

# State formation and state strength

## What is a state?

Weber defines a state as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory”.

So a few things are necessary:

- A defined territory, contrast this with a nation (group of people who share some sort of common identity like a language, a religion, an ethnicity, or a shared history) and the later nation-state.
- Monopoly of legitimate violence.
  - o Not all violence by the state is legitimate (e.g. violence against civil rights protests in the 60s).
  - o Some states do not have a monopoly (maybe a state only needs control “over the chief concentrated means of violence” (Tilly 1985)).

## State formation

### War makes states

State strength can be seen as multiple aspects that go hand in hand: monopoly of violence, legitimization, efficient administration/bureaucracy, which is necessary for raising revenue/taxes. These, as Spruyt shows, are all necessary for each other. Without an efficient administration and legitimate violence, it is hard to raise taxes.

Early state formation in Europe correlated with changes in warfare. Military developments began to disadvantage the mounted cavalry. Massed infantry, relatively unskilled troops, were able to defeat highly skilled knights. Furthermore, these men were much cheaper than the cost of a knight. These technological developments, thus, pushed states to move towards large standing armies. Together with this came the introduction of gunpowder and artillery, which also required more expensive fortifications (e.g. trace italienne). (Spruyt)

These developments necessitated greater centralization, administration, and central revenue from taxation or territorial conquest. This way, war made states. Because of war, states needed to centralize to be able to afford large standing armies and artillery. And because of the advances in technology, nobility was no longer needed for the army,

so the decentralized feudal system was over (Tilly, coercion, capital and European states).

Tilly compares this process to a “protection racket” (the state trades security for revenue, just like how a mafia group would). While various lords competed for the loyalty and revenue of their subjects, kings were more efficient at protecting their subjects (because of the factors named above, economies of scale and fixed costs). The states then emerged as a by-product of warfare.

**This is helpful because it allows the**

**Theoretical argument Tilly:**

- **The rulers of the state are rational actors and they have an interest in expanding the state/defending it**
- **For that you need taxation**
- **For taxation you need bureaucracy**

**Legitimacy comes from ‘protection racket’**

- **Stationary bandit extracts less than roving bandit**

**Historical argument:**

- **Technological improvements (like gunpowder, longbows and pikes) creates economies of scale for warfare – infantry based armies instead of mounted cavalry.**

Africa

Herbst

## Contractarianism

State formation can also be seen as a way to solve a collective action problem. Thinkers such as Hobbes or Rousseau talk about a social contract. In the state of nature there would be a collective action problem, prisoner’s dilemma.

## Economic accounts

According to both Marxist and institutionalist accounts, economic change is the causal factor behind the demise of personalist feudal rule.

## Marxist accounts

Capitalist developments, the rise of trade and urbanization created a new class: the burghers (bourgeoisie). They made their living from trade and production. According to neo-Marxist account, the state was the arbiter in class tensions between this new class and the traditional nobility. As such, a royal-urban alliance was created which brought the feudal order to an end. (Spruyt)

## Institutionalist accounts

According to institutional accounts, the emergence of this new economic group caused the state to emerge out of contracts between ruler and subject. The state is then not a predatory agent which wants to maximize its own gain but creates new institutions to maximize societal welfare. Institutions such as property rights etc. which facilitate trade. The state then, as a protection racket, protects these institutions. And because of economies of scale, kings were more attractive as contracting party. Moreover, the standardization that the kings brought was also in the urban interest. (Spruyt)

## *Olson*

‘Under anarchy, uncoordinated competitive theft by “roving bandits” destroys the incentive to invest and produce, leaving little for either the population or the bandits. Both can be better off if a bandit sets himself up as a dictator—a “stationary bandit” who monopolizes and rationalizes theft in the form of taxes. A secure autocrat has an encompassing interest in his domain that leads him to provide a peaceful order and other public goods that increase productivity. Whenever an autocrat expects a brief tenure, it pays him to confiscate those assets whose tax yield over his tenure is less than their total value. This incentive plus the inherent uncertainty of succession in dictatorships imply that autocracies will rarely have good economic performance for more than a generation. The conditions necessary for a lasting democracy are the same necessary for the security of property or contract rights that generates economic growth.’ (Olson)

An insecure autocrat will, therefore, lead to a weaker state than a secure autocrat.

