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**Seeing the State:  
The Implications of Transparency for Societal  
Accountability**

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**Abstract:**

International organizations and NGOs promote transparency as a necessary condition for enhancing accountability and curbing corruption. Transparency is predicted to deter corruption in part by increasing the opportunities for inter-institutional oversight and formal accountability, but also by expanding the possibilities for societal accountability, i.e. for citizens to monitor, scrutinize and hold public office holders accountable. While the societal accountability mechanism linking transparency and good government is often implied, it contains a number of assumptions seldom examined empirically. This study theoretically unpacks and explores empirically how transparency may influence good government via the mechanism of societal accountability, that is, by inciting reactions and responses from citizens. Using data compiled by the Quality of Government Institute, we show that increased transparency prompts different public reactions in countries with comparatively higher levels of corruption than in low corrupt countries. The data indicate that in corrupt countries, transparency, counter to many predictions, erodes political trust but stimulates civic engagement. The findings suggest that transparency may incite discontent and civic mobilization in the short term, contributing to greater accountability and better government in the long term.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

“Let it be impossible that anything should be done which is unknown to the nation—prove to it that you neither intends to deceive nor to surprise—you take away all the weapons of discontent. The public will repay with usury the confidence you repose in it” (Bentham [1839] 1999, 30).

As the quote by Jeremy Bentham indicates, the conviction that transparency induces good behavior in incumbents, and that this behavior will enhance the legitimacy of office holders, has deep historical roots. In the last decade, however, the transparency movement has gained momentum; international organizations and NGOs advocate transparency as a necessary condition for better government quality, greater accountability and limiting the scope for corruption (UN-HABITAT & Transparency International 2004; Islam 2006; Kaufmann et al. 2002; Kurtzman et al. 2004; IMF 2001; UNODC 2004; CEPA 2009) as well as bringing about economic growth (Kurtzman et al. 2004; Sielgle 2001). In addition to these predicted beneficial consequences, advocates also increasingly point to transparency and the right to know as a fundamental human right (Birkinshaw 2008; UN 1948).

Although the link between transparency and better government institutions has become conventional wisdom and permeates the thinking of international organizations and development organizations alike, our understanding of this link remains incomplete. The dominant theory behind transparency’s beneficial influence on government institutions is its potential to deter abuses of power because transparency increases opportunities for inter-institutional oversight, i.e. increases the risk of detection and consequently also punishment. More recently, Timothy Besley (2006, 98ff) and others have questioned the potential of government offices to hold one another accountable and instead propose the political agency model, which instead assigns the role of principal to the public via the mechanism of electoral accountability. Empirical research suggests, however, that electoral accountability has done little to reduce corruption. A third model linking increased transparency to better governance is societal accountability, i.e. that citizens monitor, scrutinize and hold public office holders accountable via channels other than regular, competitive elections. In this paper, we explore theoretically and empirically this latter model. A number of case studies document that citizens and civil society organizations in fact can and do succeed in bringing abuses to light and bringing about sanctions (Abers 1998; Abers 2003; Avritzer 2006; Baiocchi 2003; Batista Calvancanti 2006; Davidson 2007; Lemos-Nelson and Zaverucha 2006; Pande 2008). Yet while the societal accountability mechanism linking transparency and good government is often implied, its various underlying assumptions are seldom unpacked and explored empirically. In particular, we focus on the first and crucial link in this relationship between transparency and better government, namely whether and how citizens and civil society react at all to an increased availability of information on government activities.

In doing so, this study contributes to the growing literature on the link between transparency and improved government institutions. Many studies arguing that transparency plays an important role in reducing government corruption and

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<sup>1</sup> We wish to thank Naghmeh Nasiritousi for excellent ideas and comments.

improving institutional quality do not specify how and when this beneficial effect is likely to materialize. In addition, recent studies have advanced a more nuanced debate, revealing an ambiguous picture of the effects of transparency, with some authors suggesting that transparency in fact does not necessarily promote better decision making, less corruption and more effectiveness (Bastida & Benito 2007; Kolstad & Wiig 2009; MacCoun 2006, Bac 2001). Others point to the important conditions, such the public being able to take in and use information, that need to be in place for transparency to promote societal accountability (Naurin & Lindstedt 2010). However, the more fundamental questions of whether the public actually reacts either attitudinally or behaviorally when transparency increases, and what role these reactions might play in promoting societal accountability, are less explored.

In this paper we explore theoretically and empirically the potential for transparency to bring about better government via the mechanism of societal accountability. While the main aim is to elaborate a model for this dynamic, we also test some of the crucial parts of the model using country comparative data. More specifically, we examine the influence of greater disclosure to the workings of government on two possible public reactions key to a longer-term process of institutional reform: institutional trust and civic engagement. While both of these indicators contain ambiguities, we argue that they complement one another in a way that helps to shed light on the overarching question at hand. Many authors have followed Bentham's lead in claiming that transparency breeds confidence in governing institutions (Warren 2006). Our analyses add to the growing doubt regarding the validity of these claims. This paper therefore also seeks to contribute to the on-going debates surrounding the concept of institutional trust. We suggest that increased government transparency, in sharp contrast to most other types of improvements in government institutions, may reduce rather than increase institutional trust. The results of the analyses lend some support for the contention that transparency enables societal accountability, though we also note that additional research is needed.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it develops the theoretical model linking transparency to institutional quality focusing on its potential power as facilitator of societal accountability. The following section first outlines the overall theoretical framework under consideration and then focuses on the two potential micro foundations for societal accountability: public indignation and civic engagement. The fourth section discusses concepts and measurements, while the fifth section presents the results of the analyses of transparency on political attitudes and behavior in a country. The final section discusses the implication of our results for understanding the societal accountability enhancing effects of transparency.

