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# Observing and Measuring Government Openness. A conceptual discussion and application to Mexico

Guillermo M. Cejudo, Cynthia L. Michel, Armando Sobrino & Marcela Vázquez\*

**Abstract.** Open government has become a goal for countries all over the world, but it remains an elusive concept. Despite innovative methodologies to assess open government policies, action plans, and interventions in different countries, scholarly research and practical decisions are hindered by the lack of a precise concept and an operationalization. In this paper, we make two contributions to this discussion. First, we argue that the discussions about open government would benefit from taking the grammatical structure of the concept seriously (open is an adjective, government a noun). Second, we propose that, in order to be conceptually and practically useful, open government should be observable. We present the methodology, application and results of an effort to observe and measure open government in Mexico, based on a study of 908 government offices in terms of transparency and participation.

**Key words:** Open government, transparency, citizen participation, openness, measurement.

## Observando y midiendo la apertura gubernamental. Una discusión conceptual y su aplicación en México

**Resumen.** En los últimos años el gobierno abierto se ha convertido en un objetivo para muchos países alrededor del mundo, sin embargo, continúa siendo un concepto elusivo. Si bien se han diseñado metodologías innovadoras para evaluar políticas, planes de acción e intervenciones de gobierno abierto en diferentes países, tanto la investigación académica como la toma de decisiones prácticas para promover un gobierno abierto se han visto afectadas por la falta de una definición clara, operacionalizable y observable de dicho concepto. En este artículo realizamos dos contribuciones. Primero, argumentamos que las discusiones sobre el gobierno abierto se beneficiarían de tomar seriamente la estructura gramatical del concepto (“abierto” es un adjetivo y “gobierno” es un sustantivo). Segundo, proponemos que, para ser útil conceptual y empíricamente, el gobierno abierto debe ser observable. Presentamos la metodología, las aplicaciones y los resultados de un esfuerzo por observar y medir el gobierno abierto en México, basados en un estudio de 908 oficinas gubernamentales en términos de transparencia y participación.

**Palabras clave:** Gobierno Abierto, Transparencia, Participación Ciudadana, Apertura, Medición.

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**Content.** Introduction. 1. Understanding openness as an observable government attribute. 2. Measuring government openness. 3. Making openness observable. 4. An application: Open Government Metric in Mexico. 5. Results and findings. 6. Implications and conclusions. 7. References

## Introduction

Open government is everywhere. There is a burgeoning global community of practice including the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and a growing academic literature (Wirzt and Bickmeyer, 2015). There is an important set of administrative reforms inspired by it at the national and subnational levels (Piotrowski, 2016), laws and directives, as well as governments and civil society organizations working together to open up data, policies, parliaments, and judiciaries. And yet, as Kornberger et al. (2017) argue “Open government is in vogue, yet vague” (p. 179).

Open government is seen as a goal, a movement, a virtue, a process a model, or a technological solution (Peixoto, 2013; Yu and Robinson, 2012). Sometimes, it is used either as a fashionable label, as a guiding principle, or as an actual government practice (Cejudo, 2016). For those who dismiss it as a mere label, open government is a new umbrella term that encompasses older concepts such as transparency or access to information, but without adding any value. From this perspective, open government may contribute to build a shared language for those interested in increasing transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. But it easily may become a hollow concept that governments could incorporate in their discourse to pretend they are committed to a global openness movement, but without making decisions towards achieving real changes.

As a principle, open government is a normative ideal that guides government’s actions and citizen’s demands (Mulgan, 2014). The incorporation of this principle in the legislation, the public discourse, and citizen’s aspirations is desirable, but it will not transform governments unless it rapidly translates in concrete practices. Finally, open government as a practice is the set of decisions, tools, and actions that allow citizens to become central actors not only in electoral times, but also in shaping the exercise of power and democratically controlling it. These practices may potentially transform the way citizens interact with their government.

In this paper, we make two contributions to this discussion. First, we show that the arguments about open government would benefit from taking the grammatical structure of the concept seriously (open is an adjective, government a noun). Second, we argue that open government, to be conceptually and practically useful, should be observable. In other words, since openness is an attribute of governments, we should be able to identify how open a government is by analyzing observable characteristics of such government. We present the methodology, application and results of a study where we observe and measure open government in Mexico: the *Open Government Metric* in Mexico, developed in collaboration with the National Institute for Transparency, Access to Information and Data Protection (INAI).

