

STATE CAPACITY AS POWER: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract: This paper proposes a new conceptualization of state capacity. We argue that most existing definitions and theories of state capacity are too closely tailored to explaining particular outcomes, such as economic growth, which limits the concept's applicability arbitrarily, impeding theory development. The idea behind our conceptualization is that state capacity can be defined more generally as the strength of the causal relationship between the policies that governments adopt and the outcomes they intend to achieve. We show that this definition of state capacity fits into a larger family of concepts. We then develop a theoretical argument about the resources that states deploy when they implement policies – especially financial resources, human capital, and information – and we examine the relationship between these resources and the three main policy instruments that states rely on when they seek to control territories and populations: coercion, economic incentives, and propaganda.

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I. Introduction

State capacity has become a major research topic in the social sciences. A large and growing literature now argues that if we wish to explain long-term political change and enduring differences in economic and political development among countries, we first need to understand how states become able to control their territories, raise revenue, establish effective bureaucracies, and deliver services (e.g., World Bank 1997; Evans and Rauch 1999; Bockstette, Chanda and Putterman 2002; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Sobek 2010; Besley and Persson 2011).

At present, the literature on state capacity suffers, in our view, from three related weaknesses. First of all, the literature on state capacity typically treats the development of states in a particular region (Western Europe) and period (from the sixteenth century to the present) as the explicit or implicit benchmark of high state capacity. This inductive strategy makes sense if we merely wish to identify the most important variation in the development of the state, but it is not sufficient if we wish to build a theory of the origins and effects of state capacity. Second, the literature on state capacity is often concerned with how to explain particular economic, social, and political outcomes, and, relatedly, with the state's ability to perform particular functions, such as raising revenue. At times, this type of reasoning leads to the tautological conclusion that states that achieve those outcomes, and perform those functions, are high-capacity states. Third, and finally, the boundaries of the concept of state capacity are often blurred, resulting in confusion with related concepts such as state autonomy and quality of government.

We argue in this paper that these three weaknesses can be overcome by conceptualizing state capacity as a form of political power and by developing a theoretical argument about the resources that states use to project this power. Although our proposed conceptualization is related to that of Mann (1984), we believe that we contribute considerably to the precision of Mann's general idea of "infrastructural power." Mann (1984) never explicitly defines the concept of power. Not even in the first volume of his magnum opus on the "sources of social power" does Mann (1986, 6) come closer to a definition of power than a brief reference to Weber. By departing from an explicit and precise definition of power and by developing a theoretical argument about the relationship between resources, policy instruments, and power, this

paper constitutes, to the best of our knowledge, a novel contribution to the literature on state capacity.

Our contribution is primarily oriented toward conceptualization. Another topic of mounting concern to social scientists is how state capacity should be measured (Soifer 2008, 2012; Hendrix 2010; Hanson and Sigman 2013; D’Arcy and Nistotskaya 2015; Lee and Zhang 2016). Since conceptualization must precede measurement (Sartori 1970; Adcock and Collier 2001), we will have less to say about measurement in this paper, but we do discuss some of the implications of our argument for the problem of measurement in the concluding section.

The paper is structured as follows. After further elucidating the three problems that in our view mar the current literature on state capacity (section II), we discuss the three building blocks of our argument: power, policy instruments and resources (section III). We then use our definition of state capacity to examine some common conceptual problems in the literatures on state autonomy, power, regimes, sovereignty, and territoriality (section IV). Finally, we bring the pieces together in dynamic model of how power, policy instruments, and resources interact, emphasizing that different policy instruments require different types of state resources to become effective, and making an important distinction between investments in and uses of state capacity (section V). We conclude by discussing some of the most important implications of our argument (section VI).

II. Three Problems in the Literature on State Capacity

The first problem with the existing literature on state capacity, in our view, is that it tends to treat the development of states in a particular *region* (Western Europe) during a particular *period* (from the sixteenth century to the present) as an explicit or implicit benchmark of high state capacity. Francis Fukuyama’s often-cited suggestion (2011, 2014) that what we need to understand is how to “get to Denmark” is one example of this tendency. The problem with this approach is that it encourages us to think teleologically (“How do you get to Denmark?”) and inductively (“What have the Danes been up to?”). We believe that the way forward for the state capacity research agenda is a different one: what we need to do is to reason theoretically about what state capacity is, and what it requires.

The second problem with the literature on state capacity is that it is typically concerned with how to explain why some states achieve particular economic, social, and political *outcomes* by performing specific *functions*. For example, economists are typically interested in the contribution of state capacity to sustained economic growth (Bockstette, Chanda, and Putterman 2002; Besley and Persson 2011), scholars of war and civil war are typically interested in peace and conflict (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Sobek 2010), and scholars of environmental policy are typically interested in natural resource management and emission levels (Schwartz 2003). Since different studies have been concerned with different outcomes, they have also been concerned with different state functions – such as the ability to raise revenue (“fiscal” capacity) or to control territory (“coercive” capacity) – and not with state capacity as such.

The main downside of this approach is that the results risk becoming tautological: if we infer our measures of state capacity from observed outcomes, we cannot use the concept of state to *explain* those outcomes. Another downside of the outcome-by-outcome approach is that only those dimensions of state capacity that contribute to a particular outcome of interest are emphasized in any individual study, which inhibits the development of more general theories. Moreover, as we explain in the concluding section, this piece-by-piece approach tends to understate the importance of what we think is one of the key political developments in the past two hundred years: the widening *range* of government capacities – and, therefore, of government activities – since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

