State Capture from the Grassroots: Civil Society Efforts and Public Perceptions

Project Summary

This project is designed to deepen understanding of state capture by focusing on the previously overlooked role of public opinion in mitigating state capture and democratic backsliding. While research has explored the mechanics of state capture, little is known about how the public perceives the mechanisms used by individuals and groups who seek to capture the state, and the effectiveness of efforts to counteract them. This study will investigate public attitudes towards state capture and evaluate the impact of communication campaigns that aim to mobilise citizens to, for example, support anti-state capture interventions. The research will also explore potential risks of communications campaigns in this area, such as unintentionally reinforcing feelings of resignation or fostering populist sentiment.

The research will be conducted within South Africa—where state capture is especially salient and where there is a vibrant civil society leading efforts to reverse it. The research involves a close collaboration with a major South African civil society organisation, Corruption Watch which will lead to the co-production and rigorous test of short videos designed to raise awareness of state capture's harms and inspire public action. By using experimental survey methods and collecting new data on popular perceptions of state capture, the project will provide insights into how messaging strategies influence optimism, civic behaviour, and the willingness of citizens to support anti-state capture initiatives. We will also generate valuable interview and survey data that will shed light on a wide range of issues, including how citizens feel about the performance of different government institutions on state capture, and the risk that state capture is pushing voters to back anti-system and populist leaders who threaten to destabilise the political system.

Policy and Programming Implications

Engaging with the public is essential when fighting state capture because doing so promises to build collective resistance and increase popular pressure on captor groups. A primary way in which civil society has sought to engage the public on the issue is through awareness raising or other messaging campaigns. However, prior research suggests that anti-state capture awareness raising efforts may risk backfiring. By making the problem salient, such campaigns may unintentionally make people feel the system is too overrun by captor groups for resistance to make a meaningful difference.

The research will provide new data about how citizens view state capture, generate empirical evidence on how public opinion shapes popular resistance to state capture, and pioneer a rigorous assessment of anti-state capture communication campaigns, to

generate actionable recommendations for civil society and other policy actors that aim to engage with the public to counter state capture, and avoid some risks associated with doing so.

Research Questions

1. What are public perceptions of state capture? How does the public feel about the prevalence and impacts of different mechanisms of state capture and counter reforms?
2. What do civil society actors think are the main public and political barriers to making progress on the fight against state capture?
3. How does communication from civil society groups about state capture impact on public attitudes and willingness to support anti-state capture civic action?
4. To what extent does communication from civil society groups about state capture impact upon support for democracy, populist attitudes and beliefs about the social contract?

Methodology

In-depth interviews will be conducted with civil society actors involved in good governance and anti-corruption in South Africa to identify what they believe are the main public and political barriers to making progress on the fight against state capture.

We will co-produce two anti-state capture videos with Corruption Watch, and test their efficacy through a large household-level survey, with an embedded experiment. The survey-experiment will examine whether and how exposure to the anti-state capture videos impacts willingness to support Corruption Watch, but also attitudes about state capture, as well as corruption (more generally), populist ideas and support for democratic checks and balances. The survey-experiment will, therefore, allow us to examine whether civil society-led messaging campaigns on state capture risk having unwanted impacts of nudging people to sympathise with populist ideas.

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