

# The Expectations States Create: How State Capacity Shapes the Scope of Politics

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Much scholarly attention has focused on the origins of state capacity and the challenges states face as they seek to rule. But beyond these drivers of important change, a wide- lens examination of Latin America reveals continuity: those states that could more effectively impose order, collect taxes, and provide public goods a century ago have only grown more powerful, while weak states have remained quite weak.

This continuity is little acknowledged and remains unexplained. In this brief essay, I suggest one factor that underpins it. Against explanations for the origins of state capacity, which overwhelmingly place initiative in the hands of state leaders, I focus on the agency of societal actors, but situate this agency in historical context. In strong state contexts, people expect the state to take a leading role in provision and crisis management, and hold it accountable to this standard. These expectations lead to pressure (via protest or appeals to politicians) for increased state intervention, and thus to increased administrative capacity. By contrast, where the state is weak, even as people recognize the poor performance of governments, they expect no more from the political arena, and rather than pressing for increased intervention, turn instead to self-help and civil society organization. The result of the absence of demand-making and political pressure is an absence of state expansion, and thus weak states remain weak.

This essay examines state response to three recent natural disasters in Latin America. Natural disasters are almost completely neglected by social scientists. Their effects cut across social class more neatly than do other arenas of political contention, which makes state-society relations interesting to explore. Disasters are also interesting because they can drive societal actors to

*desire* state intervention, and thus they call into question views of state-society relations as inherently oppositional. The three cases are chosen for comparison for several reasons. First, the disasters themselves all saw relatively similar levels of damage and relatively little international assistance. Second, the cases had strikingly different levels of state capacity: the Peruvian state was quite weak, while those of Chile and Venezuela were powerful. Finally, the two strong state cases saw divergent responses to tragedy: the Chilean state was strikingly effective, unlike the Venezuelan state. Thus, these cases allow the comparison of expectations in strong and weak states, of pressures on strong states as their performance varies, and of how those pressures result in increased state capacity.

## El Niño, Peru 1998

Due to its cyclical nature, El Niño's arrival in Peru was forecast in advance. Yet flooding caused massive damage, including at least 296 deaths, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of homes, 88 bridges and \$640 million in damages to highways. Between January and April, disease spread, including thousands of cases of cholera. The government's initial statements were strikingly tone deaf. Fujimori commented that since the recent Japanese embassy hostage crisis, he was bored and eager for a new challenge (*Semana Económica* Jan. 18, 1998). The central plank of government assistance was emergency housing that could be purchased for \$400, a high price for homes without windows, furnishing, and sometimes even walls. Assistance tended to appear only with Fujimori, who personally oversaw relief efforts with hardhat and shovel in hand (Cruzado-Silveri 1999, 18). *Caretas* recounted stories of people given furniture

while Fujimori visited, and forced to return it after cameras left. By June 1998, the government response simply stopped, having announced aid amounting to only about 20 percent of estimated need and delivered even less. Survivors began reconstructing their lives through both individual action and community organization.

There was a clear and generalized sense that the government had not performed well, reflected in media coverage and interviews with victims. An APOYO poll in February 1998 showed that 54 percent of respondents believed damage could have been avoided with more effective government preparation. The government had spent at least \$120 million on prevention, personally overseen by Fujimori who sought to project the image of someone focused on preparation rather than politics (*Semana Económica* Sept. 7, 1997). Thus, he had positioned the government as responsible for these efforts as well.

Yet there was little outcry. Most tellingly, El Niño fell low among Peru's three greatest problems, named by only 13 percent of respondents in an April 1998 APOYO poll. It had already disappeared from the national agenda. Because Peruvians had low expectations of the state's response, it did not translate into disapproval of the Fujimori government or to any protest or outcry. A long history of state weakness had inured citizens to expect little from their state. As a result, it faced no pressure to expand its role in the lives of Peruvians, and remained relatively weak.

### Vargas, Venezuela 1999

A fumbled response generated much more outcry where a stronger state had created higher expectations for effective intervention. Mudslides beginning on December 15, 1999 devastated the coastal state of Vargas north of Caracas, wiping out the one highway linking it to the interior, crippling the airport and port, and leaving ten to thirty thousand dead. Direct damage totaled \$3.3 billion, about three percent of GDP, and indirect effects approached \$10 billion.

The same day saw the constitutional referendum. Chávez referenced the rains, quoting Bolívar, who said after the 1812 Caracas earthquake that had seemed a portent of divine opposition to independence: "if nature opposes us, we will defeat it too." But otherwise the unfolding tragedy slipped government notice. As the mudslides continued, the state was absent, and looting broke out in the absence of effective authority (Negrón 2000). Though late to start, the government rescue effort was massive. Thousands were rescued by sea and air (including by Chávez himself in the presidential helicopter) and housed temporarily in army barracks and stadiums.