We can illustrate these problems with reference to one of the few attempts to develop a formal theory of state capacity in the existing literature: Besley’s and Persson’s book *Pillars of Prosperity* (2011), and the papers on which it is based. Let us first stress that Besley’s and Persson’s theory is based on a number of insightful ideas that we build on, including the key notion that we need to understand when and why political agents *invest* in state capacity (more about this later). But Besley’s and Persson’s theory remains outcome-oriented and function-specific. The authors distinguish between two forms of “state capacity” (two “broad capabilities that allow the state to take action”): “fiscal” and “legal” capacity. In other words, what Besley and Persson are interested in is the capacity of states to “raise taxes” (fiscal capacity) and “support markets” (legal capacity) (see also Besley and Persson 2010), and what they

wish to understand, ultimately, is if and when states make investments in state capacity that are conducive to economic growth. We believe that this focus is too narrow. For us, as for Besley and Persson, state capacity is about “capabilities that allow the state to take action.” But states have many reasons to “take action”; although promoting growth is one reason, it is not the only one. Moreover, even if we were to think of economic growth as the main objective of increasing state capacity, it remains the case that many of the actions that states take to promote growth are neither about “raising taxes” (fiscal capacity) nor about “providing regulation and legal services” (legal capacity). Education is one example: primary, secondary, and tertiary education are non-legal services that are commonly provided by the state, or by local governments, and there is strong evidence that public education, increasing the stock of human capital, has positive effects on long-run growth.¹

The third problem with the literature on state capacity is that the concept is often poorly distinguished from other, related concepts. In the worst instances, state capacity becomes shorthand for *any* attributes of states that perform some explanatory function by predicting desirable outcomes such as growing incomes. Although the World Bank’s *World Development Report* from 1997 should be credited with bringing the issue of state capacity high on the development agenda, it tended to lapse into this inaccurate conceptual usage by equating low bureaucratic corruption and the adoption of certain state policies with state capacity. But there are other, more subtle examples of the same blurring tendency. Fukuyama (2004, 7), for example, defines state (or institutional) capacity as “the abilities of states to plan and execute policies and to enforce laws cleanly and transparently.” Why cleanly and transparently? This part of Fukuyama’s definition brings to the fore another key element of state development, namely what Rothstein and Teorell (2008) call “quality of government.” In our view, the concept of quality of government is concerned with procedural constraints on how state power is exercised. The concept of state capacity, by contrast, concentrates on the extent to which – and the techniques through which – states ex-

¹ By “legal” capacity, Besley and Persson (2011, 6) mean the provision of “the necessary infrastructure – in terms of courts, educated judges, and registers – to raise private incomes by providing regulation and legal services.” They also discuss, in passing, a third form of state capacity, which is related to “legal” capacity: “Is [the state] capable of raising private-sector productivity via physical services such as road transport or the provision of power?” (6). But this “productive capability” of the state is not examined further the book.

ercise power in the first place. By using the umbrella term “state capacity” to refer to both concepts, Fukuyama (2004) contributes to the problem of conceptual blurring.

In sum, we wish to contribute to a theory of state capacity that does not start from the assumption that political institutions in a particular region, or during a particular period, represent the high point of state capacity development. We also wish to avoid the assumption that the purpose of the theory is to explain how states perform specific functions in order to achieve specific political goals. Instead, our argument is that a more general theory of state capacity needs to account for how state authorities deploy *resources* to use policy *instruments* to effectively exercise *power* over the population that resides in the governed territory.

Since power, policy instruments, and resources are the basic building blocks of our argument, the next step is to provide more precise definitions of those concepts, and, on that basis, to provide a more precise definition of state capacity.

III. State Capacity as Power

At its most general level, the term state capacity refers to the state’s ability to “get things done.” There are several broad definitions in the literature that convey this general meaning: “the ability of state leaders to use the agencies of the state to get people in the society to do what they want them to do” (Migdahl 1988, xiii); “the capacity to implement state-initiated policies” (Geddes 1994, 14); “the degree of control that state agents exercise over persons, activities, and resources within their government’s territorial jurisdiction” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 78); and “the ability of the state to effectively implement its chosen policies” (Soifer 2013, 2 n. 2). The premise of our approach – a premise that is rarely spelled out in other accounts – is that in politics, “getting things done” means, fundamentally, the projection and exercise of *power*. In other words, we are assuming that state capacity is the ability to coerce, cajole, and persuade in order to make members of society conform to laws and directives. As we explain later, what characterizes constitutional and democratic regimes is not that the state’s power to coerce, incentivize, and persuade is *weak*, but that this power is *matched* by the power of society over the state, flowing in the opposite direction.

Following Dahl (1957), we define power in the following manner: “*A* has power over *B* to the extent that he can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do.” In our analysis, *A* is the state (or agents of the state), whereas *B* is society (or members of society).²

We rely on Dahl’s conception of power for a particular reason: it fits neatly with the most widely supported theory of causality in the social sciences today, which makes it especially suitable for our purposes since we wish to conceptualize state capacity in terms of a *causal* relationship between public policies on the one hand and political outcomes on the other. According to this theory of causality – which has been called the “counterfactual theory of causality” (Collins et al. 2004, Woodward 2003) or, alternatively, the “unobserved-outcomes model of causal inference” (Pearl 2000, Morgan and Winship 2007) – the defining feature of a causal process is that if the cause had been absent, the effect would also be absent. It is also a probabilistic theory of causality, treating deterministic relationships (in which an effect always follows from a cause) as a limiting and unusual case, and it is potentially a singular theory of causality, which can, in principle, be applied to discrete, or even unique, events; it does not necessarily invoke claims to universality (or even generality).

The connection to Dahl’s (1957) concept of power should be obvious: Dahl’s concept relies directly on counterfactual claims (“*B* would not otherwise do”), is at least implicitly probabilistic rather than deterministic (“to the extent that”), and involves relationships among a specific combination of actors (in the simplest model, *A* and *B*).

Although it is expressed in relational terms, this concept of power does not rest on the sort of behaviorist empiricism that is criticized by Isaac (1987). Moreover, there is no inherent conflict between this concept of power and the idea that power should be seen as “an enduring capacity to act” (Isaac 1987, 72). Power, as defined

² Dahl’s original formulation, and even more importantly his way of operationalizing this concept by determining whose preferences prevailed in instances of open conflict (Dahl 1961), gave rise to a huge literature on the “faces of power” (see especially Bachrach and Baratz 1970, Lukes 1974, and Gaventa 1979). In our reading, this literature is mainly concerned with how power should be *measured*, and with how the choice of measurement influences the results of empirical studies of the distribution of power in a particular country (the United States). We will therefore have little to say about the problems raised by that literature here (for reviews of the broad similarities between the “three faces”, see Isaac 1987, chapter 1, and Pierson 2015, 125–131).

by Dahl, cannot be directly observed, only *inferred* from instances where it is exercised (which has important implications for our discussion of state capacity below).

