

POLS/ECON 409 · *The war on state capacity*

1. What is state capacity? What components does it include? Why is it important? Who wants it? Who has it? What is its history? Why are state capacity and scientific expertise so closely linked?
2. Muirhead & Rosenblum argue that expertise is essential to the administration of the state, but that it can be effectively subjected to democratic oversight. How does this work in the United States? When did the US develop expert bureaucracies? Why are they a necessity for a modern state?
3. What is “ungoverning”? How does ungoverning differ from policy disagreement or political obstruction? What is the history of ungoverning globally? Are there any political regime types or ideologies that practice or advocate for ungoverning, or not? Has it been tried, and if so, with what result?
4. Muirhead & Rosenblum document the first Trump administration’s efforts to derail or circumvent governance. How has the current Trump regime expanded on those efforts? Does ungoverning reflect the will of the Trump coalition?
5. When and how can intentional chaos achieve policy goals? What are the long-term costs to using chaos as a tool?
6. Why would a leader – even an authoritarian one – disable the very state he leads? More generally, why might an autocrat appoint incompetent administrators?
7. Muirhead and Rosenblum suggest ungoverning can serve the interests of a leader who wishes to exercise personalistic rule. What do they mean? What are the benefits and disadvantages of personal rule for the ruler and the ruled?
8. What is the role of conspiracy theory in undermining public support for state capacity? What is the role of “illegibility”? Is ungoverning a rational response to what members of the public want, or does it necessarily depend in some way on delusion, misinformation, or nihilism? If ungoverning necessarily impedes good outcomes for everyone, is it enough to rule “over the ruins”?
9. Can an ungoverning survive for long? How would politics change? How would an “ungoverned” state maintain legitimacy? What would people expect from the state? What would they get? Are Muirhead & Rosenblum too *optimistic* regarding the limits to ungoverning in the US?

10. Do the ostensible aims of Elon Musk’s foray into government differ from the genuine goals of Musk and his erstwhile allies? How “successful” were these efforts? What are the likely consequences (in the short, medium, and long run) of Musk’s chaotic assault on the administrative state? Provide examples.
11. At the start of the term, I warned of the possibility of a “bitcoin bailout” under the current regime. Are the conditions for cryptocurrency-led financial crisis coming together? How might such a crisis proceed? How might cryptocurrency holders get bailed out, and what would be the consequences either way? More generally, how would the handling of such a crisis compare to the 1929 and 2008 financial crises, given the changes in state capacity under the current regime?
12. What if the next major national crisis faced by the US is not a financial crisis, but something else, such as a new pandemic, major terror attack, war, natural disaster, or sudden deepening of the climate crisis. How will the public and elites react if state capacity hamstring any federal response? What if the US is more constrained by sovereign debt than in the past? What role might the states play?
13. Why is the Trump administration drastically reducing federal support for scientific and medical research? What do you expect the public and political reaction to be over the coming years? Does the attack on science, expertise, and university education reflect the personal obsessions of Trump regime elites, or is there a broader class conflict emerging? (One potential avenue: if you were to write a coda to Goldin & Katz today, what might you add or change regarding their policy recommendations about college education?)
14. Is the United States now destined to fall behind in science, technology, and higher education? How reversible is the damage so far to what one might call the industry of basic scientific and medical research? What might be the consequences – for the economy, for the geopolitical position of the United States, and for global economic growth and well-being?
15. Can Trump’s assault on the administrative state be undone? If so, how?

CHRISTOPHER ADOLPH
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
2 JUNE 2025