# Tracking the State in a Liberal Economy: Empirical Indicators and Irish Experience

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## Introduction

After 2008, many commentators anticipated that the effects of the global economic crisis would bring about a sea-change in the terms of political debate about the role of the state in economic and social policy. Neo-liberal ideas that financial markets were self-regulating and that minimal state intervention was both necessary and sufficient to facilitate growth had, it seemed, been put to the toughest test possible, and found sorely wanting. How could a whole cluster of ideas and policy priorities prove resilient to the effects of the crisis that, to their proponents, should not have happened?

Attempts to answer this question have attracted much attention in recent years ([Schmidt and Thatcher, 2013](#_ENREF_82), [Crouch, 2011](#_ENREF_19), [Barnes and Hall, 2012](#_ENREF_3)). The power of ideas in the contest for political power has been stressed: a change in the way policy options are conceived requires not only that the dominant paradigm should be found wanting, but also that a different set of possibilities be sponsored by a credible political alternative, and this may not be immediately available ([Blyth, 2013](#_ENREF_9)). Besides, inertia and path-dependence can limit the scope of what are understood to be feasible policy options. Prior policy commitments, embedded in institutional compromises between contending interests, powerfully shape the choices policy actors believe are available to them. Gradual change rather than ‘punctuated equilibrium’ seems to pose the greater explanatory challenge ([Mahoney and Thelen, 2010](#_ENREF_61)).

But the outcome of contestation and the direction of policy change may be more open and more indeterminate than theorists of gradual change admit to. Colin Crouch, for example, has argued against the determinism he argues is inherent in analysis of ‘varieties of capitalism’. Policy options can be shelved for a time, only to be reinvigorated later; older institutional forms can be reactivated; ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ are far from uncommon in political life ([Crouch, 2005](#_ENREF_18)). Capitalist societies are not readily simplified into logics of complementarity in their institutional design ([Streeck, 2009](#_ENREF_87)). The literature on ‘mixed market economies’ in analysing varieties of capitalism, in this view, could be seen as not going far enough ([Molina and Rhodes, 2007](#_ENREF_65)): all capitalist societies are an amalgam of types of state activity, pockets of activist state intervention, zones of market-governed conduct, domains of regulation.

These reflections suggest that the complex coexistence of types of state activity needs to be captured in a more nuanced manner than is often seen. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the insights that can be gleaned from adopting an organizational approach to understanding the role of the state, taking the Irish state as a case study. The next section makes the case for taking an organizational approach to the analysis of the state, and sets out the analytical framework for doing so. The following section profiles three key themes in the evolution of the Irish state, using organizational data to generate new insights into the way the state functions. The chapter concludes with some reflections on the potential of organizational analysis of the state for comparative political science.

## An organizational approach to analysing state complexity

The modern state is said to be ‘Janus-faced’, not only ‘coherent, dominating, competent’, standing over the people, but also ‘organically tied to the population’, needing legitimation through enactment of some form of social contract, generally expressed through fiscal relationships ([Migdal, 2009, p.166](#_ENREF_64)). The outcome of efforts to balance these competing requirements result in much variation in the structural features of states. A variety of forms of institutionalized relationships may exist between state and society, state and economy ([Evans et al., 1985](#_ENREF_25), [Weiss, 1998](#_ENREF_92), [Weiss, 2003](#_ENREF_93)). What Levy called ‘the age of liberalization’ ([Levy, 2006](#_ENREF_58)), following the demise in credibility and effectiveness of the politics of the Keynesian welfare state, and intensified by the impact of international economic crisis since 2008, did not entail any simple erosion of the role of the state. But we see not only differences in states’ responses to new challenges of economic management and social policy formation ([Prasad, 2006](#_ENREF_77), [Pierson, 2001](#_ENREF_74)), but also a variety of public policy responses to a new array of issues ranging from environmental challenges, to lifestyle choices, to management of the implications of new technologies of communication, reproduction, and so on ([Kriesi et al., 2008](#_ENREF_52), [Vogel and Barma, 2007](#_ENREF_91)).

