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# DEMOCRACY AND THE QUALITY OF THE STATE

*Francis Fukuyama*

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Why is it that some countries have been able to develop high-quality state administrations that deliver services to their populations with relative efficiency, while others are plagued by corruption, bloated or red-tape-ridden bureaucracies, and incompetence? And what is the relationship between the effectiveness of a state and democracy? Are the two mutually supportive, or is there a tension between good public administration and broad political participation?

The centrality of state quality to good policy outcomes has emerged in a variety of contexts. In the crisis over the euro that began in 2009–10, countries such as Greece and Italy found their banking systems under attack due to their excessively high levels of public debt relative to GDP. While this indebtedness was facilitated by the introduction of the euro, its underlying cause in the Greek and Italian cases was the failure to control public spending. This stood in sharp contrast to the relative budget discipline exercised by Germany, the Scandinavian countries, and the Netherlands. Budget deficits in Greece and Italy were driven, in turn, by the survival in those two countries of a type of clientelistic politics that swelled public employment, facilitated corruption, and led to a low quality of public services.

A similar story can be told about many new democracies that have succeeded in holding elections but have failed to deliver high-quality governance. Brazil, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and South Africa have all been plagued with varying degrees of clientelism, corruption, and ineffective service delivery to large parts of their populations. The inability to “make democracy deliver” in terms of shared growth and

broadly available public goods has in turn weakened the legitimacy of democratic governments. Conversely, the prestige of authoritarian countries like China and Singapore lies in their apparent ability to provide precisely these things despite the absence of formal government accountability.

Democracy is of course an intrinsic good that would be valued regardless of its effects on policy outcomes. But legitimacy (or its absence) can also spring from state performance. Thus if we care about the health of democracies around the world, we must also care about the performance of their governments—that is, the quality of their state bureaucracies.

One way of understanding the relationship of democracy to state performance is to look back historically at a selected set of developed countries and to ask why some of them evolved high-quality, uncorrupt state administrations while others did not. Martin Shefter provided a useful framework for understanding state development in his 1993 book *Political Parties and the State*, one that is still widely used by scholars of comparative politics.<sup>1</sup> He argued that the existence of an effective bureaucracy in the present depends on the historical sequence in which state modernization was undertaken relative to the opening up of the franchise to broader democratic participation. When a Weberian state was consolidated under authoritarian conditions, an “absolutist coalition” developed around it that subsequently protected it from being used as a source of patronage by politicians. This characterized Prussia and later Germany, where the pressures of military competition had led to bureaucratic modernization well before expansion of the franchise.

On the other hand, if a democratic franchise opened up before such modernization had occurred, the state itself became an asset used by politicians seeking to mobilize voters with the lure of public employment. This was true of Greece, one of the first countries in Europe to adopt universal manhood suffrage. A nineteenth-century rural patronage system morphed quickly into a clientelistic form of politics that persists to the present day. Something very similar happened after Italy democratized following the fall of Mussolini, especially in the south, where clientelism, corruption, and state inefficiency became endemic.<sup>2</sup>

The United States constitutes an intermediate case: Clientelism emerged early in the nineteenth century, and the country had a relatively weak state characterized by high levels of patronage and corruption. Yet the foundations for fairly clean, Weberian administration were laid by the start of the twentieth century. While military conflict played a role in the expansion and modernization of the state, reform was driven even more by the demands of a new middle-class coalition that did not have a stake in the old patronage system. As such, the U.S. experience provides a model for contemporary developing countries hoping to reform their state administrations.

Shefter underlined the importance of the supply side of corruption: Patronage and clientelism are possible only when politicians have resources such as public offices or contracts to distribute. Political parties that were initially excluded from power, by contrast, did not have access to these resources and therefore had to mobilize their supporters by appeals to ideology or programmatic policies. Hence in their early years, outsider parties like the German Social Democrats, the British Labour Party, and the Chinese and Vietnamese Communist parties did not employ patronage or clientelism as a mobilizational strategy, though the latter two succumbed to the temptations of rent distribution once in power.

