

Seeing like an austere state: the budgetary politics of failed reform

Students of politics commonly invoke fiscal austerity as a barrier to progressive reforms, but present this condition as primarily an impediment to realizing desired policies. But austerity simultaneously guts the infrastructure that political actors require to develop reform agendas, thereby checking reform efforts by limiting the scope of the politically plausible and desirable. The paper illustrates this via a multi-sited ethnographic study of legislators and agency leaders in two northeastern states. It illustrates several non-obvious consequences of budgetary constraint: agency leaders' inability to coordinate with other states and examine their reform efforts, the inability of public bureaucracies to render local conditions sufficiently legible, and the emergency of super-brokers within the legislature, who act as bottlenecks for legislative initiatives. Contrary to accounts that emphasize conditions of possibility for a leftward shift in American state-level politics, the paper illustrates that a widespread inability to generate revenue dampens the institutional imagination of state policy makers.