



Parliamentary Transparency

Does It Improve Behavior, Trust, and Policy?

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Introduction

For more than twenty years, development practitioners, scholars, and international donors have been promoting transparency and accountability as the cornerstones of democracy. Recognizing the democratic values of improved trust, better policy, reduced corruption, and enhanced public participation, international and domestic actors have promoted applying transparency tools, such as access to information, open meetings, and disclosures, within legislative bodies to advance these principles.

Through the wave of accountability discourse, citizen's expectations for transparency have become the norm. Citizens want greater transparency and accountability, but the tools being applied are not sufficient; there is a need for additional actors, such as civil society organizations dedicated to monitoring parliaments or media, and additional emphasis on the identification and disclosure of information that is meaningful for people to truly hold their parliamentarians accountable. Notably, while transparency alone is not enough to reach the democratic ideals of trust, participation, and better policy, in some cases, it might have negative impacts, such as opening the door to undue influence of special interests or lobbyists.¹

The goal of this state-of-the-evidence review is to distinguish and highlight research on topics relevant to legislative transparency and to foster its use by Open Government Partnership (OGP) stakeholders, including parliamentarians/legislators, civil society organizations, and media development donors. The defining question for the review is, "What are the benefits of legislative transparency?" To reach that point, one must begin by exploring which—if any—of the various legislative transparency mechanisms being applied are the most effective in achieving the benefits.

Review Scope and Methodology

As a starting point for the research on the benefits of legislative transparency, only articles and books that were published within the last five years were used as primary sources for exploring the impact of the identified independent variables, access to information, key data, open meetings, and ethics and conflict of interest registries and legislation. Priority was given to peer-reviewed articles, although best practice guides and research projects are also cited. Papers included in the review included analysis, experiments, and surveys. The various papers demonstrated an inconsistency in findings. As noted by others, "Among the studies examining the relationship between transparency and trust in government, findings differ according to the method of analysis—experiments and case studies tend to turn back negative or mixed findings, whereas studies drawing on survey data uncover more positive relationships" (Cucciniello et al. 2017).

While there are significant papers presented by interested civil society organizations and international development organizations, these were largely used for background rather than as

¹ Special interest groups are "a group of people who have particular demands and who try to influence political decisions involving them." Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/special-interest-groups>.

empirical evidence. Similarly, publications that define transparency and accountability broadly were reviewed but not included in the chart specific to legislative openness. Interviews were conducted with several scholars to ensure that germane research and evidence were not missed.

In considering the seminal question, the review sought to explore the impact of various transparency mechanisms in changing legislative behavior, increasing trust, and supporting better policy formation. Four independent variables were identified and organized into broad categories of transparency mechanisms: access to information, key data, open meetings, and ethics and conflict of interest registries and legislation. The independent variables were then assigned an outcome value of positive relationship, negative relationship, or no relationship on the dependent variables of improved trust, better behavior, or improved policy.

Searches were conducted on Articles+, which provides access to scholarly publications, Emory University's Library Search for books, e-books, journals, and Google Scholar. Only English-language articles were included in the review, although Spanish search terms were applied and several Spanish-language papers were examined. Both dependent and independent variables were used as the search terms.

A review of the recent literature related to legislative transparency and accountability showed that a significant deficit of empirical evidence of the positive impacts of various reforms remains. Much of the research is focused on either the executive branch or on the impact of external tools, such as parliamentary monitoring. Moreover, of the scholarship that exists, most relate to the West, including the US, Canada, and Europe with far fewer articles dedicated to the review of legislatures in the south/developing countries. In fact, "the 30 most studied legislative chambers account for about 89% of all articles about legislative politics." (Ansley et al. 2020).