Venezuelans found many aspects of the government's response unsatisfactory. An anecdote referenced in multiple interviews described a Christmas 1999 dinner in Caracas for evacuees. Government officials distributed cash and gifts and invited survivors to serve themselves from the dinner buffet. The evacuees refused, and demanded that they be served by the government officials—after all, the purpose of government was to provide. While perhaps apocryphal, this anecdote reveals how much Venezuelans expected from their state. Perhaps the most interesting axis of

dissatisfaction with the state was the widespread questioning of the reasons for Venezuela's poor infrastructure: Venezuelans blamed the government, rather than nature, for the damage caused by the rains, which could have been prevented. That mudslides occurred at all was reason to hold the government accountable.

Dissatisfaction was widespread: two weeks after the flooding, a Datanálisis poll of Caracas residents asked respondents to name the actor most effective in responding to the tragedy. Chávez got 2.8 percent of mentions, and his political party 0.2 percent. All civilian government agencies totaled 8.4 percent of responses, trailing many other actors including private citizens. The Vargas governor tried to leverage support from this grievance by pressing Chávez for more intensive recovery efforts, leading to conflict with the federal government.

Rescue operations were followed by an ambitious long-term plan that sought to relocate thousands away from Vargas to the unpopulated interior state of Apure with promises of housing, jobs, and services. Soldiers built homes and handed keys to mudslide victims at the televised July 5th holiday parade. Residents overwhelmingly abandoned their new homes and returned to Vargas demanding reconstruction. This led to the creation of yet another new administrative agency, the Autoridad Única, to oversee the reconstruction efforts, beginning by demarcating where housing could safely be built. But progress was slow and new flooding a year later left hundreds newly homeless. Many survivors remained in refuge centers in extremely primitive conditions. The result was yet more protest and pressure on political officials, which unfolded over subsequent years. Thus, the Venezuelan government was held to a

higher standard of response (and prevention) than that of Peru, and Venezuelans were dissatisfied with many aspects of the state's actions.

### Chaitén, Chile, 2008

The Chilean state's response to disaster was quite effective in comparative perspective. Yet it faced criticism on many fronts, revealing Chileans' heightened expectations for state intervention. These pressures drove significant bureaucratic and territorial expansion of an already powerful and effective state.

The Chaitén volcano erupted in early May 2008, forcing a complete evacuation of the regional center of the same name. Nearly all of the 7,000 plus residents were evacuated within 48 hours, mostly to nearby Puerto Montt and Chiloé, and subsequent flooding and ash destroyed the town. That evacuations were completed so quickly and with no direct loss of life shows how effective the state was. Evacuees were given an evacuation bond of about 1000 dollars, a one-time payment of about \$25,000 to buy new housing anywhere in the country, and a monthly allowance if they chose not to do so. Many continued to receive benefits for years, though eligibility requirements were steadily tightened over time. This is far more assistance than in the cases above.

Yet powerful demands pressed the government to do more. Criticisms of the government for failures of pre-eruption volcano monitoring spurred the creation of a new volcano agency in January 2009. Webcams and regular bulletins now monitor volcanoes nationwide. Several dozen Chaitéños had refused evacuation, obtaining court orders preventing forcible removal, and felt themselves abandoned in

the ruined town. They famously waved Argentine flags in protests against neglect by the state (*La Nación* Feb 6, 2009). A sign appeared at the town entrance reading "Bienvenido a Zona Cero: Cero Agua, Cero Luz, Cero Apoyo del Gobierno." This pressure drove the state to maintain a presence in Chaitén, including emergency services and policing. Those who *did* flee resented resettlement, decrying their lost sense of community. State officials ruled out rebuilding but continued outcry among evacuees sharpened as the evacuation zone opened for tourism, drove the state to change course, and a new agency was created to plan a new Chaitén. Though reconstruction on a site near old Chaitén progressed smoothly, it has paused since the massive 2010 Concepción earthquake.<sup>1</sup>

The state's response to Chaitén, though cut short by the Concepción disaster, was clearly effective in comparative perspective, reflecting the capacity of the Chilean state. Yet grievances remained, spurring protest and outcry by the affected population. A May 2008 Chilevisión poll showed high expectations nationwide. Respondents were asked to evaluate the monthly payment to victims, which was larger than the national average income. Sixty-three percent considered it only "adequate," while 24 percent saw it as insufficient. That this level of assistance was so widely deemed meager reveals how much Chileans expected from their state.

### Conclusion

There are many factors underlying the divergence in state capacity between these three cases. Among them, unexplored by existing scholarship, is the divergence in popular expectations. In strong state cases, governments must respond effectively to tragedy or lose political support. The result

is that strong states are pressed to further extend their capacity over time. In weak states, expectations are lower. Politicians are not punished for poor crisis management, and the state faces no pressure to undertake administrative expansion. This suggests that along with external shocks as the engine that might drive state building in Latin America, we might also look to the political culture that shapes how people evaluate their states and to the standards to which citizens hold states accountable.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> For brief descriptions of the planning process by a key participant, see Allard (2010).

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