## Four Cases

**Prussia/Germany:** Like China more than two-thousand years earlier, Prussia was a prime example of Charles Tilly's maxim that "war makes the state and the state makes war." Prussia at the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648 was a medium-sized, landlocked German state with no obvious qualifications to be the core of a unified Germany. But in 1660, the Great Elector of Brandenburg Frederick William (1640–88) failed to demobilize his army after the Peace of Oliva, which had brought the Swedish-Polish War to an end, and instead put his country on a permanent wartime footing. Unlike the English kings of this period, the Great Elector and his successors Frederick William I of Prussia (1713–40) and Frederick II ("Frederick the Great," 1740–86) succeeded in undermining the power of the estates and replacing the hodgepodge of feudal domains with a uniform administrative system centered in Berlin. Prussia was almost extinguished during the wars of Frederick the Great, but this near-death experience both strengthened the centralized state and cemented Prussia's national identity as an "army with a country."<sup>3</sup>

Administration of this state required the establishment of a centralized bureaucracy to collect taxes and run the army's logistics train. Over time, the Prussian bureaucracy achieved an increasing degree of autonomy from the personal authority of the king and expressed its will through a growing body of public administrative law that culminated in the great Prussian law code, the *Allgemeines Landrecht* of 1794. In the meantime, thinkers such as Hugo Grotius, Jean Bodin, Thomas Hobbes, and Samuel Pufendorf had begun formulating novel theories vesting sovereignty in monarchs without any appeal to religious authority. But the new secular grounding of absolutism in the state was not necessarily a boon to princely power. According to these new theorists, the state's claim to absolute sovereignty lay in its ability in some sense to "represent" the broader interests of the whole community. The state became an impersonal abstraction of the public

interest, and not the instrument of rule of one particular group within the society. The theoretical ground was laid for the distinction between public and private, which is critical to any modern understanding of the role of government. Thus was born the modern rule-of-law state, the *Rechtsstaat*.

The final reform of the Prussian state occurred only after its defeat by Napoleon I at the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt in 1806, leading to a much more modern military machine based on the *levée en masse* (universal military conscription). The Stein-Hardenberg reforms that took place in the aftermath of Jena-Auerstedt abolished feudal privileges, opened up bureaucratic careers to the middle classes on the basis of merit, and made education the gateway to public office on the basis of a new, reformed university system. After Bismarck's forcible unification of Germany in 1871, this Prussian administrative system became the template for German government as a whole. What is remarkable is how this autonomous bureaucracy then survived over the tumultuous seventy years following German unification. Under the Weimar Republic, the bureaucracy resisted control by democratically elected politicians, who were prevented from distributing offices clientelistically. The Nazis were able to purge the bureaucracy of Jews, Communists, and politically appointed officials, but otherwise were not able to place large numbers of their own supporters within it. This bureaucracy even survived into the post–World War II period: Despite the Allied occupation authority's attempts to purge the German government of Nazi sympathizers, only about a thousand bureaucrats were permanently excluded from service.<sup>4</sup>

The fully democratic Federal Republic of Germany that emerged after 1949 put the government under democratic control. But it did so by respecting the bureaucracy's autonomy in hiring and promotion. So while elected political parties could appoint ministers at the top to direct policy, they were prohibited from colonizing the public administration with party supporters. As a result, clientelism never took root in Germany; merit and autonomy remained the organizing principles of German government.

**Greece and Italy:** If Prussia/Germany developed a strong, modern bureaucratic state early on, something of the opposite happened in Greece and in Italy. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Greece was a province of the Ottoman Empire with a long tradition of resisting tax collection. The Greeks declared independence in 1821, but were unable to achieve this goal on their own without substantial outside help from Britain, France, and Russia. Foreigners continued to dominate Greek politics long after the country achieved formal independence in 1830, with the Great Powers placing a Bavarian prince, Otto, on the Greek throne. Faced with increasing resistance to his rule, Otto conceded a constitution in 1844 that provided for universal male suffrage by 1864.

