

Five Decades of State Capacity Research: Theoretical Shifts, Empirical Patterns and New Directions for Public Administration

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Abstract

This article synthesizes fifty years of scholarship on state capacity to clarify its conceptual evolution, map empirical patterns, and propose a future research agenda for public administration. Using a systematic and integrative review of peer-reviewed literature from 1975–2025 across major databases, studies were coded and analyzed temporally, thematically, and methodologically. The review identifies five waves of research, from early emphasis on autonomy and extraction to contemporary focus on sectoral performance, digital governance, and crisis management. Empirical findings show increasing methodological pluralism, a shift from macro-indices to organizational and micro-level studies, and growing attention to subnational and sector-specific capacities. Persistent tensions exist between technocratic and political interpretations of capacity. The article reconceptualizes state capacity as a multidimensional construct integrating bureaucratic performance, institutional embeddedness, and societal legitimacy. Findings inform administrative reform, public service delivery, crisis governance, and capacity-building, offering a structured framework to guide future research and practice in public administration.

Keywords: Mental Health Care Act 2002, User Rights, Dignity, Confidentiality, Participation In Treatment, South African Mental Health Facilities, Policy Implementation

1. Introduction

Over the past half century, *state capacity* has emerged as one of the most influential and contested concepts in the social sciences. Initially developed within historical sociology and political economy, the concept has progressively moved to the center of debates on governance, development, public sector reform, and crisis management. Across diverse contexts, scholars and practitioners increasingly rely on state capacity to explain why some states are able to design and implement public policies effectively, mobilize resources, regulate markets, deliver services, and maintain social order, while others struggle to translate formal authority into practical outcomes [1-3]. Despite this centrality, research on state capacity remains fragmented across disciplines, theoretical traditions, and methodological approaches.

State capacity occupies a unique analytical position between political science and public administration. In political science, it

has been used to explain regime stability, war-making, taxation, development trajectories, and institutional persistence [1,4,5]. In public administration, closely related debates focus on bureaucratic competence, administrative reform, implementation performance, regulatory effectiveness, and public service delivery [3,6]. Yet, much of the literature develops in parallel rather than in dialogue. Political science research often emphasizes macro-historical processes and cross-national measurement, while public administration scholarship tends to prioritize organizational design, management practices, and sectoral governance. This separation has limited the development of an integrated understanding of how state capacity is built, exercised, and transformed through administrative systems.

The renewed salience of state capacity over the last two decades further underscores the need for synthesis. Globalization, decentralization, and market-oriented reforms initially raised

expectations that states would retreat from direct intervention. Instead, financial crises, pandemics, climate change, digital transformation, and post-conflict reconstruction have reaffirmed the centrality of capable public institutions. Governments are again expected to coordinate complex policy systems, regulate transnational risks, protect vulnerable populations, and manage technological infrastructures. These pressures have expanded the meaning of state capacity beyond extraction and coercion to include regulatory intelligence, service integration, crisis responsiveness, and relational governance.

As a result, the concept now encompasses fiscal, administrative, legal, organizational, and societal dimensions that are rarely examined within a single analytical frame. A fifty-year longitudinal review (1975–2025) is therefore both timely and analytically necessary. The mid-1970s marked a turning point in state-centered scholarship, when dissatisfaction with modernization theory and behavioralism prompted renewed attention to institutions, historical processes, and state structures [1]. Since then, the literature has expanded dramatically, moving through phases of neo-institutionalism, development state theory, governance and measurement revolutions, and, more recently, work on sectoral capacity, digital government, and crisis governance [3,4,6,7]. A five-decade horizon allows systematic tracing of conceptual shifts, methodological innovations, and empirical reorientations that shorter reviews cannot capture.

Despite its growth, state capacity research is characterized by four persistent forms of fragmentation. First, *conceptual fragmentation* is evident in the proliferation of partially overlapping definitions, ranging from coercive and extractive power to bureaucratic quality, regulatory reach, implementation capability, and societal embeddedness [1-3,6]. Second, *measurement fragmentation* has produced a wide array of indicators and indices, often disconnected from underlying administrative processes and rarely comparable across studies [4,7]. Third, *regional fragmentation* persists between research focused on OECD states and work on developing, fragile, or post-conflict contexts, limiting cumulative theory building. Fourth, *methodological fragmentation* separates macro-quantitative traditions from organizational, historical, and qualitative approaches, constraining integrated explanations of how capacity is actually constructed and exercised within public administrations [5].

For public administration, these divisions are particularly consequential. Administrative systems are the primary institutional sites through which state capacity is enacted, yet much of the dominant literature treats the state as an abstract actor, rather than as a complex configuration of ministries, agencies, professionals, rules, and routines. As a result, public administration scholarship often draws on state capacity without fully shaping its conceptual foundations, while political science research frequently overlooks the organizational and managerial mechanisms that transform political authority into public outcomes. A dedicated synthesis grounded explicitly in public administration is therefore required to reconnect macro theories of the state with meso- and micro-

level analyses of administration, implementation, and governance.

This article addresses that need through a comprehensive review of five decades of state capacity research. It pursues four interrelated objectives. First, it traces how state capacity has been conceptualized over time, identifying major theoretical phases and their underlying assumptions. Second, it maps dominant empirical patterns, including measurement strategies, sectoral emphases, regional distributions, and methodological trends. Third, it critically examines unresolved debates, such as the relationship between capacity and legitimacy, autonomy and embeddedness, technocracy and politics, and formal institutions and informal power. Fourth, it develops a future research agenda that situates state capacity more firmly within public administration theory and practice.

Accordingly, the review is guided by four research questions:

- a. How has state capacity been conceptualized over the past five decades?
- b. What empirical patterns dominate the literature across time, sectors, and regions?
- c. Where do the principal theoretical and methodological debates remain unresolved?
- d. What future research directions are required to advance state capacity as a core public administration construct?

