

The Overloaded State

Research and political reasoning



State capacity, public-service implementation and lawful accountability

Start without advance reading

You can start here without reading a journal article beforehand. The two article explanations inside this assignment provide the research you need. Read them as part of the activity and return to them while answering. The original articles and further reading are available for optional follow-up.

Research words in everyday language

A claim is a conclusion you want to check. A hypothesis is a possible explanation. A mechanism is the sequence of steps through which something happens: who acts, what they do, and how that could produce a result.

A rival explanation is another plausible cause of that same result. A prediction says what you would expect to see if an explanation were right. Your job is to compare those predictions with evidence, not guess which opinion your instructor prefers.

An outcome is the result being measured. The population is the group you want to understand. The sample is the people actually studied. The unit of observation is who or what each record describes; a number's unit tells you whether it is a count, a percentage, hours, or score points.

The numerator is the number being counted. The denominator is the whole group used to calculate a percentage: 8 out of 20 means 8 divided by 20. A percentage-point difference subtracts one percentage from another.

An association means two things appear together in the data. It does not by itself tell you which caused which. Random assignment puts people into conditions by chance; a comparison then asks whether changing a feature changes the measured result.

A study's limits tell you what its evidence cannot establish. An uncertainty interval is a range describing how uncertain an estimate is under the analysis used. When an interval for a difference includes zero, it does not clearly distinguish a difference from no difference. That does not prove the true effect is exactly zero.

You do not need to memorize technical names or article statistics. Use the explanations, worked examples and records on screen. In your answer, make the reasoning visible: a specific detail, what it supports, and what remains uncertain.

The research question

These sources connect comparative research about overloaded agencies with a newer argument about threats to state capacity. Article A investigates social and environmental policies across 21 OECD countries. Article B asks how procedures and political pressure can damage delivery even in an established administrative system. They offer related explanations at different scales, not two experiments testing the same reform. Connecting policy design and delivery (vertical policy-process integration) separates designers' responsibility for resources from implementers' route for practical information.

Article A argues that policy designers need responsibility for implementation costs and access to implementers' experience. Article B explicitly cites that study and extends the question to accumulated procedures and political control. The authors are not opponents in a published dispute. Their combined argument creates a practical tension: tighter control may look responsive, while successful delivery can depend on expertise, candid feedback, and discretion protected against abuse.

This packet contains the complete teaching explanations for the two core articles and links to the primary texts. It keeps article findings separate from invented local cases. Read the primary texts when checking a citation, design detail or contested inference.

Article A Bureaucratic Quality and the Gap between Implementation Burden and Administrative Capacities

Xavier Fernández-i-Marín, Christoph Knill, Christina Steinbacher, and Yves Steinebach (2024). American Political Science Review. 118(3): 1240–1260 · DOI 10.1017/S0003055423001090

Dates

First online 9 November 2023; issue August 2024. The comparative observations cover 1976–2018.

Access

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Lens

Capacity must be judged against what agencies are asked to do. Connecting policy designers with implementers can help keep responsibilities and capacity in balance.

Read first

Start with the explanation on this screen. Then check what was compared, what was found, and what remains uncertain. The journal article link is optional.

Sections

Read Explaining the Gap: The Impact of VPI; Research Design; Empirical Findings and Discussion; and Conclusion.

Reading summary

The study asks why some democracies keep implementation responsibilities better aligned with capacity. Across 21 OECD countries, stronger links between policy design and delivery accompany smaller gaps. Resources, responsibility, and implementers' practical voice matter together.

[Complete publisher text](#)

Research explanation

In everyday terms: governments can promise more work than their agencies can carry out. This study asks whether connecting the people who design policies with the people who deliver them helps prevent that mismatch.

Why does government keep making promises that its agencies struggle to fulfill? The authors distinguish implementation burden from administrative capacity. Implementation burden is the work needed to apply, monitor, and enforce public policies. Administrative capacity is the ability to perform that work: relevant expertise, resources, organization, and information. An agency can have considerable capacity yet be overloaded if its responsibilities grow faster. This is the burden-capacity gap: a mismatch between assigned work and ability to deliver it. For example, an invented school-library program can purchase books while failing to provide librarians who catalog them and make them usable. This illustration explains the distinction; it is not an observation in the study.

The proposed explanation begins with the incentives of policy designers. Politicians receive visible credit for introducing a benefit or environmental protection. The less visible costs of processing claims or inspecting compliance may fall on another agency or level of government. If those costs can be passed down, the people making promises have weaker incentives to provide what implementation requires.

