

Transparency and Trust in Government: A Two-Way Relationship

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This paper investigates the complex relationship between transparency and trust. If trust in government is most of the time regarded as a positive effect of transparency, it should also be considered as a factor influencing citizens' perceptions of transparency, and not only as a result of transparency measures. Moreover, the principles underpinning transparency policies, especially accountability and trust, have not been widely tested empirically yet. This article proposes some paths of research regarding the effect of administrative transparency on citizens' trust in government in the Swiss context.

Keywords: Administrative transparency, Citizens' trust, Governance, Switzerland

1 Introduction

Transparency is now considered as a moral imperative in all democratic systems. It has been developed as a norm of governance in both public and private sectors, as shown by the recent scandals in public administrations and private entities (e.g. the French Minister Cahuzac who lied about the existence of an account in Switzerland, horse meat scandal, the clandestine surveillance program of the United States National Security Agency). Calls for more transparency in management are now frequent, and their supporters think of it both as a remedy against all forms of corruption and as a crucial element of any accountable government (Etzioni, 2010). Therefore, transparency has become very difficult to criticise. Two main reasons seem to justify this normative point of view within the public sphere: On the one hand, the right to know has been raised as a fundamental human right in most Western societies, making transparency an essential factor of this evolution. On the other hand, transparency has been praised for its effects on the management of the administration and their citizens (Pasquier, 2014). Indeed, transparency is supposed to have a positive impact on four dimensions. First of all, supporters of transparency reforms often claim that corruption will be reduced. Secondly, they argue that administrations will be more efficient. As a result of a more transparent system, they will finally assume that transparency will increase citizens' participation and trust in government.

This article is based on this last assumption and will examine the complex relationship between transparency and trust in government. The main goal of the article is to examine if a higher level of transparency directly leads to more trust in government, as most countries, international institutions and NGOs now

advocate. More specifically, it will show that there is no parallel evolution in the Swiss case and propose a hypothesis for Switzerland, mainly based on historical and institutional aspects.

2 Transparency and trust in practice

From a practitioners' perspective, transparency is perceived as a source of trust in government and as a remedy for general distrust in Western societies. Several organisations struggling for more trust in government through transparency policies have indeed emerged in the past few years. For instance, the main objective of the NGO Transparency International (TI) is to fight against corruption in all countries of the world. In doing so, it aims to increase trust in government at the same time. In the 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index, the organisation claims: "The message is clear: across the globe, transparency and accountability are critical to restoring trust and turning back the tide of corruption" (Transparency International, 2010). Jeremy Pope, founding managing director of TI, has even described transparency as a substitute for trust.

The political world has also called for more transparency. In Europe, the link between transparency and trust in government has officially appeared for the first time in the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 (Lenaerts, 2004). For this occasion, it has been said that "The Conference considers that transparency of the decision-making process strengthens the democratic nature of the institutions and the public's confidence in the administration"¹. There is a clear link between transparency and democracy, in the sense that more transparency is supposed to reinforce democratisation within the European Union (Héritier, 2003). In the same vein, Stiglitz (2003) argues that transparency could set up a virtuous circle where increased legitimacy, democratic participation and trust would lead to a dynamic change in the government.

In North America, the Canadian Action Plan on Open Government insists on professional integrity, assuming that it is essential "to maintain and enhance public confidence in the integrity of Canada's world-class public service"². In the United States, on his first day in Office, President Obama signed the Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government by saying "We will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration". Transparency has also proved of major importance for international organisations, as explained in a report from Armstrong (2005). According to the author, the concept is considered both collectively and individually by the countries as a "founding principle of public administration". Leaders of the world

¹ Details of this declaration and annexes to the Maastricht Treaty are available here: <http://aei.pitt.edu/2944/1/2944.pdf>

² <http://ouvert.canada.ca/fr/plan-daction-du-canada-pour-un-gouvernement-ouvert>

have therefore agreed upon a transparency and accountability initiative, and the United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN) reaffirms the need to fight corruption through more transparency, because corruption erodes trust in the public sector³.

In the Swiss case, the evolution has been a bit slower, but a law on transparency has entered into force at the national level in 2006 (LTrans). According to the office in charge, “it contributes to keeping the public informed by allowing all citizens access to official documents, thereby increasing confidence in the state and authorities”⁴. Anybody can submit a request to have access to documents, but certain fields are excluded from the law (i.e. foreign policy interests). Within 20 days, the concerned authority has to respond to the application. The latter can obtain a further 20 days if the process is too long. If access to the document(s) requested is limited or refused, a written application for mediation may be submitted to the Federal Data Protection and Information Commissioner (FDPIC) in the next 20 days.

The movement is not limited to Europe and North America: In 2014, Paraguay became the 100th nation to pass a Freedom of Information (FOI) law, making obvious that access to information is now a preoccupation all across the globe (McIntosh, 2014).