This paper is based on this *Metric* (the report and supporting documents can be found here: <http://eventos.inai.org.mx/metricasga/>). After arguing that openness should be understood as an observable government attribute, we explain how we conceptualized open government and made it observable in Mexico’s governments. Finally, we present the results of our *Open Government Metric* and offer some implications for the study and practice of open government.

## 1. Understanding openness as an observable government attribute

Open government has become a goal for countries all over the world. This is evident in many political discussions or in policies that are implemented on its behalf. The increasing popularity of this concept is a result of the expected benefits that it would bring, such as efficiency, less corruption and increased government legitimacy (Meijer and Curtin, 2012). Indeed, the Open Government Partnership (OGP) declaration states that the countries that become part of it will commit “to promote transparency, fight corruption, empower citizens, and harness the power of new technologies to make government more effective and accountable”.

In recent years, two main research agendas on open government have evolved simultaneously. On one hand, multiple efforts have been devoted to the definition and characteristics of open government (McGee and Edwards, 2016). On the other hand, there have been various attempts at measuring it (Ingrams, 2017). These agendas have not necessarily complemented each other, even if any measurement of open government implies a definition. Before putting forward our own methodology, we study how open government has been defined and measured, and the strengths and weaknesses of those measurements.

Open government is an elusive concept. It suffers from two problems: concept ambiguity and concept inflation. Open government is an ambiguous concept because it may mean many different things, depending on the conversation and the context (Safarov, Meijer and Grimmelikhuijsen, 2017; Wirtz, Weyerer and Rösch, 2017). Perhaps the most evident confusion is between instruments and goals. For instance, Yu and Robinson (2012) argue that

new ‘open government’ policies have blurred the distinction between the technologies of open data and the politics of open government. Open government and open data can each exist without the other: A government can be an open government, in the sense of being transparent, even if it does not embrace new technology (the key question is whether stakeholders know what they need to know to keep the system honest). And a government can provide open data on politically neutral topics even as it remains deeply opaque and unaccountable. (p. 181).

A related problem is what Grindle (2017) calls “conceptual inflation”. In a recent critique of the literature on good governance, Merilee Grindle alerts about a recurrent problem: “the popularity of the concept encourages additive rather than analytic thinking”. Instead of developing parsimonious, observable definitions, academics and practitioners alike add normative or empirical elements to the concept. That is why open government ends up encompassing transparency, participation, innovation, accountability, technology, citizen-orientedness, and so on. Therefore, as Grindle (2017) laments regarding good governance, “like a balloon being filled with air, definitions of ideal conditions [...] were progressively inflated, and increasingly unhelpful to those concerned about how to get there” (p. 17).

Ambiguity and inflation make concepts useless for analytical and practical purposes. In his influential paper on “what makes a concept good”, Gerring (1999) warns about concepts that lack parsimony or that do not clarify what makes them different from neighboring concepts. Unless open government is clearly distinguishable from transparency, accountability or related concepts, our understanding of it will be limited.

Similarly, this lack of precision makes it difficult for countries to design public policies that would have an effect in promoting open government, and reduces our capacity for assessing the progress that governments have made in this regard. Open government may end up being “too vague to be a useful label in most policy conversations” (Yu and Robinson, 2012).

How can we make open government less elusive or vague as a concept? We argue that the most straightforward answer to this question would require to take grammar seriously. Open government is a compound noun, made up of an adjective (open) and a noun (government). Any adjective is a modifier of the noun; in this case, “open” qualifies “government”. This logic is different from putting together a set of related concepts and collapsing them into a broader, encompassing concept. It is also different from just making a list of desirable attributes of government. It means using *government* as the unit of analysis. To put it simply: we have an adjective that modifies a noun. We need to look at the noun (government) to be able to say how open it is.