### **Transparency , Societal Accountability and Good Government**

The arguments regarding the potential benefits of increased transparency are well established (OECD 2001; Islam 2006, Kurtzman et al. 2004; Siegle 2001). Several studies suggest that transparency can reduce corruption (Rose-Ackerman 1999; Reinikka and Svensson 2005; Montinola & Jackman 2002; Gerring & Thacker 2004; IMF 2001; UNODC 2004; Kaufmann et al. 2002; Lindstedt & Naurin 2010). Transparency is often seen a necessary component of quality of government and therefore a key to increasing political trust (Blind 2006). Several studies document

that corruption can reduce institutional trust (Chang & Chu 2006; Anderson & Tverdova 2003; Selingson 2002; Warren 2006), and to the extent that transparency aids in reducing corruption, it may have an indirect positive influence on institutional trust. However, transparency is often expected to both deter corruption and increase trust more or less simultaneously (Kaufmann 2005). The Committee of Experts on Public Administration, for example, recommends that member states “review their governance and public administration institutional arrangements, structures, systems, and practices and make them more conducive to civic engagement, transparency and accountability as key components of trust, which is critical in achieving the Millennium Development Goals” (CEPA 2009:40). Studies conclude that to increase institutional trust, countries should focus on improving institutions to make them more impartial (Rothstein & Stolle 2007; Teorell 2009), more efficient (Lühiste 2006; Mishler & Rose 2001), or more transparent (Blind 2006; CEPA 2009; Morrone et al 2009).

Although the first two recommendations regarding impartiality and efficiency are in line with the notion of promoting better perceptions of government performance, the prescription regarding transparency is more complex. On the one hand, transparency is an integral part of good government quality and can therefore also be expected to establish confidence amongst citizens that political institutions are acting legally and appropriately. On the other hand, however, transparency can also reveal improper or illegal government practices and potentially diminish trust in the political system.

Recently, studies have revealed a number of costs and problems associated with increased transparency (Bauhr & Nasiritousi 2010; Bastida & Benito 2007; Fenster 2006; Lindstedt & Naurin forthcoming; Kolstad & Wiig 2009; MacCoun 2006; Stasavage 2004). Studies call in question the benefits of transparency for improving government decision making and reducing corruption and point at the important conditions that have to be fulfilled for transparency to produce the expected benefits. Jonathan Fox provides one explanation for why transparency may fail to induce rule of law: “If the power of transparency is based on the ‘power of shame’, then its influence over the really shameless could be quite limited” (Fox 2007, 665). And ‘shamelessness’ tends to flourish when impunity prevails. Rather than transparency being portrayed as a sure way to better government quality, these studies emphasize that transparency may not automatically provide the expected benefits; transparency does not by itself, in other words, eliminate the abuse of public power for private gain (Olken 2004, Lindstedt and Naurin forthcoming, Bac 2001).<sup>2</sup>

Sunlight may, as Brandeis claimed, disinfect in some cases, while in other respects it may distort, and in some cases have little or no effect on political operations whatever. Under what circumstances and via what mechanisms might, then, transparency lead to reducing corruption and bringing public institutions more in line with public interests? Fox provides a concise, useful point of departure, outlining two important mechanisms, one inter-institutional and the other involving extra-institutional actors such as civil society and the media.

...the power of transparency, defined in terms of the tangible impacts of the public spotlight, depends in practice on how *other* actors respond. These

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<sup>2</sup> for a more comprehensive review of these studies see Bauhr and Nasiritousi (2010).

reactive responses can be indirect, when the mass media, opposition political parties, or voters make an issue of newly revealed abuses; or they can be direct, as when the judicial or elected authorities make binding decisions in response (Fox 2007, 666).

Transparency grants political and public institutions greater insight into one another's operations, thereby increasing their capacity to hold one another accountable, what Fox refers to as the direct mechanism. An effective flow of information regarding policy outcomes can, for example, empower and equip legislative assemblies and executive offices to investigate suspected resource leakage and waste in public administration. As Fox observes, this does not guarantee that irregularities will be investigated and redressed, but without access to such information, government oversight and accountability will be ad hoc at best. Intra-governmental transparency allows, in other words, for formal accountability structures and mechanisms to perform better, a form of oversight rather akin to police activity in that institutions carry out a type of surveillance activity, regularly patrolling administrative offices in order to detect abuses (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984).

A second possible manner in which transparency may enhance the quality of government practices refers to more indirect and diffuse mechanisms, involving an indeterminate set of actors with weak or no formal capacity to issue and enforce sanctions. In contrast to the more direct mechanism, which assumes that government agencies act reciprocally as principal and agent for one another, the indirect mechanism instead expects the citizenry itself to act as principal seeking to hold agents—elected and appointed public officials—accountable. The demos of a polity may carry out this role through regular free and fair elections, which is known as vertical accountability, or by mobilizing to create an outcry in a specific instance of abuse of public power, or by organizing to pressure for reform of public institutions. This latter and more indirect mechanism has come to be known as societal accountability (Smulovitz and Perruzzotti 2000; Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006). A considerable number of case studies document that citizens and civil society organizations in various local and national contexts in fact can and do succeed in bringing abuses to light and inducing institutions with formal accountability power to investigate and issue sanctions (see Grimes 2008b for an overview of this research). Societal accountability therefore operates when non-state actors sound fire alarms, triggering oversight processes to react (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984).<sup>3</sup> Nicely phrased by Daniel Kaufmann: “Transparency-enhancing mechanisms involving a multitude of stakeholders throughout society can be thought as creating millions of ‘auditors’” (Kaufmann 2004, 21).

A recent article, published in the New York Times, illustrates how the new Indian Right to Information Law can change the way people view the public administration, which in turn may have a mobilizing effect and force an ineffective

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to point out that even if this theorized process attributes the role of principal to non-state actors, it does not assume unbounded rationality on the part of the public. Societal accountability does not imply that the public as principal carries out coordinated actions to ensure seamless monitoring and alarm operations. The public cannot act as principal proper even barring problems of information asymmetry as citizens lack the ability to punish government agents, with the important but still limited exception of regular free and fair elections. The public is also not in most polities, however, powerless, as the considerable literature on social movements and societal accountability attest.

and corrupt bureaucracy to perform better.<sup>4</sup> With the new transparency law, people have begun to view public officials in India as accountable to the citizens. Prior to the enactment of the law, people had few tools or possibilities to hold the government or the bureaucracy responsible for wrong-doings or inaction and tended therefore to consider public officials as rulers beyond reproach. The article tells the story of Chanchala Devi a poor low-caste woman, who applied for financial support from a governmental housing program. However, while her richer neighbors received financial support to build better houses, she did not receive any support for four years. With the help of local activists, she requested information about the processes concerning the other decisions, and in a couple of days she received the financial support she had applied for. The transparency law has therefore increased the demand for government effectiveness and output and, and stimulated the creation of a number of systems to evaluate public services (including citizen reports cards, social audits and others). These systems and demands may limit the discretionary space of public officials and thereby reduce opportunities for corruption (Apaza & Johnston 2009). The positive developments witnessed in India are, however, not axiomatic; increased transparency may instead breed resignation and passivity among the demos.