Unexpectedly, elements of the ‘developmental state’ still persist, even or perhaps especially at the heart of the US liberal market economy where military and technology interests coincide ([Mazzucato, 2013](#_ENREF_63), [Block, 2008](#_ENREF_8)). Meanwhile, the economic liberalization agenda gave rise to analysis of the ‘competition state’ ([Cerny, 1997](#_ENREF_14), [Adshead et al., 2008](#_ENREF_1), [Kirby, 2004](#_ENREF_51)). And as a consequences of the retreat of the state from control over direct productive assets, we have seen the ‘rise of the regulatory state’ ([Braithwaite, 2000](#_ENREF_11), [Glaeser and Shleifer, 2001](#_ENREF_30), [Moran, 2002](#_ENREF_66), [Majone, 1994](#_ENREF_62), [Jayasuriya, 2000](#_ENREF_48), [Thatcher, 2009](#_ENREF_89), [Black et al., 2005](#_ENREF_7)). This generated research into the institutional variety in arrangements for regulating both public and private sectors ([Levi-Faur, 2005](#_ENREF_56), [Gilardi, 2008](#_ENREF_28), [Hall, 2007](#_ENREF_32), [Binderkrantz and Christensen](#_ENREF_6)). Mechanisms of implementing new regulatory regimes on the one hand, and creating new lines of accountability on the other, form an important part of a broader trend toward what is now known as regulatory governance ([Hood and Dunsire, 1981: chapter 2](#_ENREF_46), [Binderkrantz and Christensen](#_ENREF_6), [Christensen and Laegreid, 2007](#_ENREF_15)). Central to making progress on this is agreement on the characterization and typologies of regulatory agencies themselves ([Levi-Faur, 2006](#_ENREF_57), [Scott, 2004](#_ENREF_83)). The statutory basis of regulation as a principal distinguishing feature has itself been questioned in recent literature, with growing recognition of the role of private regulatory regimes and transnational regulatory regimes that are not overtly directed by states. We also find an interest developing in the emergence of the ‘contracting state’ ([Edgeworth, 2003](#_ENREF_23), [Harden, 1992](#_ENREF_34), [Freeman, 2000](#_ENREF_27), [La Porta et al., 1999](#_ENREF_54)); and new classificatory challenges are also emerging to capture the changing role of the state in relation to such functions as the delivery of public services, taxation of citizens and businesses, dispute resolution mechanisms.

Patterns of state engagement with organized interests in society changed in form and purpose since the 1980s ([Hemerijck and Vail, 2006](#_ENREF_43)) – as the boundaries of state and economy shifted, the space shrank for stable deals in which the terms of wage-bargaining deals are supported and supplemented by policy commitments ([Baccaro and Howell, 2011](#_ENREF_2)). Meanwhile, the boundaries between state and society were themselves being redrawn with developments such as contracting out of state commercial services, or the engagement of charities and NGOs in delivering welfare services under contract. We need to develop our thinking not only about what a state is in general terms, but also about where the boundaries of ‘public’ and ‘private’, ‘state’ and ‘civil society’, are to be drawn.

One such approach is to start with organized interests and work toward a coherent analysis of network governance ([Sørensen and Torfing, 2008](#_ENREF_85)). Another is to investigate state structures themselves, especially the form and scope of state agencies, where the diversity of these new modes of state action is most often institutionalized. This is the approach adopted in this chapter. Oliver Treib and his colleagues distinguish between institutional properties (polity), actor constellations (politics), and policy instruments (policy) in the analysis of modes of governance (Treib et al. 2005). There is quite a lot of work on the latter two aspects of governance. The rise of network governance and the blurring of the boundaries between formal and informal participation, for example, is often seen as an indication of new patterns of engagement in policy making and implementation (Peterson 2003; Sabel and Zeitlin 2007; Waelti et al. 2004). The growth of new instruments in regulatory governance such as risk assessment, quality audits, and benchmarking might be seen as innovations in the modalities through which new policy objectives are identified and implemented (Radaelli and de Francesco 2007). In practice, of course, these various strands are often inter-related ([Hardiman, 2012a](#_ENREF_35)). But by focusing on state structures themselves, or ‘polity’, we can probe trends in state practices ([Hardiman and Scott, 2010](#_ENREF_41))