The next task would be to come up with an understanding of what are the attributes of a government that would make it open. Those attributes would determine the openness of any given government. We would need to identify criteria to know whether government has those attributes (and therefore qualify as more or less open). This is, indeed, crucial step, since it allows us to move from a dichotomic understanding of openness (under which governments are either open or closed) towards a view of openness as a matter of degree (under which governments are gradually more or less open).

These two premises allow for an understanding of open government that is empirically observable: a government is open when it is possible for a citizen to interact with it, both in terms of knowing what it is doing (access to information) and being able to partake in its decisions (participation). How do we know if a government is open? By looking at specific government agencies and asking how citizens interact with it. Thus, openness can be observed in the interaction between governments and citizens. How openness works in specific agencies depends on the type of interaction between a government and its citizens (which may interact with governments as users, clients, beneficiaries, overseers, etc.). Moreover, openness may vary among agencies or over time. If we have an operationalized definition of openness we can observe these differences, identify trajectories and even assess progress. That where the next tasks comes into play: measuring government openness.

## 2. Measuring government openness

International organizations, governments, academic institutions, and other interested stakeholders had advanced innovative methodologies to assess open government policies and interventions in different countries. In Cejudo, Aguilar, Michel and Zedillo (2017), there is an analysis of 22 measurements<sup>1</sup> intended to assess open government or some other related concepts (e.g. open data, transparency)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> These measurements are: Global open data index; Open data barometer; Open government index; Open budget survey/open budget index; Municipal transparency index; Assessing government transparency: an interpretative framework; Online transparency index; *Índice de transparencia de los ayuntamientos* [town hall transparency index]; Global right to information rating; *Índice del derecho de acceso a la información en México* (Mexican right to information index); *Índice latinoamericano de transparencia presupuestaria* [Latin American budget transparency index]; *Cimtra-municipal*; *Cimtra-legislativo*; *Cimtra-delegacional*; *Índice de información presupuestal estatal*; *Índice de información presupuestal municipal*; *Métrica de la transparencia*

One first type of measurement aims at evaluating open government as equating it to open data, based on the Open Definition and the G8 Open Data Charter, and they mostly look at whether central governments have released any datasets.<sup>3</sup> A second type of measurement focus on transparency. These measurements are considerably more diverse and have looked at different levels of government, although for the most part they are limited to budget transparency.<sup>4</sup> Another group of measurements assesses the quality or strength of transparency and access to information laws, both across and within nations. And, finally, there are measurements based on a broad definition of open government that use proxy indicators of transparency or perceptions.

Since there is no consensus on the meaning of “open government”, every methodology identifies different components and they all use a wide variety of indicators. The analysis of national and international measurements for transparency and open government suggests that, for the most part, they examine: a) the degree of government transparency in terms of legislation or compliance, b) datasets following the Open Definition and the G8 Charter; c) some aspects of citizen participation; or d) expert and citizen perceptions on the level of government transparency or openness (Cejudo, Aguilar, Michel and Zedillo, 2017).

Measurements of open government have been focused on central governments (as opposed to state or municipal governments).<sup>5</sup> Most indexes focus on the basic standards of transparency set by legislation or the levels of reactive transparency by institutions with transparency obligations, only rarely looking at participation or proactive transparency.

In short, there are various attempts at measuring and evaluating progress in open government across a wide variety of countries and through a great diversity of methodologies and sources. Yet, there is a lack of multifactorial measurements that

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[Transparency Metric]; Metric for releasing open data; *Medición de la transparencia en línea*; Measurement of open government: metrics and process; Indicadores de iniciativas de datos abiertos en América Latina; OECD open government measurement.

<sup>2</sup> For a complete version of this analysis, see Guillermo M. Cejudo *et. al.* (2017).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the Global Open Data Index focuses on evaluating datasets based on their technical and legal components. The Open Data Barometer also includes expert perceptions and seeks to evaluate the perceived impact of released data in the countries analyzed. The Open Government Index, unlike the previous two, seeks to measure government openness based on public and expert perceptions and experiences exclusively. In Mexico, only one attempt at measuring open government could be found: Rodrigo Sandoval's measurement, which has been developed from 2007 and (at least until 2011) focused on state government online transparency.

