

1 Introduction

Conventional, state-centric approaches to politics and development often cannot explain political behaviour and development outcomes. Consider the following: a Ghanaian bureaucrat, learning that her chief has entered the queue for service, draws him to the front of the line and proceeds to process his papers. A Yemeni policeman, intent on arresting a citizen for a criminal offence, seeks permission from a local shaykh before making the arrest. A Jordanian voter supports a candidate from her tribe, even though she neither likes the candidate nor expects him to win. An American in South Dakota heeds a bishop's call to be vaccinated, but he would not listen to the same call if it was made by either his senator or the head of his state's medical association.

At first glance, these are prime examples of corruption, inefficiency, and irrationality. The Ghanaian bureaucrat has violated administrative rules that prescribe equal treatment to citizens, regardless of identity. The Yemeni policeman has wasted precious time and effort to approach the shaykh, whose permission is not technically required, before making the arrest. The Jordanian voted neither in her interest nor strategically, casting a ballot for someone she neither likes nor expects to win. And the American listened to his religious leader rather than the politician, who presumably best understands the necessary policy measures, or the physician, who has medical expertise.

Such choices are not only common but also demonstrate rational compliance with institutional rules. They are explained by the fact that citizens, public service providers, and even state officials are members of various communities – such as religious orders, family or kinship groups, or ethnic communities – which make claims on them and shape their actions. The Ghanaian bureaucrat is also a tribal member, expected to show deference to her chief. She realizes that failing to do so is both disrespectful and undermines relationships with her tribal community, which often forms the 'de facto insurance model [for] millions of Africans' (Pankani, 2014, p. 26). The Yemeni policeman, embedded in a tribal system, recognizes that shaykhs view arrests of 'their' tribal members as a threat to their sovereignty and an affront to their honour. The officer knows that it 'would be a foolhardy official who imprisoned a man without his shaykh's permission', and thus allows the shaykh to deliver suspects into government custody in order to avoid confrontation (Weir, 2007, p. 188). The Jordanian voter sees casting her ballot as a chance to demonstrate allegiance to her kin and help to demonstrate their 'presence' on a national stage, as much as a chance to choose a Member of Parliament (Lust-Okar, 2009). And the South Dakotan needs to respect the religious leader, whose authority and influence extend far beyond spiritual matters (Viskupic and Wiltse, 2022). The political capture,

corruption, and clientelism that frustrate analysts and policymakers are often better understood as the ‘winning out’ of, and compliance with, social institutions in competing arenas of authority.

Indeed, acts frequently understood solely as political behaviour or public service provision, associated with the state, are often also social acts. Those attending to a patient at a public clinic, upholding public order, or engaging in elections are likewise members of religious, geographic, kinship, and other communities, associated with arenas of authority and attendant social institutions. These social institutions dictate the roles individuals hold, shape the distribution of power, delineate acceptable behaviour, and determine the benefits of compliance and the costs of transgression. They also affect how people make sense of the world. This gives behaviours new meanings, or what Lisa Wedeen (2002) calls ‘multiple significations’. Public service delivery and political engagement are not only a chance to heal the sick, maintain security, or select an official representative, but they are also often opportunities to respond to social obligations, maintain networks that provide social assistance, demonstrate respect for elders, and safeguard social order.

Thus, the state and its institutions are not the only, or even always the most important, drivers of the everyday choices that constitute politics and development. The functions typically associated with the state (e.g., the exercise of power leading to the provision of services, security, and community welfare) are in fact not *state* imperatives but essentials for any organized community. Moreover, individuals who engage in these efforts are not only citizens but also members of other communities. As such, they have a shared identity and an interest in enhancing the community welfare and perpetuating its existence. They exist within *arenas of authority* – spheres of engagement that are characterized by expected allegiances, established authorities, and distributions of power. And within these arenas, individuals’ actions are shaped by *social institutions*, which seek to circumscribe the individuals’ actions over sets of issues in an attempt to ensure the community’s survival. These define roles within the community, the rules of engagement, and rewards that result.

