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Endogenous State Capacity

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Abstract

Canonical studies of the origins of state capacity have focused on macro-historical or structural explanations. I review recent research in historical political economy that showcases the role of politics—agents, their constraints, and their motivations—in the evolution of state capacity. Findings from both developed and developing countries emphasize how elite conflict, principal–agent dilemmas, and ethnic and racial differences have shaped agents' preferences for capacity. These new studies demonstrate that state capacity can be strategically manipulated by political and economic elites, and that the various dimensions of state capacity—extractive, coercive, legal—do not necessarily move together. Refocusing our attention on the political drivers of state capacity has also shed light on why there are such stark subnational variations in the development of state capacity, particularly within large polities like India, China, and the United States. The findings point to the need for more nuanced conceptualization and measurement of state capacity.

INTRODUCTION

The field of state capacity is ambitious and vast. It covers topics related to defining, conceptualizing, and measuring state capacity, as well as theoretical questions on how some states are able to build strong extractive, legal, and coercive capabilities while others are not.[1] A chief reason for political science's preoccupation with state capacity is a well-established consensus that capacity is vital to a range of outcomes, including economic development, peace, human capital, public goods, labor rights, democratic participation, and democracy itself (Acemoglu et al. 2016; Amat & Beramendi 2020; Berliner et al. 2015; Besley & Persson 2011; D'Arcy & Nistotskaya 2017; Dell et al. 2018; Fearon & Laitin 2003; Fukuyama 2011; Huntington 1968; Kasara & Suryanarayan 2015, 2020; Osafo-Kwaako & Robinson 2013). Between 2012 and 2022, ten leading journals in political science alone published 156 articles on state capacity.[2]

State capacity is commonly defined as the ability of a state to collect taxes, enforce law and order, and provide public goods (Besley & Persson 2011, Johnson & Koyama 2017). This article reviews literature on the historical origins of state capacity. Until recently, a few key assumptions have guided our beliefs about the origins of state capacity. The first is that state capacity is inordinately complex. To have strong capacity requires several types of organizational and technical competencies firing at once—information, administration, taxation, policing, and legal prowess. The second is that capacity is hard to build, in part because of the complexity of the endeavor, but also because rulers in the process of building capacity encounter resistance from society—the elites and masses. The third assumption is that once a stock of state capacity emerges, it is relatively stable, and the multiple dimensions of capacity—coercive, extractive, and bureaucratic—usually move in tandem over time.

These perspectives are reflected in the canonical research on the historical origins of state capacity. Scholars have overwhelmingly focused on interstate competition, territorial conflicts, geographic endowments, technology, and colonialism (Besley & Persson 2009, Coatsworth 2008, Mayshar et al. 2017, Skocpol 1979, Sokoloff & Engerman 2000, Stasavage 2011, Tilly 1992). Research has argued that building capacity in the short run is difficult (Slater 2010, Soifer 2013), and that its determinants lie in macro-historical processes that unfold over decades if not centuries. Because we view state capacity as hard to build and slow moving, it is often used as a right-hand-side explanatory variable for various phenomena.

The macro-historical accounts of why capacity building occurs verge on functionalism asserting that "the need for a state necessarily led to its emergence" (see Stasavage 2022). Illustrating this are bellicist theories that argue that war necessitated taxes, so a state emerged to tax. These approaches have tended to view the development of key institutions as the "happy byproducts" of wars (Grzymala-Busse 2023, Tilly 1992). Relegating capacity building to a centuries-long process of exposure to interstate warfare has put key mechanisms and actors—the how, who, and when—into a conceptual black box.

Recent research in historical political economy has charted a new course. Scholars have begun to study the historical development of state capacity as an endogenous and dynamic political

[1]Excellent review pieces have summarized some of these challenges (Berwick & Christia 2018, Cingolani 2013, Dincecco & Wang 2022, Hanson & Sigman 2021, Hendrix 2010).

[2]The articles are listed at **https://tinyurl.com/yck3r8f5**. The *Annual Review of Political Science* has commissioned ten review essays on state capacity, state building, and bureaucracy in the same period. In addition to articles, numerous influential books on state capacity were published between 2012 and 2022. State capacity is also a topic of key interest in economics, economic history, public administration, and sociology (Besley & Persson 2009, 2014; Besley et al. 2022; Johnson & Koyama 2017; Pomeranz & Vila-Belda 2019; Williams 2021).

process shaped by self-interested agents. Recent studies have advanced a research agenda articulated by Boone (2003, p. 12) in the context of state building in postcolonial Africa—to provide an endogenous account of the origins of state institutions that is "grounded in more macro and/or more microscopic analyses of human context and behavior."

The rapidly expanding field of historical political economy on state capacity has made three key contributions to political science. First, building on arguments made by Levi (1989) and Besley & Persson (2009), it has engaged with agent-centric models of the political origins of state capacity (also see Garfias & Sellars 2022). Second, it has put scholarship on the historical origins of state capacity into conversation with research studying state capacity in postcolonial or postauthoritarian democracies, which has long emphasized how intra-elite competition and center–periphery struggles came to shape key institutions (Boone 2003, Evans 1995, Grzymala-Busse 2008, Kohli 2004, Migdal 1988). Finally, it seeks to explain the messy business of how capacity actually gets built and persists, by studying the bureaucratic or informational foundations of the state. This has led to a much greater focus on subnational state capacity in the non-Western world, the role of the bureaucrats and masses in the process, and the cultural, ethnic, and economic factors that could shape capacity.

In the next section of this article, focusing on the canonical bellicist accounts of state capacity, I showcase research that problematizes key macro-historical accounts of state capacity. In the third section, I discuss scholarship on intra-elite conflict in both Western Europe and the developing world, and how these studies illustrate that capacity can be manipulated in the short run. Next, I examine in some detail research on the development of the bureaucratic state in China, which demonstrates the importance of strategy, ideology, and agents—be they rulers, bureaucrats, or the masses. Finally, I discuss studies that have shown the centrality of identity politics—ethnic, racial, and religious differences—to the development of capacity. This promises to be a new area of research.