<sup>4</sup> In Mexico, several measurements have tried to assess different aspects of transparency. CIDE's *Métrica de la Transparencia* –which looks at the central government, as well as all the Mexican states and a sample of municipalities– is one of the most renowned. Built on five dimensions (including an analysis of legal frameworks, citizens' experiences, and bodies tasked with access to information), its elaborate methodology reflects the supply of transparency and access to information across all branches and levels of government. In terms of budget transparency, IMCO's *Índice de Información Presupuestal Municipal* and *Índice de Información Presupuestal Estatal* seek to reflect the quality of official information on budgets through a variety of dichotomous indicators. CIMTRA provides transparency and access to information rankings for states, territorial demarcations and local congresses based on a methodology that stresses citizen involvement in measurement.

<sup>5</sup> Both the Global Open Data Index and the Open Data Barometer analyze datasets whose publication depends, for the most part, on the national government of each country considered. Even the Open Government Index –where some questions are devoted to local governments –only produce country-level scores. This index's assessment of open government and data publication is based on the most important cities in every country considered.

incorporate all the dimensions of open government and can be applied to a wider array of units of analysis (as opposed to national governments only).

### 3. Making openness observable

As it was shown in the previous sections, open government –as an idea and as a practice– is still under construction. Our intention here is not to offer a new definition, but instead to identify some measurable operational dimensions of open government for which observable characteristics can be traced, thus moving closer to measuring the level of open government in Mexico and, ideally, in any country. In order to do so, in addition to our analysis of measurements and indexes, we developed a survey for local experts, in which we gauged their points of view regarding which attributes or dimensions should be considered parts of open government. The results of these activities are presented below, and in the second part of this section we explain how we make government openness observable.<sup>6</sup>

The analysis of measurements and indexes presented in the previous section revealed that the concept these measurements incorporate the most into their methodologies is transparency (measured in one way or another by 13 out of the 22 indexes), even though only one of them considers proactive transparency. Open data comes second, as it is included in five out of the 22 measurements. The third most frequent component is participation, which four out of the 22 measurements consider. It is important to note that, even though collaboration is frequently mentioned in open government definitions, none of the indexes we analyzed explicitly sought to measure it. This suggests that even though concepts such as participation, collaboration, involvement (or even other possible concepts like co-creation) could be desirable when establishing the duties and characteristics of open governments, they might all be reduced to one single overarching concept (as in a continuum) when the time comes to measuring them in practice. Only two indexes consider the concept of accountability and, despite the fact that the right of access to information is not an essential part of the definition of an open government, it is actually part of six of the indexes we analyzed. Given these results, we may conclude that there is a considerable gap between the complexity of open government as a normative ideal and the attributes that have been considered in existing measurements. In other words, even though in theory open governments should ideally satisfy several conditions, not all of these have been considered or operationalized.

To make our decision of which dimensions and components to include in an open government measurement as precise and objective as possible, we resorted to a collaborative method in which we gathered expert opinions regarding the most important components that a definition for open government should consider, not only in normative but also in practical (observable) terms. Every participant (without exception) considered transparency to be one of the dimensions under which concepts related to open government had to be grouped in order to have a measurable definition. The second most frequently mentioned dimension was participation, with a 76%. Although participants referred to six additional categories, there seemed to be a lack of consensus given that all of them merited considerably less than 50% of the mentions. It is interesting to note, for example, that even

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<sup>6</sup> The full report can be found here: Cejudo, G. M., C. Michel, A. Sobrino, M. Vázquez, V. Aguilar, and R. Zedillo (2017), *Conceptual document for the Open Government Metric*, Mexico City: CIDE-INAI. Available at <https://goo.gl/ZWfqsx>.

though accountability was the fourth most important concept for experts, only 12% saw it as a potential dimension of an operationalizable definition of open government. This may suggest, for example, that instead of being one of the dimensions of open government, accountability is better understood as a transversal process which derives from the coordinated actions of various oversight mechanisms.

Based on the previous stages, we decided our measurement for open government in Mexico would consider two dimensions— transparency and citizen participation— since they are both essential for governments and citizens to interact and achieve, each from a different position, more efficacious public policies. However, for governments to be open, they must provide information that is actually useful for citizens, as well as work on participation mechanisms that truly allow them to get involved in decision-making. Therefore, as shown in Figure 1, we decided our measurement would consider two different perspectives –the government’s and the citizen’s– , each of them associated with different components.