By answering these questions, the article seeks to reposition state capacity not merely as a descriptive attribute of states, but as a dynamic, multidimensional administrative phenomenon. In doing so, it aims to contribute to theory building in public administration, strengthen dialogue across disciplines, and provide a structured foundation for future empirical and normative research on the capabilities of contemporary states.

2. Methodology: Systematic and Integrative Review Design

This article employs a systematic and integrative review design to synthesize five decades of state capacity scholarship and to generate a theoretically informed and methodologically transparent account of its evolution. The approach combines the procedural rigor of systematic reviewing with the interpretive depth of integrative synthesis, allowing both structured mapping of the literature and critical reconstruction of conceptual and empirical patterns.

2.1. Review Strategy

The review was designed to capture the interdisciplinary nature of state capacity research while maintaining a clear anchoring in public administration. Four major academic databases were selected for their comprehensive coverage of political science, public administration, and political economy scholarship: **Web of Science, Scopus, Wiley Online Library, and JSTOR**. Together, these platforms index the core journals in which foundational and contemporary state capacity research has been published.

The temporal scope was defined as **1975–2025**, reflecting the period during which state-centered institutional analysis re-emerged and subsequently diversified. Searches were conducted using combinations of key terms including *state capacity*,

state capability, government capacity, administrative capacity, bureaucratic capacity, institutional capacity, and public sector capability. These were paired with domain-specific terms such as *public administration, governance, development, policy implementation, and institutional performance* to ensure coverage of both political science and administrative research traditions.

To be included, studies were required to meet four criteria. First, they had to be **peer-reviewed journal articles or scholarly review essays**, ensuring academic quality and traceability. Second, publications had to fall within the **1975–2025** timeframe. Third, they needed to demonstrate a **substantive engagement with state capacity**, either as a central concept, a dependent or independent variable, or a primary analytical lens. Fourth, studies were required to fall within or bridge the fields of **public administration, political science, or economics**, with explicit relevance to governance, institutions, or public sector performance. Books, dissertations, policy reports, and purely technical capacity assessments were excluded in order to maintain conceptual coherence and comparability.

This strategy produced a broad initial corpus that reflected the conceptual diversity, methodological plurality, and geographical spread of state capacity research, while retaining a clear orientation toward public administration.

2.2. Screening Process

The screening process followed a **PRISMA-style protocol** to ensure transparency, replicability, and analytical discipline. All retrieved records were exported into a reference management system, where duplicates were removed. Titles and abstracts were then screened to exclude clearly irrelevant material, such as studies using “capacity” in purely psychological, ecological,

or engineering contexts without reference to state institutions or governance. The remaining articles were subjected to full-text screening against the inclusion criteria. At this stage, studies were excluded if state capacity appeared only tangentially, if the empirical focus lay entirely outside public sector or governance domains, or if the work did not provide conceptual, theoretical, or empirical engagement with the capabilities of state institutions. The final dataset thus represents a curated body of scholarship that meaningfully addresses state capacity across multiple decades and research traditions.

Following selection, each article was coded using a structured framework designed to capture both descriptive and analytical features of the literature. Four principal coding dimensions were applied:

- **Theoretical orientation** – including historical-institutional, political economy, development state, governance, organizational, and public management approaches.
- **Methodological Design** – distinguishing quantitative cross-national studies, qualitative comparative research, historical analyses, mixed-methods designs, and organizational or sectoral case studies.
- **Regional and Spatial Focus** – identifying OECD-centered, Global South, post-conflict, subnational, and comparative multi-region studies.
- **Analytical Focus and Dependent Variables** – such as extraction, regulation, service delivery, implementation, bureaucratic quality, crisis response, or institutional legitimacy.

This coding enabled systematic comparison across time and research traditions while preserving the capacity for interpretive synthesis.

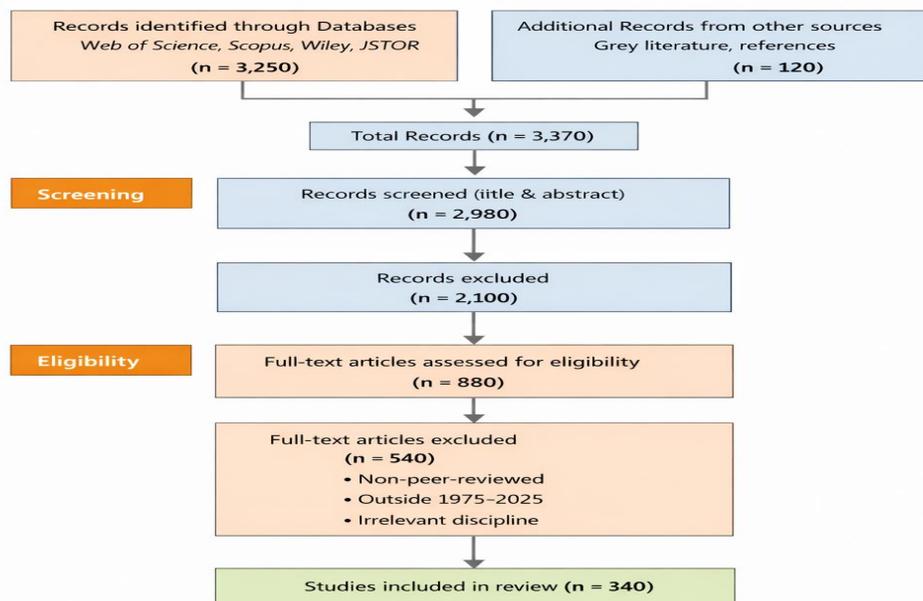


Figure 1: Presents the Prisma Flow Diagram Summarizing Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion Stages