I end the article by asking what fruit this new turn in the study of state capacity bears. First, focusing specifically on the causal mechanisms that link political factors to historical bureaucratic investments reveals that state capacity does not simply improve and expand over time with each iteration; instead, actors in contexts as different as the United States, China, and India have strategically manipulated capacity to keep it weak. This is not to say that structural conditions such as geography, technology, or war did not matter. Instead, the findings indicate that the strategic behavior of actors is a key moderating variable that can shape institutional development and, by extension, capacity at distinct time periods. Importantly, these results put historical state-capacity endeavors in conversation with scholarship on the political constraints to capacity building in contemporary democracies. Second, by unbundling state capacity we see, contrary to conventional theories, that legal, fiscal, and informational capacities often do not develop in tandem. Actors may selectively strengthen one in order to weaken another, leading to corner solutions in capacity investments, a phenomenon that is more deliberate in late state-building regions of the world. Even in the Western European case, taxation lagged coercive and legal capacities well into the late modern era. Finally, the studies show that we need to more carefully measure the concept of state capacity—as the link between the state's intent and outcomes. This entails examining the evolution of specific components of capacity historically, as well as examining subnational state capacity.

LITIGATING WAR AND STATE CAPACITY

Canonical theories on the origins of state capacity have focused on wars to explain the development of the state and, by extension, its capabilities (Besley & Persson 2009, Hintze 1975, Tilly 1992). As Slantchev & Kravitz (2019) note, bellicist accounts of state building gained traction to explain one central puzzle in European history—violent rebellions against extraction began to decline just as taxes were going up. Scholarship on war and state building has argued that as interstate wars became more expensive, extraction became necessary, leading to taxation and the development of a kind of state that could best wage war and raise taxes (Tilly 1992). The collection of taxes then involved information, monitoring, and coercion, which in turn led to greater bureaucratization, and political institutions as devices to constrain monarchs (North & Weingast 1989). These theories lead to a few empirical expectations. First, war benefitted the survival of large states, a type of entity that could most easily raise both the money and muscle needed to staff armies. Second, war weakened elite resistance to expropriation, and in turn, rulers gained means of coercion, aiding more progressive taxation. Third, the various types of capacities—coercive, legal, extractive—evolved together (Besley & Persson 2011, Hanson & Sigman 2021).

Scholars have pointed to empirical inconsistencies in these expectations. One set of studies shows that even in Western Europe, war did not lead to greater extraction or the emergence of large, bureaucratized states. Karaman & Pamuk (2013) study changes in fiscal capacity of 12 major European states in 1500–1800 and find that while there was a secular rise in taxation, there were also significant differences in the size and timing of these gains. Abramson (2017) shows that up until the eighteenth century, Europe remained highly fragmented. He argues that newly rising socioeconomic groups in European cities, rather than centralized territorial states emerged as the most efficient purveyors of war. Dincecco & Onorato (2016) argue that war in the countryside led to the rise of urbanization in Europe, with cities emerging as safe havens from war. Consequently, neither large states nor, by extension, state capacity emerged simply as a product of war.

Still others have examined the scope conditions under which wars built state capacity. One key strand of work has emphasized the central dilemma in building tax capacity even during times of external conflict—that rulers cannot credibly assure their populations that they will not plunder nor misuse the funds collected for the common good. Dincecco (2011) argues that effective states developed in Europe when two necessary conditions were met—the ability of a ruler to consolidate power and the ability of elites to place checks on the ruler's spending. He links the state capacity literature to a separate body of work that has emphasized the role of political agency in the rise of property rights (North & Weingast 1989), representative assemblies and public borrowing (Stasavage 2011). In these works, secure property rights and representation arose as a check on a predatory ruler's proclivities to raid resources and to spend as they saw fit. Dincecco (2011) argues that the check on monarchs led to more effective fiscal states, as once elites got to have a say in how public monies were spent, they were more willing to enable extraction. Karaman & Pamuk (2013) show that gains in European fiscal capacity were greater in two distinct combinations of economic structure and political regime—states with urban economies and representative assemblies or authoritarian states with rural economies. Stasavage (2010) argues that a key factor shaping both the rise of representative institutions and the subsequent survival of states was the geographic size of polities. Compact size enabled richer communication and led to small states developing not only strong national assemblies but also other institutions of taxation and credit, England being a notable example. Building further on the intuitions developed by scholars of the fiscal-financial-legal nexus, Queralt (2019), using data on war financing in the nineteenth century, shows that wars resulted in stronger states only when they were financed through taxes. When rulers have access to cheap credit, they have few incentives to invest in building up tax administration and power-sharing institutions.

A different problem for the bellicist accounts is that they do not travel beyond the Western European cases to explain state development in Latin America, Africa, or Asia (Centeno 2002, Dincecco & Wang 2022, Herbst 2014). Here, too, scholars have offered more nuance by focusing on some key conditions that link wars to capacity. Centeno (2002) argues that state weakness in Latin America could be the consequence of the "wrong" kind of wars—wars that did not lead to organizational and institutional capacity generation. Schenoni (2021) shows that prior work on state formation in Latin America, primarily that of Centeno (2002), focused on the early twentieth century. Examining the century prior, Schenoni (2021) finds that countries that won the war increased state capacity because winning created a new institutional equilibrium. Even elites who had opposed extraction during the war came to support state-building efforts for fear of being called traitors. His findings on internal consensus of elites echo the arguments made by Slater (2010) in the context of Southeast Asia. He argues that internal disturbances can have an effect similar to war and can unite elites around state building. Elites may coalesce to make a protection pact and invest in state capacity. Sharman (2023), studying wars and state capacity in Africa, and Dincecco & Wang (2022), who focus on China, show that wars' effects on the state have been geographically bounded to areas with low land–labor ratios. In Africa, land was abundant and labor was scarce, which reduced the salience of territorial conquests (Herbst 2014). As a result, despite wars, rebellions, and conflicts between African rulers being relatively common, they did not lead to state capacity. In India, Naseemullah (2022) explains that colonial wars against Mughal successors and competitors, from the Marathas to Mysore, forestalled the emergence of capacious indigenous states, in part because the British had easier access to credit.