The insight that actors and institutions outside the state affect political actions is not new. As early as the 1970s, Peter Ekeh (1975) argued that Africa had two ‘publics’: a ‘primordial public’, in which ‘primordial groupings, ties, and sentiments influence and determine the individual’s public behaviour’, and a ‘civic public’, which was ‘historically associated with the colonial administration’. James Scott (1972), writing at nearly the same time, turned our attention to how patron–client relationships – or the social ‘exchange relationships between roles’ – affected elections and parties. Yet, these analysts and others that followed them privileged the state as they sought to understand politics and

craft development programmes.¹ They viewed an effective state as the sine qua non of good governance and development, and placed social – or ‘non-state’ – actors and institutions in juxtaposition to it: they simply reinforce, complement, or replace state institutions. Indeed, the very existence of influential authorities and institutions outside the state can be evidence of pathology. In the conventional view of an ideal world, non-state authorities and social institutions are not the primary drivers of appropriate political behaviour and development.

1.1 Privileging the State

That conventional approaches to politics and development privilege the state is perhaps not surprising. The scholars, practitioners, and policymakers aiming to shape the distribution of power and resources in a manner that enhances human welfare – that is, to engage in the essence of politics and development – are closely linked to the state. They often sit in or hail from departments of government, politics, or economics, where – at least since Gerschenkron (1952) – the state is considered to be the driving force behind development. They work with or in the World Bank, the United Nations, and other multilateral organizations, for whom states are both the major funders and primary interlocutors. They use available official (i.e., state-based) statistics, gathered by the state’s machinery in the interest of legibility, to implement research, pinpoint citizens’ needs, and assess policy impacts.

These scholars, practitioners, and policymakers generally focus on the strength of the state or the nature of its institutions, and they seek development solutions through state-building or institutional engineering. Even when they take social and economic contexts into account, considering how social identities or endowments affect outcomes, they largely overlook the variation in social institutions that compete or intersect with political institutions to shape individuals’ actions. In the state-centric perspective, outcomes that deviate from expectations are ‘failures’: problems of ‘corruption’ or ‘clientelism’ to be solved through the strengthening and reform of state institutions.

The dominant state-centric perspective impedes our efforts to bring non-state arenas of authority and social institutions fully into the study of, and programming around, politics and development. First, it portrays actors and institutions as *either* state *or* non-state, ignoring differences among non-state arenas and institutions. Empirically there are multiple arenas outside the state, based on different notions of community (e.g., religion, ethnicity, locality, economy),

¹ Both Scott (1972, p. 91) and Ekeh (1975, p. 92) explicitly view clientelism and primordial publics as something to be outgrown over time.

with different distributions of power and institutional arrangements. Yet, scholars, practitioners, and policymakers too frequently lump these together as an undifferentiated ‘residual’, focusing on the absence of ‘healthy’ state institutions rather than the presence of alternatives that drive outcomes. Other times, they focus on a single arena – for instance, the relationship between tribe and state, religion and politics, or ethnicity and service provision. In doing so, they often overlook important questions about the extent to which different arenas and institutions drive development.

Second, the focus on the state diverts the efforts of political scientists and development specialists away from developing a comprehensive and coherent framework for understanding non-state arenas of authority and related social institutions. Contrast the conceptualization and study of the state and its institutions with that of other arenas of authority and associated social institutions. Particularly since Skocpol (1985) called on scholars to ‘Bring the State Back In’ and March and Olsen (1984) (re)turned our attention to institutions, the state and its institutions have been a centre of attention. It is an entity with notions of communities and belonging (nations), regimes and authority, which shape the distribution of power and constrain members in ways that go beyond the sum of its institutions. The state is also recognized as having independent interests and more or less autonomy from societal actors (i.e., strength). Moreover, its institutions are distinguished in terms of (relatively) well-developed conceptual categories (e.g., democracies and autocracies, centralized and decentralized administration, proportional representation or majoritarian electoral systems). Explicitly recognizing variations in state strength and institutional arrangements facilitates theory testing, helps clarify scope conditions within which theories should hold, allows for distinguishing between institutional and contextual factors, and provides a scaffolding on which to place new findings.

The study of non-state arenas and social institutions lacks such crisp, well-established conceptual categories and frameworks of study. Political scientists recognize arenas of authority outside the state and related social institutions, but the language and frameworks they employ are less fully elaborated than those used to study the state’s role in governance and development. Researchers and practitioners recognize the importance of different non-state authorities, but they often focus on specific authorities (e.g., traditional authorities, gang leaders, warlords) and thus leave open questions of when and why different authorities have influence.² So too, they use the term ‘social institutions’ to denote very different concepts, ranging from *organizations*

² On different forms of non-state authorities, see Arjona (2016), Arjona et al. (2015), Baldwin (2016), Cammett and MacLean (2014), Cruz et al. (2020), Magaloni et al. (2020), Murtazashvili (2016), and Post et al. (2017).

that are either non- or semi-state³ to informal rules followed by state actors (e.g., Helmke and Levitsky, 2004; 2006). Finally, researchers highlight different aspects of non-state arenas and social institutions, focusing on networks or specific rules.⁴ However, they do not place these components in a broader framework. Without a unified language and framework of study, it is difficult to compare or reconcile diverse findings, accumulate knowledge, and achieve theoretical advances and practical insights for programming.