Figure 1. Measuring open government: dimensions and perspectives:

		Dimensions	
		Transparency	Citizen participation
Perspectives	Government (supply)	Does the government make information about its actions and decisions public? To what extent? What quality is it?	What are the ways in which citizens may have an influence on public decision-making?
	Citizen (demand)	How feasible is it for citizens to obtain timely, relevant information to make decisions?	How easy is it for citizens to activate any mechanisms that would provide them with influence over decision-making?

Source: Open Government Metric, 2017.

*Open government from the government’s perspective*

Dimension I: Transparency from the government’s perspective

Our methodology regarding transparency as a dimension of open government is set to find whether (1) regulated entities have mechanisms that allow citizens to access information on government decisions and actions, (2) there are websites where public information can be accessed and analyzed, (3) regulated entities publish any additional information that is not required by law in a focalized fashion, and (4) information is made public in an open data format. The idea is to assess whether the government, in this case represented by every institution with transparency obligations, makes information about its decisions available, the extent to which they do so, and the quality of information they provide. Our measurement for transparency from the government’s perspective has four



main components, each comprised by a series of indicators and variables: 1) Access to information, 2) Reactive transparency, 3) Proactive transparency, and 4) Open data.

#### Dimension II: Participation from the government's perspective

Our measure for citizen participation from the government's perspective seeks to determine 1) the ways in which public authorities take into account citizens' opinions in decision-making, 2) whether the decision-making mechanisms in place allow for feedback on those decisions, 3) whether regulated entities have any mechanisms that set the basis for co-creation. This dimension looks at whether formal or informal participation mechanisms exist for each institution– and in case they do, it also evaluates the way they work. The goal is to explore the institutional channels the government has developed to learn and incorporate their citizens' opinions in decision-making processes. This dimension is measured by the following variables: Participation mechanisms, Actors involved, Mechanism operations, Format, and Follow-up.

#### *Open government from the citizen's perspective*

#### Dimension III: Transparency from the citizen's perspective

This dimension assesses how difficult it is for citizens to obtain information they need for everyday decisions. This dimension assesses whether common citizens are able to access useful information that is relevant for their everyday decisions, regardless of their level of knowledge about the government's structure or management. The purpose is to assess the real opportunities citizens have to make decisions over their use of public services given the available information. The resulting information allows to determine (1) whether the relevant information for each specific public service is available, and (2) whether it is sufficient to serve the make decisions. This last criterion requires an evaluation of three variables: (1) whether the information is clear (i.e. laid out in plain language), (2) whether the information is complete (i.e. enough to allow citizens to fulfill their objectives), and (3) whether the information was delivered in a timely manner (speed).

#### Dimension IV: Participation from the citizen's perspective

This dimension seeks to measure whether citizens are able to submit proposals and, ideally, have an influence over government decisions. Therefore, it gauges any opportunities citizens have to activate a participation mechanism by looking at four variables: Contact mechanisms, Reception, Activation, and Speed. While it is important that regulated entities have mechanisms through which citizens can contact them and present their policy ideas, it is even more important that citizens are able to actually enter into discussions with the authorities and, eventually, concreting their chances to influence the policy making process. Although speed is in this case desirable, it is not determinant for citizens to be able to influence decision-making.

### **4. An application: Open Government Metric in Mexico**

The two dimensions, transparency and participation, from both perspectives (government's and citizen's) were measured in Mexico through the *Open Government*

*Metric*, conducted by the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics (CIDE), a research institution based in Mexico City, at the request of the National Transparency Institute (INAI). The process of data collection began by mid-May 2016.

For our analysis of the government's perspective (for both the transparency and participation dimensions), our units of analysis were regulated entities. Our sample considered regulated entities from every level and branch of government, including every state<sup>7</sup> and five municipalities from each one of them (including Mexico City's territorial demarcations)<sup>8</sup>. We considered nine types of regulated entities from the federal and state governments.<sup>9</sup> In the end, our total sample had 908 regulated entities.