Slantchev & Kravitz (2019) note that despite war, growing coercive powers, and enhanced legal capacity, taxes continued to be relatively low across Europe well into the modern era. This suggests that extraction did not necessarily expand with legal or coercive powers. Boucoyannis (2021) shows, using the cases of England and France, that taxation in fact was not a sufficient condition for the rise of representative assemblies. Together, these studies question whether coercive, extractive, and legal capacities developed as a bundle.

While these studies have established the scope conditions, clarified key actors, and highlighted conditions that link war to state capacity, a particularly difficult challenge remains—connecting agents to *intent* in capacity investments. As Boone (2003) asks, in the context of contemporary African state capacity: Does the political economy approach that focuses on externally catalyzed state building overdetermine the causal role of structure and historical institutions and underspecify the extent to which ideologies, local social structures, and class relations constrained top-down state-building efforts and bottom-up proliferation of local institutional arrangements?

POLITICAL ORIGINS OF STATE CAPACITY

The overt emphasis on war as a catalyst to both build capacity and place political constraints on the ruler has simplified some key elements of the process, including the specific nature of elite demands and the economic, geographic, and ethnocultural underpinnings of elite conflict that determine which type of capacity is built. Additionally, even if we can get elites to invest in capacity, that collective commitment needs to take an organizational or institutional form. As (Levi 1989, p. 12) notes, rulers could by stymied by various transaction costs of "measuring, monitoring, creating and enforcing compliance" that arise from active mass resistance to the state's reach into subjects' lives or from factors that weaken the ruler's ability to monitor populations. In this section, I discuss recent historical political economy research that tackles both top-down and bottom-up challenges to capacity building.

Gaining Consensus: Elite Conflict and State Capacity

One set of studies has focused on the political conditions that led to the early adoption of income taxation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Income taxes entailed a profound transformation of the state's informational, bureaucratic, legal, auditing, and coercive abilities in addition to developing agencies dedicated to training bureaucrats.

Mares & Queralt (2015, 2020) probe an empirical oddity raised by Aidt & Jensen (2009)—that many Western countries introduced the income tax when they were still nondemocratic, contradicting theories of democratization that predict that elites expanded the franchise to credibly commit to tax and transfer policies (Acemoglu & Robinson 2000, Boix 2003). Using cross-national data from Western European countries, Mares & Queralt (2015) show that income tax was more likely to emerge in contexts of high land inequality as conservative land owners sought to shift the tax burden from land to industry and simultaneously weaken the political influence of a rising middle class.[3] Using subnational data from Prussia, Mares & Queralt (2020) find that a conservative alliance between industry and landowners led to the introduction of one of the most sophisticated systems of income aggregation and bureaucratic oversight, as well as a breakthrough in taxation technologies (Mares & Queralt 2015).

Beramendi et al. (2019) show that elite conflict, along with the timing of industrialization, influenced the development of fiscal capacity. Using data from both early and late industrializers, they show that in the early era of industrialization, agricultural and capitalist elites emerged as adversaries. For capitalists, fiscal revenues provided capital-enhancing public goods. Lacking other types of tax instruments, they willingly taxed themselves, resulting in greater fiscal capacity. Among late industrializers, capital supported agriculture rather than crowding it out, resulting in greater reliance on trade or consumption taxes. Probing subnational pathways to the evolution of state capacity, Beramendi & Rogers (2022) demonstrate that the timing of industrialization was a key factor in shaping spatial inequalities within a country and investments into state capacity. Among early industrializers, subnational variations in the concentration of wealth were lower. One crucial pathway was elite-led infrastructural investments that enabled integrated markets and reduced spatial inequalities. Another was the ability of the state to extend state building into the periphery. In contrast, spatial inequalities were greater in late industrializers, leading to an underinvestment in fiscal capacity. Using subnational data in Brazil, Pardelli (2019) finds similar evidence—high land inequality led to greater municipal tax revenue raised through indirect taxes, which was then spent on targeted goods for wealthy landholders. Together, these papers show the importance of sectoral competition between economic elites for the development of state capacity (Ansell & Samuels 2010, Lizzeri & Persico 2004, Llavador & Oxoby 2005). In a similar vein, Mazzuca (2021) differentiates between "pioneers" and "late comers" to state formation. Unlike pioneering cases in Western Europe, in Latin America, a different type of "exogenous" force prevailed—international trade. In a trade-led model of state formation, states engaged in market making and coalition making rather than war making. Under trade-led formation, states "were born with strong antibodies against state capacity" (Mazzuca 2021, p. 6) as a deliberate strategy of early elites seeking to use the state as a patronage machine. Mazzuca (2021) provides the economic mechanisms through which externally driven state building can be captured by sectoral or geographically peripheral elites leading to an endogenously engineered weak state.

In Mexico, Garfias (2018) focuses on the development of subnational bureaucratic presence and argues that investments into state capacity depend on the consent of nonruling economic elites, who threaten to seize power if provoked. Governments depend on elite intermediaries to maintain local peace and suppress mass revolts. When centralizing forces seek to undercut local control, intermediaries can selectively weaken policing, which could lead to mass rebellions (Garfias & Sellars 2021b). But when economic elites find themselves on the back foot,

[3] Scheve & Stasavage (2016) note that despite the advent of income taxation, top marginal tax rates remained low in most countries in Europe until franchise extension. Building an income tax regime that involved high top rates required further investments in administrative capacity in later time periods.

rulers can press their momentary advantage and invest in state capacity in order to secure extraction in the future. Garfias (2018) shows that during the Great Depression, negative price shocks resulted in greater land redistribution and greater investments in state capacity. A large municipality that suffered a one-standard-deviation decrease in commodity potential witnessed an increase in government bureaucrats of 18 agents per 1,000 residents. Garfias & Sellars (2021a) show that when Mexico experienced a sudden demographic collapse of indigenous populations due to disease, the decrease in threats of mass rebellions also allowed central elites to expand fiscal capacity.

Mattingly (2017) examines capacity building under colonialism in the Japanese state of Manchuko in Northern China between 1932 and 1945. The Japanese efforts to create a strong state had four components—administrative restructuring, bureaucratic training, infrastructure development in public goods, and the production of raw materials for the Japanese war effort. This is a clear illustration of how capacity building can occur within a short time frame and how the historical development of capable bureaucracies is central to economic development (Evans 1995, Kohli 2004, Wade 1990). These areas continue to have higher wealth and better developmental outcomes in the present day.

