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Don't tell us: the demand for secretive behaviour*

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Don't tell us: the demand for secretive behaviour*

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Résumé

La question traitée ici est comment, et avec quelles implications, les gens peuvent décider de ne rien vouloir savoir de secrets les concernant, et cela même s'ils peuvent obtenir l'information sans effort ou sans frais. Le raisonnement est présenté en termes de relations d'agence, les principaux, supposés ne pas vouloir connaître l'information détenus par les agents, étant les électeurs et lesdits agents étant les politiciens au pouvoir. Après une exploration rapide des motivations pouvant expliquer l'attitude des principaux, l'exposé se concentre sur les cas où il n'y a ni secret total ni complète transparence. La demande de maintien d'un secret partiel est analysée à l'aide de deux modèles, l'un concernant des processus en cours, l'autre des événements passés. Pour finir le papier discute la façon dont le mécanisme étudié interagit avec des mécanismes voisins

Mots-clés secrets, transparence, information asymétrique,

Abstract

The matter studied here is how, and with what implications, people may decide that they do not want to be let into secrets that concern them. They could get the information at no cost but they refuse to know. The reasoning is framed in terms of principals and agents, with the principals assumed not to want to know the agents' secrets. For convenience, the context chosen for the exposition is mainly that of voters as principals and the government or the office-holders as agents. After some exploration of the motivations underlying the attitude of the principals, the paper focuses on the case when neither total secrecy nor total disclosure prevails. The demand for partial secrecy is analysed with the help of two models, one devoted to ongoing processes and the other to past events. Finally the paper discusses some of the ways the "don't tell us mechanism" may interact with two others: "thinking about something else" and "low issue salience".

Keywords secrets, transparency, asymmetric information, voluntary ignorance, voting

Classification JEL A13, D72, D82

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1. Introduction

The matter studied here is how, and with what implications, people may decide that they do not want to be let into secrets that concern them. They could get the information at no cost but they don't want to. They refuse to know. There are many instances of such behaviour in the real world but it runs counter to the way asymmetric information is usually addressed in economics.

The word "secret" does not convey exactly the same meaning as do the words "hidden" or "private". Yet, it is interesting to compare the logic of the phenomena we are concerned with in this paper to the usual treatment of hidden or private information in economics. There, hidden information is the source of a cost at least to one of the two parties to a relation. In some situations, principals have to pay a premium to mitigate the effects of the exploitation of their private information by the agents. In other cases, information asymmetry is the source of a cost to both agents and principals, for instance limiting some mutual gain of trade; if the information which only agents possess could credibly be revealed to principals, both sides would gain. By contrast, in the state of affairs we study in this paper secrets can be profitable to both parties. If principals did not find some advantage in being "kept in the dark", so to say, there would be no demand from them to being kept in the dark. If agents preferred to reveal information, its disclosure would be an easy way for them to satisfy that preference. Admittedly, things can be otherwise when the relationship is considered in a wider setting (hierarchical in particular). Agents might be forced by principals to keep information secret even though disclosure to principals would suit them better. But, in that case, the phenomenon we are interested in becomes even more different from the logic of information asymmetry as discussed in economics.

We will not dwell on the motivations of agents who want to keep secret some facts which they know. We take as an established fact that agents generally have an incentive to do so and we focus on the less understood reasons why principals may also want agents to behave toward them in that way, and on various implications of that desire. In the more analytical part of the paper, we tend to suppose that principals are voters or citizens and the agents are governments, office-holders, rulers or incumbents. This is mainly for convenience since the scope of our reasoning is more general. Many categories of principals are happy to ask for or allow some degree of secretive behaviour on the part of their agents. To illustrate, the principals may be politicians,

rulers or chief executives and their agents may be bureaucrats or employees, their mutual relationship embodied in hierarchical organizations. Or principals may be the members of political parties such as the Communist Parties of the West in the 1950s and the agents the Communist leadership in general. Principals may be shareholders and the agents the managers of large quoted companies. Principals may be buyers of furs, foie gras or tropical wood and the agents the suppliers of these products. Or the principal may be one country such as the United States or France, and the agent some Latin American or African dictatorship.

Even with explicit reasoning focused on voters and politicians, there are several types of motivations and settings which may justify the behaviour of voters as principals. We discuss the most relevant ones in Section 2. The concept of secret or secrecy is not as straightforward as it seems. Although there are certainly many cases of complete secrecy in the area of politics, it is also true that many apparent cases of complete secrecy do not remain so under additional examination or reflection. Secrets that everybody knows -- "open secrets" -- constitute an extreme case. But openness, or secrecy, may be a more continuous variable. Even when total secrecy does not obtain, there may be a demand by principals for partial secrecy on the part of agents. We study explicitly this phenomenon in Section 3 with the help of two small models, one devoted to partial secrecy about ongoing processes and the other to partial secrecy about past events.