3 Transparency and trust in theory

In spite of this broad support for transparency – at least in terms of intention – few studies have empirically shown that transparency and trust in government are positively correlated. Facing the complex definition of transparency, several authors have focused on disclosure of information and the effects of e-government on citizens’ trust (Kim & Lee, 2012; Parent, Vandebek & Gemino, 2005; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). However, reality proves to be more complex, as many citizens do not know the existence of official online platforms, or do not use them (Kolsaker & Lee-Kelley, 2008), do not always understand their content or get access to information in various ways. Therefore, it will be useful to test transparency in terms of citizens’ perceptions, because they often play a crucial role. In that sense, Kweit & Kweit (2007) have shown that the feeling of being associated to a specific public policy seems to be more important for individuals than their effective participation online. With regard to perceptions of administrative transparency, it would be promising to focus on what kind of information individuals really get from their authorities and how they use these resources.

So far, few academic articles have tended to prove that transparency has a rather neutral effect on citizens’ trust in government, appearing to confirm the so-called “sceptics” – those who remain sceptical about a strong influence of

³ <http://ouvert.canada.ca/fr/plan-daction-du-canada-pour-un-gouvernement-ouvert>

⁴ <http://www.edoeb.admin.ch/oeffentlichkeitsprinzip/00887/00888/index.html?lang=en>

transparency on trust in government (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). In most of these studies, transparency is defined as “the availability of information about an organization or actor allowing external actors to monitor the internal workings or performance” (Meijer, 2013). This paper also follows this definition, as it seems rather exhaustive and shows at the same time the double dimension of transparency. On the one hand, information should be made available (active transparency) or searched by citizens (passive transparency); on the other hand, information must be clearly processed and understood by individuals in order for the system to be transparent. This complex situation shows that both disclosure and reception of information should be considered with regard to transparency. Moreover, characteristics specific to a certain field have led academics to focus on a particular issue most of the time, making a generalisation of results somewhat difficult. Living on its own, trust in government proves really difficult to define. One of the most relevant definitions is developed in a recent thesis of Fivat (2013). According to the author, the concept includes three main dimensions:

1. Competence (or ability): It is related to the initial level of resources and the way they are used by the administration;
2. Probity (or integrity, honesty): The second dimension refers to the ability of the administration to keep their commitments, following the norms and values usually associated to these commitments;
3. Benevolence (or goodwill): The administration is favourably disposed towards their citizens, and no individual interest is pursued.

The level of trust in government can be measured using these three dimensions. Indeed, perceptions of citizens in terms of competence, probity and benevolence of the administration would prove useful in studying the relationship between the levels of perceived transparency and trust in government.

4 Transparency as a source of trust, trust as a source of transparency

As shown above, transparency is often regarded by practitioners as a source of trust in government, a factor that can generate trust in government in almost any context. It is praised for its instrumental value, but is also given a strong intrinsic value, becoming a quasi-religious doctrine and leaving no space for criticism (Hood, 2006). The conceptual confusion between accountability, transparency and its effects, including citizens' trust in government and participation, has led all democratic leaders to join the transparency movement. In certain occasions, their enthusiasm has even transformed this position into a central argument of their political campaigns.

Some scholars have recently tried to evaluate the effect of transparency on trust in government, but their studies have led to mixed conclusions. Some works have shown that transparency can sometimes have a positive impact on trust in government, but that it remains specific to a certain area (De Fine Licht, 2014), while others remind us that transparency does not automatically have a decisive influence on trust in government and depends on the context (Grimmelikhuisen et al., 2013). Finally, it should be noted that if transparency leads to deception, it may destroy the basis needed to ensure trust in government. For instance, Anheier, Kaldor and Glasius (2005) pretend that revelation about risk management in the case of Bhopal and Chernobyl disasters, as well as the Contergan (Thalidomide) affair in Germany have seriously diminished the confidence of citizens in both the industries concerned and the regulatory agencies of the state.

If trust in government is almost exclusively studied as a result of transparency, the very nature of the relationship between both concepts is often disregarded. However, one could argue that trust in government is also a prerequisite to believe in the information gathered. In other words, faith of a person is indispensable to believe what the other person says in the first place. This approach dates back to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, where the author states: "faith, in the man; Beleeffe, both of the man, and of the truth of what he says. So that in Beleeffe are two opinions; one of the saying of the man; the other of his virtue. To have faith in, or trust to, or beleeve a man, signifie the same thing; namely, an opinion of the veracity of the man: But to beleeve what is said, signifieth onely an opinion of the truth of the saying" (Hobbes, 1651, p. 36). This statement still seems valid nowadays and has been rephrased in the same vein by several authors. According to Rawlins (2008, p. 2), "Being transparent requires a willingness to be vulnerable, because you can't ensure how people will use the information you share". In terms of institutions, we argue that the preliminary level of trust held by citizens in their government may significantly influence their perceptions of transparency. Some articles have indeed shown that the initial level of trust in institutions, among other factors, plays a crucial role when studying the relationship between transparency and trust (Bouckaert and Van de Walle, 2003).