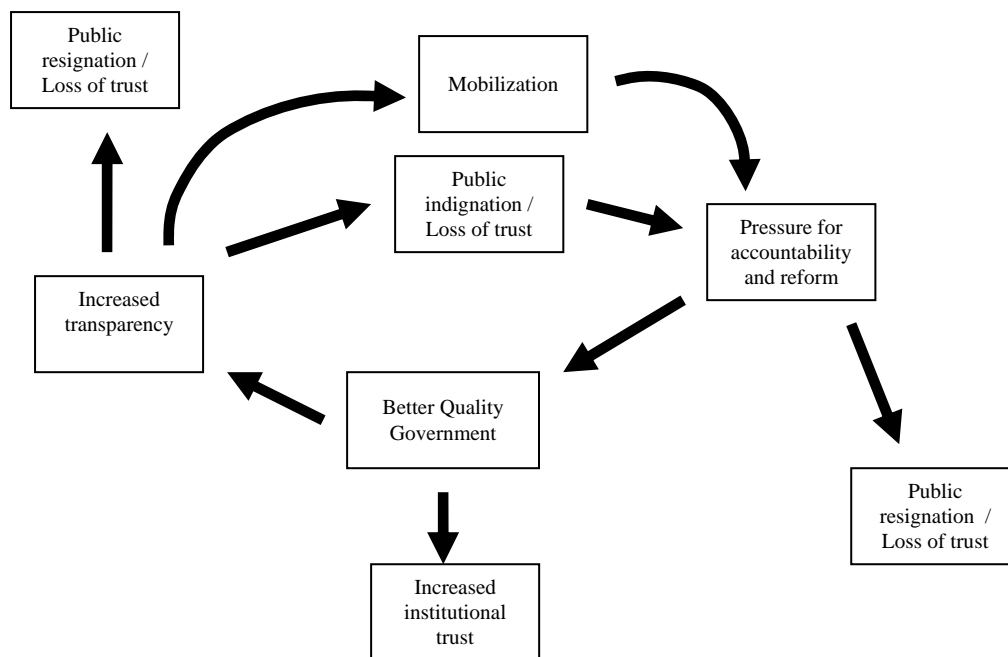


Figure 1. Theorized long-term positive effects of transparency on good government.

The indirect mechanism, while arguably plausible, contains a host of assumptions regarding public reactions to the newly acquired information. As Figure 1 illustrates, increased transparency must incite public indignation and protest, which may then be channeled into movements pressuring for investigation of abuses or for institutional reform. This pressure must be sufficiently well orchestrated and noticeable to prompt actors with formal powers to react and implement measures to address or redress problems. Reform efforts may include further improving the transparency of the

<sup>4</sup> Polgreen, Lydia. Right-to-Know Law Gives India's Poor a Lever. *New York Times*. 28 June 2010.

workings of the public sector, i.e. a virtuous cycle of transparency, accountability and institutional reform that ultimately improves quality of government and institutional trust.

Several of the elements in this theorized spiral have support in empirical research, not least in the studies of societal accountability mentioned above. That non-state actors can play an instrumental role in bringing about institutional reform has been documented, though analyses suggest that bringing about any institutional reform is far from a simple affair. Less is known, however, about the effects of transparency on the first links of this chain, i.e. how citizens and civil society react to an increased availability of information related to government activities. The aim of the analyses presented here is to explore precisely these issues: does transparency incite indignation and empower citizens to take action? Or does a flood of information instead confirm citizens' worst suspicions and give rise to resentment and resignation? Transparency may, in other words, have a disempowering effect, cultivating a desire to withdraw from political matters and the public sphere. In order to explore these issues, the analyses below explore the effect of transparency on citizens' institutional trust as well as on civil society activity in the country.

### **Transparency and Institutional Trust**

Institutional trust is a conceptual subcomponent of political trust. Political trust refers to institutions on both the input and output sides of the political systems. In other words, political trust can mean trust in politicians as well as trust in implementing public agencies (Rothstein & Stolle 2007). Political trust can vary depending on specific support for the rulers at any given time. Trust in institutions is, in comparison, more stable as public institutions remain to a greater extent unaffected by political colors (Rothstein & Stolle 2007). A decrease in institutional trust may therefore signal a more substantial fluctuation in state legitimacy (Lühiste 2006; Hetherington 1998; Miller and Listhaug 1999).

The few empirical studies that examine the effect of transparency on institutional trust have produced rather mixed results, suggesting there is cause for more tempered expectations. Two recent experimental studies examine whether citizens gain confidence in decision-making authorities under conditions of greater transparency (De Fine Licht 2010; Grimmelikhuijsen 2010). Both used manipulations in which respondents either received cursory descriptions of a decision-making process, or more detailed information. Both studies found that more information about the decision process tended to *undermine* the perceived trustworthiness of decision makers and the decision-making process. Both studies were conducted in and referred to contexts generally rated high on country comparisons of quality of government: Sweden (De Fine Licht 2010) and Holland (Grimmelikhuijsen 2010). The results suggest that even in contexts relatively free from egregious problems of inefficiency and lack of rule of law, citizens have unduly high expectations of the policy process, overestimating the competence, rationality, and perhaps also the level of ethical enlightenment of decision makers. Increased transparency may, in other words, reveal to citizens that policy making operates under the same cognitive and resource constraints that characterized human decision-making more generally (Stone 2001).