Psychological mechanisms have become widely studied in economics, notably in the setting of experimental economics. The purpose of the present paper is limited; it is instrumental to reflections on particular political or political economy matters, and this may explain that the discussion will not be explicitly connected to the economics and psychology literature. In fact, the paper is an element in a line of thought started on the occasion of an essay on European integration (Salmon 1995). The subject was what is called today "integration by stealth" (this felicitous expression was not used in the essay) and one of the ideas defended was that voters wanted, and perhaps still want, integration to have that feature (stealth). Contrary to conventional wisdom, it was claimed that voters do not (or did not) want to know where integration may lead to. Admittedly, in that first paper, the discussion of the mechanism underlying the attitude was only suggested. Another mechanism, "thinking about something else", was

explored in Salmon (2001). It may work as an alternative or as a complement to “not wanting to know”, depending on the circumstances. This is also true of a third mechanism, which we may call the awarding of “low issue salience”, discussed in the context of political extremism in Salmon (2002) and more generally in Salmon (2007). Lastly, in Salmon and Wolfelsperger (2007), the main puzzle addressed – as illustrated by the French policy against crime and by the Common Agricultural Policy-- is the phenomenon of “acquiescence to opacity” (the topic of the 1995 essay), which, of course, brings us quite close to the logic of “demand for secrecy” discussed here.

A small part of Section 2 below follows the Salmon-Wolfelsperger paper. The rest of the analysis presented here -- in particular, the theoretical argument of Section 3 -- is completely new. Section 4 explores some relations between the three mechanisms mentioned above and Section 5 is a brief conclusion.

2. Motivations underlying “don’t tell me” attitudes

Some distinctions may help to manage the diversity of cases. Let us start with contexts and distinguish three categories. A strictly bilateral context is when a secret is disclosed by one person to another and the existence of other individuals -- whether or not the secret is also disclosed to them -- does not count. Why, in such context, may B prefer *not* to know A’s secret? Several motivations may account for the attitude, even in so restricted a setting. One possibility is that knowing A’s secret could not but have an effect on B’s behaviour; then B may refuse to be told the secret because he or she does not want that to happen. That case is usually discussed as an instance of self-deception, which may or may not entail that the underlying behaviour is irrational (Mele 1997), but, in the light of recent developments in the economics of psychology, it can be interpreted in other ways. A more traditional explanation would involve fully standard strategic considerations, B’s anticipation being that both A’s and B’s behaviours would change in an interactive way if the secret were disclosed.¹ Strategic calculation may then induce B to refuse being told A’s secret. A different approach is related to the mind being treated “as a consuming organ”, as suggested by Schelling (1984) - that is, the mind being something subject, on par with the body, to utility-providing or utility-depriving flows. In the pure case, if B knows that knowing about A’s secret will not

¹ See Levine and Ponsard (1977) for a related framework. I am grateful to Hakan Holm for the reference.

affect behaviours or have any other kind of tangible effect whereas it might well be painful, then B may rationally choose to safeguard at no cost his or her peace of mind by not knowing.

We may call bilateral-augmented the contexts in which B would be the only one to be told A's secret (it would be told confidentially) but the existence of other persons or institutions does count. For instance B may have a commitment or an inclination to tell everything to C and that would undermine any pledge of confidentiality made to A. It can be better then for B to refuse being informed in the first place. Or knowing A's secret could engage B's responsibility vis-à-vis some outside person or authority. This consideration is particularly likely to be relevant if B has some reason to suspect that A's secret might involve something illegal or unethical.

For want of a better word, we may call the third context "multilateral". The fact that we focus on it explains the title of the paper: "don't tell *us*" instead of "don't tell *me*". If A's secret were disclosed, it would be disclosed directly to several, possibly many, individuals. The question, then, is why any of these individuals might prefer disclosure not to happen. Several of the motivations just discussed – especially those related to treating one's mind as a consuming organ - remain relevant but a new one is particularly important. Each individual may be influenced now by the fact that the secret is divulged also to others. Suppose that A's secret is about a dimension K of P. For convenience we suppose P to be a policy, but it could be any kind of action or even person (an incumbent for instance), or some collective (a party, a country, etc:). Suppose that individual B strongly supports P when information about dimension K is kept secret. Suppose also that B always assigns some positive utility to being better informed about all the properties or dimensions of P (there is no motivation of the type "mind as a consuming organ"). However, the utility that B assigns to the fact that other individuals will be better informed about K may be negative. As a strong supporter of P, B may think that, if there were more information available about K, he or she would personally have a low probability of changing his or her mind whereas there would be a higher probability that at least some of the other supporters of P would change theirs. If that happened, policy P might lose support and even might be discarded contrary to what B would wish. Depending on a more precise calculation of costs and benefits

(adumbrated in Salmon and Wolfelsperger, 2007), B may thus prefer information about K not to be disclosed.