Third, and somewhat ironically, a state-centric approach impedes the study of the state. Assuming state predominance and under-theorizing social institutions not only precludes a full understanding of how social authorities and institutions affect governance and development outcomes, but it also distorts the view of the state. Reducing social institutions to context and under-specifying their variation makes it difficult to understand the role that state institutions truly play. Where the state is weak and social authorities are readily visible, their presence is viewed as a problem to be solved rather than forces to be understood. Where the state is apparently strong, social authorities and institutions are viewed as ineffectual and unimportant, even though they may be critical in shaping governance. Even multi- and bilateral development agents for whom state actors will remain the primary interlocutors need a clearer understanding of non-state arenas of authority and social institutions in order to be effective.

1.2 Competing Claims and Individuals' Choices

The perspective I present here is not simply that non-state arenas of authority and associated social institutions shape individuals' choices but that multiple communities often vie for control over their actions. The Ghanaian bureaucrat, Yemeni policeman, Jordanian voter, and American citizen presented earlier do not respond *only* to their kin, tribe, or religious arenas of authority any more than they respond solely to the state. The strengths of arenas vary across space and time, as well as for different individuals, depending on their position within the community (e.g., leader versus follower, elder versus youth). Often, the inelasticity of social demands becomes all too evident; particularly within development settings, institutions outside the state that shape actions lead to outcomes contra state and programming objectives. At other times, the state

³ These include, for instance, unelected, non-state local governance councils analysed by Khan Mohmand and Mihajlović (2016) or service-providing organizations that are the focus of Cammett and MacLean (2014).

⁴ On networks, see Arias et al. (2019), Cruz (2019), Cruz et al. (2020), and Ravanilla et al. (2021). Rules include those regarding altruism, reciprocity, or group boundary maintenance (Ambec, 2008; Bowles et al., 2003; Fearon and Laitin, 1996; Kruks-Wisner, 2018; Lieberman, 2009) and lineage systems (Brulé and Gaikwad, 2021; Robinson and Gottlieb, 2019).

may wrest control from even powerful non-state authorities, either by acting alone or in conjunction with other arenas.

The social institutions within arenas of authority also vary, creating different incentives for members within them. Expectations differ across even seemingly identical arenas of authority. Take, for example, local and international religious arenas – even of the same denomination. At times, these make competing demands on members, forcing members to choose between them. This was evident over the backlash to Pope Francis’ 2016 *Amoris Laetitia*. Papal supremacy called for holistic sexual education for children, reintegration of divorced and remarried Catholics into the church, and respect for LGBTQ individuals, but many local dioceses – and a great number of individual Catholics – chose to ignore this newest apostolic exhortation. Therefore, in voting for the ‘bathroom bills’, proposed in US state legislatures between 2017 and 2019 as a way to limit accommodation of non-cisgender individuals, the arena of authority governing Catholic voters’ decisions could be *either* aligned with the Papal seat (which would be against the restrictive legislation) *or* with the competing religious interpretation within their local community (thereby validating discriminatory practices against LGBTQ individuals). When multiple arenas of authority make contradictory demands, individuals are forced to respond to some arenas over others.

Thus, understanding political behaviour and development outcomes requires that one recognizes both the importance of competing arenas of authority and the nature of the social institutions within them. Rather than view citizens and state officials as relating their actions solely, or even primarily, to the state, I argue that we need to start by considering how individuals – voters, public service providers, bureaucrats, politicians, and others – understand the acts in which they engage. Actions such as voting, dispute resolution, and public service provision *are engagements with the state, but they are also, critically, engagements in multiple other arenas of authority*. So too, actors are not ‘either’ state or non-state, political or social, but often acting simultaneously as players in multiple arenas. The apt question is not ‘is the service provision, election, or political behaviour in question located within the state realm?’ – and thus shaped by state institutions – but rather, ‘when individuals engage in these actions, what meaning do they attach to the actions?’ Which arenas of authority make demands upon them, what do they believe is expected of them in each, and with what consequences?