Two aspects of the organizational characteristics of the state need to be distinguished and given empirical definition. Firstly, we need to identify criteria for identifying state organizations. Secondly, we need a classification schema to capture the main features of the variety of organizations involved. Just such an exercise has been carried out for the Irish state, in the form of Irish State Administration Database (ISAD) ([Hardiman et al., 2014](#_ENREF_39), [Hardiman, 2012a](#_ENREF_35)).

### Defining state agencies

We may think we know clearly enough what is involved when we speak of institutions of the state, but a robust definition of organizations that are or are not part of the state is problematic in the Irish case. There is no unambiguous definition of the state in Ireland. While the principal constitutionally defined bodies are straightforward enough (ministerial departments, the revenue authority, audit office, police force and army, judiciary etc.), as are state commercial bodies, these bodies far from exhaust the range of organizational forms through which state action may be undertaken. Neither statutory status nor receipt of public funding fully and unambiguously defines the boundaries of the Irish state. Besides, organizations that may be private in ownership can also have monopoly status to discharge a national public function. State functions may be discharged through the delegation of public authority to private actors to conduct certain tasks under licence, or under the umbrella of a statutory provision, and thereby fulfil what are in fact state functions. Government may also permit sectoral self-regulation by recognized bodies as a direct substitute for statutory regulation such as, for example, in the case of the Irish Bar Council and the Irish Law Society for the legal profession. The delegation of public powers may extend to the adoption by public law of privately set standards, and statutory instruments may even adopt private standards without modification.

Rather than accepting a cut-off point at the statutory end of the spectrum, we may be able to develop more powerful analytical tools for understanding state action by recognizing the longer spectrum of possibilities encompassed by ‘stateness’. This can create more opportunities for engaging in real comparative inquiry about the extent to which different modalities of state action are adopted cross-nationally ([Rudder, 2008](#_ENREF_80), [Flinders, 2008](#_ENREF_26)). Yet at all times we must bear in mind that what shapes the extent and the nature of the delegation of authority is the fact that this takes place under ‘the shadow of hierarchy’, that is, the democratic mandate of an elected government to control and discipline ([Goetz, 2008](#_ENREF_31), [Scharpf, 1994](#_ENREF_81), [Héritier and Lehmkuhl, 2008](#_ENREF_44), [Boerzel, 2007](#_ENREF_10)). The five distinguishing features of state organizations identified by Hardiman and Scott in the Irish case are public ownership status; source of funding; powers of public appointment; delegated function; and statutorily defined responsibilities ([Hardiman and Scott, 2012](#_ENREF_42)). A full discussion of the criteria for inclusion in the Irish State Administration Database is set out at [www.isad.ie](http://www.isad.ie).

### Classifying state agencies

 Many of the structures through which state power is exercised can broadly be understood as ‘quangos’, or ‘quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations’. The term may provide an easy target for critique of supposedly wasteful public spending, but it is not particularly analytically useful. Yet most of the major approaches to conceptualizing state agencies are problematic, such as those based on legal status alone ([Pollitt et al., 2004](#_ENREF_76)), functional and bureaumetric criteria ([Hood and Dunsire, 1981](#_ENREF_46)), organizational ecology ([Peters and Pierre, 2001](#_ENREF_73)), or spatial and relational criteria ([Rolland and Roness, 2009](#_ENREF_79), [COST-CRIPO, 2007-11](#_ENREF_17)). We have also found shortcomings in existing functional classifications of agency activities ([Dunleavy, 1989a](#_ENREF_21), [Dunleavy, 1989b](#_ENREF_22), [Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011](#_ENREF_75)).