More generally, an individual -- a voter for instance -- may think that the disclosure of some hidden facts to several persons, or to a whole electorate, could start or accelerate a collective dynamic process whose outcome is difficult to predict but might be quite unfavourable. This might happen in particular when distributive and fairness considerations dominate. Individuals approaching uncertainty in that way might then consider that it would be safer for them or for all if disclosure were eschewed -- and this even when the information disclosed is likely to be valuable in itself. The case for such attitudes is strengthened if the individuals are risk-averse.

The foregoing discussion supposes that the relevant information is either held completely secret or completely disclosed. Before turning to situations in which that simple dichotomy does not obtain, let me note two things. First, a consideration that generally plays an important role in the decision to refuse being told a secret is the degree of trust one has in the holder of the secret, or in the way that holder reacts to various kinds of circumstances. An extreme case is complete alignment of preferences. Principal B knows that agent A has exactly the same preferences and will decide as if B had decided himself or herself. More generally, even in the absence of such alignment, B may trust A to act to maximise B's preferences. Or, even more generally, B may know how A would decide in such and such circumstances and this is enough to trust A's decisions. This interpersonal kind of trust, confidence or knowledge may be a very important positive factor in "don't tell me" behaviours (Breton and Wintrobe 1982, 1986).

The second remark is that several of the motivations that may lead principals to prefer agents not to reveal information may play a role simultaneously. In the context of voting and supporting, when the principals are a large number of citizens and agents are politicians in office, or when the principals are numerous ordinary members of a political party and the agents are the leaders of that party, some of these principals may be motivated only by a desire to keep their peace of mind, others mainly by the fear of being held co-responsible if informed of some reprehensible actions by the agents, and others still mainly by the prospect of an uncertain collective dynamics whose outcome they may not like. The motivations of many individual principals may also be mixed.

Consequently, in the following analysis, we need not distinguish any more between these various motivations. We simply assume that, for some of the reasons just discussed, principals – i.e. voters -- bear a cost when informed.

3. Features of the demand for partially open secrets.

3.1. The significance of partially open secrets

When examined more closely, many secrets do not seem so secret after all. A frequent pattern is the apparent disclosure of some secret behaviour or state of affairs followed by the demonstration that information about that behaviour or state of affairs was already available before the purported divulgence and even that it had been so for a long time. In such circumstances, it is often claimed that the so-called revelation brings nothing new (we will see that this assertion is mistaken). Many illustrations of the phenomenon come to mind. Let us mention two: the publication in 1973 of Solzhenitsyn's book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, and more recently, the book (following an interview in *Le Monde*) in which General Aussaresses (2001) gives a detailed account of the torture and executions he and his unit of the French Army inflicted on the Algerian rebels during the "battle of Algiers" in 1956-57. Both publications were generally alleged to bring major revelations, a claim which was immediately denied by commentators who downgraded to *secrets de Polichinelle* - open secrets - the matters supposedly divulged. Indeed, information about the Gulag system, including about its magnitude, had transpired to the West at least since Boris Souvarine's book published in 1939 and had become quite substantial and widely available in the 1960s (see Judt 2005, 2008). Testimonies of systematic recourse to torture by the French Army in Algeria in 1955-57 were published almost contemporaneously to the facts (see Branche 2001, Shatz 2002). Yet, the French President and the Prime Minister, as well as many other people in politics and in the intellectual world reacted to Aussaresses's "revelations" as if stunned by them, as many people were apparently stunned in France in 1971 by *The Sorrow and the Pity*, a documentary about Vichy, in Germany in 1978 by the television series *The Holocaust*, and recently in America and everywhere by pictures of prisoner abuse in the Abu Ghraib prison of Baghdad.²

² In a second book (2008), Aussaresses is more explicit than in the first about the intimate knowledge that the government in Paris, and in particular one of the ministers in charge -- François Mitterrand -- had of

To understand these reactions, two phenomena must be taken into account. One is the desire not to know, which we have already discussed. The other is uncertainty about the truth of allegations. A typical response from some quarters to information about the Gulag or the use of torture by the French army in Algeria -- as by the British forces in East Africa and Northern Ireland, the General Security Service in Israel, or the Spanish Civil Guards in Spain (see Parry 2006) -- has been to give it the status of simple allegations, the truth of which could then be denied, or their scope reduced (e.g., downgrading the phenomena to single “aberrations”). In such situations, individual voters or citizens, or party members, are facing contradictory assertions about facts. This explains that revelations of the kind mentioned above (Solzhenitsyn’s, or Aussaresses’s), even when not really genuine revelations, have a direct effect – as well as an indirect effect (by discrediting denials) -- on individuals’ belief in the reality of the facts concerned. This makes them highly significant.