This leads us to question the common distinction between “power over” and “power to” (Isaac 1987; Morriss 1987). Essentially, we believe that making “power to” completely distinct from “power over” only makes sense, if ever, in the context of the relationship between humans and nature. In politics, all forms of power are, in some sense, “power over.”

As Hillel Soifer has argued (2008, 239), the concept of power that we rely on also lends itself naturally to assuming intentionality. A state’s capacity to do something is of debatable explanatory value if that state does not in some sense desire or hold a “positive attitude” toward that something (White 1971). We will thus restrict our analysis to *intended* outcomes of state actions. This has some important ramifications. It becomes inherently difficult, for example, to directly compare the level of state capacity across states with vastly different preferences for action. We will return to this problem in our concluding discussion about measurement.

We now turn from power, the first building block of our analysis, to the concept of *policy instruments*. When states try to “get things done” – that is, making members of society to do things that they would not otherwise do in order to implement the policies that the government has adopted – they use one or more policy instruments, or tools, and those instruments come in three basic varieties, which Mann (1984, 193) calls “military,” “economic,” and “ideological” power, and which Bemelmans-Videc et al. (1998) refer to as “sticks” (coercion), “carrots” (economic incentives), and “sermons” (propaganda).

To see the distinction between these three types of policy instruments, imagine that the state would like to make sure that as many citizens as possible do y (pay their taxes, say), although many citizens in fact prefer to do $\sim y$ (evade their taxes). The state can achieve this outcome in three different ways.

The state can punish citizens that do $\sim y$, so that even citizens that would otherwise prefer to do $\sim y$ choose to do y since the benefit of doing y is greater than the benefit of doing $\sim y$ minus the cost of being punished, or in other words, so that

$$u(y) > u(\sim y) - u(\text{punishment}),$$

where u is a utility function. This is the policy instrument that Mann (1984) calls “military power” and that Bemelmans-Videc et al. (1998) call “sticks” (and that Weber calls “violence”).

Alternatively, the state can reward citizens that do y , so that even citizens that would otherwise prefer to do $\sim y$ choose to do y since the benefit of doing y plus the reward makes citizens better off than doing $\sim y$, or, in other words, so that

$$u(y) + u(\text{reward}) > u(\sim y)$$

This is the policy instrument that Mann (1984) calls “economic power” and that Bemelmans-Videc et al. (1998) call “carrots.”

The third option is to use propaganda to change the preferences of the citizens, so that even citizens that would have done $\sim y$ before their preferences changed now choose on their own accord to do y since the (subjective) benefit of doing y becomes greater than the benefit of doing $\sim y$. In formal terms, this means that the utility functions of citizens reluctant to do $\sim y$ change from u to u^* , ensuring that

$$u^*(y) > u^*(\sim y).$$

This is the policy instrument that Mann (1994) calls “ideological power” and that Bemelmans-Videc et al. (1998) call “sermons” (and that Lukes 1974 calls the “third face of power”).³

To sum up the argument so far, we want to think of state capacity as a form of power – the power of agents of the state to get members of society to do things that they would not otherwise do – and we think of policy instruments as the means, or tools, by which states exercise this power. More formally, we think of a state as an organization that implements a vector of policies (bundles of policy instruments), \mathbf{p} ,

³ It is in principle possible to think of other ways for A to make B do y . For example, A can sometimes make it impossible for B to access $\sim y$, removing $\sim y$ from the menu of options that B chooses from. But it should be possible, nevertheless, to sort all such possibilities under the three main headings of coercion, incentives, or propaganda. (The example we just mentioned, for instance, can be seen as a form of coercion; see Moe 2005, 227.)

in order to achieve a vector of outcomes \mathbf{y} , and we think of state capacity as the strength of the causal relationship between \mathbf{p} and \mathbf{y} : when the government of a high-capacity state decides to adopt the policy p in order to achieve the outcome y , it is more (likely to be) successful than the government of a low-capacity state would be, if it adopted the same policy.⁴

Note that the strength of the relationship between \mathbf{p} and \mathbf{y} is likely to vary across policy instruments and outcomes – no state implements all kinds of policies equally effectively, or achieves all outcomes equally effectively. As Fukuyama (2004) has noted, some states are highly effective in some areas, but not in others. The most effective type of state is one that is able to select among a broad range of policies, which it can implement equally well, to attain a broad range of outcomes.

This brings us to the third building block in our analysis: the *resources* that states deploy in order to increase the effect of \mathbf{p} on \mathbf{y} . We denote those resources \mathbf{r} . In other words, the causal relationship between \mathbf{p} and \mathbf{y} – which, again, is our definition of state capacity – is conditioned by \mathbf{r} . In theory, \mathbf{r} represents all the assets that the state can deploy in order to use policy instruments more effectively – or, in other words, all resources that the state controls and can use to improve the way it coerces (“sticks”), bribes (“carrots”), and persuades (“sermons”). In our view, the most important resources that states control are *revenue* (or government income), *human capital* (the government’s workforce), and *information*. We will have more to say about these resources later on, and about how they matter to the development of the modern state.

A high-capacity state, then, is a state that has access to many resources (\mathbf{r}) that can be deployed to increase the strength of the causal relationship between \mathbf{p} and \mathbf{y} . As we discuss in the concluding section, one of the main implications of this argument is that although state capacity as such cannot be observed, since we define state capacity as a causal effect, the resources, \mathbf{r} , *can* be observed. The way forward for the state-capacity research agenda, then, is to *theorize and estimate* the relationships between \mathbf{r} , \mathbf{p} , and \mathbf{y} , and to *measure* \mathbf{r} .

⁴ Using standard notation, we use boldface to denote vectors: \mathbf{p} are all the policies that the state seeks to implement; p is an individual policy.

IV. Conceptual Distinctions

The concept of state capacity that we have proposed can be used to illuminate some common conceptual problems in the literatures on state autonomy, types of state power, regimes, sovereignty, and territoriality.