Component	Specification
Review design	Systematic and integrative literature review combining structured screening with conceptual synthesis
Timeframe	1975–2025
Databases searched	Web of Science; Scopus; Wiley Online Library; JSTOR
Disciplinary scope	Public Administration; Political Science; Political Economy; Governance Studies
Core search terms	“state capacity”; “state capability”; “government capacity”; “administrative capacity”; “bureaucratic capacity”; “institutional capacity”
Supplementary terms	“public administration”; “governance”; “development”; “policy implementation”; “state effectiveness”; “bureaucratic performance”
Search logic	Boolean combinations using AND/OR (e.g., “state capacity” AND “public administration”) applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords
Inclusion criteria	(1) Peer-reviewed journal articles or review essays; (2) Published between 1975–2025; (3) Explicit conceptual or empirical engagement with state capacity; (4) Relevance to public administration, governance, or institutional performance
Exclusion criteria	Books, dissertations, policy reports, conference papers; studies using “capacity” in non-state contexts (e.g., psychology, engineering); articles with only incidental reference to state capacity
Screening protocol	PRISMA-style process: identification → duplicate removal → title/abstract screening → full-text eligibility assessment
Unit of analysis	Individual peer-reviewed journal article
Coding category: theory	Historical institutionalism; political economy; development state; governance theory; organizational and public management perspectives
Coding category: methodology	Quantitative cross-national analysis; qualitative comparative studies; historical analysis; mixed methods; organizational or sectoral case studies
Coding category: regional focus	OECD countries; Global South; fragile/post-conflict states; subnational governance; multi-region comparative studies
Coding category: analytical focus (dependent variables)	Extractive capacity; regulatory capacity; administrative/bureaucratic quality; service delivery; policy implementation; crisis response; institutional legitimacy
Analytical outputs	Conceptual synthesis; thematic mapping; temporal clustering; measurement typologies

Table1: Review Protocol and Selection Criteria

2.3. Analytical Approach

The analysis proceeded through four complementary techniques designed to integrate structure with interpretation.

First, **conceptual synthesis** was employed to reconstruct how state capacity has been defined, redefined, and operationalized across successive research waves. Rather than treating definitions as static, this stage traced shifts in underlying assumptions about the state, institutions, and administration, identifying dominant conceptual clusters and points of theoretical rupture.

Second, **thematic mapping** was used to organize the literature around recurring analytical domains, including extraction and coercion, bureaucratic organization, regulatory governance, service delivery, crisis management, and digital administration. This mapping clarified how substantive concerns expanded over time and how public administration gradually emerged as a central, though often implicit, site of analysis.

Third, **temporal clustering** grouped studies into broad historical phases based on their dominant theoretical orientations, research questions, and methodological preferences. This allowed

identification of patterned transitions, such as the move from macro-historical explanations to measurement-driven comparative studies, and later to sectoral, organizational, and subnational analyses.

Fourth, **measurement typologies** were constructed to compare how state capacity has been operationalized, including fiscal and extractive indicators, bureaucratic quality measures, sector-specific performance metrics, and composite governance indices. This step highlighted both innovation and fragmentation, as well as the growing disjunction between quantitative proxies and the administrative processes they are often assumed to represent.

Together, these analytical strategies made it possible to move beyond descriptive cataloguing toward a critical synthesis that integrates theory, evidence, and methodological practice. The outcome is not a simple aggregation of findings, but a reconstructed narrative of how state capacity research has evolved, where its internal tensions lie, and how it can be repositioned more firmly within public administration scholarship.

By combining systematic procedures with integrative interpretation, the methodology supports the article's central aim: to provide a comprehensive, analytically coherent account of five decades of state capacity research and to establish a rigorous foundation for future inquiry.

3. Conceptual Evolution of State Capacity

Over five decades, state capacity has undergone a profound conceptual transformation. What began as an effort to “bring the state back in” as an autonomous analytical category has developed into a multidimensional framework encompassing bureaucratic organization, institutional embeddedness, sectoral performance, and crisis responsiveness. This section traces five major waves in the evolution of state capacity research, highlighting how theoretical priorities, ontological assumptions, and analytical scales have shifted over time.

3.1. First Wave (1970s–1980s): State Autonomy, Bureaucracy, and Extractive Capacity

The first wave of state capacity research emerged from dissatisfaction with behavioralist and society-centered explanations of politics. Scholars in historical sociology and comparative politics sought to reassert the state as an analytically distinct actor with its own organizational interests, resources, and constraints. This period emphasized *state autonomy and infrastructural power*, focusing on the extent to which state institutions could formulate and implement decisions independently of dominant social groups [1].

Central to this wave was the idea that capacity resided in the organizational coherence of bureaucracies and in their ability to penetrate society. Mann's distinction between despotic and infrastructural power conceptualized capacity not merely as coercion, but as the institutional reach through which states collect information, extract resources, and coordinate social life. Similarly, historical analyses of taxation, warfare, and bureaucratic formation highlighted extractive capacity as a foundation of modern statehood, linking fiscal institutions to administrative expansion and political consolidation [8]. Skocpol's work underscored the importance of bureaucratic organization, professionalization, and administrative routines in shaping policy outcomes, arguing that states possess structural capacities that cannot be reduced to class interests or elite preferences.

In this formulation, state capacity was largely macro-structural, rooted in central administrations, military-fiscal systems, and elite bureaucracies. The emphasis lay on *whether* states could act, rather than *how* administrative processes translated authority into everyday governance.

Conceptually, this first wave framed state capacity as a relatively unified attribute, anchored in extraction, coercion, and bureaucratic coherence. Although it laid the theoretical foundations for later work, its focus on national-level institutions and historical trajectories left the internal dynamics of public administration underexplored.

3.2. Second Wave (1990s): Institutionalism, Governance, and the Developmental State

During the 1990s, state capacity research expanded in response to globalization, structural adjustment, and debates over the role of the state in development. The concept was increasingly linked to institutional performance, governance quality, and the conditions under which states could foster economic transformation. This wave marked a shift from autonomy alone to embedded autonomy, emphasizing relational ties between state institutions and societal actors [6].

Developmental state theory argued that effective capacity depended not only on insulation from narrow interests but also on dense, structured connections with business, labor, and social organizations. Capacity was reconceptualized as an institutional configuration in which competent bureaucracies, meritocratic recruitment, and coordinated industrial policies enabled strategic intervention. Migdal's “state-in-society” approach further challenged static notions of capacity by highlighting the fragmented, negotiated, and contested nature of state power across local and national arenas [2].