A better approach is to recognize explicitly that state organizations may need to be defined with reference to multiple criteria, and to provide for this in any coding exercise. In the Irish case, this means that every state organization or ‘unit’ is coded with reference to three major criteria: function, policy area, and legal status of the organization. The detailed classification under each of these headings is based on internationally recognized definitions, but each has needed to be modified somewhat in order to capture the specificities of the Irish experience. The principal area of contrast with other countries’ experiences – particularly those in the continental European administrative law tradition – is the legal status adopted by state organizations. There is considerable variation in this in Ireland. Even within the same functional or policy areas, agencies set up to do analogous work may have quite different kinds of legal status: agencies may be statutory or non-statutory, departmental or non-departmental, and may have different kinds of corporation or company status. Government Departments can also be considered as ‘units’ in the same sense (requiring their own organizational classification, by function and legal status).

In addition to classifying state organizations or ‘units’, the Irish State Administrative Database makes it possible to track change in the organizational profile of the state over time, by classifying all the possible fates that could befall an organization. The Irish State Administration Database identifies twelve possible types of ‘events’. Agencies can be created or ‘born’, and may be abolished outright, or ‘die’. But other possible outcomes are also possible: a national-level agency could be merged with another, or absorbed back into a parent Department; it could be the subject of nationalization or privatization; its remit could be transferred from, or returned to, the local level of responsibility. Changes in the structure and responsibilities of government Departments can similarly be tracked and coded.

## Complexities of the Irish state: statism and liberalism

The Irish state has tended to elude ready assimilation into typologies of various kinds. This is partly because all typologies are necessarily simplifying, as noted earlier, and the process of theoretically-guided selection flattens out some features while highlighting others. But the Irish state may also have features that seem inherently contradictory when viewed from the dominant perspectives, since many approaches to generalization take the experiences of the advanced industrial societies as the norm. Ireland is neither clearly statist nor liberal in economic policy, but both, to varying degrees; neither straightforwardly marginal nor familist in social policy, but features some elements of both.

The Irish state inherited a state apparatus upon its independence in 1922 that was strongly shaped by its British origins. However, like the peripheral economies of southern Europe, Ireland was a latecomer to economic development ([Barry, 2003](#_ENREF_4)). High tariff barriers facilitated domestic industrialization under a strong state-led drive between the 1930s and 1950s. Subsequent growth was based on a progressive opening up of trade and investment opportunities, and full engagement with the European integration project. Ireland came to be among the most open economies in the world, highly dependent on foreign direct investment, and highly exposed too to fluctuations in international finance. Anticipating an end to the global economic crisis, Taoiseach Enda Kenny hoped in 2012 that within a very short time, Ireland would be viewed as ‘the best small country in the world to do business’ ([Kenny, 2012](#_ENREF_50)). In parallel with its late economic development, Ireland’s welfare state development had lagged well behind European averages. But in the same 2012 speech, Kenny flagged the ambition that Ireland would also be ‘the best country in which to raise a family, and the best country in which to grow old with dignity and respect’ ([Kenny, 2012](#_ENREF_50)).

Strong statism is an enduring feature of the Irish growth story, and a populist streak in Irish political culture continues to expect a state response to many contingencies. But the share of national income raised in taxation and committed to public spending puts Ireland among the lower spenders, and the highly internationalized economy tended to favour market-conforming solutions to many policy challenges ([Dellepiane-Avellaneda and Hardiman, 2012](#_ENREF_20)). These parallel features of Irish political culture can be tracked through three areas of the functioning of the state: in the development of state capacity; in the nature of industrial development policy; and in the manner in which governments have used state institutions as part of the process of building coalitions of economic interests and consolidating electoral support.

### The diffuse state: the fragmented development of state capacity

A striking feature of the structure of the Irish state is the dramatic increase in the number of new state bodies during the 1990s and 2000s. A gradual increase over time was followed by a plateau of 240 bodies during the 1980s. As Figure 1 shows, this rose to 311 in 2000, and reached a peak of 377 in 2008.