Overall Findings

Transparency is widely regarded as a fundamental pillar of democratic governance, and essential for holding legislators accountable. But like most governance instruments, transparency mechanisms on their own are insufficient to reach the ideals of better legislative behavior, more citizen engagement, increased trust, and improved policy. While the research demonstrates that citizens desire more transparency and accountability, they often are not sufficiently informed with timely and meaningful information or lack the time and capacity to properly evaluate the information they receive. Citizens want transparency from their legislators and are more willing to support the decisions when seen to be procedurally fair and transparent: "Decision-making perceived to be transparent will, therefore, be judged as more fair, which will have a positive effect on public legitimacy beliefs such as willingness to accept political decisions" (de Fine Licht 2014). But too often the public perception is based on what de Fine Licht called "transparency cues," such as what the media tell us, rather than true transparency.

Moreover, parliamentarians are rarely held accountable for their policy decisions and votes, and they are aware of this, particularly in places with strong party politics (Hanretty et al. 2021). Legislators may be incentivized toward certain behaviors if they believe that failure to do so would result in greater electoral accountability, i.e., they would be voted out of office. However, this is rarely the case, and "MPs' beliefs in electoral sanctioning are consistent with the small effects we find in our analysis of the BES data. We interpret this to mean that legislators in the UK know they

are only minimally accountable for their issue stances” (Hanretty et al. 2021). This is particularly the case when the elections are farther in the future, there is no fear of a primary challenger, or their district is not competitive. (Grossman and Michelitch 2018). Linnea Mills (2017) similarly notes mixed evidence on whether voters electorally punish legislators for misconduct.

As such, for legislative transparency tools to lead to greater transparency and accountability, there needs to be additional inputs and efforts, including parliamentary monitoring oversight and organizations committed to reviewing legislative happenings, better quality data, and more accessible information.

However, when the instruments only provide the perception of transparency and accountability rather than reality, they can inadvertently open the door to undue influence from special interest and lobbying groups or hinder the legislative process. “There is a trade-off inherent in increasing transparency between increasing the potential for accountability, on the one hand, and decreasing negotiators’ ability to reach compromise solutions due to their reputational concerns, on the other” (Cross 2013). If the legislator taking part in the policy negotiations is concerned for their reputation or reelection, it “can lead them to take more extreme positions than they might otherwise have done were bargaining to take place behind closed doors” (Cross 2013). Importantly though, more recent research has indicated that legislative deliberations and the ability to compromise are not impacted when there is greater transparency. (Harden and Kirland 2021).

The paradox is clear: legislative transparency is highly desirable but does not lead to the presumed benefits—better behavior, increased trust, and improved policy—without the application of a mix of various instruments tailored to the specific context of each democracy and with additional ingredients, such as oversight, reporting, better data, more accessible information, and enhanced communication with the public. Without these, there can be only the appearance of transparency, which does little to reach democratic ideals and may facilitate more undesirable effects.

Four main independent variables (transparency mechanisms) were reviewed to determine whether there was evidence of a positive impact on the dependent variables of behavior, trust, and policy. The research presented below—positive, negative, no impact—reflects the legislative transparency contradiction.

Specific Transparency Mechanisms

Access to Information

Providing the public with access to this information enables citizens to scrutinize the actions of legislators, fostering a culture of openness and accountability. “When Congress enacts legislation, it should not be difficult for Americans to find out what was done and how their representatives voted. Americans should be informed about how taxpayer money is being spent and whether governmental purposes are being achieved” (Lee 2019). However, studies have varied on the role access to information has in increasing transparency and, thus, trust. The provision of information, and “its effects on trust are fluid, constructed, and context-specific” (Roelofs 2019).

In a review of best practices and case studies from selected parliaments, Vidačak and Šelo Šabić (2023) found that providing information can positively impact on the perception of the institution,

its credibility, and public trust. They highlighted a recent study based on an “information provision experiment” of France’s High Authority for the Transparency of Public Life (HATVP), which “showed that proactive communication and information on the HATVP work and investigations had meaningful, positive impacts on French citizens’ perceptions of the HATVP, political transparency, and representative democracy.” (Vidačak and Šelo Šabić 2023). Nevertheless, the authors also noted difficulties, including poor quality of the disclosure data, uncertainty of what information should be shared, and the need for legislative oversight bodies to investigate and impose penalties.