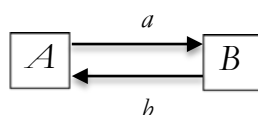
We start with the commonly blurred distinction between state *autonomy* on the one hand and state *capacity* on the other. As Soifer and vom Hau point out in their work on the “infrastructural power” of the state (2008, 200), there is a long-standing, mostly post-Marxist, research program that inquires into “the relative autonomy of the state from societal actors.” According to classical Marxism, the state is merely a superstructure that reflects the underlying economic structure and its patterns of ownership; it is not autonomous from economic elites (such as the bourgeoisie under capitalism). According to a series of influential studies from the 1970s and 1980s that sought to “bring the state back in,” however, the state has autonomous power to set its own priorities (Skocpol 1979, 1985; Evans 1995). The thrust of these state-centric arguments was to show that the state mattered for key societal outcomes such as economic development and public policy. In other words, state autonomy was thought of as a prerequisite for state capacity.

We argue that the analytical categories of autonomy and capacity need to be kept separate. In order to distinguish the two, we would like to draw an analogy with the concept of judicial independence. As the term suggests, judicial independence implies autonomy. Following Ríos-Figueroa and Staton (2014, 107), and in line with the counterfactual concept of power that we rely on, judicial independence can be defined as “a causal relationship between judicial preferences and outcomes” (so that “what judges think sincerely about the record controls the outcomes of their cases”). But judicial independence also requires *influence*, or, in other words, “that there is a causal relationship between how judges think the underlying conflict they are adjudicating should be resolved and how it is resolved in practice.” The autonomy criterion requires that judges are not *controlled*; the influence criterion that they *themselves are in control* (so that their decisions are not “routinely ignored or poorly implemented”).

The state apparatus can be subjected to the same twin criteria: its *autonomy* reflects the extent to which it is not controlled by external forces; its *capacity* reflects the extent to which it controls the outcomes it attempts to achieve. This can be pictured as

a bidirectional causal diagram (see Figure 1). Let the state be A , and let B be some combination of individuals or groups in civil society. State “capacity” then implies a causal arrow pointing from A to B ($a > 0$). State “autonomy,” by contrast, implies the *absence* of a causal arrow point from B to A ($b = 0$).

FIGURE 1. Capacity vs. Autonomy



There is a close correspondence between our conception of state “autonomy” and what Michael Mann (1984) calls the “despotic power” of the state (if the state is autonomous, its despotic power is high; if the state is not autonomous but constrained by social forces, so that $b > 0$, despotic power is low). There is also a close correspondence between the concept of state capacity that we propose and what Mann calls “infrastructural power.” In the words of Soifer and vom Hau (2008, 223), “[t]he state’s despotic power refers to the range of policies that it can order: in Mann’s analogy from *Alice in Wonderland*, the despotic power of the Red Queen refers to her ability to *order* one’s head to be cut off.” Infrastructural power, by contrast, “captures the ability of the Red Queen to hunt down Alice.”

Accordingly (again following Mann 1984), we can at least in theory conceive of autonomous but incapacitated states, just as we can imagine non-autonomous but potent ones. Figure 2 lays out the two-by-two configuration.

FIGURE 2. Four Types of States

		State Capacity:	
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
State Autonomy:	<i>Low</i>	Feudal	Bureaucratic
	<i>High</i>	Patrimonial	Totalitarian

Source: Adapted from Mann 1984, Figure 1 (page 191).

The feudal state was both controlled by external forces *and* held little sway over the lives of its subjects. The patrimonial state was autonomous from its subjects (although controlled by the nobility or landed elites), but still carried relatively little weight in producing societal outcomes.⁵ The bureaucratic state – which is Mann’s term for the type of state in modern capitalist democracies – is highly capable but, not being able to set its own goals, less autonomous. The totalitarian state is both autonomous and powerful.

One of the points of the argument that we are making here is that despotic power and infrastructural power are not different *kinds* of power. Both despotic and infrastructural power are powers in the counterfactual-causal sense defined by Dahl. The difference is in the *direction* of the power relationship, not in the nature of power. In the figure above, despotic power is low when *B* (society) can get *A* (the state) to do something that *A* would not otherwise do; infrastructural power – or state capacity – is high when *A* (the state) can get *B* (society, or, in any event, members of society) to do what *B* would not otherwise do. In other words, the reason that most of us think of infrastructural power as a “nicer” form of power is not that infrastructural power does not involve coercion or other forms of control (“carrots” and “sermons”). The reason is that most of us have a strong preference for political systems with low levels of despotic power.

⁵ Mann (1984) uses the term “imperial,” but we wish to restrict “imperialism” to the outward projection of power (from one state to others).

Another point of the argument that we are making here is that by understanding the organization of political power in terms of the reciprocal relationship described in Figure 1, we can show that a free society – with a democratic, constitutional government – does not necessarily require that infrastructural power or state capacity are constrained (in other words, that a is low); what democratic, constitutional government requires is that the exercise of infrastructural power is always matched and controlled by a flow of power in the other direction ($a \approx b$) (cf. Pettit 2012). Habermas (1996, 150) puts it well: “We can ... interpret the idea of the constitutional state in general as the requirement that the administrative system, which is steered through the power code, be tied to the lawmaking communicative power and kept free of illegitimate interventions of social power (i.e., of the factual strength of privileged interests to assert themselves). Administrative power should not reproduce itself on its own terms but should only be permitted to regenerate from the conversion of communicative power.” Another way of expressing the same idea is this: What turns us from subjects to citizens is not that a is low, but that b is high.

Related to this – and as the references to “democracy” and “totalitarianism” in Figure 2 should make clear – Mann’s notion of “despotic power” and the concept of state autonomy are intimately related to the concept of a political “regime.” Following O’Donnell (2001, 14), we can define a regime as “the patterns, formal or informal and explicit or implicit, that determine the channels of access to principal governmental positions.” Ignoring, for now, the additional complication introduced by the reference to the concept of a “government” (state capacity refers to how *state* power is exercised), a “regime” is primarily defined by who controls the state. In other words, the regime question is a question of state autonomy.⁶

Think about a democratic regime, for example. At its most general level, “rule by the people” must imply that at least a minimal amount of control over the state is exercised by the citizens. In a direct democracy, that control is more or less perfect: what the state “wants” is directly determined by the collective decision of the citizens. In a representative democracy, control over the state is more indirect. As a

⁶ This is not to say that all regime typologies exclusively refer to the pathways determining access to power. Linz (2000) for example defined an authoritarian state also in terms of how power was exercised. Many regime conceptions, moreover, also takes the social identity of the “ruling elite” into account.

minimum, however, representative democracy implies that citizens exercise some amount of control over the personnel occupying key state positions, which may or may not imply control over the actual *policies* that are pursued (Hadenius 1992, 14).