Figure 1. Number of state agencies, 1923-2014

On the surface, this looks analogous to the kind of agencification associated with New Public Management (NPM). But the reality is rather different ([Hardiman and MacCarthaigh, 2011](#_ENREF_37)). What appears to have happened is that instead of broadening or deepening the competences of existing Departments in response to demands for the state to take on new functions, or to become involved in new policy areas, new external agencies were created, albeit under the authority of existing Departments. This made it possible for the agencies to recruit specialist expertise not readily available in the generalist Irish civil service, and to provide political focus and profile for specific policy areas.

The economic crisis of 2008 reignited domestic debate about public sector reform, particularly since an official report on the functioning of the Department of Finance found that it was severely deficient in the capacity to undertake serious policy evaulation and to advise government effectively ([Independent Review Panel, 2011](#_ENREF_47)). More generally, in a review of the Irish public sector, the OECD commented unfavourably on what it called the ‘organizational zoo’ of Irish state bodies, by which it meant the uncontrolled proliferation of agencies, and the lack of consistency in their organizational design and purpose ([OECD, 2008](#_ENREF_72)). The differentiation of competences between generalist policy Departments and more specialized agencies that lacked policy autonomy, the OECD argued, had not served Ireland well.

The need for rationalization of state agencies was also explicitly driven by the imperative of cost reduction ([Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes, 2009](#_ENREF_86)). Under pressure from the Troika of international lenders, employment in the public sector was reduced by 10% between 2008 and 2013, and the public sector pay bill was cut by some 20%. The distributive impact of cuts in public spending and in public sector numbers has been hotly debated ([Callan et al., 2014](#_ENREF_13), [Social Justice Ireland, 2014](#_ENREF_84)). Fears had been expressed that government would use cutbacks as an opportunity to withdraw from sectors of activity and to fundamentally reconfigure the role of the state. Others had hoped that government would ‘not let a good crisis go to waste’ and would push for the efficiency gains that had proven elusive in the period of negotiated partnership-based reform of the preceding two decades.

An organizational perspective suggests that neither of these two expectations has been fulfilled ([Hardiman and MacCarthaigh, 2013](#_ENREF_38)). Analysis of the profile of agency terminations suggests that Ireland has seen neither a neo-liberal withdrawal of the state nor a ‘bonfire of the quangos’ ([MacCarthaigh, 2014](#_ENREF_60)). As Figure 2 shows, existing functions have been reorganized, but little outright ‘death’ has taken place. The resourcing of the Irish state was sharply reduced, but the scope of its activities showed remarkably little change. And despite the declared importance of ‘deagencification’ and reintegration of policy competences into the core civil service, the disaggregation of activity continued to be a marked feature of the Irish public service.

Figure 2. Agency terminations by type

### The ‘liberal developmental’ state: arm’s-length activism

As in other late-industrializing economies, the Irish state had played a strongly developmental role in the early decades of independence. A number of state commercial enterprises were set up, not only in key utilities such as electricity and gas supply, rail and air transport, but also in food processing, chemicals manufacturing and other areas. The opening up of the economy to external trade during the 1960s and 1970s, and particularly the fiscal pressures on the state in the 1970s and 1980s, saw the state withdrawing from direct production activities. A slow but regular trickle of privatizations ensued between 1975 and 2010 ([Hardiman et al., 2014](#_ENREF_39)). In parallel, a tax-incentivized growth strategy, based on attracting foreign direct investment, had evolved from the 1950s onward; this made Ireland one of the most open economies in the world.