To date, however, no studies have examined how the level of transparency in a polity affects institutional confidence at the aggregate level. Transparency advocates proclaim that disclosure will cultivate institutional trust, while the results of



experimental research suggest that increased transparency instead will undermine institutional trust. Considering that both normative theories or experimental research belie the messiness of political reality, we hypothesize that the effect of transparency on trust will not be constant but rather vary depending on other attributes of the country, in particular on the level of corruption in the country and the avenues available to citizens to mobilize, express discontent, and effect institutional change. We suggest, in other words that two conditions can influence the confidence building effect of transparency: the actual prevalence of corruption in a country, as well as the existence of voice opportunities.<sup>5</sup> In countries with comparatively weak rule of law and government, transparency may have deleterious effects on institutional trust for two interrelated reasons: transparency can influence institutional trust 1) by exposing institutions rife with venality, or 2) by raising expectations for additional reform that may not be forthcoming. Transparency, as suggested by Roberts (2006), can illuminate the dark sides of governance, such as institutional failures or public rulings that are perceived as unfair. With respect to the second point, accountability reforms and laws on public participation often take much longer to implement than freedom of information laws. The World Bank, for instance, acknowledges that transparency often leads to greater public awareness of misconduct by public officials without the necessary decrease in malpractices in the short run.<sup>6</sup>

A decrease in institutional trust under these circumstances may be a sign that transparency does what it is suppose to do, i.e. provoke public reactions to abuses of power. Under such circumstances, decreased institutional trust may represent a needed corrective, a sound response that may ultimately lead to institutional reforms as suggested in Figure 1. However, a decrease in trust is not unambiguously good for long-term reform. One ambiguity of institutional trust as an impetus for institutional change is whether reductions in institutional trust represent constructive indignation that can be channeled into an inclination to act and promote institutional change, or whether it represents resignation and thereby an inclination to withdraw from political matters or even reinforce destructive patterns in society (such as increasing an inclination to participate in corrupt acts).

The second reason that transparency may erode institutional trust is by feeding a demand for and creating expectations regarding institutional reform that then go unheeded. Transparency may increase demand for additional anti-corruption measures, and if a polity lacks the basic institutional arrangements for citizens to express this discontent, frustration and distrust may follow. A related argument about transparency can also be made that the more information is made publicly available, the more information the public demands in order to lift doubts about secretive government (cf Van Waarden 2006). Freedoms of information laws are thus only one small piece of the puzzle to restore trust in political institutions. Unless transparency reforms are accompanied by other anti-corruption measures, transparency may do more harm than good with respect to citizens' confidence in public institutions. Without the enabling conditions for citizens to take advantage of such laws to influence policies that they disagree with, transparency will do little to establish trust

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<sup>5</sup> In our empirical analyses we use national aggregates of individual attitudes to study effects on country-level. How a change on country-level, in terms of increased transparency, affects individual or micro attitudes, which in turn has effects on aggregate country-level estimates.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/decentralization/admin.htm#4>

(Frost 2003).<sup>7</sup> In sum, exposing institutions and raising expectation about their performance without corresponding institutional reforms may decrease institutional trust.

While low trust and public discontent may represent a healthy response to transparency reforms and a necessary step in a longer-term reform process, these effects need to be understood in order to set realistic expectations on transparency reforms as well as to shed light on how different types of government reforms relate to and affect each other and society at large.

### **Transparency and Civic Engagement**

Institutional trust or more precisely a lack of institutional trust may, as mentioned above, be an expression of indignation and therefore an impetus to exercise the voice option, or an expression of resignation and an inclination to exit the political and public sphere to the extent possible.<sup>8</sup> The second dependent variable – civic engagement – is included to attempt to mitigate this ambiguity.

As Figure 1 suggests, an increase in transparency, in particular in countries with comparatively high levels of corruption, may incite citizens to action in an effort to redress the abuses that have become observable. Jonathan Fox and colleagues document how peasant organizations use a newly enacted access to information law in Mexico to hold public offices accountable (Fox, García Jiménez and Haight 2009), suggesting that increased transparency may indeed empower civil society. Similarly, Goetz and Jenkins document a number of successful accounts of NGOs in India using transparency laws to bringing abuses of public power to light (Goetz and Jenkins 2005).

The transformative power of transparency laws such as access to information legislation lies not only in citizens' increased capacity to observe misdeeds but also to secure evidence to substantiate them. Even in contexts with considerable secrecy surrounding public affairs, citizens may witness strong indications of misappropriation of funds, not least if public officials live well beyond the means of a reasonable salary. Acts of embezzlement may be nearly impossible to prove, however, without access to information regarding, for example, exact salaries or budget allocations to specific public projects or works. Transparency can, in other words, equip civil society with the needed means to investigate and substantiate suspected abuses, a key element of societal accountability actions, and therefore act as an incentive for greater civic engagement.

### **Concepts and measures**

This paper focuses on the micro foundations through which transparency can influence the quality of government institutions. We suggest, in concurrence with the definition highlighted by Florini (1999), that transparency is “the release of information by institutions that is relevant to evaluating those institutions.” This definition suggests that transparency is related to accountability. However, some definitions of transparency conflate transparency and accountability and thereby

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<sup>7</sup> Such conditions include accountability reforms, such that transparency can lead to changes in government behaviour, as well as laws on public participation, so as to allow for input by citizens in public policies. In the words of Schumann (2007:856), “Transparency reforms may often usher in a democracy of access but not necessarily the democratization of decision-making. It potentially obfuscates as much as it illuminates.”

<sup>8</sup> Retaining a high level of trust would correspond to ‘loyalty’, the third strategy outlined by Albert Hirschman (1970).

become unsuitable for operationalizations. The divergence in definitions most likely results from the wide applicability of the term, where studies of transparency can be found in such varying fields as international security (Florini 2002), regime effectiveness (Mitchell 1998), and negotiation theory (Stasavage 2004).