Minaudier (2022) considered whether the information used by lawmakers in decision-making should be kept confidential, the opposite of transparency. In this peer-reviewed paper, which applies a modeling exercise that considers a policymaker and a lobbyist, she argued that by not sharing what information lawmakers have, they can get lobbyists/special interest groups to be more transparent in their agendas. “When interest groups can observe the information already available to PMs, they can produce evidence that is just sufficiently accurate to tilt the policy decision in their favor” (Minaudier 2022). If the information that the policy maker possesses is not disclosed, it encourages the lobbyist to share more information that could be pertinent and lead to better legislation, thus arguing for less access to information and greater opacity.

In contrast, a recent peer-reviewed paper found that access to information has had little effect. Based on a randomized experimental study, the researchers sought to test the hypothesis that latent transparency² may serve as the unidentified element for those researchers who found a positive link between increased access to information and trust, i.e. “that citizens may value transparency as a principle or policy, even while not having much interest themselves in directly requesting or accessing public information, documents, or data” (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2020). Unexpectedly, the results demonstrated that there is either no or a “small yet significant negative effect” when the participants are provided with details about their rights to information; none of the latent primes increased the participants’ trust in government (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2020). The authors opined that one explanation may be “the nature of transparency remains rooted in a healthy skepticism of government—a skepticism that may account for the negative connotation of transparency in the mind of the public” (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2020). While this research focuses on public agencies, rather than the legislature, it is an important contribution to the consideration of the impact of the awareness of access to information on trust.

Open Meetings and Hearings

It is often posited that legislators’ behavior is positively influenced when operating in a transparent environment in which their actions and decisions are subject to public scrutiny. This would be particularly true in terms of open meetings and hearings whereby they would more likely engage in substantive debates and open exchanges of ideas, leading to the development of more informed and better policy.

² “Manifest transparency” is when people are actively seeking information as opposed to “latent transparency,” which is an awareness that access to government information exists. This study highlighted the impacts of latent transparency.

Hearings “are not just about getting information in, but also about getting information out” (Kornberg and Siefken 2023). The antecedents of committee hearings came from legislative oversight functions, but “nowadays committee hearings are often held in the process of law-making” and these hearings are increasingly open to the public, particularly as committees travel throughout the country and hearings are broadcast digitally. In Kornberg and Siefken’s (2023) peer-reviewed study of use and value of open committee hearings, they used varied data sets from the 2022 Global Parliamentary Report, a joint initiative of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations Development Program, along with interviews and focus groups for a descriptive analysis. Significant variation exists in the use of public hearing committees and their design, but the study emphasized the importance of sharing information, increasing legitimacy, and bringing more people “into the conversation.”

While open meetings and hearings may bring valuable benefits, they also present challenges. Legislators may be cautious about expressing unpopular opinions or compromising in negotiations for fear of backlash, particularly when up for reelection. For years, there has been the argument that if legislative proceedings are open to the public, it will harm the representatives’ ability to negotiate and compromise. “Policymaking requires negotiation, and legislators commonly note that their ability to negotiate requires political cover” (Kirkland and Harden 2022).

In her book *Rejecting Compromise: Legislators’ Fear of Primary Voters*, Sarah Anderson (2020) shares the finding that open meetings hamper a lawmaker’s ability to negotiate and compromise, particularly when facing reelection. Anderson looked at national, state, and local legislators using examples from the US Congress and several US states, as well as primary data gathered from surveys conducted at the National Conference of State Legislatures annual Legislative Summit. Using these surveys and a designed experiment to assess legislators’ perceptions, she juxtaposes the benefits of negotiating in private with the risk that the legislator will be punished for the appearance of secrecy, as voters continue to favor public meetings. Anderson finds that better communication can limit the potential of voter punishment during primaries. She writes, “With greater communication and building of trust, legislators may have the leeway to insulate portions of the legislative process from public scrutiny, helping them reach compromise and overcome gridlock.” She suggests that “after negotiating in private, they can reveal the compromise to constituents with both the concessions and the benefits, and then face the accountability necessary for democratic representation.”