At the same time, international organizations promoted governance frameworks that associated state capacity with administrative efficiency, rule enforcement, and service provision. The so-called governance turn reframed capacity around institutional quality, accountability, and regulatory competence, broadening its scope beyond extraction to include legal, administrative, and managerial functions.

This second wave thus reoriented state capacity toward development outcomes and governance arrangements. The state was no longer seen solely as a centralized apparatus but as an institutional ensemble embedded in social and economic networks. For public administration, this period marked an implicit turn toward organizational design, bureaucratic professionalism, and inter-organizational coordination, even though the literature often remained anchored at the macro level.

3.3. Third Wave (2000s): Measurement Revolution and Comparative Indices

The early 2000s ushered in a measurement revolution. As comparative political economy and development economics increasingly sought causal explanations, scholars prioritized the operationalization of state capacity into quantifiable indicators. This wave transformed the field by shifting attention from conceptual debates to empirical proxies, indices, and large-N analyses.

State capacity was decomposed into measurable components such as fiscal extraction, bureaucratic quality, territorial control, and policy implementation. Cross-national datasets proliferated, enabling researchers to examine the effects of capacity on growth, conflict, inequality, and regime stability. Studies emphasized causal sequencing, path dependence, and institutional feedbacks [4,7,9].

While this period significantly advanced empirical testing, it also intensified conceptual fragmentation. Different research communities adopted distinct indicators, often without shared theoretical foundations. Capacity was variously equated with tax ratios, expert assessments of bureaucracy, infrastructure penetration, or composite governance scores. As a result, the term increasingly functioned as an umbrella concept encompassing heterogeneous phenomena.

From a public administration perspective, this wave generated valuable comparative insights but often abstracted away from organizational processes. Bureaucracies were treated as black boxes, and measurement frequently prioritized outcomes over administrative mechanisms. The expansion of indicators thus deepened empirical sophistication while simultaneously widening the gap between macro-level inference and micro-level administrative reality.

3.4. Fourth Wave (2010s): Sectoral Capacity, Implementation, and Legitimacy

The 2010s witnessed a corrective shift. Scholars increasingly questioned whether aggregate indices adequately captured how states actually govern. This fourth wave redirected attention toward *sectoral, organizational, and implementation-centered* perspectives. Capacity was reconceptualized as differentiated across policy domains, levels of government, and administrative functions. Research began to focus on health systems, education bureaucracies, regulatory agencies, and local governments, highlighting variation within states and across administrative arenas. Implementation studies emphasized problem-solving, learning, and adaptation, framing capacity as dynamic and constructed through practice rather than as a fixed national attribute [3,10].

At the same time, legitimacy and trust entered the conceptual core. Capacity was increasingly linked to citizen perceptions, compliance, and institutional credibility. Rather than treating authority as given, scholars examined how administrative performance, procedural fairness, and service quality condition the effective exercise of state power. This wave brought state capacity closer to the concerns of public administration. Bureaucratic

rouines, organizational cultures, and managerial capabilities became central explanatory variables. The state appeared less as a monolithic entity and more as a constellation of administrative capacities that interact, complement, and sometimes undermine one another.

3.5. Fifth Wave (2020s): Digital State, Crisis Governance, and Resilience

The 2020s have accelerated another conceptual reorientation. Global pandemics, climate emergencies, and rapid digitalization have foregrounded the capacity of states to operate under conditions of uncertainty, interdependence, and systemic risk. State capacity is now increasingly associated with *resilience, anticipatory governance, and digital infrastructures*. This emerging wave conceptualizes capacity as the ability to integrate data systems, coordinate across sectors, mobilize scientific expertise, and sustain administrative continuity during shocks. Digital platforms, algorithmic governance, and real-time monitoring have become central to how states perceive, intervene in, and restructure social processes. Crisis governance research highlights coordination, learning, and adaptability, extending capacity beyond routine administration to emergency management and long-term transformation.

In this formulation, state capacity is no longer only about what states can do, but about how rapidly and legitimately they can reconfigure administrative systems in response to evolving challenges. The conceptual frontier thus moves toward relational, technological, and ecological dimensions of capacity, positioning public administration as the primary arena in which contemporary state power is assembled and exercised.

Together, these five waves reveal a steady expansion in both the scope and depth of state capacity research. From macro-historical analyses of extraction and bureaucracy, the literature has progressed toward multidimensional, sector-sensitive, and practice-oriented frameworks. This trajectory underscores the necessity of grounding state capacity more firmly within public administration, where the organizational, technological, and human foundations of state power are most directly constituted.