The lack of agreement in measures of government transparency for cross country research is surprising given that we have a number of widely used and accepted measures for other complex and multifaceted terms, such as corruption and democracy. Several developments of these measures are underway.<sup>9</sup> To date, the only comprehensive measures of government transparency with wide country coverage that we are aware of is a World Bank index of transparency<sup>10</sup> that measures transparency with two different indices: the economic and institutional transparency index and political transparency index. Both these indices are aggregate indexes. The economic and institutional transparency index includes indicators of access to information laws, transparency of policy and the public sector, transparency of the budget process, the publication of economic data and e-government. The political transparency index contains indicators of freedom of speech, political competition, press freedom and regulations concerning disclosure of political funding. In this paper we chose to include only the economic and institutional transparency index as a measure of government transparency. Using Lindstedt and Naurin's (2010) terminology, the type of transparency that we are interested in is agent controlled transparency, and since the political transparency index contains larger elements of non-agent controlled transparency, such as freedom of the press and political competition, these measures fall outside our conceptualization of government transparency.

To explore whether an increase in government transparency might enable greater societal accountability and reduce corruption, we focus on two different dependent variables: institutional trust and civic engagement. Institutional trust and civic engagement, we argue, represent two important micro foundations for institutional change. This approach enables us to explore two of the variables often implicitly or explicitly associated with an increased government transparency and increased demand for improved government performance, although this relationship remains an assumption.

Our measure of institutional trust is based on the country mean of individual responses to a question from the World Values Survey wave 4 (1999-2002). The respondents are asked about their trust in the civil service, and choose from alternatives ranging from "none at all" to "a great deal."

The data on the number of civil society organizations in each country comes from CIVICUS, a global network of civil society organizations active in the area of social and economic development. The CIVICUS directory is compiled for the development community and does not purport to be an exhaustive register of all organizations. Organizations may themselves ask to be included but otherwise are identified primarily through public sources and the internet. One way of validating the data compiled from the directory is by comparing it to the results of a comprehensive analysis conducted at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Civil Society Studies of a much smaller subset of countries (Salamon, Sokolowski and List 2003). Though the latter employs a broader definition of civil society and measures civil society as

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<sup>9</sup> For an alternative measure of transparency focusing on bureaucrats' support for transparency see Bauhr and Nasiritousi (2010).

<sup>10</sup> The index is still under construction (Bellvar & Kaufmann 2005)

the proportion a country's workforce active in civil society, the Johns Hopkins and CIVICUS measures correlate respectably (Pearson's  $r=0.63$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $N=35$ ). Much as with institutional trust, numerous social, political and economic factors may shape civil society activity in a country. These include the extent to which a country is democratic and free of political oppression, as well as the extent to which civil liberties are honored in the country. The analyses therefore take these factors into account when examining the effect of transparency on civic engagement.

Our model suggests that two factors condition the influence of government transparency on institutional trust: what transparency reveals (*exposure effect*) and possibilities to do something about it (*agency / accountability effect*). The measure we use to capture the exposure effect is the control of corruption index of the World Bank Governance Indicators. The indicator is based on a combination of data from both citizen and expert perceptions of corruption, covering several aspects of the phenomenon, such as for example the frequency of "additional payments to get things done" to perceptions of grand corruption among political elites. In order to capture whether there is an agency / accountability<sup>11</sup> effect we use the Economist Intelligence Unit democracy index, which covers different parts of democratic rule, such as for example whether there are free and fair elections and whether citizens enjoy civil liberties.

Before turning to the empirical analyses, a brief note on the concept of institutional trust is in order. Trust has long been recognized as playing a central role in political, economic and social relations.<sup>12</sup> Trust facilitates interactions between citizens and allows for more efficient transactions between government and the governed (Mishler & Rose 2001). Low levels of political trust have been linked to a range of societal ills, including tax evasion (Hayoz & Hug 2007) and weak democratic fabrics in societies (Morrone et al 2009; Braithwaite & Levi 1998). On a theoretical level, authors have converged on a definition of trust for an institution or actor. Trust is a belief that the institution or actor, whose actions may affect one's interests or well-being, will behave in accordance with implicit or explicit terms set by agreed upon rules or norms, established conventions, or stated intent. Trust presumes some level of knowledge about the entity upon which trust is conferred, even if that knowledge is generic or systemic and not specific to the entity in question (e.g. one might trust an obscure public office in Sweden because one trusts the accountability mechanisms in the system as a whole).

Empirical analyses of institutional trust indicate, in contrast, that trust as an empirical phenomenon is inordinately broad and that trust for any specific institution may build on factors ranging from evaluations of institutional performance and the perceived fairness with which the institution makes decisions (Grimes 2006), to mistaken inference (Hardin 1999), personal disposition or political socialization (Jennings et al 2001), or culture and zeitgeist (Inglehart 1997). In a political system in which information regarding policy deliberations and operations is scarce or lacking altogether, citizens' sentiments toward government may reasonably build to a larger extent on disinformation provided by the government itself, or on factors exogenous

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<sup>11</sup> In our model, political competition is a condition that may mediate the influence of government transparency on institutional trust, as illustrated by our "expectation/ disillusionment" mechanisms

<sup>12</sup> For example, Confucius identified trust, food and weapons as being crucial to government (Newton 2007).

to the political sphere.<sup>13</sup> Trust can therefore mean different things in different contexts, and have very different implications for the political system depending on the specific nature of its micro-foundations.