5 Levels of trust and the rise of transparency

If initial trust in government has to be taken into account when studying the impact of transparency policies, there is also another phenomenon that must be paid attention to cautiously. In the last few decades, the focus on the relationship between transparency and trust in government has increased because of two related assumptions. Firstly, a feeling of decline of trust in the public sector (Van de Walle, Roosbroek and Bouckaert, 2008), and secondly the conviction that a minimum level of trust in institutions is required, as already told by Confucius in the 5th century BC and recently reaffirmed by philosopher O'Neill (2002). According to her, trust is essential to the very survival of the political community.

Among the most detailed analyses on transparency and trust in government, some authors have affirmed that the higher the level of transparency, the higher the level of trust in government (Grigorescu, 2003). The purpose here is not to completely invalidate this study, but how can we explain the recent rise of transparency (Florini, 1998) and the supposed decline of trust in institutions?

On that matter, the United States provide us with an interesting example, because FOI laws are there a quite long-established tradition and an issue before presidential elections, as transparency of the public sector is a major theme discussed in the candidates' bid for the White House. Table 1 shows the levels of trust in government in the US between 1993 and 2010. Although the Bush administration has been presented as one of the most secretive government in US history, polls seem to prove that levels of trust in government were especially high in 2002 and higher during the whole Bush presidency than during Obama's first years of mandate. This result can be surprising in the sense that Obama has campaigned for more transparency and severely criticised Bush's politics in terms of transparency.

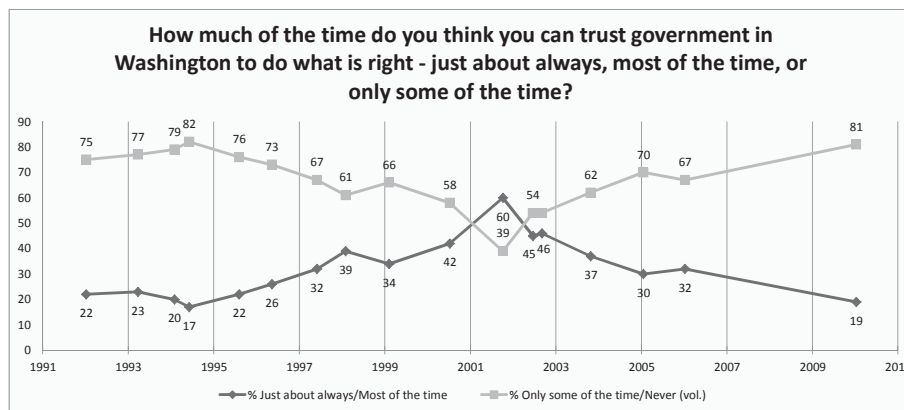


Table 1: Level of trust in government in the United States between 1993 and 2010,
 Source: Gallup polls "Trust in Government",
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/5392/trust-government.aspx>

In 2013, only 40% of the OECD country residents said they had trust in their national governments (OECD, 2013). However, it seems tricky to compare these data with transparency reforms within the administration, because of at least two reasons. First of all, we assume that other factors do have a strong impact on trust in government, and transparency itself does not make a significant difference in all cases. Secondly, we believe that citizens' perceptions of transparency should be taken into account, and that disclosure of information or laws of access to information alone are not sufficient to measure transparency. In fact, any study on transparency should aim for an accurate definition of the concept, taking into account both the conditions of diffusion (administration) and reception (citizens) of information. It is necessary to take these two comments into account in order to isolate the relationship between transparency and trust in government and to better assess the effect of one variable on the other. Moreover, strong variations remain between countries in terms of trust in government. This is especially the case of Switzerland, which has witnessed an increase of trust between 2007 and 2012 (OECD, 2013). The last section of this paper will analyse more deeply the Swiss case and suggest some ideas for future research.

6 Hypothesis for Switzerland

In the case of Switzerland, levels of trust in government have remained very high in the last decade. It was actually the OECD country which ranked first in terms of confidence in government (77%) in 2012, with an increase of 14% compared to 2007 (OECD, 2013). Concerning transparency, a law entered into force in Switzerland in 2006, allowing citizens to submit requests to the federal administration. However, few individuals (journalists more particularly) have resorted to this right until now. Reasons for this lack of mobilisation are to be found in the recent nature of the law. Compared to some other OECD countries, such as Sweden (where access to information for the public was added to the Constitution in 1766), Switzerland has adopted a law on transparency relatively late. The law also lacks visibility, thus failing to reach out to the population. Another obstacle seems to lie in the specific case of Switzerland (Pasquier, 2009). The Swiss political context, characterised by a federal organisation and a system of concordance (presence of all major parties in the government), already gives access to information to political parties through multiple channels. Members of the Parliament have also other professional activities and can spread information beyond the political sphere. Finally, associations concerned by a specific reform take part in the consultation process in the pre-legislative phase.