The term “regime,” however, does not need to refer only to the common distinction between democracy and autocracy. The key question to ask is always this: Autonomy from whom? As we argued above, a patrimonial state is not fully autonomous. On the contrary, one of its defining characteristics is that it is captured by economic, religious, or tribal elites, who treat state offices as their personal fiefdoms. Colonialism, as a “regime,” means that a state is controlled by, and hence not autonomous from, another state.

This brings us to the concept of “sovereignty,” a hallmark of theories of international relations (Krasner 1999). The connection between state sovereignty and autonomy should be obvious: a sovereign state is a state that is not being controlled. Yet the common distinction between “internal” and “external” sovereignty complicates the picture. *Internal* sovereignty means “supremacy over all other authorities within that territory and population,” whereas *external* sovereignty denotes “not supremacy but independence of outside authorities” (Bull 1977, cited in Krasner 1999, 47; also see Hinsley 1986, 158). External sovereignty is thus a species of state autonomy: the absence of external control. But internal sovereignty implies capacity, the broadcasting of control domestically.

Juxtaposing the external vs. internal distinction with that between capacity and autonomy produces another two-by-two matrix (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. Two domains of state power.

		Domain:	
		<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>
Dimension of power:	<i>Capacity</i>	Domestic sovereignty	Imperialism
	<i>Autonomy</i>	Regime	Westphalian sovereignty

The capacity of the state to project its power *internally* equates what Krasner (1999, 4) calls “domestic sovereignty” – “the ability of public authorities to exercise effective control within the borders of their own polity.” Domestic sovereignty thus basically coincides with Weber’s (1978 [1921]) minimal definition of a state (we will return to this point later). “Westphalian sovereignty”, on the other hand, “refers to a political organization based on the exclusion of external actors from authority structures within a given territory.”⁷ In the lower-left corner of the figure, state autonomy from control by other forces internal to its territory, we again encounter the question of a “regime” (in the domestic sense of the word). The capacity of a state to project its power over other states and their territories, the upper-right corner, falls broadly within a class of foreign policy goals referred to as “imperialism” (Doyle 1986, 12).

In the modern global order, where maps clearly delineate the borders at which one state’s claim to territory ends and another’s begins, the distinction between “internal” and “external” in this regard is rather crisp. Historically speaking, however, it was not always so. “In many cases,” Bartelson (2014, 259) argues, “the externalization and nationalization of sovereignty were two sides of the same coin. This has arguably turned sovereignty into a composite concept whose internal and external dimensions are difficult to disentangle without a loss of coherence.”

One might thus ask what it is more precisely that makes a power relationship “internal” rather than “external.” Think of the Russo-Japanese territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands, for example. Is the question of control over that territory a question of domestic (internal) or Westphalian (external) sovereignty? In order to argue for the latter, something other than territoriality needs to enter the equation. One could for example say that the concern is “Westphalian” (or external) with reference to the fact that it involves the relationship between two states. That, however, begs the question of what should be counted as a state to begin with.

To provide another example, does the fact that the Islamic State group claims parts of the territory that formally belongs to Syria and Iraq make the control over that territory an issue of “external” or “internal” sovereignty for Iraq or Syria? Again,

⁷ Krasner (1999, 20) is well aware of the fact that this norm of non-intervention in internal affairs had nothing to do historically with the Peace of Westphalia, which has lent its name; “the common terminology is used here because the Westphalian model has so much entered into common usage, even if it is historically inaccurate.”

to argue that it is “external” requires that we treat the Islamic State group as a state. The “internal” vs. “external” distinction, so fundamental for our thinking about international relations, will thus always be relative to a specific definition of the state.⁸

In our view, it is territoriality – or spatial reach – that is the *sine qua non* of that particular organization for exercising control which we call a state. We thus agree with Mann (1984, 198): “Only the state is inherently centralized over a delimited territory over which it has authoritative power. Unlike economic, ideological or military groups in civil society, the state elite’s resources radiate authoritatively outwards from a center but stop at defined territorial boundaries. The state is, indeed, a place – both a central place and a unified territorial reach.”

The state is thus an organization that projects political power *vis-à-vis* a population within a restricted territory. The sharpness and exact limits of these territorial boundaries may vary, and are not themselves the defining characteristic of the state. Also note that, unlike Weber’s (1978 [1921]), this definition does not necessarily imply monopoly of violence, which is a “variable” as Levi (2002, 40) puts it, not an element of a definition. Following Nettl (1968), we argue that state power can, at least in principle, vary independently in different dimensions, where control over the means of violence is only one. But the Weberian view can still be arrived at as a highly plausible empirical hypothesis, stating that coercive power precedes the others.

Defining the state as an *organization* also implies that we do not assume that the state is a unitary actor. Sometimes the state is better viewed as an arena where a range of actors struggle for mastery (Skocpol 1985). The most important relationship that we would need to account for, if we opened up the black box of the “state” is arguably the relationship between the government (the “rulers” or “politicians”) and the bureaucracy (the “state administrators”). There is an important literature on the need to ensure that the bureaucracy is autonomous from the day-to-day decision-making of rulers in the government (see, for example, Dahlström and Lapuente, forthcoming). A more elaborate analysis of state capacity would therefore require a theory of

⁸ Following the Associated Press news agency, we use the term “the Islamic State group”: “The Associated Press refers to it as the Islamic State group – to distinguish it from an internationally recognized state – or IS for short, usually as an adjective before the words group, organization or extremists.” (Associated Press 2015.)