The disagreement regarding what, in reality, political trust builds on has consequences for normative discussions of political trust as well. On the one hand, declining trust for political institutions may indicate mounting dissatisfaction with government and a growing unwillingness to defer to its authority (Norris 1999). On the other, several authors have raised the question of whether a high level of political trust is desirable since democracy and accountability, to thrive in the long run, require a critical and citizenry (Hardin 1999). These two positions can largely be reconciled by introducing the variable of whether or not political trust builds on knowledge of and information about the institutions themselves. Informed and satisfied citizens may be normatively desirable for democracy while uninformed and satisfied citizens may not. This discussion cannot be developed in a meaningful way until we know more about when and how political trust builds on knowledge of and assessments of the political system and its operations. The empirical explorations below seek to make a contribution in this discussion as well.<sup>14</sup>

These discussions suggest a number of control variables. First of all, we control for economic development since economic development is frequently used as a powerful determinant of the effects of government transparency. Furthermore, institutional trust can be affected by whether people are satisfied with the outcome from the political system, such as for example whether it generates economic growth.<sup>15</sup> Another plausible outcome variable is educational opportunities in the country. We use a measure of number of university students per 100,000 inhabitants in order to study whether education as an outcome variable has any effect on institutional trust.<sup>16</sup>

Our second control variable is societal post materialism, which is typically seen as a powerful determinant of institutional trust. Post materialist values are claimed to generate a general aversion towards authority, which create lower levels of trust in for example political institutions (Inglehart 1999). We control for societal post

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<sup>13</sup> Theories on what political trust builds on are typically divided into two dimensions depending on the extent to which explanations for political trust are endogenous or exogenous to political institutions. Cultural theories view trust as exogenous, a basic character trait learned early in life (Mishler and Rose 2001: 33) Institutional theories, in contrast, emphasize that political trust and distrust are endogenous, even rational responses by individuals to the performance of institutions (Mishler and Rose 2001:36, March, 1988; North, 1990). Institutional theories disagree, however, on which aspects of government performance are important and how performance is assessed (Mishler and Rose 2001:36). Studies that have attempted to explain the decrease in trust in various countries have identified factors such as corruption (Lühiste 2006; Anderson & Tverdova 2003; Chang & Chu 2006; Job 2005; Mishler & Rose 2001), the media's attention to scandals (Blind 2006; Robinson 1976) and policy performance, including especially economic performance (Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibab, & Limongi, 1996). This latter issue – perceptions of political and economic progress of a country (or lack thereof) – has been identified as a major determinant of institutional trust (Lühiste 2006; Mishler & Rose 2001). According to Mishler and Rose's analysis (2001:52): "This indicates that the effects of macro performance are largely mediated through micro evaluations; aggregate corruption does corrode political trust, but only to the extent that individuals perceive corruption and ascribe it importance relative to other concerns."

<sup>14</sup> In a way, this study thereby contributes to evaluate the institutional explanation for political trust. Institutional explanations contend that institutional trust is based on citizens' evaluations of political institutions (cf Mishler and Rose 2001) and not only on cultural explanations.

<sup>15</sup> We use the Gleditsch data of real GDP which is based on estimates reported by the IMF.

<sup>16</sup> This measure is from Vanhanen's index of power resources. It is lagged by 10 years, so it is actually a measure of university student per 100 000 inhabitants 10 years ago.

materialism using the mean value of aggregated individual values received from the World Values Survey.<sup>17</sup>

The third control variable is political terror. Survey questions regarding institutional trust can be sensitive to levels of political terror. In some regimes the respondents might not be willing to state their distrust in fear of reprisals.

### **Analyses and Results**

The analyses presented below explore key components of the theoretical model that claims that transparency enhances good government. How does the opportunity to observe the state affect citizens' reactions to and views of the state? Do these reactions tend toward indignation or resignation, and do they depend on the prevalence of corruption and levels of democracy in the country? Though the contention that transparency increases citizens' confidence in governing institutions has considerable purchase in international policy discourses, it is certainly disputable on theoretical grounds that transparency per se will enhance institutional confidence irrespective of the nature of the activities exposed. Evidence revealing or supporting suspicions of corruption—or, for that matter, extreme inefficiency or other departures from shared norms and principles—would enhance institutional confidence. The first set of analyses explore these issues. The second set turn to a question raised and left unresolved in the first set of analyses: can the fall in trust that seems to follow from greater transparency in comparatively corrupt countries suggest a swell of indignation that might constitute a force of reform, or does the decline in political trust instead signal resignation and an inclination to withdraw from the political sphere. The results presented below build on OLS regression of 74 countries. First, the influence of transparency on discontent, measured as institutional trust, is explored, followed by an analysis of the influence of transparency on active civic engagement.

#### *Transparency and institutional trust*

Government reforms to curb corruption are typically expected to enhance trust in institutions; the findings of the analyses presented below suggest, however, that increasing transparency does not provide a simple lever to pull in order to cultivate trust in public institutions. A fairly strong and positive correlation ( $r = 0.68$ ) supports the theoretical contention that transparency is conducive to improving the control of corruption; transparency, in contrast, correlates only weakly with confidence for public institutions. Counter to normative claims, opening the shutters on the windows of the political system does not alone seem to induce confidence in public institutions.

The first set of analyses examines the main effects of both quality of government and transparency on institutional trust in a multivariate model (Table 1). The main effects (Model 1), concur with the findings of previous research in showing that control of corruption constitutes a substantively important component of institutional confidence (cf. Chang & Chu 2006; Anderson & Tverdova 2003; Selingson 2002). This correlation does not seem to be a simple reflection of satisfaction with other circumstances in the country, such as the overall economic well being of the country or availability of educational opportunities. Even under

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<sup>17</sup> The measure is based on four items. The respondents have to give priority to two out of four political statements 1. "Maintaining the order of the nation", 2. "Giving people more say in important government decisions", 3. "Fighting rising prices" 4. "Protecting freedom of speech". Priority to statement 2 and statement 4 is claimed to capture a post material value orientation.

control for these factors, citizens in countries with lower levels of corruption feel more confidence in public institutions than in countries with higher levels of corruption.

Transparency, in contrast, seems to influence institutional trust in the opposite direction. While most other measures of good government typically have a positive influence on institutional trust, transparency seems to have a slightly detrimental effect on citizens' willingness to defer to public institutions, though the pattern is rather weak and not sufficiently consistent to be statistically significant. How can we understand this seemingly paradoxical situation in which two attributes of good governance – control of corruption and government transparency – affect institutional trust so differently?

The logic of principal agent theory suggests that one of the main reasons for implementing transparency reforms is that it allows the principals to better monitor the agents (Besley 2006). If transparency works according to the model illustrated in Figure 1, it seems reasonable to expect that the effect of increased transparency on public confidence would depend on what citizens see when allowed greater scope of insight into the workings and machinations of the political process. Model 2 therefore explores whether the degree of transparency in a country has a greater or lesser effect on institutional trust depending on whether the country has high or low levels of corruption.