On the one hand, measuring open government from the government's perspective required the submission of information requests for both dimensions, namely, transparency and participation. With regards to the transparency dimension, we also reviewed different websites to assess the availability and characteristics of reactive and proactive information, as well as open data, in each of the 908 regulated entities.

For our analysis of the citizen's perspective, our units of analysis were seven policy areas: education, social development, security, legislative process, health, urban development, and public services; yet the mechanism we used to evaluate those areas was the submission of information requests to the regulated entities included in the sample.

On the other, measuring open government from the citizen's perspective required, for our transparency dimension, the formulation of a general question for all regulated entities related to a common policy area. In addition, we submitted information requests with a more specific question to every institution. This question was more directly linked with their legal responsibilities. For our participation dimension, we selected a policy area and attempted to present a policy proposal to each institution. We performed simulations to gauge citizens' possibilities of activating any participation mechanisms by e-mailing the policy proposal to every regulated entity that provided an address. When they did not provide one, as well as in the cases where the address did not work or the institutions did not reply, we attempted to reach them via telephone.

Each one of the four dimensions was measured -for every regulated entity in the sample- through one or more of the following four methods:

1. Legal analysis: review and analysis of the relevant regulations that apply to each regulated entity to determine whether there are procedures for citizens to request public information and mechanisms for them to participate.

2. Information requests: this was our most important source of information. We engaged in simulations which required the generation of a fictitious character that would submit information requests. Our purpose was to analyze how regulated entities respond to citizens who are trying to access government information while avoiding any bias derived from the institutions' knowledge that they were being evaluated.

3. Websites reviews: examination of the information on each institution's website, as well as information available through internet (Bing) searches and

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<sup>7</sup> We use the term "state" to refer to the 31 Mexican states plus Mexico City.

<sup>8</sup> We considered, for every state, the municipality for the capital city and an additional four municipalities, which were selected on the basis of two criteria: population (two with more than 70,000 inhabitants and two with less than 70,000 inhabitants), and party (each of them under the rule of a different party). For Mexico City, we selected five territorial demarcations favoring diversity in terms of the party in power as much as possible.

<sup>9</sup> The Executive, the Legislative, the Judiciary, autonomous organs, decentralized organs (which includes, for the federal government, state-owned companies), universities, political parties, unions, and trust funds.

transparency/open data websites. This was our source of information for our evaluation of reactive and proactive transparency, as well as open data.

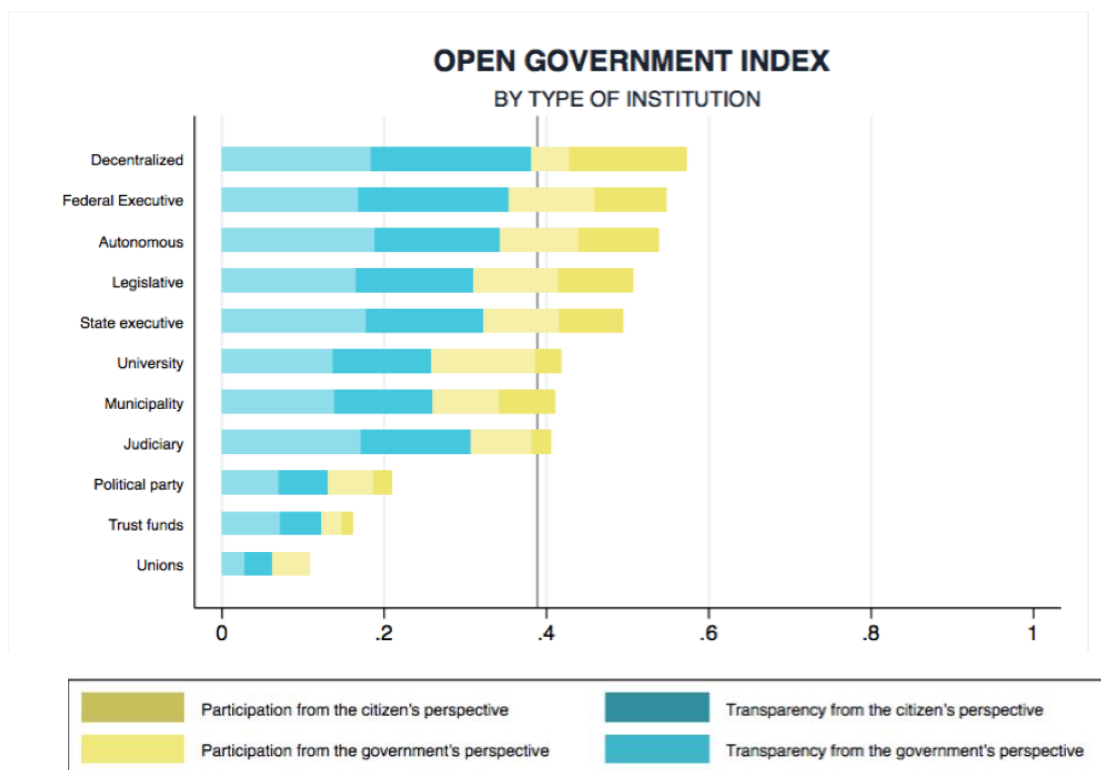
4. E-mail, inboxes, and telephone calls: to analyze participation from the citizen's perspective, we sent e-mails or messages to contact inboxes available on each institution's website; alternatively, we sought out contact via telephone. For these procedures, we also resorted to a simulation.