Greece thus became one of Europe's first electoral democracies, preceding Britain by a full generation.

The Greek state continued to be weak and subject to foreign influence through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. It was defeated militarily by Turkey in 1923, then flooded by ethnic Greeks fleeing Asia Minor, who came to constitute a fifth of Greece's total population. The country was invaded by Italy and Germany during World War II; following the defeat of the Axis powers, Greece succumbed to a brutal civil war and later a period of military dictatorship under the colonels in 1967–74. These political conflicts left Greece with a deeply divided society and high levels of distrust, both of other Greeks and of the Greek state. The current euro crisis, during which Greek policy has been dictated by the “troika” (the European Union, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund), is simply a continuation of this earlier trend of foreigners pulling strings behind the scenes.

The unified Italian state that was created by Count of Cavour Camillo Benso and military leader Giuseppe Garibaldi in the 1860s linked a developed north to a highly underdeveloped south. When the northerners first confronted this reality, they were shocked: The new governor of Naples after its liberation by Garibaldi reported to Cavour, “This is not Italy! This is Africa: the bedouins are the flower of civic virtue besides these country bumpkins.”<sup>5</sup> The southern landowning elites agreed to unification under the leadership of the northern bourgeoisie in return for being left alone on their estates, in what Antonio Gramsci labeled the *blocco storico*, or “historic alliance.”

The state in southern Italy, like its Greek counterpart, had been weak and dominated by foreigners. By the fifteenth century, the kingdoms of Sicily and Naples had passed from the German Hohenstaufen dynasty to the House of Aragon, and the latter’s dynastic possessions were united under Spanish rule with the 1469 marriage of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. Southern Italy remained a possession first of the Spanish Habsburgs and then, after the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), the Spanish Bourbons, until it was invaded by Napoleon I, who put his brother Joseph on the throne. Thus for nearly five centuries, the nominal sovereign over the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was a distant foreigner, whose rule was frequently contested by local uprisings.

Greece and southern Italy share another characteristic—the failure of an indigenous industrial revolution to take root. Both places experienced rapid urbanization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but without the transformative effects of industrialization and a rapidly expanding market economy. Under these conditions (which resemble those of many contemporary developing countries), entire peasant villages would move to the city, bringing with them their rural patron-client relationships and village mores. Neither a modern middle class nor an industrial proletariat emerged to the same degree as in West European

countries such as Belgium, England, France, or Germany. State employment became the major route to upward social mobility, and capture of the state the central object of political contestation.

Thus in Greece and southern Italy, as the franchise expanded and democratic politicians faced the task of mobilizing voters and getting them

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to the polls, rural patronage relationships were gradually transformed into modern clientelism. Already in the 1870s, the Greek government had seven times as many civil servants per capita as the British government. This tradition continued following the return of democracy in 1974 after the rule of the colonels. The two democratic political parties that have dominated Greek politics from that period to the present,

the center-right New Democracy (ND) and the socialist Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), traded places in power in 1981, 1989, 1993, 2004, and 2009. Since the strong Greek public-sector unions had negotiated rules guaranteeing tenure for many public employees, every alternation of parties led to an expansion of the Greek state. Public employment saw a fivefold increase between 1970 and 2009, with average public-sector wages one-and-a-half times higher than those in the private sector.<sup>6</sup>

Something similar happened in Italy. Traditional patron-client relations date back to Roman times, where the terms *patronus* and *cliens* referred to a highly formalized legal relationship between a superior and an inferior. With the abolition of feudalism in the south of Italy in the nineteenth century, these formal relations shifted to informal ones, in which local landlords used their wealth and political connections to control the peasants living on their lands. Italy opened up the franchise shortly before World War I, but this democratic experiment was cut short a decade later by the rise of Mussolini. True democratic contestation began only after the fall of Il Duce in 1943. The Italian Christian Democratic (DC) party was founded in 1943 and originally conceived as a progressive, mass-based party that would compete with the Italian Communists. Like early U.S. parties, however, the DC faced the problem of how to get masses of voters to the polls for the first democratic elections under the new postwar Republic. The DC did this using modern organizational methods; under the leadership of Amintore Fanfani, it built a centralized party hierarchy based in Rome, with networks of party bosses who could recruit voters on a clientelistic basis.