With regard to the relationship between transparency and trust in government, Pasquier (2009) notes that high levels of trust in government could lead citizens to refrain from submitting requests, as their amount is relatively low compared to other European countries that have adopted a law at the same time

(e.g. Germany, where the Federal Act Governing Access to Information went into effect in 2006). Transparency appears to have no significant impact on trust in government, as scores remain high in the OECD scale, while individuals do not take advantage of transparency measures introduced recently (such as the right to access information). Based on this observation, one may suggest the following hypothesis: the transparency measures implemented in 2006 have no influence on the Swiss citizens' high level of trust in their institutions. In this particular case, it seems necessary once again to concentrate on individual perceptions of transparency and trust in government and have more detailed definitions in order to isolate the relationship between both concepts. A study focusing on a particular sector could be beneficial in this framework. Any further research should not leave out the "initial trust in institutions" factor, as the latter may play a significant role on the relationship.

7 Conclusion

Switzerland has experienced an exceptionally high level of confidence in government in the last few years. At the same time, transparency policies have been promoted, leading to the adoption of a first law on transparency in 2004, which was enforced two years later. Requests and appeals have nevertheless been used parsimoniously. This observation leads us to question the common statement about the positive correlation between transparency and trust in government. Likewise, in spite of all ongoing transparency reforms, the decline of trust in the public sector perceived in most European countries and the US calls this assertion into question. As O'Neill (2006, p. 77) puts it, "If more institutions and office-holders are being held to higher standards of transparency, surely we might expect the reverse?". As a possible answer, some articles have shown no positive correlation between openness and trust (e. g. Worthy, 2010), but they have centered their attention on FOI laws. More generally, it seems hardly possible to compare Gallup data on trust in government and transparency policies that have been implemented recently by administrations. The US case also shows that levels of trust in government do not fluctuate in accordance with policy measures in terms of transparency. In Switzerland, it might be particularly interesting to look into the impact of other factors, such as political stability and direct democracy instruments (referendum and popular initiative). Based on the fact that few control variables have been considered in most studies so far, and given the high number of internal (i.e. high level of initial trust in government) factors in the specific political context of Switzerland, it does not seem especially surprising that there is no direct correlation between the reinforcement of transparency measures and the level of trust in government.

Moreover, we believe that a comprehensive definition of transparency, taking into account citizens' perceptions, would enable us to carry out a relevant analysis on this complex relationship between transparency and trust in government. Such a study may build upon both the definition of Meijer (2013) and the dimensions elaborated by Fivat (2013). It would then contribute to the research field and help to revise the widely held assumption that transparency reinforces trust in government, all things being equal.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht die komplexe Beziehung zwischen Transparenz und Vertrauen. Das Vertrauen in die Regierung wird meistens als positiven Effekt der Transparenz betrachtet. Jedoch beeinflusst das Vertrauen in die Regierung auch die Wahrnehmung der Transparenz der Bürger und ist somit nicht nur das Ergebnis von Transparenz schaffenden Massnahmen. Nur wenige Studien haben die häufig präsentierten Grundprinzipien der Transparenz, accountability und Vertrauen, empirisch getestet. Dieser Beitrag präsentiert einige Forschungsansätze betreffend den Einfluss der Verwaltungstransparenz auf das Vertrauen der Bürger im schweizerischen Kontext.

Schlagworte: Verwaltungstransparenz, Vertrauen der Bürger, Governance, Schweiz

Résumé

Cet article se concentre sur la relation particulière qu'entretiennent transparence et confiance. Si la confiance est souvent considérée comme un effet bénéfique induit par la transparence, il s'agit de ne pas négliger l'impact que la confiance dans le gouvernement peut avoir sur la perception de la transparence par les citoyens. Ainsi, la confiance ne doit pas être uniquement étudiée comme une variable résultant des mesures prises par l'administration en matière de transparence. De plus, peu d'études ont démontré empiriquement la validité des arguments souvent avancés pour soutenir la transparence, notamment l'accountability et la confiance. Cet article propose à cet égard quelques pistes de recherche quant à l'effet de la transparence administrative sur la confiance des citoyens dans le contexte suisse.

Mots-Clé : Transparence administrative, confiance citoyenne, gouvernance, Suisse

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