Wang (2022) studies the role of kinship networks in either aiding or inhibiting the growth of state capacity. He argues that historically scholars have viewed kinship as an impediment to state building (Fukuyama 2011, Migdal 1988). Using tomb epitaphs from the eleventh century—a period of rapid state building in China—he shows how the effects of kinship on state capacity are shaped by the geographic dispersion of networks. Where networks are concentrated, they limit the reach of the state. Where they are geographically spread out, the state becomes a key means to secure public goods such as justice and security, which aligns the interests of elites to those of state builders. Wang (2022) makes a key contribution to explain how societies move from one equilibrium of nonstate provision to prioritizing capacity investments.

In India, Suryanarayan (2016) finds that the introduction of legislative institutions and limited elections in directly ruled colonial provinces was associated with weaker taxation. Using data on land tax collections around the first franchise expansion in 1920, she finds that districts with greater caste inequality had weaker tax collections and experienced a decrease in the size of the bureaucracy a decade after franchise extension. A key reason for the drop in revenue collection was the decision by newly elected political elites to stop or delay periodic revenue surveys to gauge agricultural productivity as well as lower investments into the revenue bureaucracy. In the American South, Suryanarayan & White (2021) show the decline of county-level bureaucratic and informational capacity as White elites sought to weaken local taxation following the emancipation of African Americans. Importantly, they show that intra-White inequality in contexts of high racial inequality was associated with weaker capacity, as a racial-status threat led to cross-class coalitions among Whites. Jensen et al. (2023) show that in the pre–Civil War era, states with greater slave ownership invested in local taxation in order to invest in public goods that could further their economic interests—notably railroads.

Collectively, the findings from Mexico, China, the United States, and India highlight the importance of focusing on local bureaucratic presence as the site of elite resistance rather than on national-level measures of extraction. By shifting the lens to bureaucratic power, these studies demonstrate how social and economic prerogatives played into regional elite calculations over investments into state capacity in the short run. Additionally, the subnational findings in India, China, and the United States highlight how kinship networks and identity-based competition for public goods, rather than economic inequality per se, shaped elite preferences for state capacity—a theme I return to later in this review. Together, these cases show that capacity has contracted or expanded rapidly in specific time periods, suggesting that the slow-moving macro-historical accounts of capacity development need to contend with intentional moments of state building. In particular, while capacity might be hard to ramp up in the short term, it is easier to erode.

Building Capacity: The Role of Local Actors, Information, and Identity

The previous section highlighted the importance of investigating the historical determinants of bureaucratic capacity. This involves studying the emergence of an organizational apparatus of the state—how it expands its territorial presence, gains subjects' compliance to gathering information, builds administrative layers between center and periphery, and eventually designs and implements specific policy agendas (Mann 1984, Soifer 2008). In Europe, as noted above, Slantchev & Kravitz (2019) find that taxation lagged legal and coercive capacity. They point to the development of an administrative state capable of assessing the wealth of taxpayers rather than war, political constraints, or debt instruments as the key factor in taxation.

Bureaucratic capacity. Sociologically minded scholars of politics have long argued that the bureaucratic state is shaped by the very society that it seeks to govern, and its effectiveness is contingent on the extent to which the state can be simultaneously autonomous and embedded (Evans 1995, Kohli 2004, Migdal 1988). Indicators of bureaucratic capacity typically focus on the competence and ability of bureaucracies and how effectively they score on dimensions of autonomy, meritocratic staffing, and service delivery (Evans & Rauch 1999, Hendrix 2010, Knack 2001). Soifer (2008) notes that scholarship tends to conflate three distinct aspects of Mann's (1984) formulation of infrastructural capacity—the capabilities of a centralized state, its territorial reach, and its effects on society. Importantly, while the first aspect of this definition speaks to centralized states, the size and contours of that state depend on the struggles between central and subnational actors—elites, masses, and bureaucrats.

In a terrific review of the field, Williams (2021) notes that when studies veer from the macrohistorical origins into contemporary explanations for bureaucratic capacity, they conflate capacity with performance, which is contingent on politics and policies. He argues that when we conceive organizations as possessing capacities, we forget that "organizations are collective actors," and we should explicitly engage with the incentives that shape these actors under different principals. But if politics is key to understanding performance in the present-day, then contingency, politics, and the tussle between agents and principals could hold valuable clues to explaining the historical development of local bureaucratic capacity.

Recent research on the historical roots of bureaucratic capacity in China offers valuable insights. An enduring and defining feature of Chinese political history has been the presence of a bureaucracy since the third century BCE. Chinese bureaucrats were appointed using an examination system, which was introduced under the Sui dynasty (581–618 AD), expanded during the Tang (618–906 AD), and became the principal route for recruiting officials under the Song dynasty (960–1279 AD). Through examinations, bureaucrats were hired at the capital, provincial, or county level to be appointed to posts for 3–5 years on a rotation basis, and were precluded from serving in their home county. Successive dynasties continued to use and refine the system they inherited. Yet, although China developed a vast, well-trained bureaucracy and a centralized tax system a full two millennia before Europe (Dincecco & Wang 2018), research has shown that taxes in China began to lag Europe's by the early modern era (Ma 2011, Ma & Rubin 2019, Sng 2014).

The Chinese case offers three key departures from the European case. First, it is possible to build the very apparatus needed for extraction without actual extraction. Second, in the quest to build a centralized bureaucracy, rulers faced challenges not only from elites trying to hold an Imperial court in check but also from local-level actors (provincial elite networks, peasants, and bureaucrats) that shaped the character and quality of the bureaucracy. Third, the Chinese case offers a startling example of a reversal of bureaucratic capacity.