For the purpose of this paper, what the foregoing discussion suggests is that it might be fruitful to combine the desire not to know with an interpretation of secrets as continuous variables. We undertake to do that explicitly now. Two situations should be distinguished, depending on whether what is kept completely or partially secret is an ongoing process or something that happened in the past.

3.2. Secrets about ongoing processes

We assume here that the principal is an individual voter or citizen j and the agent whose behaviour is secretive is the government. The production of Y by the government (for example, a particular kind of policy against terrorism) gives individual j a gross benefit B_j .

$$(1) \quad B_j = B_j(Y)$$

Assume that j is perfectly informed about B_j . But the process Y has an aspect or a side effect -- or requires recourse to a means – K (for instance torture, or killing innocent people), which is potentially distasteful to individuals such as j .³ To simplify, we assume proportionality:

the details of what the army was doing in Algiers in 1956-57. But again, as widely noted, this has been more or less an open secret for a long time.

³ Instead of a personal repulsion to torture the cause of the cost of K to individual j may be related to the fear that K , when known, might start the kind of perverse collective dynamics mentioned in the previous section..

$$(2) \quad K = \alpha Y$$

The relationship may be perfectly known to j ; or it may be kept perfectly secret from j ; or, in between, it may be a partially open secret in the sense that j has heard about it and gives it some (subjective) probability π_j of being true. In the latter case, $0 < \pi_j < 1$; if there is no secret, $\pi_j = 1$; if the secret is perfect $\pi_j = 0$. As perceived by j , K entails a cost C_j which depends on the probability that j gives to K and on a parameter β_j which is related to the strength of j 's dislike for the class of phenomena K is an instance of (strength of abhorrence of torture, for instance). Thus:

$$(3) \quad C_j = \pi_j \beta_j K$$

Assuming that both B_j and C_j are measured in the same units, the net benefit or utility derived by j from Y is

$$(4) \quad U_j = B_j - C_j = B_j - \pi_j \beta_j \alpha Y$$

For given values of π_j , β_j and α , individual j derives maximum utility at a level of Y in which

$$(5) \quad d B_j / d Y = \pi_j \beta_j \alpha$$

[Figure 1 about here]

In Figure 1, curve OB represents relation (1), and the straight lines starting from the origin represent C_j for different levels of π_j (the slopes of the lines are proportional to π_j). From j 's perspective, there is an optimal level of Y for each of these lines. These optimal levels are y_0 , y_1 , y_2 and y_3 , corresponding respectively to $\pi_j = 1$; $\pi_j = 1/2$; $\pi_j = 1/8$, and $\pi_j = 0$ (the straight line then is the horizontal axis). Given the assumptions, it is clear that j 's utility increases with the degree of secret about K . To a varying degree, this is also true of many other voters. Thus, in this case, secretive behaviour is one of the "goods and services" that politicians in power, eager to be supported and re-elected, supply to voters so as to please them. In this sense we may speak of voters' demand for secrecy as we speak of voters' demand for security, etc. The fact that this demand is implicit and perhaps unconscious does not make it different in kind from the demand of voters in other domains.

The model is incomplete, however, because it does not explain why secrecy is not always total, which, as is clear from relation (5) and Figure 1, would maximize voters'

utility. One could perhaps simply assume something like a tax-price constraining the amounts demanded. For a more convincing treatment, one would have to engage in a more demanding analysis of supply. Some of its main features are not really difficult to pick up. Although politicians may also give a positive utility to secrecy (indeed, this is the usual assumption), they may find it (when constructed as a continuous variable) increasingly costly to provide. This may be the result of technical and political constraints on the production or maintenance of a high degree of secrecy. For instance, preventing any occurrence of leaks may require arrangements that are costly in terms of money or in terms of what would be the consequences on other political goals and concerns of politicians. A different possibility is that incumbents, having in mind what they might fare in the future, are not displeased to associate voters to their deeds through partial disclosure. In that case, only partial secrecy would be optimal for incumbents, independently of cost considerations.