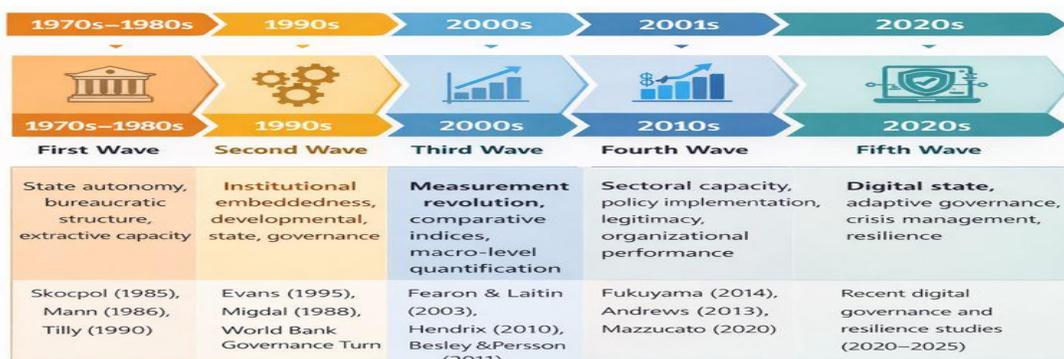


Figure 2: Presents A Timeline of These Conceptual Shifts

Period / Wave	Dominant Conceptualization of State Capacity	Core Analytical Emphases	Representative Scholarly Orientation
1970s–1980s (First wave: state-centered turn)	State capacity as autonomy and infrastructural power of the state apparatus	Bureaucratic coherence; extraction and taxation; territorial penetration; coercive and administrative reach	Historical sociology; state-centered institutionalism; macro-historical analysis
1990s (Second wave: institutional and developmental turn)	State capacity as institutional embeddedness and developmental coordination	Meritocratic bureaucracy; policy coherence; state–society relations; governance and development outcomes	Developmental state theory; new institutionalism; governance and political economy
2000s (Third wave: measurement and comparative turn)	State capacity as a measurable national attribute captured through comparative indicators	Fiscal extraction; bureaucratic quality indices; regulatory enforcement; cross-national performance metrics	Quantitative comparative politics; development economics; large-N institutional analysis
2010s (Fourth wave: sectoral and implementation turn)	State capacity as differentiated administrative and sectoral capability	Policy implementation; organizational problem-solving; service delivery systems; institutional legitimacy	Public administration; implementation studies; organizational and governance research
2020s (Fifth wave: digital and resilience turn)	State capacity as adaptive, digital, and crisis-responsive governance capability	Data infrastructures; inter-agency coordination; anticipatory governance; resilience and system reconfiguration	Digital governance; crisis and resilience studies; adaptive public administration

Table 2: Dominant Definitions and Conceptual Emphases of State Capacity Across Five Decades

4. Empirical Patterns and Findings

Empirical research on state capacity has expanded dramatically over the past five decades, reflecting diverse measurement approaches, sectoral emphases, regional foci, and methodological innovations. This section synthesizes the dominant empirical patterns and highlights how analytical practices have evolved alongside theoretical developments.

4.1. Measurement Traditions

Empirical operationalization of state capacity has historically emphasized a range of dimensions:

- **Extractive Capacity** – Measurement focuses on the state’s ability to mobilize resources, particularly taxation and revenue collection. Indicators include tax-to-GDP ratios, fiscal compliance, and centralization of financial administration [4,8]. Extractive capacity often serves as a proxy for both institutional strength and coercive reach.
- **Administrative Capacity** – Reflects bureaucratic competence and efficiency. Common measures include civil service size, professionalization, meritocratic recruitment, procedural standardization, and policy implementation performance [6,10]. Administrative capacity links structural attributes of public organizations with functional outcomes.
- **Coercive Capacity** – Captures the state’s monopoly on legitimate use of force. Indicators include military size, police presence, enforcement of law, and territorial control [1,7]. Coercive capacity is closely tied to state stability, sovereignty, and security policy.
- **Legal Capacity** – Relates to the formulation, implementation, and enforcement of formal rules. Measures include quality of legislation, rule of law indices, judicial independence, and regulatory compliance [11]. Legal capacity connects state

authority with societal legitimacy and governance quality.

- **Digital Capacity** – Emergent in the 2020s, emphasizing technology-driven governance. Metrics include digital service provision, e-government adoption, data integration, and algorithmic policy systems [3,10]. Digital capacity enables rapid decision-making and crisis responsiveness.
- **Relational Capacity** – Examines embeddedness in society and cross-sector networks. Measured via stakeholder engagement, collaborative governance, and inter-organizational coordination [5,6]. Relational capacity highlights legitimacy, compliance, and social embedding.
- Each measurement tradition captures complementary aspects of capacity, yet no single approach fully represents its multidimensionality. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recommends integrating multiple metrics to provide holistic assessments.

4.2. Sectoral Evidence

Empirical studies have moved beyond aggregate national-level measures to **sector-specific assessments**, reflecting the complexity of contemporary governance:

- **Tax Administration** – Studies analyze fiscal performance, compliance, collection efficiency, and reform initiatives. These analyses connect extractive capacity with developmental outcomes [4].
- **Health Systems** – Focus on delivery efficiency, bureaucratic oversight, resource allocation, and crisis response (pandemics) highlight administrative and sectoral capacity [10,12].
- **Security and Law Enforcement** – Capacity is evaluated through policing, territorial control, and military effectiveness, often in fragile and conflict-affected states [7].
- **Environmental Governance** – Empirical research examines

regulatory enforcement, implementation of environmental policies, and adaptation to climate-related shocks [13].

- **Social Protection** – State capacity in social sectors is operationalized through program reach, bureaucratic efficiency, and equitable service delivery [3].

Sectoral evidence underscores the heterogeneity of capacity within a single state, emphasizing the need for multi-dimensional frameworks that account for organizational, legal, and relational differences across policy domains.

4.3. Regional Trends

Comparative research demonstrates systematic variation in state capacity across regions:

- **OECD Countries** – Typically display high bureaucratic professionalism, regulatory quality, and administrative reliability. Capacity is often consolidated, technologically advanced, and supported by strong legal institutions [6].
- **Global South** – Capacity is frequently uneven, with variability in resource mobilization, bureaucratic quality, and sectoral implementation. Developmental, institutional, and post-colonial legacies shape administrative performance [2].
- **Fragile/Post-Conflict States** – Characterized by low extractive and administrative capacity, weak institutions, and limited legitimacy. Research focuses on capacity-building interventions, reconstruction, and governance stabilization [5].
- **Federal and Decentralized Systems** – Capacity is distributed across multiple levels of government, producing variations in policy implementation, service delivery, and intergovernmental

coordination [3]. Decentralization introduces opportunities for innovation but challenges coherence and accountability.

Regional analysis reveals that empirical patterns are contingent not only on resources and institutional design but also on historical trajectories, political settlements, and societal structures.

4.4. Methodological Shifts

Empirical research has evolved from macro-level aggregate analyses toward nuanced, micro-level and organizational studies:

- **Macro-indices** – Early 2000s studies relied heavily on composite indices (e.g., Worldwide Governance Indicators) and large-N quantitative analyses to measure national capacity. These enabled cross-country comparisons but often obscured internal administrative processes [7].
- **Organizational and Micro-bureaucratic Studies** – Recent work emphasizes the internal dynamics of ministries, agencies, and service delivery units, including managerial practices, institutional culture, inter-agency coordination, and implementation challenges [10,12].
- **Mixed-methods Approaches** – Integration of qualitative case studies with quantitative metrics has become common, allowing explanation of both outcomes and causal mechanisms.