Probing the determinants of the early development of a bureaucracy in China, Stasavage (2021) argues that the evolution of writing technology in the Shang Dynasty was a key factor in enabling the rise of an administrative structure. Using data on bureaucratic presence from 186 societies and geographic distances from Sumeria, Shang China, and Olmec Mesoamerica as an instrument for the advent of writing technology, he finds that societies that adopted writing systems were more likely to develop state presence. This finding has implications for what we believe comes first—the functional need for state capacity or an endogenously developed technology that propels the ability of a state to put down roots in the first place. While successive Chinese dynasties expanded the bureaucracy, its actual effectiveness varied considerably.

One particular period in Chinese history is worth probing deeper. Up until the early 1600s, tax collections in China overwhelmed or at least tracked the collections of the English state. The Ming empire raised about 5.5% of GDP in revenues in 1423, when the English king raised less than a third of that level (Stasavage 2020). But by the middle of the nineteenth century, Chinese tax collections dropped to 1–2% of GDP, in contrast to 15–20% of GDP in Tokugawa and early Meiji Japan and 10–15% in eighteenth-century England. Qing taxation was unusually light (Zhang 2023). Historians have offered several explanations.

First, Sng (2014), focusing on late Imperial China (c. 1650–1850), argues that China's large size impeded the ability of the ruler to control bureaucrats. Second, Ma & Rubin (2019) argue that the Chinese empire created a set of conditions that weakened Imperial incentives to engage in extraction. The Qing empire focused on territorial expansion by co-opting enemy territories, thereby reducing the need to prepare for sudden external attacks. Unlike in Europe, in China state development lacked both external threats and European-style institutional constraints, which led to weak investments into a tax system where the ruler paid bureaucrats good wages in return for tax revenues. Third, the Qing state simply relinquished everyday governance of tax collections, security, and even legal matters to local communities; it showed little will to intervene in subcounty matters or invest in resources that could do so (Zhang 2023). Both Ma & Rubin (2019) and Sng (2014) allude to principal–agent problems where excessive exploitation came not from a despot but from local officials who enjoyed tremendous discretion. China's low tax capacity could be understood as an equilibrium where, given a pre-existing bureaucracy, the ruler was unwilling to incite a tax rebellion and also unable to keep the corruption of local officials in check.

However, Chinese state builders have always faced the challenge of a large territory; size has been a relatively static factor through Chinese history, despite fluctuations across dynasties. A key episode highlights how the drop in taxation was a strategic choice made by Qing rulers. In 1712, after a successful empire-wide land revenue survey, the Kangxi emperor called off any future assessment surveys, as he was satisfied with the revenue base that year. As no further surveys were conducted, land tax rates remained frozen at their 1711 level, leading to a rapid decline in fiscal revenue and a stagnation of the administrative bureaucracy. Similar to India in the early twentieth century or the US South in the nineteenth, a relatively high-capacity state simply gave up its historical bureaucratic advantage in collecting information about economic surplus.

Zhang (2023) argues that the Qing state's deliberate retreat from fiscal capacity was a manifestation of an "empirical ideology" guiding its approach to taxation. Analyzing elite debates and documents from that era, he notes that elites of the Qing court adopted a pragmatic/utilitarian view that "increasing agricultural taxes will lead to severe economic hardship among the general population, and therefore lead to social unrest and rebellion" (Zhang 2023, p. 17). This belief was partly based on what they thought were the failures of the Ming era—that taxation had disastrous effects on subsistence agriculture. Even when empirical reality began to diverge in the eighteenth century and agricultural surplus grew, the ideology held sway over fiscal capacity investments and policy, resulting in even worse fiscal outcomes in the nineteenth century. He (2013) shows that despite experiments in public finance in the nineteenth century, the Chinese state failed to transform into a modern fiscal state in part due to the continued reliance on decentralized governance arising from a decaying administrative state.

The Chinese bureaucracy was also often a pawn in the battle between the emperor and regional elites, who did not want to expose themselves to centralized control. Local rulers sought to strengthen their control of regional strongholds and make their role critical to containing peasant rebellions and enabling agricultural growth. Chen et al. (2021) show how state builders used the bureaucracy itself to weaken elite resistance. Rulers compensated losers by giving them prestigious and consequential positions within the expanding bureaucracy. Using geocoded data on the career histories of elites gathered from tombstones in the late fifth century, the authors show that aristocrats who controlled autonomous strongholds were disproportionately recruited into the bureaucracy. These positions carried direct benefits and helped align their interests with those of the ruler. These strategies of appeasement radically transformed the reach of the Chinese state, allowing it to impose taxes and military service on peasants who until then had been under the control of local elites.

Another set of studies shows how internal conflict shaped the relationship between the Imperial crown and local elites with implications for the bureaucracy. Bai et al. (2023) study war mobilization efforts to suppress the Taiping Rebellion in nineteenth-century China. The rebellion, which lasted 14 years (1850–1864), was one of the deadliest in human history, killing at least 20 million. Bai et al. (2023) study recruitment and mobilization for the Hunan army, which, under the leadership of scholar-general Zeng Guofan, finally managed to suppress the rebellion. Using records on China's civil service examination system and networks of marriage, kinship, and friendship, the article shows that counties with more dense connections to Zeng experienced more casualties in the war. These same counties also saw the rise of new provincial and national-level elites. In a notable twist to Tilly's (1992) famous aphorism "war made the state, and the state made war," they show that elites made war, and war made elites.

Peng (2022) studies seventeenth-century China and argues that rulers strategically used patronage appointments to secure loyalty and gain trusted bureaucrats in times of conflict. She shows that the Imperial court was more likely to make patronage appointments during times of internal and external crises in order to mitigate risk. Conversely, the court relied on meritocratically chosen bureaucrats during times of peace. In this way, wars possibly weakened the meritocratic state.

Kim (2021) tackles more directly endogenous sources of bureaucratic change. Studying opium taxes in Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth century, she documents a truly remarkable episode of a state withdrawing from an easy and lucrative source of indirect taxation due to the intentional yet quotidian practices of seemingly powerless bureaucrats. Using rich archival data, she demonstrates the key role of local colonial administrators not only in delegitimizing opium taxes but also in the very construction and implementation of opium prohibition policies. In this way, the moral priorities of bureaucrats within the state came to be a force in crafting the state's extractive priorities. Naseemullah (2022) argues that British agents of the colonial state were variously motivated by greed, frugality, or fear, which shaped their governance strategies over indigenous elites and non-elite communities, leading to variations in local state capacity and state–society relations in Colonial India.