In clear contradiction, according to Harden and Kirkland (2021), little research or empirical evidence supports policy-makers’ claims that open meetings inhibit political compromise. Using theoretical modeling and empirical predictions and testing them “by leveraging temporal variation in the adoptions and legislative exemptions of states’ transparency requirements for legislative meetings. We employ novel data and multiple modeling strategies to identify the effects of “exposure to sunshine” on our indicators of political compromise in state legislatures.” Harden and Kirkland looked at five theoretical disadvantages to open meeting laws: 1) enacting fewer pieces of legislation because of gridlock, 2) higher levels of party polarization in roll call votes, 3) greater party loyalty in roll call votes, 4) budget kurtosis, and 5) budget delay. In so doing, they found that open meetings have negligible impacts, including on legislative deliberations and negotiations.

In furtherance of the earlier study, in their book *The Illusion of Accountability: Transparency and Representation in American Legislatures*, Kirkland and Harden (2022) argue that while open meetings do not negatively impact legislation, they also do not make for better legislation, i.e., the policies passed did not better reflect citizen's preferences. Rather, open meetings can inadvertently favor special interest groups and lobbyists as they have the time and capacity to engage. The book uses examples from several US states, including an examination of open meetings in Illinois, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Florida. "Open meetings laws create a public more confident in but less knowledgeable about its legislature, while not actually changing legislators' decisions and behavior...In fact, open meetings create an environment in which interest groups can expand their reach and keep the status quo in place" (Kirkland and Harden 2022, 31). The authors find that the idea of transparency mechanisms is sufficient for constituents to be satisfied but that it is illusory, providing a false sense of accountability without leading to improved representation or policy. Rather, they proposed that the more transparent, the less representative or accountable, which leads to a greater potential for exploitation by interest groups.

Key Data, Including Roll Call Voting

Data, including roll calls, electronic voting, and publication of individual voting records, can enhance the transparency of the legislative process, provide evidence of representation, and give valuable insights into the internal parliamentary dynamics. However, drawbacks such as pressure for conformity or to vote in line with party positions and the potential for strategic voting underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of their role in advancing the democratic ideals of trust and better policy. As with other transparency mechanisms, the evidentiary impact is mixed. While some studies demonstrate a benefit, most show that the impacts are minimal or potentially negative.

In terms of roll call voting, Ainsley et al. (2020) reviewed legislative voting procedures for 148 legislative chambers across 105 countries from around the world but noted that "the bulk of legislative research involves only a fraction of the 145 chambers catalogued here. The 30 most studied legislative chambers account for about 89% of all articles about legislative politics." They posited that a limitation in studying the impact of roll call voting is that within legislatures, voting can happen in multiple ways and roll calls may not be the standard operating procedure (Ainsley et al. 2020). Moreover, "singling out votes of final passage for attention would ignore all the critical business that occurs before what may end up being a pro forma vote on a carefully selected and highly vetted item" (Ainsley et al. 2020). "Both our empirical and theoretical analyses indicate that the resulting vote samples are likely unrepresentative of general legislative voting" and can be impacted when roll call voting is used. Party leaders are incentivized to use roll calls when their party has a "noticeably higher level of unity than the opposition" (Ainsley et al. 2020). "Because legislators may change their votes depending on whether the results are public, the selection of votes for roll call can have powerful effects on outcomes." At present, the data being used to study this procedural impact is not "benign." There is no uniform means of voting in legislatures and incentives often determine which votes are individually recorded and made public (Ainsley et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, for most of the research, roll call votes have either demonstrated no impact or have impaired the parliaments studied. An illustrative example where increased transparency harmed voter's influence on their elected officials comes from the Upper House in Switzerland, where a

