

Weidemaier on Sovereign Immunity and Sovereign Debt

Mark Weidemaier (University of North Carolina) has published *Sovereign Immunity and Sovereign Debt* in the latest issue of the *University of Illinois Law Review*.

The law of foreign sovereign immunity changed dramatically over the course of the 20th century. The United States abandoned the doctrine of absolute immunity and opened its courts to lawsuits by private claimants against foreign governments. It also pursued a range of other policies designed to shift such disputes into litigation or arbitration (and thus relieve political actors of pressure to intervene on behalf of disappointed creditors). This Article uses a unique data set of sovereign bonds to explore how international financial contracts responded to these legal and policy initiatives.

The Article makes three novel empirical and analytical contributions. The first two relate to the law of sovereign immunity and to the role of legal enforcement in the sovereign debt markets. First, although the decision to abandon the absolute immunity rule was a major legal and policy shift, this article demonstrates that investors dismissed their new enforcement rights as irrelevant to the prospect of repayment. Second, the ongoing Eurozone debt crisis has prompted fears that private investors will use litigation to prevent debt restructurings necessary to revive European economies. This Article shows that such fears may be overblown and, in the process, informs the broader empirical and theoretical debate about the role of legal enforcement in the sovereign debt markets.

Finally, the Article exposes a gap in contract theory as it pertains to boilerplate contracts such as sovereign bonds. Boilerplate presents a puzzle of intense interest to contracts scholars. It is drafted to serve the interests of sophisticated, well-resourced players, yet it often remains static in the face of new risks. To explain this inertia, contract theory posits that major shifts in boilerplate financial contracts require a financial crisis or other exogenous shock that substantially alters investors' risk perceptions. This Article, however, demonstrates that the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act of 1976 prompted a major shift in contracting practices despite investors' continued indifference to

legal enforcement and argues that contract theory must recognize that a wider range of forces may prompt boilerplate to change.