3.3. Secrets about past events

A major difference between the setting to be discussed now and the foregoing is that, in this subsection, Y and K have been realised in the past and are to be treated as given. They took place at time t , or until time t , and now we are at time $t+n$. Using indexes t and $t+n$ becomes necessary. The knowledge of K_t is or would be painful to many individuals at time $t+n$. This may generate a demand for some degree of secrecy about K_t . If this is the case, politicians will have an incentive to satisfy that demand and provide secrecy, even though doing that may also respond to other considerations. Again, we do not attempt to construct a complete model. The question we are interested in is how the degree of secrecy may evolve between t and $t+n$. For convenience, we assume that all voters are identical or that there is a representative voter of some kind (median voter for instance, or, under the assumption of probabilistic voting, a weighted average of all voters).⁴ This allows us to rewrite equation (3) of the previous subsection as

⁴ This is a strong assumption. The desire to make politicians accountable for their deeds may lead some voters to demand transparency rather than secrecy. This is particularly likely to be the case when voters did not vote for the politicians in power at time t (in a sense, however, these voters were not the principals of the incumbents, which makes the situation different). If heterogeneity is acknowledged, recourse to assumptions akin to those made in the theory of probabilistic voting may nonetheless justify the derivation of an aggregate demand for a degree of secrecy.

(3bis) $C_t = \pi_t \beta_t K_t.$

One important factor of change in the demand for secrecy is simply the effect of the passing of time on the cost of knowing about K_t . As a rule, and *ceteris paribus*, the intensity of emotions generated by knowledge about a past event diminishes over time. To give an extreme example, the fate of people massacred one thousand years ago does not generate the same intensity of emotions today than that of people killed last week, last year or even twenty years ago. The nature of this general phenomenon is partly psychological but is also related to differences in what is at stake, differences which are in turn related to generational replacement – i.e., whether or not people of our generation or of the generations of our parents and grand-parents were involved in the event.

If coefficient λ measures the eroding intensity of displeasure due to the passage of time between t and $t+n$, we may write:

(6) $C_{t+n} = \pi_{t+n} \beta_{t+n} \lambda K_t.$

To facilitate comparisons, let us consider the values that would lead to the same outcome in $t+n$ as in t -- that is, let set $C_{t+n} = C_t$.

Then:

$$\pi_t \beta_t K_t = \pi_{t+n} \beta_{t+n} \lambda K_t$$

Since, by definition, $\lambda < 1$, we have

(7) $\pi_{t+n} \beta_{t+n} > \pi_t \beta_t$

If β , the parameter of dislike, remained constant, this means that, for an equal cost C , less secret would be needed – that is, more disclosure would be permissible -- in $t+n$ than was the case in t .

[Figure 2 about here]

However, as we will see, historically β -- that is, abhorrence of the kind of phenomena K is an instance of -- is far from being constant. If this is so, as showed in Figure 2 its variation may reinforce or weaken the effect of λ on π . In other words, it is not certain that the degree of secrecy demanded diminishes with the passing of time (supply being another matter). In Figure 2, in which the two curves correspond to the

same cost at t and $t+n$ (the separation in two curves being due to λ),⁵ the degree of secrecy demanded diminishes, and would even have come to zero if β had remained constant, but it could have increased if β had increased even more than is represented.

4. The “don’t tell us” mechanism and its brethren

In Section 1, we mentioned the existence of two mechanisms related to the one studied in this paper. In social sciences, it is usually difficult to specify the conditions under which a mechanism is triggered (see, *e.g.*, Elster, 2007). In some contexts, “thinking about something else” and “giving low salience to an issue” are two mechanisms or states of affairs that might meet the same needs than those satisfied by refusing to be told a secret. Or they may work as complements. Deciding which process or combination of processes will take place may be out of reach, but we can try to identify features of the environment of the mechanisms -- for instance, attention devoted to an issue by the media, or stress put on one dimension by some moral or judicial authority -- that favour one mechanism, process or state of affairs over the others.

The three mechanisms are logically very different in their defining features but the ways they may shape the attitude of voters vis-à-vis incumbent politicians are not that dissimilar or, in any case, are closely interrelated. Thinking about something else is first of all an individual decision but it is conditioned by the social context, and governments or incumbent politicians play a role in that context. Issue salience is discussed in the literature mostly as a collective variable, concerning the whole electorate or subsets thereof, its determinants being typically assumed to be exogenous (but, for instance, see Schofield 2009). These assumptions are often qualified by some recognition that politicians do find ways to influence the salience of some issues, in either direction (see, for instance, Salmon 2007, Salmon and Wolfelsperger 2007).. Independently of the theoretical literature on voting, there is a long tradition of denouncing the provision by rulers of *panem et circenses* (“breads and games”) as a way to distract the ruled from the matters they should be mostly concerned with. This claim is particularly interesting for our purpose because, in general, the mainly moral denunciations of this distraction do not target the rulers only but extend to the ruled -- when it is not the latter who are

⁵ For convenience, we assume in Figure 2 that K_t – in any case a constant -- is equal to 1 so that it need not be mentioned together with β on the horizontal axis.

shamed as the main culprits. The underlying assumption is that both the demand by the ruled and the supply by the rulers are responsible for the outcome, which is exactly our point.