1.3 Plan of the Element

In this Element, I aim to overcome problems of the dominant state-centric perspective by setting state and non-state authorities and institutions on equal

intellectual footing, providing a structure for accumulating knowledge about how these competing arenas and social institutions influence politics and development, and reconsidering the state. To do so, I take a ‘bottom-up’ approach that focuses on the perspective of individuals – voters, public service providers, bureaucrats, politicians, and others – and considers how their simultaneous membership in various arenas of authority shapes their choices and, ultimately, governance and development. I focus on how the everyday choices before individuals may take multiple meanings, provide guidance on how to understand the extent to which different arenas of authority influence actions, and illustrate how differences in social institutions affect individual choices and outcomes.

This Element is intended for two audiences. For scholars, I aim to bring together currently disparate findings from extant research, highlight general themes found in empirically rich but contextually specific (and less accessible) regional studies, provide a new perspective on governance and development, and pose questions for future research. For practitioners, I hope to help develop a structure for programming that is less prone to problems of isomorphism and state centrality than conventional approaches, and yet also less indeterminate than some of the existing alternative approaches. The goal is to provide a structure and language that allow scholars, practitioners, and others interested in politics and development to make sense of the many compelling studies to date, to structure research moving forward, and to design programmes that take these findings into account.

The Element proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature. It finds that state-centric and institutional approaches have dominated the study of and programming around political behaviour and development, while alternative approaches that highlight the complexity of development make it difficult for scholars and programmers to build on past experiences. Section 3 presents arenas of authority and social institutions, the building blocks of the framework. Sections 4–6 examine how arenas of authority and the social institutions within them affect political behaviour and development. Section 4 provides guidance on how to determine the extent to which competing arenas of authority influence decisions at the core of politics and development, while Section 5 turns attention to how variations in the social institutions within these arenas shape outcomes. Section 6 examines how social institutions within the arenas of authority outside the state affect state institutions. Section 7 concludes by considering how we can use the approach presented here in future research and programming and exploring unanswered questions.

Before proceeding, two caveats are in order. First, although I adopt the language of state and non-state institutions, I am uneasy with the distinction.

As argued in Section 6, the distinction between state and non-state institutions is often overdrawn, and the boundary itself may be a useful subject of enquiry (see Mitchell, 1991). It is perhaps more apt to speak in terms of the basis of authority on which actors and institutions rest. The second caveat relates to the scope of this Element. I focus on the Global South throughout much of this text, but the social institutions discussed are not limited to what Western readers may think of as ‘those places’. I emphasize the Global South because that is where the vast majority of programming is implemented, but the issues raised very much describe life in Gothenburg, Sweden; New Haven, Connecticut; Marshall, Michigan; and elsewhere as well.

2 State Centrality in Politics and Development

This section examines how the existing literature on politics and development addresses arenas of authority outside the state and the social institutions within them. Broadly speaking, there are four approaches. I call the first two ‘conventional approaches’. Both place the state and its institutions centre stage and presume a duality between state and society. The first approach focuses directly on the state, while the second emphasizes society. A third focuses on institutions within non-state arenas but does not fully consider the existence of competing arenas of authority. Finally, the fourth explores how membership in multiple communities shapes individuals’ lived experiences but pays little attention to institutional arrangements. All of the existing studies of politics and development thus point, more or less, to the importance of competing arenas of authority and the social institutions within them. However, they do not provide a unified language and overarching perspective required for knowledge accumulation and development programming.

2.1 Conventional State-Centric Approach

Most political scientists and development practitioners privilege the state. Early modernization theorists (e.g., Lerner, 1958; Lipset, 1959; Rustow, 1970) presumed the state seeks, and ultimately will achieve and maintain, the monopoly over the legitimate use of force in a given territory, providing security and welfare to people therein.⁵ The state is the locus of participation and representation, the engine of economic growth and development (Gerschenkron, 1952). In general, these scholars argued that individuals in ‘traditional’ societies held values that constrained their demands on authorities and the state (Almond and Verba, 1963; Lerner, 1958). Economic development – including the spread of

⁵ Conceptually, the state is defined as the set of individuals and organizations that holds power to control the population and resources in a given territory (Fukuyama, 2004; Nordlinger, 1981).

roads, radios, and other aspects of modernization – would lead to greater mobility, expectations, and demands for democracy, which in turn would foster development. There would be hurdles. Huntington (1968) famously argued that the strength of state institutions must keep pace with the level of social mobilization in order to avoid political decay and disorder. Yet, in general, development and democracy went hand in hand, and the state and its institutions were key. The state had the inherent ability to be more organized, technologically savvy, and capable of extending its power than social counterparts, putting them on the defensive. Where the state was not yet dominant, it would – or at least *should* – be so in the future. The question was when.