In order to explore the *exposure effect* hypothesis, countries are categorized by levels of corruption.<sup>18</sup> The estimates of model 2 provide quite strong indications that an increase in transparency may in fact *erode* citizens' trust in public institutions when venality is prevalent in those institutions. In the group of comparatively more corrupt countries, the effect of opening up the political system to public scrutiny has a negative and substantively considerable impact on institutional trust. As the measure of transparency in this category of countries spans a 3.5 point scale, the difference in mean institutional trust between the least and most transparent countries is -0.8 on the four point trust scale.

In countries with comparatively higher levels of quality of government, however, levels of transparency have no bearing on institutional trust whatsoever. This finding confirms our expectation that the exposure of government institutions may have different effects in different contexts. In particular, the findings support the exposure effect discussed above, and also suggest that transparency may be less important for institutional trust in contexts that are historically and firmly rooted in relatively well functioning government institutions. The findings are robust and stand even once factors such as real GDP per capita, levels of state political terror, access to higher education, and aggregate levels of post materialism in the country are taken into account.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This categorization is of course a necessary but artificial construction as regardless of how we choose to measure or define corruption, it is impossible to classify some polities as corrupt and others as non-corrupt. As the World Values Survey, the only comparative study of levels of institutional trust, only covers 74 countries, the categorization was adjusted in order to sort the countries in to groups of approximately equal size, rather than using the mean as a cut off point.

<sup>19</sup> It is possible that countries with more transparent government institutions might also foster greater public interest in political affairs, which in turn might lead to a more critical citizenry. This does not, however, seem to account for the effects reported in model 2. Even controlling for levels of political interest in the country, the negative relationship between increased transparency and institutional trust remains in countries with comparatively higher levels of corruption.

Table 1. The Influence of Government Transparency on Institutional Trust

	Model 1 B ( $\beta$ )	Model 2 B ( $\beta$ )	Model 3 B ( $\beta$ )
Constant	.94	.80	2.00***
Economic and institutional transparency	-.10 (-.27)		
<i>In corrupt countries</i>		-.23 (-.62)**	
<i>In non-corrupt countries</i>		.07 (.01)	
<i>In democracies</i>			.06 (-.05)
<i>In non-democracies</i>			-.20 (-.51)**
Democracy (Dummy)			-.24 (-.36)
Control of Corruption (Dummy)	.17 (.52)**	.22 (.33)**	
Control of Corruption (Estimate)			.20 (.72)**
Political Terror Scale	.09 (.27)	.07 (.22)	.12 (.40)*
Post-materialism	-.31 (-.20)	-.30 (-.19)	-.46 (-.30)*
GDP (ln)	.04 (.30)	.04 (.30)	0. (0)
Share of students	0 (-.32)*	0 (-.34)**	
N	71	71	72
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.12	.18	.16

Comment: \* p<.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01

The second hypothesis regarding the relationship between transparency and institutional trust states that the way in which increased transparency effects citizens' institutional trust may depend on the extent to which those citizens have the possibility to act to address any observed shortcomings in the political system. Ultimately, a citizens' possibilities to effect change in the political system is a factor of numerous parameters, including resources at the individual level, incentives to mobilize, and the openness of the political system and availability of channels through which to seek to bring about change. This analysis presents a preliminary exploration of this hypothesis using a more coarse but undeniably essential measure of possibilities of citizens influence, namely whether free and fair elections are held and the level of political freedoms in the country (measure by the Economist Intelligence Unit).

When interacted with levels of transparency, the findings reveal a similar pattern to those observed in models 1 and 2. An increase in transparency in non-democratic countries tends to erode institutional trust, whereas differences in levels of transparency in comparatively more democratic polities instead have little or no bearing on institutional trust.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly enough, however, the average levels of institutional trust seem to be *lower* in more established democracies than in countries with weaker democratic institutions.



In sum, both of the factors hypothesized to affect the relationship between transparency and institutional trust in fact seem to be at work. Increasing transparency in highly corrupt systems, as well as in political systems that offer only limited opportunities to effect change both seem to undermine citizens' confidence in public institutions. It should be noted, however, that while not identical, the categorizations of low and high corruption overlap somewhat with the categorizations of weak and established democracies. These two mechanisms are, in other words, rather difficult to explore completely independently of one another, and even on an individual level the micro-foundations may be intimately intertwined. Greater insight into the working of a political system may induce a similar sense of disillusionment both as a result of the magnitude of the challenge of changing a system rife with corruption, as well as from an acute awareness of the limited prospects of bringing about change due to electoral manipulations or truncated political freedoms. On a theoretical level, however, these two are quite distinct and merit further investigation.

The empirical results confirming the theorized exposure effect indicate that trust may build on evaluations of public institutions to a greater or lesser extent depending on the availability of information. In this sense, the results shed light on one aspect of the micro-foundations of institutional trust. It may not be possible to determine to what extent political trust builds on assessments as this varies by country. A second issue regarding the micro-foundations of trust remains unresolved, however, namely whether a loss of trust signals indignation or resignation.

#### *Transparency and civic engagement*

In order to shed light on this second issue, this section explores whether transparency promotes not only an attitudinal reaction to low quality government and a disillusionment over the possibility to influence them, but also incites active civic engagement. If attitudinal disapproval is coupled with more active forms of engagement, then it strengthens the interpretation that the distrust resulting from greater transparency is indignation rather than purely resignation. The analysis uses one measure of public activism, namely the vibrancy of its civil society as measured by the number of civil society organizations in the country relative to size of its population.