change in the process from manual voting to electronic voting and online publication of individual voting records allowed researchers to consider the “effect of increased transparency on legislator’s choices” (Benesch et al. 2018). In this peer-reviewed article, the authors reviewed data from “all individual legislator decisions on almost 300 final passage votes for the 2011–2015 legislative period.” This review was accompanied by interviews with legislators and legislative administrators.

Benesch et al. (2018) looked at votes taken on identical bills in Switzerland’s Lower and Upper House. Using the Lower House as a control for any changes that may be specific to the bill and historical trends, they reviewed votes taken before the reform—votes taken with a show of hands only—and those taken after the reform—electronically and published—to see how closely the legislators align with their party. They found that when the votes are public and more easily observable, the legislator is less likely to deviate from their party. Notably, this holds only when the legislator is “seeking reelection; retiring legislators did not adapt their voting behavior.” This research supports the notion that increased transparency, which may be important for legislators’ efforts, only serves to increase the likelihood of party-line voting.

Similarly, in a study of the French legislature carried out after the 2014 reforms that made voting electronic and more transparent, Cloléry (2021), in her peer-reviewed article, used existing data sets to demonstrate the hypothesis that the increased transparency in voting disadvantaged the electorate. Parliamentarians are expected to serve two different groups: their constituents and their political party. Previous research showed that legislators are more likely to follow their party than the perceived wishes of their citizens. In this study, Cloléry found that when the interests of the two are not aligned, transparency might lead the parliamentarian not to vote at all, depending on how it will impact their reputation. “Greater transparency has led to less participation and more alignment to the Party line. As such, knowing that their behavior is more easily observable, legislators prefer not to take sides, and additional information benefits Party leaders more than constituents in the short term” (Cloléry 2021). In this research, they found that transparency reduced legislator’s participation in voting by 8–12 percentage points. “As their behavior becomes more easily observable to both constituents and Party leaders, MPs strategically prefer not to take sides.” Moreover, transparency in voting is also an opportunity to enhance their reputation through strategic voting, which can further distort decision-making.

Another mechanism that has been used to increase legislative transparency is the use of television cameras. This is thought to positively “strengthen the link between legislators and voters,” as it makes it easier to see the actions of the parliamentarians and, thus, hold them accountable. On the other hand, it is argued that the introduction of television encourages legislators to “play to the cameras” and diminishes meaningful debate and decision-making (Yildirim 2020). Yildirim’s peer-reviewed paper uses existing datasets and a quasi-experimental study to investigate the impacts of television cameras on Turkey’s legislative body when, in 2011, the use of television cameras changed from every day to only Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. By reviewing the legislative behavior on days with cameras and those without, the researcher was able to analyze the impact on legislative behavior and proceedings within the same legislative terms. Yildirim (2020) found that parliamentarians, particularly more junior and electorally vulnerable MPs, “capitalized on the varying presence of TV cameras in the parliament and altered their parliamentary behavior strategically, shifting their constituency-related activities to the televised proceedings.” While not addressing the impact on particular legislation, Yildirim’s findings “imply that partially televised

proceedings may be less desirable than proceedings that are fully televised or not televised at all, as legislators seem to alter their behavior based on the varying presence of TV cameras in the parliament” and that it can impact the agenda setting by “discouraging the discussions of national political issues in the proceedings with TV cameras.”

Similar to increasing access to information are open data efforts. Open data often refers to information that is made available in a digital, machine-readable format and that is easily accessible and shared. Open data often adheres to principles such as availability, accessibility, and reusability, contributing to greater transparency and accountability. In the context of legislative bodies, this includes making information about voting records, committee proceedings, registries, and budgets and expenditures available to the public, often using websites. While potentially positive for increasing citizen’s understanding of parliamentary behavior and accountability for wrongdoing, as with other internal legislative mechanisms, data transparency can be used strategically or even weaponized (Worthy et al. 2022).