Contemporary scholars largely reject modernization theory's teleological perspective, and yet many continue to privilege the state. It is by now well-recognized that the state extends power unevenly and often fails to act as early scholars predicted (e.g., Migdal, 1988; Scott, 1972). Nevertheless, many view a high-capacity state as vital for economic growth and human development (see Cingolani, 2018 for a review). State institutions are also key: regime types affect political stability, economic growth, and human development; electoral systems shape voter behaviour, representation, policymaking, and economic welfare; administrative arrangements affect service delivery.⁶ Research in this tradition has led to important insights about the logic of institutional arrangements that can be extended to other arenas of authority as well. Yet, these lessons are often overlooked because scholars in this tradition tend to view forces outside the state as disruptive. They label their impact 'corruption', 'clientelism', or 'low quality government',⁷ and invest their time and energy into determining how state institutions (through the implementation of gender quotas, civil service exams, etc.) can overcome such forces.

Development practitioners also focus on state institutions. Particularly in the early 2000s, many explicitly called for state-building interventions. A report prepared for the UK's Department for International Development noted, 'The need to better understand state-building is not an academic exercise; states are crucially important to the future of those who live under their jurisdiction'

⁶ On the role of regime type on political stability, see Geddes et al. (2018), Knutsen and Nygård (2015), Magaloni (2008), and Smith (2005); on economic growth, see Doucouliagos and Ulubaşoğlu (2008), Gerring et al. (2005), and Przeworski (2000); and on human development, see Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) and Andrews et al. (2017). On electoral systems and voter behaviour, see Bowler et al. (2001), Carey and Shugart (1995), Cox (1997; 2015), Jackman (1987), and Sanz (2017); on representation, see Krook (2018) and Norris (1997); on policymaking and economic welfare, see Carey and Hix (2013) for a short review; Kam et al. (2020). On how administrative arrangements affect service delivery, see Ahmad et al. (2005), Arends (2020), and Bardhan and Mookherjee (2006).

⁷ This approach is evident even among scholars who recognize the variation in these practices. See Ledeneva (2008).

(Whaites, 2008, p. 3). Prior to becoming president of Afghanistan, but after serving as finance minister and in the World Bank, Ashraf Ghani and his co-author, Clare Lockhart, wrote a book calling for greater attention to state-building (Ghani and Lockhart, 2009). In light of spectacular failures in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere, the notion that external actors could successfully build states came under attack (e.g., Krasner, 2011), and ‘state-building’ became a dirty word. Nevertheless, practitioners continued to see the strengthening of ‘core government functions’ and other aspects of the state as the key to development, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states (UNDP and World Bank, 2017).

Consequently, most programming is centred around the state. Major multi-lateral and bilateral development organizations, themselves instruments of states, often focus their programming on state organs, implementing projects around budget support, administrative strengthening, or public infrastructure. Smaller development organizations, too, often partner with government agencies. Thus, even when these organizations engage business, NGOs, or other elements of civil society, they tend to do so privileging the state’s perspective.⁸ Indeed, strengthening the capacity of these actors and organizations to engage the state is often a fundamental goal.

The instruments used to measure governance and development are also state-centric. The Fragile States Index, developed by the Fund for Peace, seeks to measure state capacity. Extant indicators of governance and service delivery (e.g., World Governance Indicators, Quality of Government) focus primarily on participation, transparency, accountability, and other dimensions of governance with respect to the state. Participation in elections or local council meetings is measured, whereas participation in tribal primaries⁹ or non-state councils is not. Moreover, most indicators are at the national level, assuming that the important variation is to be found in national-level state institutions but not in local-level social institutions. Some may view the primacy given to national-level state indicators as reflecting the ease of using available data. Yet not all conventional measures are state collected, and alternatives can exist (see Appendix A for one such alternative). Moreover, measuring governance and development with regard to state institutions not only reflects the privileging of the state, but also contributes to it. Thus, while measures of state capacity and institutions are important, it is also necessary to correct the imbalance between measures of the

⁸ For an insightful discussion of this problem with regard to HIV/AIDs programming privileges the priorities of the state over those of local village headmen in Malawi, see Dionne (2018, chapter 6).

⁹ Tribal primaries are similar to party primaries, but organized by tribes to choose their candidates. These are often well run and highly contested events.