The models in table two examine the effect of increased transparency on civic engagement in countries with different levels of corruption. Model 1 first shows the main effects of transparency and corruption on civic engagement. While levels of corruption do not seem to correlate with civic engagement, increased transparency does correlate positively with measures of civic engagement. Moreover, this effect of transparency on civic engagement is slightly stronger in countries with comparatively higher levels of corruption, as indicated in model 2. In terms of the long term effects of transparency for political development, these results are encouraging. Even in comparatively more corrupt polities, a greater degree of transparency tends to be associated with a more vibrant civil society than less transparent countries, an effect that stands even once factors such as real GDP and the prevalence of political imprisonment and state brutality are taken into consideration. Rather than demobilizing, an increasing openness in a political system, even one rife with corruption, seems instead to have a mobilizing effect.

Table 2. The Influence of Government Transparency on Civic Engagement

	Model 1 B ( $\beta$ )	Model 2 B ( $\beta$ )
Constant		171.60***
Transparency	6.72 (.24)*	
<i>Corrupt countries</i>		8.36 (.30)*
<i>Non-corrupt countries</i>		4.85 (.20)
Control of Corruption (Dummy)		-18.31 (-.37)***
Political Terror Scale	.19 (.01)	-.66 (-.03)
GDP (ln)	-6.0 (-.6)***	-6.30 (-.63)***
Control of Corruption (Estimate)	3.09 (.13)	11.50 (.47)***
Civil liberties	-.58 (-.04)	
N	168	168
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.20	.24

Comment: †p=.11, \* p<.10, \*\* p<.05, \*\*\* p<.01

More transparent polities may also show a stronger inclination to honor citizens' civil liberties, which may also allow civil society to flourish. We therefore also controlled for the Freedom House measure of civil liberties, which captures freedom of expression and belief, as well as associational and organizational rights. The effects observed in model 2 do to some extent seem to be a reflection of civil rights, but not entirely. Once civil rights are controlled for in the model (results not shown), openness still retains a positive relationship with the density of civil society organizations in the country, although the relationship is only marginally significant ( $p=0.11$ ).

Taken together, the models in Table 2 suggest that, at the level of micro-foundations, transparency may have a mobilizing rather than a disempowering effect on political activity. One important caveat is in order, however. The measure of civil society density counts the number of development related civil society organizations in the country. While some of these organizations may engage in societal accountability and perhaps also engage in advocacy work for the political development of the polity, others and perhaps the larger portion may instead work exclusively with service provision. Service providing civil society organizations – while perhaps essential to the social and economic well-being of those individuals served – may not constitute a transformative force with respect to the political development of a country. To the extent that civil society organizations successfully provide services needed by citizens, a vibrant civil society may instead represent a forced or voluntary expression of exit, opting out of public endeavors and may instead abate the pressure for government reform. The results of a previous study support the interpretation that the civic engagement represents voice rather exit, however. Using the same measure of civic engagement, that analysis found that the civil society vibrancy had a positive relationship to a reduction in corruption between 1996 and 2008 (Grimes 2008a).

## **Concluding Discussion**

This article explores how transparency can influence institutions, in suggesting that transparency influences two factors that potentially drive changes towards better government institutions: attitudinal discontent and active engagement. Our analyses show that government transparency can influence both citizens' attitudes, as measured by institutional trust, and citizen mobilization, as measured by the number of civil society organizations in the country relative to size of its population. In countries with comparatively higher levels of corruption, greater transparency reduces institutional trust and enhances civic engagement. Our analysis also shows that the influence of transparency on institutional trust is determined by two central conditions, the exposure effect and the accountability effect.

Our findings provide preliminary support for the principal agent model of transparency, in which transparency is used by the principal to monitor the agent, rather than a more normatively oriented model of transparency in which transparency reforms signal a commitment to improve government institutions and thereby increase trust and confidence that the government will deal with its problems internally. The logic of principal agent theory suggests that because the interests of agents and principals may diverge, principals must find ways of monitoring the actions taken by agents. Transparency could reduce this asymmetric information problem by shedding light on whether the agent (i.e. the government) is pursuing goals that are in the interest of principals (i.e. its citizens) effectively and efficiently (Besley 2006; Florini 2002: 14-15). In other words, transparency could aid in overcoming the principal-agent problem by providing principals with information about actions taken by the agent on their behalf, which could be used to judge whether their interests are being served by the agent. Transparency can thus lead to good governance both by encouraging good public policy-making and by deterring abuses and mistakes by officials (Cary 2009). While more research is needed, our findings lend support to the theoretical claims that increasing transparency will provoke a reaction from citizens, and that this reaction can be conducive to institutional development in the long run.

In expounding the model that links transparency to good government via the mechanism of societal accountability, we have also added theoretically and empirically to discussions of the influence of transparency on institutional trust. Contrary to what is often suggested by advocates of transparency, our results show that transparency does not automatically improve institutional trust. Under some circumstances, transparency can even reduce institutional trust. In particular we suggest two conditions under which this may occur: when corrupt systems are exposed publicly and when citizens do not see a political way to influence institutions. The exposure and accountability effect does not work equally across contexts, however. Increased transparency does not seem to increase institutional trust when institutions are good. This finding supports previous arguments about how the balance of what the public values shift at higher levels of institutional quality.

The results reported here indicate that transparency may be positive in the sense that it allows for a corrective of sorts of political trust. With little transparency, corruption may go unpunished both formally and in the court of public opinion. In corrupt countries with little transparency, comparatively high levels of trust may result either from disinformation or because expressions of institutional trust build on factors other than assessments of the institutions themselves. These findings suggest that transparency can alter the micro-foundations of institutional trust so that they to a

greater extent build on evaluation as opposed to affect or world view. Nonetheless, even institutional trust that has evaluative foundations may both be an expression of resignation or of indignation, the latter of which may constitute a pressure for political and institutional reform. The lower institutional trust observed in corrupt countries with relatively greater transparency may, but does not necessarily, offer a promise of long-term political development, as distrust and discontent can serve as an impetus to monitor, mobilize, and generate pressure for the development of more impartial public institutions. If the micro-foundations of the observed negative effect of transparency on institutional trust are instead disillusionment and a sense of powerlessness, then increasing transparency too early in the political development of a country may in fact produce a crisis of credibility of a more unproductive kind, one which demobilizes rather than mobilizes citizens to action. These issues warrant additional research, not least because of their substantial policy implications.

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