Beyond local bureaucrats, peasant activism also shaped extractive capacity (Dincecco & Wang 2018, Slantchev & Kravitz 2019). Peasant revolts, while frequent in both Asia and Europe, were usually not meant to cause a revolution nor were they in pursuit of greater redistribution, but rather were collective efforts to protest taxation. In China, these took the form of rebellions by regional elites against the emperor and also mass revolts. In a historical sample of conflicts in China, Dincecco & Wang (2018) show that 20% of the revolts were from elites and 30% from peasants. Beyond Europe, Steele et al. (2017) find that right before the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the ability of the state to tax varied considerably across the 300 domains across Japan. Here, too, the authors point to collective mobilization by peasants and their large-scale flight from their villages, rather than wars, as key constraints on taxation. Areas with more rebellions had lower tax rates levied by their samurai rulers.

Information capacity. One reason for the persistence of weak taxation and frequent rebellion is the inability of rulers to gather accurate data about their societies. A key idea that emerged from Scott's (1998) seminal book *Seeing Like a State* was the concept of legibility—the ability to accurately "see" populations in order to make revenue extraction more efficient. Slantchev & Kravitz (2019) show in Europe that the development of an administrative state removed any informational advantage possessed by subjects and led to early modern European princes gaining taxation as leverage, which reduced their subjects' willingness to rebel. These data can be as basic as counting populations and groups, or they could involve more complex information gathering such as measuring and ordering the sources of income and wealth of citizens.

Scholars have operationalized informational capacity in various ways. A key innovation in informational capacity was the invention of land cadastral maps. The cadasters stored information about the boundaries of a plot, who owned it, and how much it was worth. While the cadaster enabled people to register their property rights, it also made it much easier for the state to tax the asset, often based on its productivity. By drastically reducing information asymmetry between rulers and subjects over property ownership, cadasters have been recognized as a transformative institution—one that was highly controversial, as both rulers and subjects were aware that the collected information could be used for the benefit of some and the loss of others (Christensen & Garfias 2018, Kain & Baigent 1992). D'Arcy & Nistotskaya (2017) document the quality and longevity of state-administered cadasters from the first century AD to the date of democratization in 78 countries and find that countries where cadasters preceded democracy had better public goods outcomes. Consequently, the origins of land cadasters have become an object of particular interest to scholars in contexts as different as Napoleonic France (Degrave 2022), twentieth-century Colombia (Sánchez-Talanquer 2020), and contemporary Brazil (Christensen & Garfias 2018).

Sánchez-Talanquer (2020) studies the expansion of cadastral records at the municipal level in Colombia and finds that these records exploded exactly when conservative elites started to fear land reforms. While we would expect elites to hide information on asset ownership from the state, elites became more willing to register their land in order to gain property rights, even if it exposed them to taxation. However, elites also actively manipulated land evaluations. Sánchez-Talanquer's (2020, p. 69) work highlights how the correlation between actual taxation and information might not always be straightforward: "legibility risks taxation but enables property rights."

Degrave (2022) studies the advent of the Napoleonic cadaster—a top-down effort by the French state to increase fairness in direct taxation. Using data on the timing of the introduction of cadasters in 2,600 cantons, she finds that the rollout of the cadaster in 1800–1821 reduced coercive taxation. She attributes this reduction in coercion to the state's ability to control communities rather than citizens' support for the cadastral reforms.

Others have focused on the introduction of a national register or a census whose basic function was to count a population. Soifer (2013) uses the presence of a national census as a key measure of capacity. Brambor et al. (2020) measure informational capacity as an index that includes the implementation of a regular census, national population registers, statistical yearbooks, and a national statistical agency. Beyond population demographics, several recent studies (notably Charnysh 2022, Lee & Zhang 2017, and Suryanarayan & White 2021) have studied the accuracy of one key piece of information in a census—the age of respondents. They model the extent of "age heaping," in which census enumerators or respondents guess ages, resulting in a bunching of ages around numbers ending with 0 or 5. Variations in age heaping give us clues about whether states can collect basic data with implications for both the quality of the state's bureaucratic capacity and the strength of state–society relations. As discussed in the next section, informational quality is shaped by the ethnocultural diversity of a society.

Identity and state capacity. Most studies that examine the political origins of state capacity have emphasized the economic motivations of actors. We know much less about the ways in which ethnicity, religion, or culture shape elite conflict and institutional development. This is surprising because a rich body of scholarship has shown that ethnic politics is associated with weaker state provision of goods (Alesina et al. 1999, Baldwin & Huber 2010, Singh & Vom Hau 2016), in part because of historically weaker state capacity. In the postcolonial context, scholars have argued that when key resources such as jobs, education, and public goods are scarce and primarily provided through the state, the salience of ethnic identity increases in political and economic life (Bates 1983, Chandra 2007). New work seeks to understand how ethnocultural differences shaped the development of state institutions, in particular, state capacity. The studies below show that identity can both impede and aid institutional development and information quality.

For example, while research on information capacity has long noted that both the ability to collect information and the quality of what is collected depend on gaining the trust of citizens, and the employment of bureaucrats who have local knowledge (Lee & Zhang 2017, Scott 1998), recent research has pointed to one key mechanism that shapes that link. Rulers can engage in information gathering more easily when populations are legible to bureaucrats. Magiya (2022) studies subnational census quality in the late Ottoman Empire and finds that administrative units were more likely to complete a census when they were ethnically homogeneous. In Imperial Russia, state officials relied on intermediaries to gain information about ethnic outgroups instead of investing in bureaucratic capacity directly (Charnysh 2022). Charnysh finds lower levels of voluntary compliance with state information-gathering efforts among non-coethnics. This had terrible consequences for the availability of public support during times of crises like famines, when Russian Orthodox officials delayed assistance to districts with high Muslim populations because of a lack of high-quality information about those communes. In the American South, Suryanarayan & White (2021) show that census collectors collected worse data from White populations in enumerator districts with greater proportions of African Americans after Reconstruction's demise in order to limit state redistribution. The US findings along with those of Charnysh (2022) show the importance of citizen compliance, which can vary by ethnic group, resulting in weaker legibility and taxability and ultimately lowering the quality of public goods.