Clientelism in the south was reinforced by the government's economic policies. Beginning in the 1950s, the central government in Rome pur-

sued a policy designed to stimulate industrial development in the south. This process did not lead to the emergence of a large, self-sustaining industrial base there. Rather, it created a bonanza for local politicians seeking to expand their bases of support. As in Greece, having political connections and being able to manipulate the state became a much surer route to wealth and personal security than private entrepreneurship, thus reinforcing the existing north-south gap while creating a culture of political favoritism that would soon get out of hand.

The post–World War II Italian political system collapsed in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, with the disappearance of both the old Christian Democratic and Communist parties. But the practice of clientelism and its associated political corruption remained strong thereafter, not just in the south but throughout the whole of Italy. The rise of Silvio Berlusconi in the early 1990s (and of his ally Umberto Bossi and the Northern League) did not herald the emergence of a new type of uncorrupt and reformist politics in Italy. Rather, Berlusconi simply modernized the practice of Italian corruption, using his personal media empire to win elections and shield himself from criminal prosecution.

***The United States:*** Against this background, the case of the United States is interesting because its national administration looked more like that of Greece and Italy in the middle of the nineteenth century, but became more like that of Germany by the middle of the twentieth. It is safe to say that the United States invented the practice of clientelism, precisely because it was the first large country to open up a broad democratic franchise. This happened piecemeal during the 1820s and 1830s, as most U.S. states eliminated property qualifications for voting and implemented a universal white male franchise. Political parties, which had not been envisioned by the Founding Fathers, scrambled to mobilize supporters and to get them to the polls on election day. They found that the easiest way to do this was not through appeals to programmatic policies, much less appeals to abstract ideologies. Rather, voters were more easily mobilized by promises of direct benefits like a job in the post office, a Christmas turkey, or a “get-out-of-jail card” for a relative.

The U.S. patronage or “spoils” system blossomed after the election of 1828 that brought to power the populist Andrew Jackson. As president, Jackson declared that since he had won the election, he had the right to appoint officials to posts in the government; he added that there were few if any jobs in public administration that could not be performed by any ordinary American. The competing political parties fought over such issues as slavery and tariffs, but (particularly after the Civil War) they created highly sophisticated political machines to get out the vote through the distribution of individualized benefits. The U.S. experience suggests that clientelism is not a deviant or a culturally grounded form of political behavior, but rather a natural outgrowth of an early form

of democracy in countries characterized by low levels of income and education.

Serious attempts to reform the American state began only in the 1880s. The British had undertaken a major reform of their civil service during the 1850s and 1860s following publication of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report, eliminating political appointments and grounding hiring and promotion in the civil service on education and merit. These ideas traveled to the United States, where they were promoted by intellectuals such as Frank Goodnow, Francis Lieber, and the future president Woodrow Wilson, who as a professor argued in favor of the separation of politics from administration and the professionalization of the latter.<sup>7</sup> A grassroots civil-service reform movement emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as assorted groups attacked the apparent corruption and poor performance of U.S. government at its various levels. Reform was stimulated by an external event, the assassination of newly elected President James A. Garfield by a disappointed office-seeker in 1881, which galvanized Congress into passing the Pendleton Act two years later. This act established the first U.S. Civil Service Commission and created a system of classification for government officials that made merit rather than political connections the qualification for office.

Creating a modern Weberian state in the United States was a protracted process, however, and one that in some respects has never been fully accomplished. In Britain, the reform bill implementing the recommendations of the 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan Report was passed just sixteen years later, due to the decisiveness of the British Westminster system and the relative homogeneity of the ruling elite at the time. In the United States, the spread of a merit-based system took decades due to the obstacles placed in its path by the U.S. Constitution's checks and balances. Entrenched party politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, had no interest in giving up their right to make political appointments. So the classified civil service expanded only when one party replaced another after an election, and the outgoing party sought to protect its incumbent appointees. It took until the New Deal in the 1930s for the vast majority of federal employees to be put under the classification system.<sup>8</sup> In many large U.S. cities, including New York, Boston, and Chicago, municipal political machines were not dismantled until the 1960s.