The authors call connecting policy design and delivery vertical policy-process integration. Top-down integration means policy designers share responsibility for implementation resources, structures, and success. It does not simply mean giving more orders. Bottom-up integration means implementers can organize their concerns, be consulted, and feed practical experience into evaluations and policy design. Their information can reveal a missing resource or a rule that does not fit real cases. Either connection can help align promises with delivery; both can work together.

Method

The researchers compare social and environmental policy in 21 OECD countries from 1976 to 2018. They trace policy targets and instruments in legislation to estimate how much implementation work accumulates. They combine several indicators of administrative quality with sector-specific information to estimate capacity, and examine whether stronger connections between designers and implementers accompany smaller gaps.

The statistical analysis considers other country characteristics and changes over time. It also uses 36 interviews with implementers in Denmark and Italy to check whether contrasting national scores fit work experience. The countries were selected for that check; the interviews are not a representative poll of all public employees.

Findings

Stronger integration is associated with smaller burden-capacity gaps in both sectors. The bottom-up relationship tends to be more pronounced. In environmental policy, improved integration connects particularly with greater capacity rather than simply fewer policies. The finding supports workable delivery arrangements, not a blanket demand to stop adopting protections or benefits.

Limits

This is observational comparative evidence, not random assignment of local offices to reforms. Its measures summarize whole policy sectors; counting targets and instruments can miss complexity added to existing rules. It cannot forecast how many additional cases a particular local reform would complete. A local decision requires its own diagnosis and follow-up.

Technical details

The environmental policy fields are air and climate, water, and nature protection; social fields are pensions, unemployment, and child benefits. Legislative targets and instruments proxy implementation load, rather than recording the time needed for every action.

Capacity is estimated with a Bayesian latent-variable model combining general indicators and sector-specific information. The relationship model includes lagged predictors, autoregressive dynamics, decade effects, and country-clustered errors. Statistical adjustment is not random assignment.

The authors examine alternative assumptions about learning as agencies gain experience with policy instruments. They also identify omitted complexity from changes to existing rules as a limitation. The study's standardized burden-capacity measure should not be treated as a local applications-per-week count.

Evidence receipts

Which gap?

An agency's resources must be interpreted relative to its responsibilities. Funding a benefit and funding the skilled work required to deliver it are different commitments.

Which connection?

Top-down integration assigns policy designers responsibility for implementation costs and success. Bottom-up integration creates a route for implementers' experience to influence policy. Neither is simply a count of meetings or instructions.

Which evidence?

The study compares social and environmental policies in 21 OECD countries, 1976–2018, and checks contrasting experiences through 36 interviews in Denmark and Italy. Greater integration accompanies a smaller gap.

Which boundary?

Aggregate measures and observational comparisons provide useful evidence about institutional arrangements. They do not estimate a precise weekly effect of adding staff or removing a local approval step.

Article B Rescuing state capacity: Proceduralism, the new politicization, and public policy

Donald P. Moynihan (2025). Journal of Policy Analysis and Management. 44(2): 364–378 · DOI 10.1002/pam.22673

Dates

First published online 17 February 2025. A presidential-address essay about threats to capacity, particularly in the United States.

Access

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Lens

Delivery can weaken when procedures overwhelm public goals or political pressure undermines expertise, retention, and truthful information.

Read first

Start with the explanation on this screen. Then check what was compared, what was found, and what remains uncertain. The journal article link is optional.

Sections

Read Defining State Capacity; Proceduralism; The New Model of Politicization; and Conclusion.

Reading summary

This essay explains why accumulated constraints and a new form of political control may damage public delivery. It synthesizes existing research and argues for protecting the expertise, trust, and practical flexibility that capacity requires.

[Complete publisher text](#)

Research explanation

In everyday terms: this essay asks how too many approval steps or political pressure can stop a government agency from doing its job. It also asks which procedures protect people and which get in the way.

What can weaken government's ability to act even when a policy is funded? Moynihan treats state capacity as the potential to carry out public tasks. Skilled staff and effective

organizations take time to build. Their value can remain invisible until a service fails. He focuses on two threats: proceduralism and politicization.

Proceduralism develops when rules, approval steps, and fear of blame become so dominant that they frustrate the public goal. After a failure, leaders often add another check. Workers may then spend more time documenting compliance or waiting for permission. In an unrelated invented library example, purchasing the same inexpensive book could require several repeated authorizations before students can borrow it. Yet procedures can protect fairness, participation, and due process. The argument requires examining which steps provide protection and which add avoidable obstruction; it does not make every safeguard a mistake.

