UNDERSTANDING POLITICS · CHAPTER 10

States, State Formation and Political Capacity

Who can make law real?

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OPENING PUZZLE

A law that is not enforced

On paper

Illegal extraction is banned in the river basin.

In practice

Extraction continues; inspections are rare; cases stall.

Ask: is the state unable to enforce, or unwilling?

> *“A state is that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a certain territory.”*

Weber, ‘Politics as a vocation’, in *Political Writings* (1994), pp. 310–311

A claim, not an achievement; ‘legitimate’; territory.

> *“War made the state, and the state made war.”*

Tilly (1975), p. 42

Rulers bargained with taxpayers to fund war, building administration as they went.

LIMITS OF THE EUROPEAN MODEL

Where Tilly’s mechanism breaks down

Latin America

Wars financed by borrowing left weaker fiscal institutions (Centeno, 2002).

Africa

Low density and large territory made authority costly to project (Herbst, 2000).

Colonial rule

Decentralised despotism through customary authorities (Mamdani, 1996).

MANN · TWO KINDS OF POWER

Despotic and infrastructural power

Despotic

What elites can do without negotiating with society.

Infrastructural

The capacity to implement decisions throughout the realm.

A state can be high on one and low on the other.

INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS

Rules outside the rulebook

Definition

Shared rules enforced outside official channels (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004).

Can help

Fill gaps or coordinate where formal rules fail.

Can harm

Clientelism: benefits depend on political support.

MEASURING CAPACITY

Each proxy captures part of the concept

Tax/GDP

Extractive input; also reflects economic structure.

WGI

Perceptions of governance from around 35 sources (World Bank, 2025).

Task outcomes

Birth registration, service coverage: what the state achieves.

Hanson and Sigman (2021) estimate latent capacity from many indicators.

THE ENFORCEMENT CHAIN

Where did the law fail?

Registration and inspection

Do officials know who operates, and can they reach them?

Investigation and prosecution

Are cases built, and do they reach court?

Sanction and verification

Are penalties applied and followed up?

Each stage can fail through inability or protection.

TASK-SPECIFIC CAPACITY

Strong here, weak there

Pockets of effectiveness

High-performing agencies inside weak administrations (Roll, 2014).

Embedded autonomy

Cohesive bureaucracy with ties to private actors (Evans, 1995).

Ask: what makes one agency perform when others do not?

SEMINAR TASK · 25 MINUTES

Inability or unwillingness?

1. Group A argues the basin case is mainly a capacity failure.
2. Group B argues it is mainly political protection.
3. Group C designs evidence that would decide between them.

THIS WEEK’S ESSAY

Does war build states?

Plan

Reconstruct Tilly’s mechanism.

Test

Centeno, Herbst and external revenue.

Judge

Under which conditions does the mechanism hold?

1,500 words maximum · Student Pack: essay questions