## The Politics of Reform

The question immediately arises, why did civil-service reform occur in Prussia/Germany and the United States, but not in Greece or Italy? The answer has already been given in the Prussian/German case: Reform, driven by the existential pressures of military conflict, happened before the advent of mass democracy. A similar story can

be told of China at the time of the Qin unification in 221 B.C.E., or of Japan after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Military competition provides incentives to create an efficient and therefore modern state that are far more powerful than the economic incentives present in day-to-day life.

It would be quite tragic, however, if war proved to be the only route to a modern state. No developing country should aspire to replicate Germany's war-torn history over the past three centuries. High-quality, autonomous bureaucracies are in any event a double-edged sword. If they are too autonomous and capable, they can escape political control altogether. Both Germany and Japan ended up fighting disastrous wars because politicians proved unable to control their military bureaucracies. The fact that democratic political control was eventually established in both countries after the Second World War is a matter of slight comfort.

The U.S. (as well as the British) case is more interesting because state reform did not depend in the first instance on national-security imperatives. Political pressure for reform came out of a middle-class coalition, as new social groups created by the process of industrialization led a prolonged political struggle against the entrenched proponents of patronage and clientelism. In this respect, economic growth provided the occasion for the formation of such a coalition. In the British case, support for the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms came from a rising middle class that was largely excluded from patronage positions in the government and had to rely on merit and educational qualifications for advancement. The reform coalition, which included business interests, scientific societies, and education reformers, lobbied the relatively compact British political elite for change. Even here, military competition was a factor: Britain's poor performance during the Crimean War was cited as a major reason for civil-service reform.<sup>9</sup>

The U.S. case was more complex and shows that economic change per se does not necessarily promote reform. In the 1880s, the railroads represented the leading edge of industrial capitalism in North America, yet railroad interests had largely learned to play the corrupt game of buying political influence from the existing class of patronage politicians. The Progressive coalition was formed around other groups whose interests were hurt by the railroads' often monopolistic practices: shippers, farmers, urban businessmen, and smaller railroads that were losing out in competition. They were joined by other newly mobilized groups, such as the urban reformers who deplored the living conditions in U.S. cities. Both ideas and leadership were critical to making the coalition viable. There was a broad belief in the need to apply businesslike principles of "scientific management" to government operations, and individuals like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were critical in promoting reform. Roosevelt had been the head of the U.S. Civil Service

Commission before becoming president of the United States, and he sought to make clean government one of his great legacies.

## Modernization: Theory and Reality

In looking across these cases, one is led to ask why middle-class reform coalitions appeared in Britain and the United States, but not in Greece and Italy. There would seem to be at least three reasons.

The first has to do with the nature of economic development. Britain and the United States experienced classic industrialization, with newly organized industries drawing huge numbers of workers out of agriculture and putting them into urban environments where social life and the division of labor were completely transformed. Greece and southern Italy, by contrast, experienced what is sometimes called “modernization without development”—that is, urbanization not based on the growth of a vigorous industrial market economy. Under these conditions, the old rural order gets transplanted to cities, and there is no mobilization of broad new groups like a middle class or proletariat. Instead of *Gemeinschaft* (community) being transformed into *Gesellschaft* (society), *Gemeinschaft* is simply transferred wholesale to the city, complete with its rural mores and habits of patronage.

A second reason for the difference is cultural. The rising middle classes in Britain, the United States, the Netherlands, and Prussia/Germany were largely Protestant, and often had highly moralistic views about personal integrity. The Great Elector surrounded himself with imported Calvinist bureaucrats who were free of family ties to the existing Prussian elite. The Progressive movement in the United States was fueled by old-line Protestants resentful of the way that machine politicians were organizing newly arrived Catholic, Jewish, and Orthodox immigrants in rapidly growing U.S. cities.