The methodological diversification enhances explanatory power and aligns research more closely with the realities of public administration. By combining macro-level measurement with micro-level analysis, scholars can better capture the processes through which capacity is enacted, negotiated, and constrained.

Dimension	Representative Indicators / Datasets	Key References
Extractive	Tax-to-GDP ratio, revenue mobilization, fiscal compliance	[4,8]
Administrative	Civil service size, meritocracy, procedural standardization	[6,10]
Coercive	Military size, police density, territorial control	[1,7]
Legal	Rule of law index, judicial independence, regulatory compliance	[3,11]
Digital	E-government adoption, digital service coverage, data integration	[10,12]
Relational	Stakeholder engagement, collaborative governance, inter-agency networks	[5,6]

Table 3: Major Datasets and Indicators of State Capacity

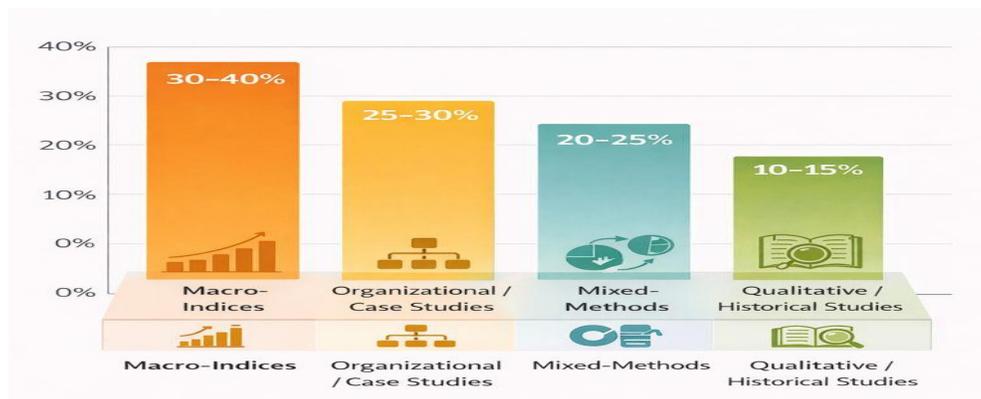


Figure 3: Distribution of Empirical Approaches

A bar chart or network visualization can illustrate:

- Macro-indices (30–40%)
- Organizational/case studies (25–30%)
- Mixed-methods (20–25%)
- Qualitative/historical studies (10–15%)

This figure demonstrates the shift from macro-dominated research to more nuanced, sectoral, and process-oriented empirical work.

5. Theoretical Debates and Unresolved Tensions

The study of state capacity is not a settled domain. Despite five decades of research, key theoretical debates continue to shape scholarly discourse and practical interpretations. These debates revolve around questions of legitimacy, autonomy, technocracy, measurement, and the interplay between formal and informal institutions. Understanding these tensions is essential to position state capacity as a conceptually robust and analytically useful construct within public administration.

5.1. Capacity vs Legitimacy

A central theoretical tension lies between *capacity*—the technical and organizational ability of the state to implement policies—and *legitimacy*, the normative and social recognition that gives state actions authority. Early scholarship focused almost exclusively on capacity as a structural attribute, emphasizing bureaucratic coherence, extractive ability, or coercive reach [1]. Yet, research from the 2010s onward highlights that technical capacity alone does not guarantee compliance, effectiveness, or societal stability [3,10].

States may possess strong administrative apparatuses, but without legitimacy, policies may fail due to resistance, non-compliance, or lack of trust. Conversely, highly legitimate states may compensate for organizational weaknesses by leveraging social capital, networks, and normative authority. This debate underscores the necessity of integrating both structural and relational dimensions of capacity, moving from purely functionalist models to multidimensional frameworks that account for the social and political embeddedness of governance.

5.2. Autonomy vs Embeddedness

Another enduring debate concerns the relative importance of state autonomy versus embeddedness in society. First-wave scholarship emphasized autonomy, highlighting the state's ability to act independently of social pressures [1]. Autonomy was seen as critical for fiscal extraction, regulatory enforcement, and military consolidation.

Second-wave scholarship, particularly on developmental states and governance, challenged this notion by emphasizing *embedded autonomy* [6]. Effective states, it argued, combine insulation from narrow interests with dense, coordinated relations with societal actors. Over-embedded states risk clientelism and fragmentation, while under-embedded states risk illegitimacy and alienation from society. Public administration scholarship grapples with operationalizing this balance, especially in contexts

of decentralization or post-conflict reconstruction, where local engagement is necessary but excessive political capture may undermine administrative integrity.

5.3. Technocracy vs Politics

State capacity also sits at the intersection of technocracy and politics. While early public administration models emphasized professional, merit-based bureaucracies capable of rational policy implementation, political scientists highlight that state action is inevitably embedded in partisan, electoral, and power dynamics [2,6].

The tension arises when technocratic ideals clash with political objectives. Highly competent bureaucracies may resist political interference, preserving efficiency but reducing democratic responsiveness. Conversely, politically embedded administrations may prioritize legitimacy and policy alignment but suffer from inefficiency, corruption, or uneven service delivery. Contemporary debates focus on how capacity can be designed to *balance technical expertise with political accountability*, a question central to reforms in fragile, decentralized, and post-conflict states.

5.4. Measurement vs Lived Institutional Practice

A methodological tension parallels the conceptual debates: *measurement versus lived practice*. Large-scale indices, such as bureaucratic quality scores or governance indicators, dominate macro-comparative studies, offering valuable cross-national comparability [4,7]. Yet these metrics often abstract away from how capacity manifests in daily administrative routines, decision-making processes, or frontline implementation. Recent organizational and sectoral studies reveal significant divergences between measured capacity and functional performance. For example, a state may score highly on legal or fiscal indicators but struggle to implement social protection programs or coordinate inter-agency responses during crises. This discrepancy illustrates that measurement alone cannot fully capture the dynamic, contextual, and relational dimensions of capacity, emphasizing the need for mixed-methods and qualitative validation.