When it is supposed that issue salience can be manipulated at the collective level, the distinction between the “thinking about something else” and the “low issue salience” mechanisms is as follows. Not thinking about an issue remains an individual decision but it is easier to achieve when that issue has a low salience, a matter which in turn can be arranged to some extent by the politicians in office. The demand for being helped not to think about some issues is thus a demand addressed to the government for lowering as far as possible the salience of these issues, which the said government obtains as a rule by increasing the salience of others.⁶ When issue salience is itself assumed to be, at least in part, an individual matter, the distinction between “thinking about something else” and “attributing low salience” more or less vanishes.

In the two models presented in the previous section, β can be reinterpreted as an indicator of the salience of the category of issues raised by K , varying across individuals in a single period in the first model, over time for a single representative voter of some kind in the second. The way it is introduced assumes that it is exogenous. Let us uphold that assumption. For a constant cost of K , a higher level of β must be compensated by a lower level of π , and thus a higher degree of secrecy. This is true as a consequence of the assumptions made both in the setting of subsection 3.2 and (abstracting from the effect of time) in that of subsection 3.3. Taking into consideration also the solution of “thinking about something else” increases our understanding of this result. The higher the salience of an issue, the more difficult it is to think about something else. Refusing to know appears then as a substitute to “thinking about something else”. When recourse to the latter becomes more difficult, recourse to the former may take its place. For a given value of π_j and B_j , if voter j , in the setting of subsection 3.2, had given more importance to K than he or she did (that is, if β_j had been higher), then the optimal level of Y and the level of utility would have been smaller. This result is rather obvious: if people pay more attention to the negative side-effect of an action useful to them, this reduces the utility they derive from the said action and induces them to want less of it.

⁶ In general, issue salience is defined in relative terms (see Enelow and Hinich 1984), which implies that a decrease in the salience of some issue is associated with an increase in the salience of another. Here, however, β , which we interpret as an indicator of issue salience, is treated as if defined in absolute terms.

But there is no reason to suppose that cost remains the same except if it is so high that society could not withstand an increase. In that case (in which thinking about something else is precluded), it is understandable that an increase in salience is accompanied by an increased demand for secrecy. If people do not care very much about torture, an increase in the importance given to that issue may or may not lead to an increased demand for secrecy about the practice (cost being allowed to vary). People may still think about something else, only somewhat less easily. If people care very much about torture (β is very high), then they (unconsciously) demand or need more secrecy about it. In a society in which moral values are very much stressed, the demand for secrecy about their violation is much stronger than it is in a society relaxed about morality -- see Rabin (1994) for a related argument.

How will the relation between the demand for secrecy and the level of salience vary over time? In the model of Subsection 3.2, the salience of K and the value of the main policy -- that is, for each individual, his or her β_j and $B_j(Y)$ -- are assumed to be independent. In reality, when $B_j(Y)$ is large for most individuals, it is likely that the salience of K , that is β_j , will be low. A context of external war or of intense danger of terrorism will affect positively the value given to the fight against the enemy or the danger, and negatively the attention given to human rights. We may expect then a demand on the part of voters for secrecy about the side effects of the fight against the enemy or terrorists to be relatively weak. Full disclosure might be too much for them to bear -- that is, perhaps, π should not be equal to 1 -- but a value a little below 1 (e.g., a lot of evidence about breaches of human rights available but denied by the government) may leave most voters fully contented. When the war is over or the danger past, Y is abandoned and does not count any more (the setting becoming that of the second model). It is likely then that, on average, β will increase and attention to human rights recover. This makes, *ceteris paribus*, secrecy about past events more valuable to voters. However, as noted, a force playing in the opposite direction is the passing of time. Altogether, it is usually only after some decades that the demand for secrecy completely evaporates. Only then can society face at no psychological cost and without upheavals all the aspects of its past.