Ireland is therefore often seen as a clear instance of a liberal market economy ([Hall and Soskice, 2001](#_ENREF_33)). And yet the older strong activist state stance was not abandoned; rather, it changed shape and direction. The key institution behind Ireland’s industrial policy was not a government Department but a state agency, the Industrial Development Authority (IDA). Originally established in 1949, it had considerable operating autonomy. Over time, it developed a highly activist role in both soliciting international investors and in facilitating relationships between investors and the range of domestic actors and services needed to bed down new economic activities. Irish industrial development policy came to be seen as developmental, but ‘flexible’, working with not against market incentives, facilitating the connection between ‘global’ actors and local economic conditions ([Ó Riain, 2004](#_ENREF_70), [Ó Riain, 2000](#_ENREF_69), [Barry, 2007](#_ENREF_5)). The IDA proved highly successful in its remit. Criticism of its relative lack of interest in developing domestic industry resulted in shifts in the reconfiguration of industrial development bodies during the 1990s ([Hardiman et al., 2014](#_ENREF_39)). But the contention that Ireland remains over-reliant on FDI, with the IDA as its champion, is never entirely put to rest.

As in other European countries, Ireland displayed a rise in the ‘regulatory state’ alongside the decline in direct productivist state activities. Indeed, as Figure 3 shows, regulatory agencies, along with delivery and advisory bodies, account for a disproportionate share of the increase in the number of agencies since 1990.

Figure 3. State agencies by function

Many of the regulatory agencies were set up to comply with EU requirements, but the proliferation of discrete bodies in Ireland was unusual. Delivery bodies include organizations providing educational services, implementation of commitments to policies such as active citizenship and sustainable housing, as well as commercial state enterprises. Advisory bodies include agencies set up to monitor government policy, such as the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, as well as agencies providing a link between civil society organizations and government policy, such as the National Economic and Social Council and other tripartite social partnership bodies.

The delegation of authority to regulatory and other authorities has become standard practice for bodies that need to display a credible commitment to independence from government. But if such agencies are kept at arm’s-length from government policy, and if clear policy oversight is not maintained, perverse consequences may ensue. Arguably, the poor oversight of agencies noted in the preceding section contributed to policy drift prior to the crisis. For example, Ireland followed the British preference for ‘light-touch’ financial regulation, but in the Irish case, the Financial Regulator was in effect exercising little or no active regulation at all ([Clarke and Hardiman, 2012](#_ENREF_16), [O Riain, 2012](#_ENREF_68), [Honohan, 2010](#_ENREF_45)). The Irish banks went on to suffer one of the worst-ever banking crises, and the liabilities were disproportionately borne by the Irish taxpayers ([Woll, 2014](#_ENREF_94)). And Irish governments proved highly resistant to nationalization as a solution, even a temporary solution to crisis on such a scale. Yet it seems that Irish politicians always preferred arm’s-length institutional solutions, for example in the design of the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), the agency charged with taking over property development loans from Irish banks in return for government bonds. To take another example of delegated authority: while the social partnership institutions had contributed to patching up some shortcomings in policy-making and implementation during the 1990s, the weight government accorded to the preferences of the public sector unions can be argued to have contributed to the implementation of pro-cyclical fiscal policies during the 2000s ([Hardiman et al., 2012](#_ENREF_40), [Regan, 2012](#_ENREF_78)).

### The porous state: clientelism

The Irish state typically scores well on indicators of administrative competence and ‘impartiality’; but it scores considerably less well on indicators of perception of political corruption ([Byrne, 2012](#_ENREF_12), [Teorell et al., 2009](#_ENREF_88)). The IDA and its FDI-related activities are generally viewed as relatively unproblematic. But while most of the exporting activity in the Irish economy is concentrated in the FDI sector, most private sector employment is in enterprises that are small by international standards, and that operate mostly in the non-exporting domestic economy. Problems involving political corruption have been clustered in areas such as the allocation of licenses for the conduct of particular kinds of commercial activity, control over regulation of land use, and the preferential allocation of public contracts to private firms that were known to make generous political donations.

The scale of political corruption can be difficult to pin down. It may be seen as one end of a spectrum of activity that extends back into clientelist methods of building up political support. An incorrupt public administration can coexist with political practices of using state functions to build up political support. Among the perks of political office is the allocation of positions on the boards of state agencies, since these boards generally offer some remuneration and expenses to appointees ([Ó Riain, 2014](#_ENREF_71)). Comparative research suggests that the independence of state bodies depends less on statutory rules than on extent to which the potential for political interference is curbed, particularly when it comes to making appointments to the board and management of those agencies ([Ennser-Jedenastik, 2014](#_ENREF_24)).