Saleh & Tirole (2021) show that rulers are not always revenue maximizing, and they can be motivated by religious identity. They study taxation after the Arab conquest of Christian Egypt. The Arab caliphate levied a poll tax on non-Muslims that would be eliminated upon conversion. However, when those revenues began declining, as large numbers of Christians converted to Islam, pious rulers called for even more conversions. They prioritized identity concerns even if they lost revenues.

Grzymala-Busse (2023) focuses on European state formation in the medieval era and argues that the church's religious ideology and institutions played a key role in fragmenting the territorial authority of states it mistrusted—in particular the Holy Roman Empire. Her findings, along with those of Møller & Doucette (2022), suggest that the church led the way to institutional innovations. The church's investments in human capital—literate clerks, documentation and archival expertise, and administration—could serve as a template for information bureaucracies (tracking births, deaths, and property), taxation, and legal frameworks, or could block those innovations in other places. In this way, the building blocks of state capacity emerged prior to the pressures of war and could be adopted and replicated by interested actors during times of external aggression in later eras. The spread of these institutions carried the legitimacy of the church's doctrine, which gave them added weight. Conversely, in the case of Byzantine Europe, the church and religious identity continued to play an outsized role well into the early modern era, crowding out other institutional innovations.

Blaydes & Paik (2016) focus on another mechanism through which religion aided rulers to build capacity—the exit of elites from cities across Europe to fight the religious crusades. As elites left to fight religious wars, this reduced elite resistance and made it easier for rulers to extract. The authors show that places with greater numbers of religious fighters experienced greater stability and taxation through crusade tithes, one of the first types of per-capita taxation in Europe. Charnysh (2019) studies a different type of exit—mass displacement after war—and how this ruptures communal/ethnic ties and mixes people from different places of origin together, which in turn weakens resistance to state building and increases demand for state presence.

Identity can also explain who becomes a bureaucrat and the ideology that drives those bureaucrats. Writing on seventeenth-century China, Peng (2022) shows that rulers made trade-offs between ethnic loyalty and competence, and chose coethnics in perilous times when loyalty was more prized as a way to secure information. In Nigeria, Johnson-Kanu (2021) demonstrates that some ethnic groups were overrepresented in the colonial bureaucracy (an advantage that persisted for over a century) due to coethnic hiring practices because some ethnic groups had an early advantage in English-language education. In India, Suryanarayan (2016) finds that upper-caste Brahmins were overrepresented in the British bureaucracy, despite being a small share of the overall population, which in turn shaped their preferences for bureaucratic capacity after franchise expansion.

IMPLICATIONS

Political scientists have long grappled with the challenges of building state capacity after democratization (Fukuyama 2011, Huntington 1968). Scholars working in a variety of democratic contexts have studied how political elites deliberately engineer capacity. Grzymala-Busse (2008), studying Eastern European democratic transition, argues that political agents may substitute party organization for the state and take over key functions. In Brazil, Hollenbach & Silva (2019) find that wealthy elites in high-inequality municipalities deliberately corrupt bureaucrats and weaken fiscal capacity when citizens seek higher taxes. Also in Brazil, politicians may selectively seek not to invest in land cadasters because they fear an electoral backlash from property tax–paying constituents (Christensen & Garfias 2018). In Uganda, Martin (2023) finds that rent-seeking politicians strategically underinvest in state capacity because they do not want to be held accountable by taxpayers. Her argument that citizen accountability poses a threat to elected officials provides one explanation for why it is hard to build state capacity under a democracy (Fukuyama 2011, Huntington 1968). Using evidence from Mexico in the 1960s, Fergusson et al. (2022) argue that incumbent political parties who hold an advantage in clientelism may purposefully keep bureaucratic capacity weak in competitive contexts in order to weaken the opposition. Prichard (2018), using cross-national electoral data from developing countries, shows that taxpayers and bureaucrats can use noncompliance as a form of resistance to put pressure on politicians to improve governance, leading to a decline in state capacity. In Kenya, Hassan (2020) argues that bureaucrats are the link between citizens and politicians and understanding how politicians strategically manage bureaucrats can explain state effectiveness even in low-capacity contexts. Focusing on Senegal, Gottlieb (2021) argues that political elites in low-capacity contexts face few incentives to invest in state capacity, resulting in a "weak-state trap." In weak states, citizens mistrust politicians' ability to deliver public goods and prefer keeping the state weak in order to safeguard particularistic benefits. Nathan (2023), focusing on Northern Ghana, argues that even a "scarce state" can deliver enormous windfalls to key local actors, who may then deliberately weaken any further investments into state capacity.

Scholars have begun to theorize more deeply about the conditions under which rulers deliberately configure weak states. In the Indian context, Suryanarayan (2016) labels this phenomenon "hollowing out the state" and points to social-status inequality as a key explanatory variable shaping preferences for social integration and state capacity. According to Acemoglu et al. (2011), elites intentionally create inefficient states—those that create more rents for bureaucrats—as a forward-looking strategy to capture electoral politics and weaken redistribution under democracy. Acemoglu et al. (2020) theorize that attempts to centralize a state change the political calculations of citizens, leading to greater collective action. This anticipation of coordination discourages elites from centralizing in the first place.