Finally, factors of leadership probably had important effects. In the years following the end of the Cold War, Italy had a tremendous opportunity to create a clean, modern state. The Tangentopoli prosecutions in the early to mid-1990s of corrupt Christian Democratic and Socialist politicians and of the Mafia itself could take place only after the end of Cold War polarizations. Instead of getting a Roosevelt or a Wilson, however, Italy produced Silvio Berlusconi and Umberto Bossi. The electoral base of both Berlusconi’s center-right party (Forza Italia, today part of Popolo della Libertà) and Bossi’s Northern League included precisely those middle-class groups that were fed up with the corruption of the old system and wanted change. But instead of providing a path toward state modernization and structural reform of the Italian economy, both leaders pandered to populist causes and protected their own personal interests. Berlusconi in particular legitimated a new form of media-based corruption that will weigh on Italian politics for years to come.

An assumption that has been around since the time of Max Weber is that the growth of an “iron cage” of centralized bureaucracy is an inevitable by-product of the modernization process. Subsequent studies of corruption and clientelism have often followed in this tradition, assuming that these were deviant forms of political organization whose existence needed to be explained.

The reality is that high-quality bureaucracies tend to be more an exception than the rule. A relatively small number of states, many of them in Western Europe or East Asia, are heirs to a long bureaucratic tradition formed in absolutist times under military pressure. Other states have succeeded in reforming their existing administrations under democratic conditions. But sequencing and historical accident play large roles in determining these outcomes. It is the emergence of modern bureaucracy, rather than the survival of patrimonial or clientelistic systems, that needs to be explained.

The experiences of the United States, Greece, and Italy further suggest that in the process of political development all good things do not necessarily go together. Democratic expansion of the franchise, when it takes place in advance of state modernization, can lead to widespread clientelism. Conversely, authoritarian states that develop modern bureaucracies early on are often in a happier position once they democratize, since their states tend to be inoculated from the dangers of political colonization. Whether it is worth paying the cost of authoritarian tutelage and military conflict that this route to state modernization often entails is a different question.

Finally, we need to ask whether Weberian states, once achieved, are permanently self-sustaining or whether they are subject to political decay. The state bureaucracies in China, Germany, Japan, and other countries have been remarkably durable over long periods of time. All modern states, however, are subject to recapture by powerful groups in society. The reform efforts undertaken in the United States from the Progressive Era on have largely eliminated the form of corruption that involved explicit exchanges of favors for votes. But it has been replaced in contemporary U.S. politics by a broader and perfectly legal system of influence-buying, in which politicians and interest groups engage in a reciprocal exchange of favors. It would appear that political development is not a one-way ratchet that keeps turning in a progressive direction. Political decay remains an ever-present possibility.

## NOTES

1. Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Merilee Grindle builds on this framework in *Jobs for the Boys: Patronage and the State in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

2. In this article, I define patronage as a reciprocal exchange of favors between two individuals of different status and power, usually involving favors given by the patron to the client in exchange for the client's loyalty and political support. Clientelism is distinguished from patronage primarily by its scale, and by the use of a hierarchy of organized intermediaries in the distribution of favors. As such, clientelism is a phenomenon associated with electoral democracies.

3. For a general account of Prussia's rise, see Hans Rosenberg, *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy, and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience, 1660–1815* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958).

4. Shefter, *Political Parties and the State*, 42.

5. Percy A. Allum, *Italy—Republic Without Government?* (New York: Norton, 1973), 9.

6. John Sfakianakis, "The Cost of Protecting Greece's Public Sector," *International Herald Tribune*, 10 October 2012, and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Greece: Review of the Central Administration* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2011), 71–72.

7. Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Political Science Quarterly* 2 (June 1887): 197–222.

8. Patricia W. Ingraham, *The Foundation of Merit: Public Service in American Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 32–33.

9. Richard A. Chapman, *The Civil Service Commission, 1855–1991: A Bureau Biography* (London: Routledge, 2004), 29–30.