## *Acemoglu et al.*

Acemoglu et al. make the case that state strength, which is the result from strong institutions, does not have to be caused by war. They argue that it can also be imported through colonization. They look at the difference in policy that European states had when colonizing. The Europeans could be either extractive, not instantiate strong institutions and just focus on moving as much wealth as possible from the colony to

themselves (example: Congo), or they could replicate European institutions, with strong emphasis on private property and checks against government power: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, United States. The second scenario was also often a consequence of the fact that many Europeans settled in those colonies. Therefore, they use a regression analysis by looking at the mortality rate of the first European settlers and how that correlates with GDP per capita, which is a result from weak state strength. They find that states with high mortality are significantly poorer. They also correlate it with “risk of expropriation”. This suggests that, for instance, Africa is poorer because of weaker institutions.

### *Putnam*

Putnam analyses differences in democratic performances in certain regions in Italy. Instead of focussing just on institutions, it emphasizes the importance of “civic traditions” and the social capital. Northern Italy has much more civic engagement, more trust and more community life which have reinforced the workings of local governments. In the South, it is the different way around. He gives the example of Seveso (Northern Italy), where the local government responded very well to an environmental disaster, and Pietrapertosa (Southern Italy), where the local government was unable to provide even basic public goods such as running water or transportation. It uses the instantiation of 20 local governments in 1970 as a perfect experiment to find out what determines the success of institutions.

### **More sociological arguments for state formation:**

- **Universities, legal tradition**
- **Church**
- **Thomas Ertman – universities, birth of the leviathan**
- **Religion as a cultural force:**
  - **The rulers of the state are legitimate because of the divine right and later on there is a nationalist argument why the state is legitimate. So this would explain why certain actors are able to succeed over others.**

### **We need additional explanations in other regions:**

- **Colonization in Acemoglu**
- **Population density argument – in those conditions, war does not lead to state formation**
- **Centeno argues that war in the postcolonial state in Latin America does not lead to strong states.**
- **China is the other example: state formation does happen but much earlier because of warring states.**

- **Africa, might have similar problems. Herbst. Maybe some regions don't have this problem like Rwanda n stuff because of path dependence, lake region is more densely populated so state formation is easier there.**
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## State strength

Taxes? De facto strength

Control over the army? Monopoly of violence

Mainly African scholars:

- Bureaucratic control
- Economic development
- ???

## State failure

### Bates

State failure is the implosion of the state. This can happen in multiple ways: the state becomes an instrument for predation, and a loss of the monopoly of coercion. Bates looks at economic factors, ethnicity, and democracy in the process of state failure. Economically: poverty (probably because this means that it is cheaper to recruit armed forces and not because economic inequality leads to grievances), fiscal dearth (state runs out of money, can't pay the civil servant who then resort to corruption/army uses their weapons to pay themselves – the causal link with private incomes runs through the public treasury), resource wealth (petroleum/natural resources increase likelihood of state failure because rebel groups want them, though with petroleum this process runs through the state because rebels cannot operate them, for instance: because governments of petroleum countries do not rely on their citizens for money, they are more repressive). Ethnicity: diversity and polarization (not necessarily about ethnic diversity, more about ethnic polarization: when sorted into two groups it is highest, Bates argues that this also does not correlate, though maybe it is because diverse/polarized societies fail to agree on public policies, which results in a weak state), concentration (if there is a small majority, then the large minority can challenge it), minority rule (minority regimes will choose a higher level of resource extraction and choose to repress rather than prosper). Democratization: intermediate democracies increase likelihood of state failure. Lastly, international intervention reduces the likelihood of state failure.

## Questions

Why do states vary in strength? (2024)

‘State capacity is more a matter of inheritance than design.’ Discuss.  
(2022)

Does state strength depend more on domestic or international factors? (2019)

Is state strength better explained by social or institutional factors?  
(2018)

To what extent is state strength the result of conscious choices by elites? (2017)

Assess the role of technology in the formation of modern states.

What explains variations in state capacity?