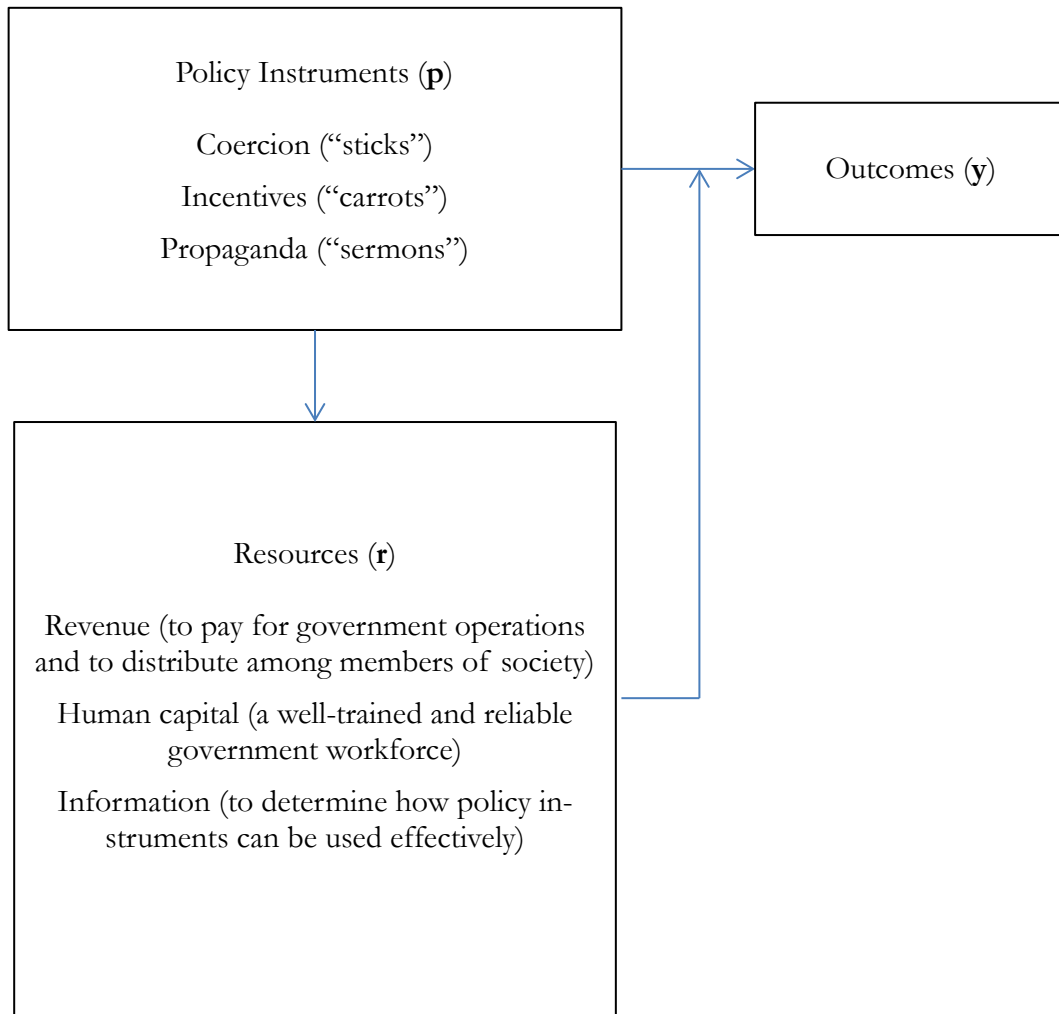
the *tripartite* relationship between the government, the bureaucracy and society (instead of the *binary* relationship described in Figure 1). We leave that for another day, however. In this paper, we do not examine the *intra-state* power relationship between the government and the bureaucracy; we treat the bureaucracy as a central resource that “the state” can employ in order to achieve its goals.

V. Resources, Policy Instruments, and Power: Toward a Theory of State Capacity

We have argued that state capacity should be conceptualized as a form of political power. Specifically, we have defined state capacity as the strength of the causal relationship between policy instruments (**p**) and the intended outcomes of public policies (**y**), and we have suggested that what characterizes a high-capacity state is that it has access to many resources (**r**) that it can deploy to increase the strength of this causal relationship. This argument is summarized in Figure 4.

In addition to illustrating the main ideas that we have explored so far, Figure 4 illustrates the important point that the resources that states use to improve the effectiveness of government policies today (strengthening the causal relationship between **p** and **y** in the present) are the results of policy choices made in the past: resources do not come from nowhere; they need to be accumulated. Following Besley and Persson (2011), we can think of a government as making a choice between using policy instruments to achieve the policy outcomes that the government desires at time t (and to deploy resources to achieve this end) or to invest in *new* resources that can be used at time $t + 1$ to improve the effectiveness of the policies that the government adopts then. As Pierson (2015, 130) argues, “The exercise of authority is not just an exercise of power; it is potentially a way of generating power.” This is an important reason why the development of state capacity tends to be path-dependent: early gains can be reinvested to further improve the capacity to project power later on.

FIGURE 4: Resources, Policy Instruments, and Policy Outcomes



In our view, the three key resources that states can use to increase state capacity (or, in other words, that can be used to increase the strength of the causal relationship between policies and outcomes) are *revenue* (government income), *human capital* (the quality of the government workforce), and *information*.

Revenue (money or equivalent resources) is important since implementing policies is costly. The more financial resources a state controls, the more it can spend (carrots), the more policemen and judges it can hire to enforce the laws (sticks), and the more propaganda it can produce and transmit (sermons). Since this factor is so im-

portant, “fiscal capacity,” the ability to raise revenue, is often taken to be a particularly important dimension of state capacity.

But revenue is not all. Agents of the state need specialized knowledge and procedures to perform their functions well (especially in modern, functionally differentiated states). The human capital embodied in a professionalized bureaucracy is therefore necessary for the operation of the modern state apparatus, putting a premium on administrative institutions in which officials are selected on the basis of education and training and rewarded for loyalty and effectiveness. High-quality administrative institutions cannot be created from scratch in a short period of time, which is why this second factor cannot be reduced to the first factor, revenue: human capital is an asset that states need to accumulate over time.⁹

Just as a firm does not only depend on capital and labor, but also on ideas and specific knowledge, however, a state needs more than revenue and a well-trained workforce: it also needs up-to-date information about the society, the territory, and the population that it governs. Without information, the agents of the state cannot determine how to use policy instruments effectively. This is why social science classics such as James Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* (1998) – a study of how states have made societies “legible” – have emphasized the importance of information-gathering activities and institutions for the development of the modern state (cf. Lee and Zhang 2016; Brambor et al. 2016).