5.5. Formal Institutions vs Informal Power

Finally, state capacity is shaped by the interplay of *formal institutions and informal power structures*. Formal institutions—ministries, legal frameworks, and standardized procedures—provide the scaffolding for governance, yet informal networks, patronage, social norms, and elite bargaining frequently determine the extent and effectiveness of implementation [2,5].

In many Global South or post-conflict contexts, informal power can either reinforce or undermine formal institutions. Capacity is thus not simply a function of organizational design but also of the ability to navigate and sometimes co-opt informal structures. For public administration, this tension highlights the importance of context-sensitive reforms and the integration of institutional theory with political and sociological insights.

6. Implications for Public Administration Theory and Practice

The synthesis of five decades of state capacity research offers significant implications for both the theoretical development of public administration and its practical applications [14-17]. By integrating conceptual, empirical, and methodological insights, this review provides a foundation for rethinking how capacity is understood, measured, and enacted in modern governance systems.

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

First, the review **repositions state capacity as a central construct within public administration scholarship**. Historically, state capacity has been studied primarily in political science and development economics, with public administration often drawing on these insights indirectly. By explicitly linking capacity to administrative structures, managerial processes, and organizational routines, scholars can reconceptualize public administration as the locus where capacity is both produced and exercised. This perspective emphasizes the micro- and meso-level mechanisms—bureaucratic professionalism, inter-agency coordination, procedural standardization—that translate macro-institutional authority into actionable governance outcomes [6,10].

Second, state capacity research **bridges bureaucracy, governance, and political economy**. Integrating autonomy and embeddedness, technocracy and politics, formal institutions and informal power, scholars can develop a multidimensional theoretical framework that situates public administration within broader state–society dynamics. Such integration helps reconcile tensions identified in Sections 4 and 5, providing a holistic understanding of how administrative systems achieve performance, resilience, and legitimacy. The framework encourages the development of models that account for both institutional design and contextual negotiation, thereby enhancing theory-building in PA while informing empirically grounded interventions.

Third, the evolution of measurement approaches and sectoral evidence enables **refinement of conceptual constructs** in public administration. Administrative capacity, relational embeddedness, legal enforcement, and digital governance can now be operationalized in ways that inform both theory and practice. By linking these dimensions with empirical outcomes, PA scholars can move beyond descriptive or normative accounts toward explanatory models that anticipate performance challenges and guide organizational innovation.

6.2. Practical Relevance

The findings of this review have direct implications for **policy design, administrative reform, and governance practice**.

- **Administrative Reform**—Understanding the multidimensional nature of state capacity allows policymakers to target interventions more precisely. Efforts to professionalize civil services, standardize bureaucratic procedures, or enhance inter-agency coordination can be informed by both macro-level indicators and sector-specific assessments, increasing the likelihood of effective implementation [10,12].
- **Anti-Corruption and Accountability** – The integration

of formal and informal institutional dynamics provides a nuanced lens for anti-corruption strategies. Recognizing how patronage networks, social norms, and organizational incentives interact with bureaucratic structures enables more context-sensitive interventions that strengthen compliance and reduce governance leakage [5].

- **Crisis Governance** – The growing emphasis on digital and relational capacities highlights the importance of adaptability and rapid response. Administrative systems can enhance crisis preparedness by investing in data infrastructures, real-time coordination mechanisms, and inter-agency communication, while maintaining legitimacy and public trust during emergencies such as pandemics, climate shocks, or security crises [3,10].
- **Development Planning** – Linking capacity with developmental outcomes allows governments to align fiscal, administrative, and regulatory resources with strategic priorities. Targeted sectoral interventions in health, education, environment, and social protection can benefit from empirical insights into bureaucratic performance, implementation bottlenecks, and intergovernmental coordination.
- **Post-Conflict Reconstruction** – Fragile states often face simultaneously low administrative capacity, weak legitimacy, and contested authority. By mapping the interplay between formal institutions and informal power, reconstruction strategies can prioritize the restoration of administrative systems, capacity-building in essential ministries, and engagement with local governance networks to foster stability and sustainable development [2,5].

By applying these lessons, public administrators can move from reactive management to strategic capacity building, ensuring that bureaucracies are equipped to meet contemporary governance challenges. Moreover, these insights reinforce the importance of aligning theory and practice, demonstrating that state capacity is not merely an abstract attribute but a tangible, actionable phenomenon that shapes everyday governance outcomes.

7. Future Research Agenda

The evolution of state capacity research over the past five decades highlights significant conceptual, methodological, empirical, and normative gaps. To advance both theory and practice in public administration, future research must engage with these gaps in an integrated manner. This section proposes a structured agenda organized into four interrelated research frontiers: conceptual, methodological, empirical, and normative [18-20]. Together, these frontiers provide a roadmap for advancing state capacity scholarship in ways that are theoretically robust, empirically grounded, and socially relevant.

7.1. Conceptual Frontiers

- **Capacity–Legitimacy Integration**

While extensive research has examined capacity and legitimacy separately, their intersection remains underdeveloped. Future studies should theorize how states achieve *effective legitimacy through capacity*, considering both structural competence and

relational embedding. Integrating legitimacy into conceptual models will allow scholars to examine the conditions under which administrative effectiveness translates into societal compliance, political stability, and public trust. Multi-level frameworks can map interactions between national institutions, subnational administrations, and local communities to understand the dynamic feedback loops between capacity and legitimacy.

- **Ethical and Ecological State Capacity**

Emerging global challenges climate change, resource scarcity, and technological disruptions require conceptual extensions of state capacity to include ethical and ecological dimensions. Research can examine how states incorporate sustainability, environmental stewardship, and intergenerational equity into governance processes [21]. Ethical state capacity encompasses decision-making that balances efficiency, fairness, and long-term societal wellbeing, integrating public administration with global sustainability frameworks and policy ethics.