In addition to the effects of war and peace and interacting with them, there may be in some matters a trend in the variation of issue salience and thus in the demand for

secretive behaviour. In the past, the dominance of ideologies such as nationalism, ethnocentrism and historicism has led to an almost complete neglect of -- if not an explicit contempt for -- humanitarian considerations in general. A few million dead here and there did not matter so much, many people unfortunately felt, provided this served the main collective goal. And, *a fortiori*, breaches of human rights did not disturb very much a large part of the population, who, if need be, could deal with them simply by thinking about something else. The rise or return of humanitarianism, especially in the 1960s and 1970s made such treatment much more difficult to sustain. Breaches of human rights became an ever more important issue. As a consequence, there has been a potential for the demand for secretive behaviour to increase, hampered however, over some periods or in some countries, by the contexts of war and terrorism discussed above. Whether the said trend will turn out to be a lasting one or only part of a long cycle is difficult to say.

5. Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion, we analysed voters' demand of secretive behaviour by governments as a particular case of secretive behaviour by agents demanded by principals. Such demand by principals may seem strange. It runs counter to the usual way in which information asymmetry and the principal-agent relationship are understood. We discussed the various motivations and settings which may underlie the paradox but in the end focussed on the political relationships. As agents, rulers need some support or acquiescence from their principals -- the ruled. This is true even in the case of monarchs and dictators. But, in democracies, incumbents competing with challengers to remain in office are particularly attentive to getting the support of voters. For the purpose of increasing the probability that voters will vote for them at the next election, politicians in office attempt to deliver goods and services that satisfy voters' generally implicit demand. We argued that, for some of the reasons discussed earlier, disclosure may generate a cost to voters and thus that secrets may constitute one category of items whose provision they demand (which does not imply that secrets may not also have some utility for politicians).

We focussed the theoretical discussion on cases when neither total secrecy nor total disclosure prevails. For instance, some information has been disclosed, is readily

available, but it has also been denied. Thus voters are not perfectly sure one way or another. They attribute a probability to the information being true. Total secrecy is when that subjective probability is equal to zero, total disclosure when it is equal to 1. Under these assumptions, the demand for secrecy becomes a demand for partial secrecy -- that is, for arrangements allowing voters to give a low probability to the existence of something which, inasmuch as it is known, entails for them some cost. We focussed on the particular case of this something being an unsavoury aspect of a policy which otherwise voters like. To explore that setting, two models were distinguished, one devoted to ongoing processes and the other to past events. Finally we made a few remarks on the way the demand for partial secrecy may interact with mechanisms explored in previous work, in particular low issue salience.

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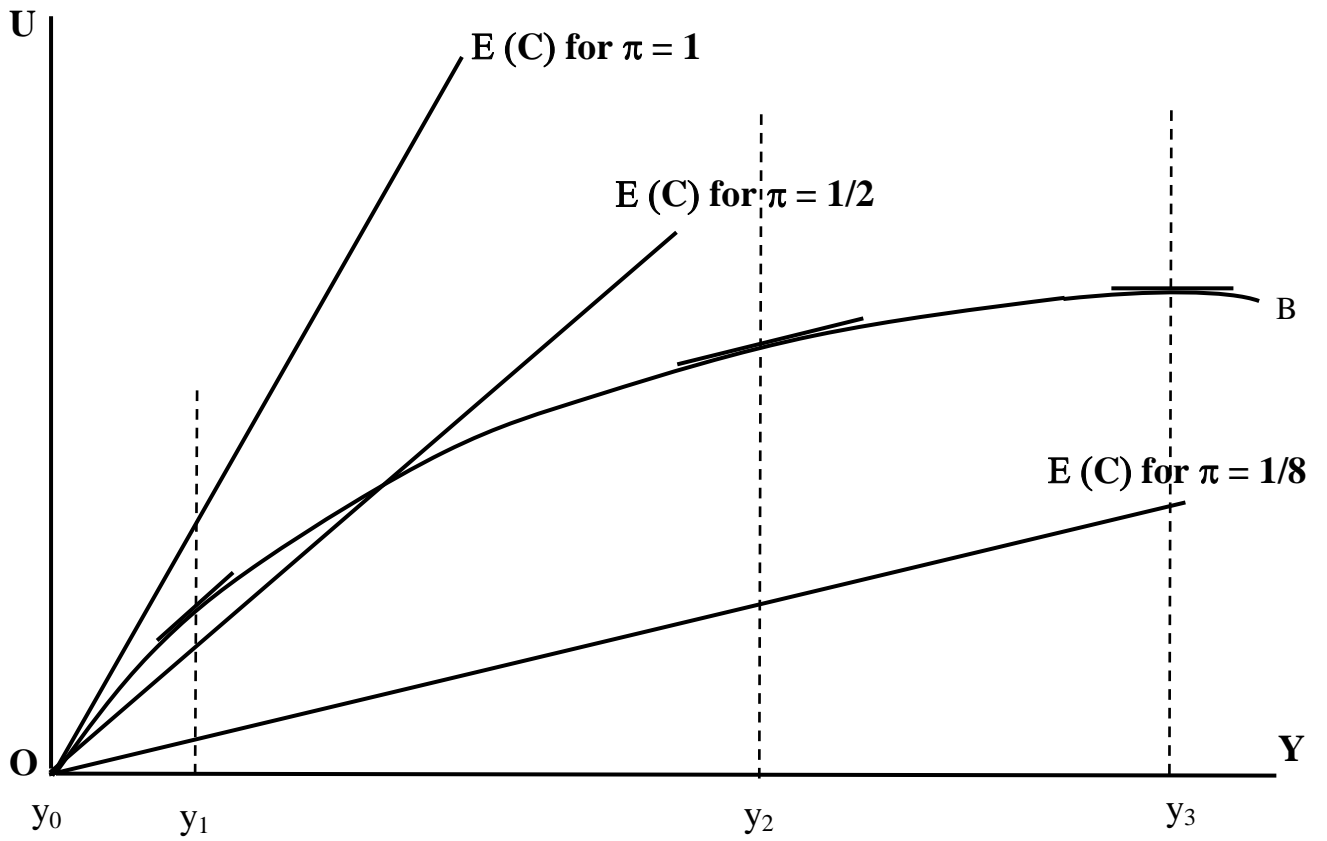