The way forward when developing a more precise theory of state capacity, in our view, is to examine the relationship between the main resources that states use to increase their capacity to implement policies (**r**) and the main types of policy instruments that states rely on (**p**). The sorts of resources that are required to use “carrots” and “sermons” effectively are very different from the sorts of resources that are required to use “sticks” effectively, which tells us something important about the specific nature of power in modern societies. The most basic instrument of power is violence, or coercion (which is why Weber defined the state as an organization that successfully claims monopoly over the legitimate use of force within a given territory), but modern states rarely use large-scale violence (Pinker 2011). We therefore

⁹ Effective policies against corruption, graft, and patronage is another key factor that explains why some bureaucracies work better than others (Acemoglu, Ticchi and Vindigney 2011).

need to explain why states have become able to govern their populations *without* resorting to the open display of force.

To use *sticks* effectively, the state needs to control the means of violence (police forces, prisons, etc.) and, returning to our earlier formalization, it needs to be able to separate those who do y from those who do $\sim y$ (in order to punish the latter). Coercion is the crudest way of exercising state power. It is relatively simple to do, once a state controls the means of violence, but it is also a method that has many limitations. Most importantly, it is not possible to use coercion when the outcome is difficult to observe (when it is difficult to separate those who comply from those who do not comply).

To use *carrots* effectively, the state needs detailed information about the motivations, incomes, and dispositions of individual citizens (it needs to know *how* to incentivize individuals), it needs to have access to policy instruments that can be used to provide incentives (tax-and-transfer systems and services that are sufficiently sophisticated to reward those who do y), and, most importantly, it needs material resources (revenue) that can be distributed. On the other hand, once incentives are structured effectively, it may not be necessary to monitor each individual case (which is necessary to do when using coercion): the best incentive systems are self-sustaining, in the sense that citizens who do y are rewarded *automatically* (in other words, it is not necessary for an agent of the state to make a discrete decision). Using carrots thus requires a more complex set of resources than using sticks, but it is an instrument that is much more flexible than raw coercive power.

To use *sermons* effectively, the state needs to have access to the means of communication and knowledge transfer (including, importantly, the education system), and it needs to have a good model of the population's psychological dispositions (state agents need to know which "buttons to push"). Sermons have the advantage over carrots and sticks that it is an instrument that requires no information at all about which citizens actually do y and which citizens actually do $\sim y$. On the other hand, there are good reasons to believe that it is a very difficult instrument to use, especially in a pluralistic society where the state does not enjoy a monopoly on the means of communication.

We would like to end this section by discussing two very different examples of how the theoretical argument that we have just outlined can be used to analyze important political developments and events.

Our first example is historical. State capacity is often understood, explicitly or implicitly, as a single variable that is strictly increasing in the resources that states have at their disposal. Our argument suggests, however, that the most significant change in state capacity in the world's most developed regions during the past two hundred years is not that the state does *more*, in a quantitative sense – it is that the state does *many different things*. In particular – as we have already mentioned – the late-modern state relies much less on “sticks” than states have historically, and much more on “carrots” and “sermons.” We argue that the great increase in the power resources that states control – both in terms of the volume of their combined resources and the diversity of those resources – has made it possible for the state to use non-coercive means of control more effectively. In a recent paper, d’Arcy and Nistotskaya (2016) argue that states need both “teeth” (coercion, an instrument) and “eyes” (information, a resource). That is absolutely correct – but we would add as an important qualification that high-capacity modern states command such a wide range of resources that they rarely need to bare their teeth at all.

This type of analysis reveals, in our view, what is distinctive about the development of state power in industrial, high-growth societies. “Industrial society,” Gellner argues in *Nations and Nationalism* (2008, 22), “is the only society ever to live by and rely on sustained and perpetual growth, on an expected and continuous improvement. ... Its favored mode of social control is universal Danegeld, buying off social aggression with material enhancement.” Our take on this important point is that the increase in the economic strength of the state in the modern economy, combined the emergence of professional bureaucracies capable of administering tax systems, social insurance systems, and other public programs, has encouraged the widespread use of “carrots” rather than “sticks” as the main method of achieving desired political outcomes.

But that also makes the modern state highly dependent on high levels of economic growth. In hard times, when economic output falls and economic resources become scarcer, the modern state’s “favored mode of social control” falters, which ex-

plains why modern political regimes become unstable during economic crises, particularly at intermediate levels of development, where the government cannot draw on a reserve of accumulated economic resources (Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Przeworski et al 2000).

Our second example is contemporary. The main aim of this paper is to develop concepts and ideas that can support empirical analyses of changes in state capacity over long periods of time. But the same concepts and ideas can be used to analyze political events in our own time.

Consider the rise of the Islamic State group. As Loretta Napoleoni shows in *The Islamist Phoenix* (2014), the Islamic State group – which calls itself a state and controls important parts of the vast territory that it lays claim to – has made great efforts to expand its capacity to *govern*. On November 29, 2015, the *New York Times* reported that the militant Islamist organization is “exacting tolls and traffic tickets; rent for government buildings; utility bills for water and electricity; taxes on income, crops and cattle; and fines for smoking or wearing the wrong clothes.” The Islamic State group has even developed a functionally differentiated bureaucracy, and the revenue that it raises through taxes appears to have exceeded its income from oil smuggling: “As Western and Middle Eastern officials have gained a better understanding of the Islamic State’s finances over the past year,” the *New York Times* reports, “a broad consensus has emerged that its biggest source of cash appears to be the people it rules, and the businesses it controls.” On December 7, 2015, the *Guardian* newspaper provided a summary of a leaked document that describes the Islamic State group’s state-building strategy (a manual called “Principles in the Administration of the Islamic State”). The *Guardian* notes that the organization is focused on “mundane matters such as health, education, commerce, communications and jobs,” and that it is currently training “cadres of administrators.” When the Islamic State group lost ground in 2016, its enemies recapturing one pocket of territory after the other, the *Economist* argued, in an article titled “Islamic Stateless?” published on July 9, that the Islamic State group is now “becoming more like a conventional, stateless, terrorist organization.”

