of bureaucratic autonomy. We show that the link between the two is non-trivial and nonlinear, and that it seems to be dependent on the political context, which justifies the inclusion of both concepts in empirical analyses of the determinants of development goals. The fourth section contains the key empirical contributions of the paper. There, we examine the effects of both state capacity and bureaucratic autonomy on two policy indicators included in the Millennium Development Goals: child mortality rates and tuberculosis prevalence. Using data during 1990–2010, we find that bureaucratic autonomy has a stronger impact on these goals than state capacity, and that bureaucratic autonomy and state capacity are both more important than traditional

macroeconomic variables such as GDP growth. The fifth and final section concludes and points toward open questions that merit further research.

2. STATE CAPACITIES: WHERE DOES THE BUREAUCRACY STAND?

Although the literature on state capacity gained special momentum over the recent years, its theoretical roots date back to the ‘statist’ movement of the seventies and eighties, illustrated by the salient works of Theda Skocpol, Charles Tilly, Peter Evans, Dieter Rueschemeyer, Alfred Stepan, among others. This movement responds to both Marxist and pluralist approaches portraying the state as a political arena colonized by a myriad of societal actors seeking personal gains. Statism, in contrast, argues that under certain conditions the state can credibly be independent from social classes and particularistic interests.

Following the Weberian tradition, this early political sociology literature systematized discussions on state capacity as something intrinsically linked to the quality of public bureaucracies. But as the concept ‘traveled’ to different disciplines and became more popular over time, the procedural and organizational aspects of the state became largely overlooked. Motivated by an interest in outcomes, more recent strands of literature focus on aspects such as the control of violence, the investment climate, and/or countries’ fiscal performance.

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(a) *The early interest in administrative capacity and autonomy*

Several classic political sociology works stress the importance of bureaucracies for state capacity. [Huntington \(1968\)](#), for example, understands the strength of the state as the degree of institutionalization of its power. This institutionalization is determined by the level of adaptability, complexity, autonomy, coherence, and coordination of the political organizations absorbing social transformations (1968, pp. 12–23). In *States and Social Revolutions (1979)*, Skocpol presents a comparative historical account of social revolutions in China, Russia, and France, highlighting the importance of bureaucratic features in determining the opportunities for social change, and the subsequent path of evolution in state capacity. Along similar lines, Evans, Skocpol, and Rueschemeyer's *Bringing the State Back in (1985)* gathers essays that explore the importance of autonomic power in the pursuit of different policy goals, such as sectoral industrial development, the management of economic crises, trade policy, and conflict resolution, among others.

The comprehensive work of [Mann \(1986, 1993\)](#) *The Sources of Social Power* is also an illuminating exploration of the complexity surrounding the power of the state. Here, a distinction is made between despotic and infrastructural power: while the first refers to the state's capacity to impose legislation, the second looks at the actual operational capacity of the state within society, and the extent to which decisions at the political level can be implemented throughout the territory. The notion of infrastructural power permeated throughout the literature and led to numerous debates, in particular geared toward granting more importance to the street-level bureaucracy (see, for example, [Soifer, 2008](#) or [Soifer & vom Hau, 2008](#)).

In *Embedded Autonomy (1995)* Evans analyzes a series of causal mechanisms by which bureaucracies achieve the transformative capacity needed in order to shape structural change and promote industrial growth in newly-industrializing countries (NICs). Evans argues that the range of action governments can take depends on the different kinds of state structures in place. He coined the term 'embedded autonomy', a combination of internal bureaucratic coherence within agencies and external connectedness with industrial sectors, which enables high-quality state intervention. Depending on the level of embedded autonomy, states come to be either predatory, intermediate, or developmental, a classification extensively explored in [Evans \(1989\)](#) and further expanded in discussions on developmental and rentier states (e.g., [Karl, 1997](#); [Kohli, 2004](#)).

Focusing on Latin American countries, [Geddes \(1996\)](#) asks which are the factors that determine politicians' decisions to appoint public managers on the basis of meritocratic principles, in contrast to partisan concerns. She defines state capacity as the implementation power of the state, a task that falls inherently under the bureaucracy. This power relies on the building of insulated public services, which in turn depends on the advancements toward merit-oriented administrative reforms. In order to answer the initial question, she introduces the notion of the politician's dilemma: a president faces a tradeoff between appointing competent state managers who increase the chances of fostering growth and development, and appointing partisan managers to reassure their own support. Which path will be taken depends on a series of institutional and political conditions.

In the field of empirical macrodata, a key contribution was made by [Evans and Rauch \(1999\)](#), who provided a first systematic assessment of the links between bureaucracies and development. These scholars designed and built the Weberian

State Dataset, a dataset made of surveys examining public service features such as meritocratic recruitment, salary arrangements, and career paths in 35 developing (semi-industrialized) countries, with data representing the period 1970–90. Their findings show strong associations between 'Weberianness' and economic growth. Also, [Rauch and Evans \(2000\)](#) find significant associations between bureaucratic 'Weberianness' and state effectiveness, measured with a number of different sources of data.

More recently, the efforts in linking bureaucracies to discussions about state capacity and development have lost much of their initial momentum. While state capacity has acquired universality in its use by development scholars, the study of public service characteristics remains largely idiosyncratic, as it lacks comparability and empirical consensus regarding measurement. Among some notable exceptions, we find the scholarship making use of the Quality of Government survey on public administration, which seeks to measure to which extent administrations are impersonal in the implementation of their policies ([Dahlström, Lapuente, & Teorell, 2010](#), among others); or occasional works on administrative capacity building (e.g., [Christensen & Nielsen, 2010](#)). Other recent scholarship looks at public services across the world in ways unrelated to the concept of state capacity.

(b) *Other notions of state capacity: coercive, fiscal, and legal capacity*

As the concept of state capacity disseminated among different disciplines and debates, the focus was shifted toward a series of outcomes related to the coercive, fiscal, and legal dimensions of capacity.

The importance of the state's coercive capacity to successfully control episodes of violence within its boundaries has been a core topic among recent studies on failed and weak states. Several works have explored the role of state capacity in conflict resolution in these settings. [Fearon and Laitin \(2003\)](#) show that among the factors that facilitate guerrilla warfare and insurgency are low financial, organizational, and political capacities of central governments. Similarly, [DeRouen and Sobek \(2004\)](#) find that state capacity is at the core of civil war outcomes and duration. [Sobek \(2010\)](#) shows that more capable states provide lesser opportunities for rebels to initiate violence, as they are able to channel social demands in a way that limits the possibilities of rebels to achieve collective action. [Braithwaite \(2010\)](#) contends that state capacity affects the probabilities of contagion from neighboring countries. [DeRouen et al. \(2010\)](#), in turn, examine the importance of state capacity in the implementation of 14 peace agreements in Northern Island, Indonesia, Burundi, Mali, and Somalia. They find that state capacity is indeed an important determinant of both the enactment and implementation of peace agreements.

Also, recent economic literature has developed an interest in understanding the incentives leaders face to invest in state capacity. [Acemoglu, Ticchi, and Vindigni \(2006\)](#) use game theory to explain how inefficient states arise and persist. Here, state efficiency involves the abilities of a central authority to monitor bureaucrats, which in turn depends on previous investments in this capacity. [Besley and Persson \(2008, 2009\)](#) do extensive work on the determinants of capacity building as a type of investment under uncertainty. In [Besley and Persson \(2008\)](#) they analyze how self-interested incumbents invest part of today's government revenue in order to build fiscal capacities that secure higher extraction from society in the future. They show theoretically how two types of exogenous

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