Politicization can weaken capacity through a different process. If personal loyalty becomes more important than competence, appointments and incentives change. Skilled employees may leave or stop investing in expertise. Workers may fear reporting problems that embarrass leaders. The agency can become more obedient to an executive while becoming less able to deliver lawful, reliable services or respond to other legitimate public institutions.

The two threats can reinforce one another. Slow procedures can be described as officials' resistance, creating a rationale for stronger political control. Political abuse can then prompt additional procedural protections. Helpful discretion requires trust that officials will use it competently and fairly; intimidation or favoritism can undermine that trust.

Method

This is a research-informed essay and presidential address, not a newly conducted experiment or a systematic review. Moynihan discusses American institutions around President Trump's return to office and draws on studies of hiring, turnover, public performance, and information. He explicitly cites article A when describing how new policy demands can overwhelm delivery.

The cited research comes from different historical and national settings. It supplies reasons to take the mechanisms seriously, but the essay does not combine those studies into one new estimate of what a specific reform will achieve.

Findings

The central conclusion is that flexibility, better hiring, and candid learning can be undermined by a workplace that punishes unwelcome information or devalues expertise. Responsiveness should include successful policy delivery and accountability to legitimate public actors, rather than only compliance with a leader's wishes.

Limits

Moynihan calls the new model of politicization provisional. The essay was published in early 2025, so it is not a record of all subsequent events. It cannot establish a dominant mechanism in a particular local agency or guarantee a reform outcome. Those claims need direct evidence about workflow, staff, decisions, and public results.

Technical details

The new model discussed in the essay includes a personalist presidency, governance through fear and conspiratorial messages directed at public employees, and weakened distinctions and protections between career officials and appointees.

Its cited mechanisms include selection of staff by connections or loyalty, exits, reduced investment in expertise, short time horizons, chilling of information, and risks of corruption. These are drawn from distinct studies and settings, not a single newly estimated chain.

The conclusion distinguishes proceduralism, which can accumulate through institutional blind spots and blame avoidance, from politicization as a choice by political elites. It calls for descriptive and causal research into the scale and consequences of the changing pattern.

Evidence receipts

What kind of source?

The publisher identifies the article as a presidential address. Moynihan calls it an essay and says it is not a systematic review. Its mechanisms draw on existing research rather than a new local reform trial.

Which procedural problem?

A step can have a legitimate purpose but accumulate delays or induce overcompliance. Examine the protection provided as well as the time consumed. Removing an obstructive duplicate is different from removing the underlying right or eligibility standard.

Which political problem?

Loyalty-based control can encourage loss of expertise and suppression of accurate but unwelcome information. More responsiveness to one leader does not automatically mean better service or broader accountability.

How does it connect to A?

Moynihan cites the overload study and extends its concern. A route for practical feedback helps little if employees believe honestly reporting a problem will put their jobs at risk.

Further reading

The Political Economy of Bureaucratic Overload: Evidence from Rural Development Officials in India

Aditya Dasgupta and Devesh Kapur (2020). American Political Science Review. 114(4): 1316–1334 · DOI 10.1017/S0003055420000477

Primary publisher article; check the available full-text options.

A study of rural development officials in India examining responsibilities, resources, and the political conditions of overload. It offers a different administrative setting from article A's OECD comparison.

When political leaders add tasks, who carries the work, who receives credit, and who can demand more resources?

[Complete publisher text](#)

Strengthening State Capacity: Civil Service Reform and Public Sector Performance during the Gilded Age

Abhay Aneja and Guo Xu (2024). American Economic Review. 114(8): 2352–2387 · DOI 10.1257/aer.20230019

Publisher page offers a complimentary full-text PDF.

Historical research on civil service reform and postal performance in the United States. It lets readers investigate evidence about workforce arrangements and delivery beyond the mechanisms summarized in Moynihan's essay.

How could changes in recruitment and staff continuity affect performance even when formal service goals remain the same?

[Complete publisher text](#)

Political Control and Bureaucratic Resistance: The Case of Environmental Agencies in Brazil

Katherine Bersch and Gabriela Lotta (2024). Latin American Politics and Society. 66(1): 27-50 · DOI 10.1017/lap.2023.22

Primary publisher article; check the available full-text options.

Research on political control and bureaucratic responses in Brazilian environmental agencies. Moynihan cites it when discussing how pressure can damage the flow of uncongenial information.

When does bureaucratic pushback preserve lawful expertise, and what evidence would distinguish that from obstruction of legitimate policy?

[Complete publisher text](#)