Until recently, these studies of the challenges of building state capacity in contemporary democracies have remained distinct from the historical determinants of state capacity. The new historical research discussed in this review drives home the point that many of the contemporary explanations for why state capacity remains weak rely on mechanisms that were also at play historically. State capacity, rather than being a slowly accruing stock variable, is in fact dynamic—it can grow or shrink—contingent on the income, status, and ideological or ethnic preferences of actors. Importantly, moments of democratization, industrialization, or economic shocks can precipitate attempts to deliberately weaken state capacity. The historical findings also push against the notion that fiscal, coercive, and administrative dimensions of state capacity always develop together (Besley & Persson 2011, Tilly 1992). Empirical investigations of the interrelated nature of these dimensions have largely agreed with this assessment (Hanson & Sigman 2021). But as Sánchez-Talanquer (2020) shows in Mexico, political elites can attempt to substitute one type of capacity for another. In Mexico, this took the form of improving land cadasters while simultaneously undervaluing the land to weaken taxation. Similar strategies continue today. In Tanzania, Bowles (2023) studies civil registrations, asking why citizens voluntarily provide information to the state in exchange for documentary proof of identity. He finds that wealthier citizens are willing to register their information as long as bureaucratic capacity is weak and the state is able to provide narrowly targeted benefits. In India, Toth (2023) finds that an initiative to improve legibility by digitizing land records enabled landowners to veto infrastructure development. Importantly, recent studies of the link between war and state capacity in Europe and China have shown that states were in fact able to build coercive, legal, and administrative capacities without taxation (Dincecco & Wang 2018, Slantchev & Kravitz 2019).

A greater understanding of the political mechanisms shaping state capacity over time and at the subnational level also highlights the importance of aligning measurement with theory (Berwick & Christia 2018, Soifer 2008). We now recognize that there are national-level functions that rely on specific dimensions of subnational capacity. This in turn has changed the measures we use to study distinct dimensions. Studies now use local bureaucratic presence as a measure of local-level administrative capacity, including the number of colonial-era bureaucrats in administrative districts (Lee 2019, Suryanarayan 2016), bureaucratic workload (Dasgupta & Kapur 2020), or distance to and/or size of the bureaucracy in Mexico and the American South (Fergusson et al. 2022, Garfias 2018, Suryanarayan & White 2021). In North America, Jensen & Ramey (2020), Geloso & Makovi (2022), and Acemoglu et al. (2016) use the presence of a post office as a measure of federal government reach and local state capacity. The proliferation of optical character recognition technology has greatly facilitated the use of historical census data, particularly age-heaping, as a measure of local information capacity. Studies using age heaping have particularly facilitated our understanding of how identity politics shaped state capacity (Charnysh 2022, Lee & Zhang 2017, Suryanarayan & White 2021).

CONCLUSION

This article reviewed recent research on the historical origins of state capacity. From a methodological perspective, many of these studies used a historical political economy approach (Charnysh et al. 2023). They showcased the development of key institutional innovations—like income taxation, professionalized bureaucracies, land cadasters, or censuses—in contexts as varied as Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the United States. They focused on the role of specific actors and causal mechanisms linking actors to outcomes through the frameworks of ideology, identity, class politics, and principal–agent dilemmas. As **Figure 1** shows, this new research has changed the ways in which we study state capacity in political science—from a slow-moving, lumbering independent variable to an endogenous and dynamic dependent variable. Between 2012 and 2022, a robust new agenda has emerged on the determinants of state capacity. Of the articles that focus on state capacity as a dependent variable, 67 articles focused on nonstructural causes of capacity building, while 36 focused on factors like war, resources, or geography; and even in the latter, many focused on the politics catalyzed by macro-historical events.

The shift in focus on the origins of state capacity has led scholars to examine the specific informational, infrastructural, and organizational dynamics of how capacity is built or weakened (**Figure 2**). As a consequence, studies of the historical determinants of state capacity are now more centrally contending with state capacity as the link between the intent of political leaders and outcomes—whether to make and enforce rules, implement policies, or control people and land (Brambor et al. 2020, Lindvall & Teorell 2016).

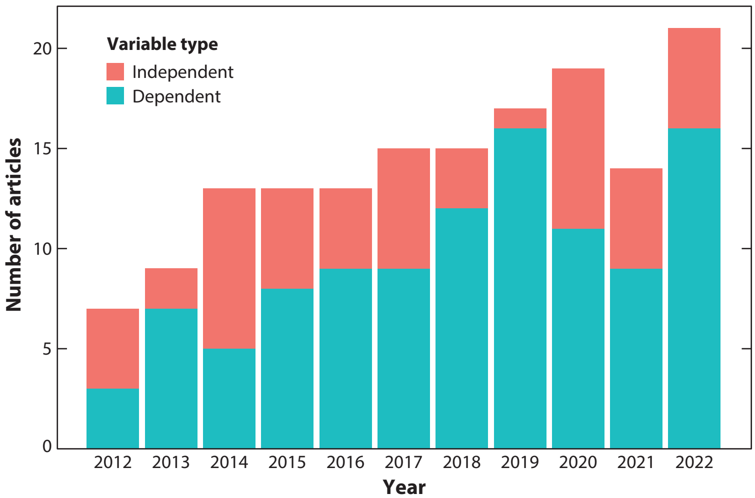

Figure 1

Articles on state capacity published between 2012 and 2022 in 10 political science journals: the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *American Political Science Review*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *International Organization*, the *International Studies Quarterly*, the *Journal of Politics*, *Perspectives*, and *World Politics*.

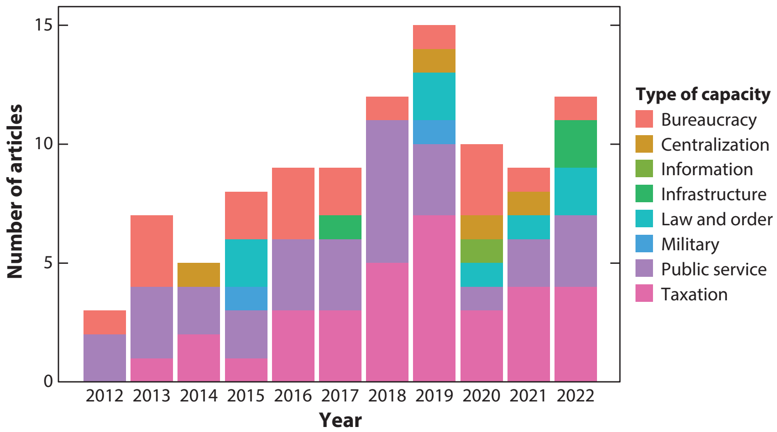

Figure 2

Articles on state capacity as dependent variable published between 2012 and 2022 in 10 political science journals: the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *American Political Science Review*, the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *International Organization*, the *International Studies Quarterly*, the *Journal of Politics*, *Perspectives*, and *World Politics*.

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