Understanding Politics — Chapter 10 Student Practice Pack

States, State Formation and Political Capacity

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About this pack

This pack follows the practice-chapter template: a data exercise and a case analysis. You download the data yourself, so you always use the current release under its provider's terms. Answers are in the Instructor Pack, available to teaching staff from www.oxterpress.com. Student Pack, Chapter 10, version 1.0 (October 2026). © Oxter Press. CC BY-NC 4.0.

Chapter at a glance

Idea	Meaning	Key source
The state	A claim to the monopoly of legitimate force in a territory	Weber (1994)
War and state formation	Rulers bargained for revenue to fight wars	Tilly (1975; 1992); Centeno (2002) for limits
Territory and reach	Low density makes authority costly to project	Herbst (2000)
Despotic and infrastructural power	Acting without consultation versus implementing across society	Mann (1984)
Informal institutions	Shared rules enforced outside official channels	Helmke and Levitsky (2004)
Capacity is task-specific	Pockets of effectiveness within weak administrations	Roll (2014)

Data exercise: measuring capacity

Allow 90 minutes. Choose three countries, including at least one in Africa.

Step 1. Collect. For the latest available year, record:

- tax revenue as a share of GDP, from the World Bank's World Development Indicators or the OECD's Global Revenue Statistics;
- the Worldwide Governance Indicators score for Government Effectiveness, from the World Bank;

- one task-specific indicator of your choice, such as birth-registration completeness or the share of births attended by skilled health staff.

Country	Tax/GDP (%)	WGI Government Effectiveness	Task-specific indicator

Step 2. Explain (300–500 words):

1. Do the three measures rank your countries the same way? If not, why?
2. Which measure records inputs, which processes and which outcomes?
3. Tax/GDP also reflects economic structure. How would you separate that from administrative ability?
4. The WGI records perceptions. Whose perceptions, and what might they miss?

Case analysis: the enforcement chain

Use the chapter's hypothetical river basin (section 10.10). A law bans illegal extraction, yet the activity continues.

Stage	Actor	What could fail?	Inability or unwillingness?	Evidence you would need
Rule-making	Ministry			
Registration	District officials			
Inspection	Inspectors			
Investigation	Police			
Prosecution and sentence	Prosecutors and courts			
Verification	Agencies			

Then recommend two interventions, one addressing capacity and one addressing political protection, and say which failure each targets.

Self-test

1. Weber defines the state through its:
    - A. Constitution
    - B. Successful claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence in a territory
    - C. Welfare provision
    - D. Elections
2. Tilly's summary of European state formation is that:
    - A. Trade made the state
    - B. Religion made the state

- C. Revolution made the state
- D. War made the state, and the state made war

3. Centeno's study of Latin America shows that war:
   - A. Need not build fiscal capacity, especially when financed by borrowing
   - B. Always builds states
   - C. Did not occur
   - D. Created democracy
4. Herbst argues that many African states found authority costly to project because of:
   - A. Religious division
   - B. Too many wars
   - C. Low population density and large territories
   - D. Democratic constraints
5. Mann's infrastructural power is the capacity to:
   - A. Act without consulting society
   - B. Implement decisions throughout society
   - C. Win elections
   - D. Raise armies
6. Informal institutions are:
   - A. Socially shared rules enforced outside officially sanctioned channels
   - B. Illegal organisations
   - C. Unwritten constitutions only
   - D. Private firms
7. Clientelism differs from programmatic politics because benefits:
   - A. Go to everyone
   - B. Are set by law
   - C. Are paid in cash only
   - D. Depend on political support
8. 'Pockets of effectiveness' are:
   - A. Corrupt agencies
   - B. Wealthy regions
   - C. Agencies that perform well within weak administrations
   - D. Private contractors
9. The resource curse argument holds that oil revenue can:
   - A. Weaken demands for accountability by reducing reliance on taxation
   - B. Always strengthen democracy
   - C. Increase tax collection
   - D. Remove the need for a state
10. Scott's 'legibility' refers to:
    - A. Readable laws
    - B. The state's simplification of society into categories it can record and act on
    - C. Literacy rates
    - D. Freedom of information
11. The Worldwide Governance Indicators measure:

- A. Tax revenue
- B. Election results
- C. Perceptions of governance from many sources
- D. Military spending

12. Tax/GDP is an imperfect capacity measure because it:
    - A. Is never published
    - B. Only covers Europe
    - C. Ignores taxes
    - D. Also reflects economic structure
13. Distinguishing inability from unwillingness matters because:
    - A. They require different remedies
    - B. They are the same
    - C. Only inability exists
    - D. Courts decide it
14. Evans's 'embedded autonomy' describes:
    - A. Fully isolated bureaucracies
    - B. A cohesive bureaucracy with dense ties to private actors
    - C. Federalism
    - D. Military rule
15. Klitgaard's heuristic treats corruption as:
    - A. A cultural trait
    - B. Inevitable
    - C. Monopoly plus discretion minus accountability
    - D. A legal category only

Short answers and essays

Short answers: (1) Weber's definition and why 'claim' matters. (2) Tilly's mechanism. (3) Despotic versus infrastructural power. (4) Formal versus informal institutions. (5) Capacity versus legitimacy. (6) Inputs, processes and outcomes. (7) Why capacity is task-specific. (8) Taxation and bargaining. (9) Colonial inheritance without determinism. (10) Coordination failure across agencies.

Essays: (1) Does war build states? (2) Can a state be coercively strong but administratively weak? (3) When do informal institutions improve governance? (4) Does colonial history explain state capacity in Africa? (5) Is state capacity a precondition for democracy? (6) Can capacity be measured?

Glossary

Term	Definition
State	Organisation claiming legitimate force over a territory
State capacity	Ability of public institutions to implement decisions

Term	Definition
Infrastructural power	Capacity to implement throughout society (Mann)
Despotic power	Range of action without negotiation with society (Mann)
Informal institution	Shared rule enforced outside official channels
Clientelism	Benefits contingent on political support
Legibility	Making society readable to administration (Scott)
Resource curse	Effects of resource revenue on accountability