Let us leave aside, for time being, the complicated question of whether the Islamic State group *is* or ever *was* a “state.” What seems clear is that the Islamic State group

managed, at least for a while, to develop some measure of state *capacity*. It did not only have the ability to coerce, but also sought to accumulate the resources required to use other forms of power, involving, among other things, the creation a secure stream of revenue. The question of how states acquire – and lose – these resources is thus not only of historical interest; answering that question is central to understanding important events of our own time.

VI. Conclusion

We have argued in this paper that the main weaknesses and inconsistencies in the existing literature on state capacity can be overcome by conceptualizing state capacity as a form of political power, and by developing a theoretical argument about the resources that are required to project such power.

In our view, this way of theorizing state capacity is clearer than other attempts to analyze this phenomenon in the literature. One distinction that is commonly made, for instance, is that between *coercive*, *extractive* and *administrative* capacity (Soifer 2012; Hanson and Sigman 2013). Coercive capacity typically includes the “Weberian core”: the monopoly of violence within a given territory, which implies domestic/internal “sovereignty.” Extractive capacity is similar to what we have called “fiscal” capacity (the ability to raise revenue). Administrative capacity is somewhat more loosely defined, but could perhaps be thought of as the “productivity” of the state’s personnel. From our perspective, this way of differentiating between different dimensions of state capacity rests on a category mistake: we count “coercive” capacity as a *policy instrument*, “administrative” capacity as a *resource* that states use to improve the effectiveness of policy instruments, and “extractive” capacity as a way of *generating new resources*.

More generally, we believe that many of the existing typologies of capacities fail to differentiate between *means* and *ends*, and we believe that our concept of state capacity as power helps to organize the analysis in more fruitful ways. In fact, existing typologies do not only fail to differentiate between instruments, resources, and capacity – even more damagingly, they fail to differentiate between these phenomena and the *outcomes* that states seek to achieve. We recognize that it is not always simple to maintain this distinction. We also acknowledge that defining state capacity as the state’s ability to achieve its *intended* outcomes makes it inherently difficult to compare the le-

vel of state capacity of, say, North Korea with that of Sweden (the North Korean state clearly wishes to implement policies that are vastly different from those adopted in Sweden). However, these difficulties are empirical and practical rather than conceptual and theoretical (suggesting that they are in principle possible to overcome), and we maintain that the distinction between capacity and outcomes is essential: the concept of state capacity has no clear meaning without it.

When it comes to operationalization and measurement, the main implication of our argument is that state capacity as such cannot be measured, only estimated. State capacity is defined as the strength of the causal relationship between the policies that governments adopt and the (intended) effects of those policies, and by definition, causal relationships cannot be observed. One potential escape from this impasse, however, is to rely on something that *can* be observed: the resources that states deploy to increase the strength of the effect of policies on outcomes – resources such as revenue, human capital, and information. Instead of trying to measure state capacity as such, then, the approach that we advocate is to measure resources that are known to increase state capacity.¹⁰

In future work, we hope to examine the relationship, theoretically and historically, between our concept of state capacity as power and the concept of political *legitimacy*. In this paper, we have analyzed the three main instruments that governments can use to make citizens comply with their policies (coercion, economic incentives, and propaganda), and we have identified the three main types of resources that states need to deploy to use those instruments effectively (financial resources, human capital, and information). We have thus emphasized the importance of the manifest or latent exercise of power.

Following Weber (1978 [1921]), however, many sociologists and political scientists have argued that political authority does not only rely on raw power, but also on legitimacy, which can be defined as an internalized motivation to obey among members of the population. If the government and the state apparatus are seen as legitimate,

¹⁰ For a recent attempt to develop a measure of “information capacity,” see Brambor, Goenaga, Lindvall and Teorell (2016). One needs to be aware, however, that the strategy that we are proposing here is only an indirect strategy, since the possession of resources cannot be equated with the effective *use* of those resources (Soifer and vom Hau 2008, 228).

they will rarely encounter resistance; it will therefore not be necessary to use instruments of power – citizens will comply anyway.

Levi (1988, Chapter 3), emphasizes one dimension of legitimacy, which she calls “quasi-voluntary compliance,” a disposition to comply with authority as long as the ruler can convince the subjects that the policy is “fair” in the sense that all citizens – or at least most of them – can be expected to do their part (53). When the government is able to generate such “quasi-voluntary compliance,” the costs of enforcement decline – as Levi, Saks, and Tyler (2009) put it, “The existence of legitimacy reduces the transaction costs of governing by reducing reliance on coercion and monitoring.” This does not mean that rulers do not need to exercise power; it means that they can do so in a more selective and effective manner: “Quasi-voluntary compliance,” Levi writes, “rests on the effectiveness of sanctions when enough constituents are already cooperating. Rulers can then focus scarce resources on those constituents most likely to be noncompliant” (1988, 54).

The difference between this view of legitimacy and our argument about ideological power is that whereas the exercise of ideological power is a deliberate attempt to change specific preferences and values in citizens in order to cause them to act in accordance with the government’s wishes, legitimacy is a diffuse norm that increases the general likelihood that members act in accordance with the government’s wishes. The effect is the same – the “distance” between what the government wants and what the citizens are disposed to do decreases – but the causes are different.

Even if legitimacy matters to the ability of states to implement government policy, an understanding of state capacity as power, as we have defined it, is still essential. Neither in Weber’s original formulation nor in Levi’s model of compliance is legitimacy expected to be *sufficient* for effective government: for Weber, domination (*Herrschaft*) is a function of both legitimacy and power (*Macht*), and for Levi, quasi-voluntary compliance cannot be maintained unless the state uses its coercive power against those who do not otherwise comply. In other words, what matters is the *combination* of legitimacy and power.

But Levi’s model of procedurally induced legitimacy suggests an interesting relationship between state capacity and society’s control over the state (cf. Figure 1 in our paper), which is also anticipated in Mann (1984): in a modern constitutional

and/or democratic regimes, society's control over the state is strong, which, in Levi's model, increases legitimacy, which in turn reduces the need for the state to use instruments of power broadly, allowing the state to target those instruments more effectively.

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