Figure 1: The demand for secrecy about an ongoing process

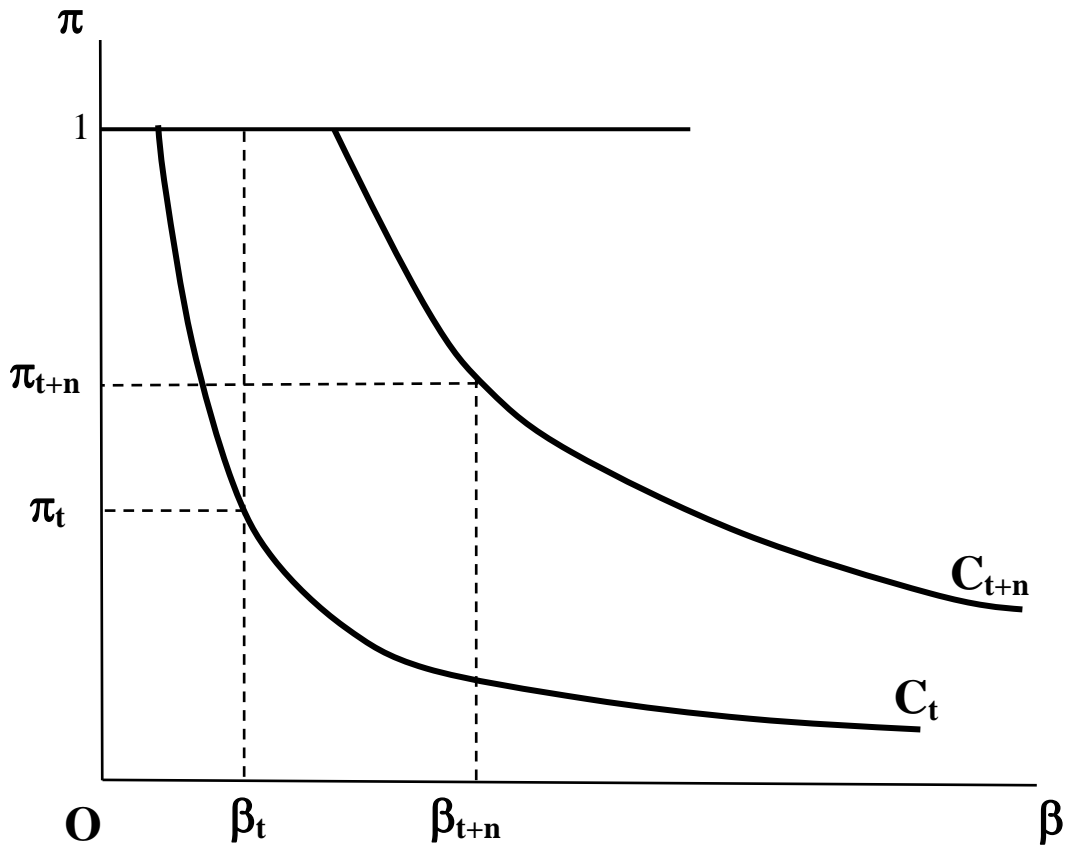


Figure 2: The demand for secrecy about a past event