The discretionary role of governments in making appointments to Irish state agencies is part of a wider phenomenon of the overspill of party politics into policy-making activities ([Hardiman, 2012b](#_ENREF_36)). An organizational approach reveals the scope for clientelist coalition-building within state agencies themselves.

In summary, we can see that the Irish state has featured somewhat contradictory tendencies that run in parallel to each other in several key areas of state functioning. The administrative apparatus of the state was expanded where it was considered necessary or appropriate to increase policy capacity. But overall control and integration of policy capacity was lacking. The ‘developmental state’ took a strong role in supporting FDI-led growth. But it was poorly integrated with the development of indigenous firms. Meanwhile, the state bodies responsible for regulatory oversight of a highly exposed economy were in thrall to the logic of minimal intervention and the self-regulating market. And while the administrative capacity of the state is quite high, the overall management of many state bodies was prone to a pervasive clientelism and overspill of party political interests. Organizational analysis enables us to track parallel trends in the way states function without requiring them to fit readily into over-simple typologies.

## Comparative organizational analysis of the state

The capacity to analyse complexity can be an advantage, but a recurring tendency in the study of the state from an organizational perspective has been the non-comparability of findings. Studies in the public administration tradition, for example, are likely to be comprehensive for individual countries, but difficult to generalize from more broadly. Nevertheless, there is a growing interest in developing empirical databases of state organizations to analyse state structures and activities in a comparative framework. Regulatory agencies, for example, are now well mapped comparatively ([Levi-Faur, 2006](#_ENREF_57), [Jordana et al., 2011](#_ENREF_49)). Norway already has a database of state institutions, and interest in developing databases analogous to the Irish State Administration Database are under way in a number of other (mostly small) states ([Norwegian Social Science Data Services, 2011](#_ENREF_67), [COST-CRIPO, 2007-11](#_ENREF_17)).

While ISAD was developed to capture fully the contours of the Irish state, its design was motivated by questions that were inherently comparative in nature. It is aligned with a recent turn in the study of state structures that is more explicitly animated by questions of commonality and variation in organizational expressions of state activity ([van Thiel, 2014](#_ENREF_90), [Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014](#_ENREF_53), [Lodge and Wegrich, 2012](#_ENREF_59), [Lane, 2009](#_ENREF_55)).

The design of ISAD facilitates comparison because it explicitly recognizes that there is variation in the definition of what is to count as a state organization. Moreover, the multiple classification schema also recognizes that there will be variation not only in structural features such as the legal status of organizations but also in the level – national or sub-national – at which different functions are exercised and different policy competences are located. Moreover, fine-grained analytical distinctions, such as in functions of organizations, can be aggregated to higher levels of generality to facilitate comparison ([Hardiman and Scott, 2010](#_ENREF_41)).

## Conclusion

The decline of the state in advanced industrial societies was widely expected with the spread of neo-liberal ideas from the 1980s on. But the activist state never went away, though it changed the way it functioned ([Levy, 2006](#_ENREF_58)). Some state roles such as the public ownership of heavy industries have largely been abandoned; some previously state-dominated social provisions have been opened up to internal markets if not outsourced entirely ([Gingrich, 2011](#_ENREF_29)). But in most states, a mixture of trends will be discernible. Decentralization of activities into agencies in some areas may coexist with some regrouping and de-agencification of policy. State activism continues alongside market-led liberalization. Bureaucratic autonomy is unchallenged in some areas, but subject to political interference in others. Discerning the nature of the admixture and tracking these trends empirically is a challenging prospect. An organizational approach, guided by the theoretical concerns of comparative political science and political economy, can generate new empirical data to enrich these discussions.

Figure 1. Total number of state agencies, 1923-2014



Figure 2. Agency terminations by type



Figure 3. State agencies by function



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