7.2. Methodological Frontiers

- **Mixed-Methods Capacity Research**

- While macro-level quantitative indices provide cross-national comparability, they often obscure internal administrative processes. Future research should combine large-N datasets with qualitative, case-based analyses to explore the mechanisms that drive capacity outcomes. For instance, integrating fiscal extraction data with organizational ethnography can reveal how bureaucratic culture mediates the implementation of national policy objectives [22-25].

- **Bureaucratic Ethnography**

Ethnographic and field-based approaches are critical for understanding the lived realities of public administration. Future studies should investigate how frontline bureaucrats, mid-level managers, and local officials exercise discretion, negotiate informal norms, and interact with citizens [26]. Bureaucratic ethnography can illuminate the micro-foundations of capacity, revealing how institutional rules are interpreted, adapted, or circumvented in practice.

- **AI and Administrative Intelligence**

The rise of artificial intelligence and digital governance systems presents both opportunities and challenges for state capacity. Research should examine how AI-driven decision support, predictive analytics, and automated service delivery enhance administrative efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness. Simultaneously, scholars must critically assess risks related to bias, transparency, and the displacement of human judgment, ensuring that technological adoption strengthens rather than undermines governance.

7.3. Empirical Frontiers

- **Subnational Capacity**

Capacity is unevenly distributed within states. Future research should explore regional, provincial, and municipal capacities, particularly in federal or decentralized systems [21]. Comparative studies can examine how local administrative competencies interact with national priorities, shaping outcomes in service delivery, crisis response, and development planning.

- **Street-Level Bureaucratic Power**

Street-level bureaucrats often exercise discretion that directly affects policy outcomes. Investigating how these actors influence implementation can provide insights into administrative variability, citizen experience, and organizational learning. Research should examine the determinants of discretion, including workload, training, cultural norms, and incentive structures.

- **Informal Institutions**

Empirical studies must address the interaction between formal rules and informal power networks [27-30]. Informal institutions—patronage, social norms, elite bargaining—can facilitate or undermine administrative objectives. Understanding this interplay is essential for designing context-sensitive reforms that enhance effectiveness while mitigating governance risks.

7.4. Normative Frontiers

- **State Capacity and Justice**

Future research should examine how capacity intersects with distributive, procedural, and social justice. Scholars can investigate how administrative competence affects equitable service delivery, fair policy implementation, and access to rights. Normative frameworks that incorporate justice into capacity analyses can guide reforms toward inclusive governance.

- **Capacity in Democratic Decline**

- Rising authoritarianism and democratic erosion pose new challenges for state capacity. Research should explore how weakening democratic institutions impacts administrative effectiveness, policy legitimacy, and resilience [31]. Comparative studies can illuminate strategies for maintaining capacity under conditions of political instability or democratic backsliding.

- **Capacity and Inequality**

Capacity is unequally distributed across regions, sectors, and social groups. Future studies should investigate how administrative structures contribute to or mitigate inequality. Integrating socioeconomic, gender, and ethnic dimensions into capacity research can inform policies aimed at reducing disparities while improving governance performance.



Figure 4: Integrated Future Research Framework

This figure can visualize the four research frontiers conceptual, methodological, empirical, normative showing interconnections and feedback loops:

- Conceptual drives the theoretical lens applied across empirical studies.
- Methodological provides tools to operationalize and validate conceptual insights.
- Empirical ensures context-sensitive, multi-level data inform theory and practice.
- Normative aligns research with ethical, justice-oriented, and societal goals.

The integrated framework highlights that advancing state capacity scholarship requires simultaneous attention to theory, method, evidence, and values. By pursuing this agenda, future research can enhance public administration scholarship while equipping policymakers and practitioners to address contemporary governance challenges with both rigor and relevance [32-35].

8. Conclusion

This review has synthesized five decades of state capacity research, offering a comprehensive assessment of its conceptual, empirical, methodological, and practical evolution. By tracing the trajectory from the first wave's emphasis on autonomy and bureaucratic extraction to the current focus on digital, adaptive, and crisis-responsive governance, the study demonstrates the increasing complexity and multidimensionality of the concept [36]. Each wave has contributed distinct insights: historical analyses highlighted structural foundations; developmental and governance perspectives emphasized embeddedness and relational networks; measurement innovations enabled comparative empirical evaluation; sectoral and implementation studies captured organizational heterogeneity; and the recent focus on resilience and digitalization foregrounds responsiveness, legitimacy, and technological integration [37].

The review repositions state capacity as a central analytical bridge between political science and public administration, highlighting its relevance not only as a theoretical construct but also as an operational tool for governance. By integrating autonomy, legitimacy, technocracy, politics, and formal–informal institutional dynamics, this synthesis underscores that effective public administration requires both structural competence and relational embeddedness. Moreover, the empirical patterns across sectors, regions, and levels of government reveal significant heterogeneity, illustrating that capacity is neither uniform nor static but contingent upon historical, social, and political contexts [38].

From a practical perspective, the findings have significant implications for global policy and governance practice. Insights into administrative reform, anti-corruption strategies, crisis management, developmental planning, and post-conflict reconstruction demonstrate how multidimensional capacity frameworks can guide evidence-based interventions. Additionally, the proposed future research agenda spanning conceptual, methodological, empirical, and normative frontiers provides a roadmap for advancing scholarship while addressing emerging challenges such as digital governance, democratic erosion, inequality, and sustainability.

In sum, this review consolidates the state of knowledge, identifies persistent debates, and provides actionable insights for both scholars and practitioners. By bridging historical understanding with contemporary challenges, it affirms that state capacity is a critical determinant of governance effectiveness, societal resilience, and sustainable development [39,40]. For public administration scholarship, this synthesis offers both a robust theoretical foundation and a practical lens through which to navigate the evolving demands of twenty-first-century governance.

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