We sent a total of 3,635 information requests; reviewed more than 750 websites; made around 2,700 searches on Bing; sent roughly 600 e-mails, and made over 1,000 phone calls. The whole process was completed on October 30, 2016.

## 5. Results and findings

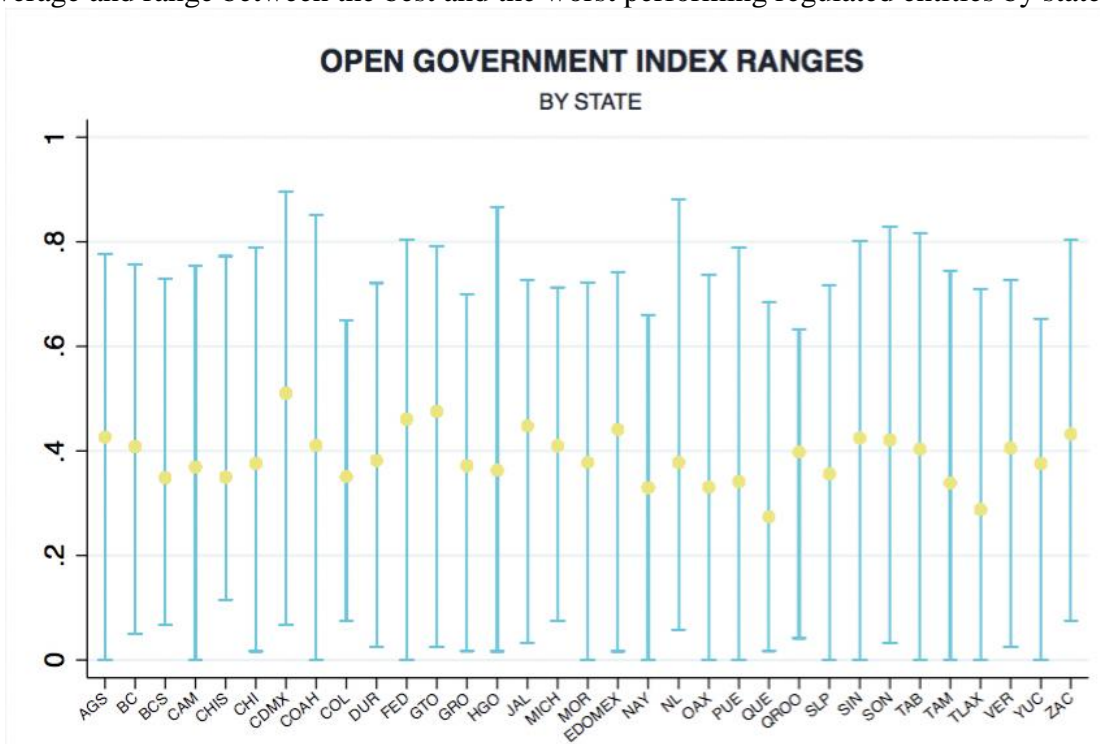
With our approach to observing and measuring open government, we can generate *aggregate indexes* about openness in a country (full results can be found at <https://goo.gl/ksuXDA>). The Open Government Index for Mexico is 0.39 (on a scale from 0 to 1). We could do the same for each level of government or for different local governments, as well as for different types of government agencies (see Figures 2 and 3). Scores tend to be low, which shows the long way ahead (especially in the participation dimension) for Mexican governments to truly allow citizens to gain knowledge about and have influence over their governments.

Figure 2. Open government index by type of institution (Mexico)



Source: Open Government Metric, 2017.

Figure 3. Open government index by state (Mexico).  
Average and range between the best and the worst performing regulated entities by state



Source: Open Government Metric, 2017.

We can also differentiate among the different *dimensions of openness*. As noted above, the Index considers both the value for transparency (for which the average was 0.5) and the one for participation (0.28), which incorporate the government’s and the citizen’s perspectives. The final value of the national Index results from calculating the average value of each of these four Subindexes: Transparency from the government’s perspective (0.46), Transparency from the citizen’s perspective (0.54), Participation from the government’s perspective (0.23), and Participation from the citizen’s perspective (0.33). Each of these values is derived from verifiable information obtained through one of the four methods mentions above, and could be replicated at any point in time following the public methodology.

We could even disaggregate into *components* of those dimensions, in order to understand what are the aspects of transparency or participation that a given agency is lacking or, alternatively, the ones in which it is above average (for full results, see Open Government Metric, 2017). This is why our study only makes sense when regulated entities are our unit of analysis (as opposed to states or national governments)— it allows not only for comparisons across regulated entities with a similar set of attributions, but also for a more detailed understanding of the specific challenges each state faces in their road to an open government.

Any analyst can build on these results and use the data to compare among government agencies, levels of government and, eventually, over time. She could also look for detailed explanations behind the performance of a given agency. And, with this information, it would be possible to assess the effectiveness of different instruments aiming at furthering open governments.

## 6. Implications and conclusions

Understanding government openness as an observable attribute of a government allows for progress in at least three agendas in the public and academic discussion of open government. First, it allows us to measure and assess open government *in practice*. Of course, this is different from saying that a government belongs to a global partnership, that it has set up initiatives to advocate open government, that a country has passed laws to promote openness or that a government has agreed to open up its datasets. It means that, in specific government agencies, a citizen can interact with officials: by having access to government information and by being able to influence its decisions. We can measure, and compare among agencies and over time. We could, therefore, assess the effectiveness of different initiatives, laws and projects to open governments.

Second, analyzing government openness as an observable attribute may contribute to better understanding of how to promote and advocate open government in different contexts. Opening government may mean different things in different contexts: open data may be relevant in some cases, but in other contexts citizens may need alternative ways of getting to know what their governments are doing. Similarly, the ways in which a citizen may participate to try to influence decision making will vary depending on the substantive work of a given agency and the type of relationship between the agency and the citizen. And, yet, the principle remains the same: openness refers to the ways in which a citizen may interact with the government, and therefore we can verify empirically (not based on laws or discourses) whether or not that interaction can take place, and we can assess how different instruments (laws, policy directives, external oversight) have an effect on the openness of a given agency.

Third, if we can empirically observe government openness, then we can ask questions about causal explanations for it. Scholarly discussions about the determinants of government openness may now have answers based on evidence at the agency level. We could then move forward the discussion on the determinants (political, organizational, or institutional) that enable the attainment of open government by comparing the performance achieved by different levels of government, policy areas or types of agencies.

The *Open Government Metric* responds to a specific context in a developing country with an ambitious agenda for opening up governments, but facing significant challenges of implementation, fragmentation, corruption and lack of accountability. It could not be automatically extrapolated to new contexts; but its logic (observing governments to assess how open they are) has the potential to improve theoretical and practical discussions in this area, by moving from generic calls to action, illusions about silver bullets (like open data), or evidence-free announcements about best practices, to questions about specific attributes of government agencies that can be observed, measured, assessed, and improved.

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