Nevertheless, Worthy (2023) finds that with more data—and easier to find data—parliamentarians are “more accountable. After votes, they now share explanations and justifications” and in some cases, they changed their behavior (Worthy 2023). In a recent project undertaken by Worthy et al. (2022), funded by the Leverhulme Trust, the authors theorized that this is particularly true for MPs in the majority party, those vulnerable to electoral challenges, and women. The project sought to identify who is using the parliamentary data, how it is being used, and the impact on MPs both individually and collectively, engaging “a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative methods such as interviews, surveys, and case studies with quantitative data gathering and media analysis” (Worthy et al. 2022). The findings demonstrated that increased data, including disclosure and reporting requirements combined with monitoring, does lead to greater accountability. It creates positive behavior change, provides more explanation about their decisions, and, in a few cases, has encouraged policy reforms. But it also has magnified resistance and attempts to “game the system.” Data may not change voters’ behavior showing little effect on voting patterns, likely because of the type and poor quality of the information, and it can augment distrust (Worthy et al. 2022).

Digital tools are also used by legislatures to enhance citizen participation, both through sharing more information and data and by using the tools and platforms as a means of receiving inputs from their constituencies. In Vidačak and Šelo Šabić’s (2023) paper on best practices, the authors share the example of Brazil’s Parliament, where both the House of Representatives and Senate use digital means to engage citizens. Tools such as LABHacker, which allows citizens to co-create projects and exchange ideas, and online portals where representatives use surveys and online forums to “collect opinions and encourage citizens to engage more in the law-making process” are designed to influence legislative behavior and policy. As noted in the paper, studies have shown that citizen inputs received through e-tools have been reflected in legislative reports and parliamentarian comments, but “the reality of the political game, however, does not always correspond to the theoretical possibilities sought by the institutions” (Teixeira de Barros 2016). Parliamentary culture “is not always anchored on the principles of participatory and social engagement” and representatives may fail to use their constituents’ tools and inputs provided by their constituents to improve their work (Teixeira de Barros 2016).

Ethics and Code of Conduct

Increasingly corporate actors and special interest groups play a key role in influencing policy and in legislative agenda setting (Boucher 2021). “Regulating interest groups’ access to and interactions with decision-makers constitutes a key dimension of a legitimate and accountable system of government” (Bunea 2017). A review of the recent research and literature suggests that lobbying regulations, registers (with quality, complete, and current information), financial and conflict disclosures, and codes of conduct are a potentially effective—albeit still with mixed results—means of influencing legislatures’ behavior, particularly when combined with strong sanctions.

To test the impacts of various transparency laws and the different forms of ethics disclosure on trust, Crepez and Arikan (2023) conducted an online experiment in Ireland with 1,373 citizens looking at three different actors: political parties, MPs, and business interest groups. “The experiment tested the direct effects of disclosure of political donations by political parties, disclosure of financial assets by MPs, and disclosure of lobbying activities by business interest groups on citizens’ political trust and perceptions of corruption toward these actors” (Crepez and Arikan 2023). From the responses in this peer-reviewed article, the authors determined that transparency had different impacts on people’s perceptions of these actors. Notably, they found that transparency in political donations and asset declarations improves trust and reduces perceptions of MPs’ corruption, while lobbying transparency does not impact people’s attitudes about special interest groups. The increase in the trust of political parties and the reduced perception of corruption of MPs were unexpected results, perhaps explained by the importance of the information being disclosed, prior knowledge, and the significance placed on these values, such as MPs’ honesty and integrity (Crepez and Arikan 2023). In the case of business interest groups lobbying, there was the perception that respondents knew little about this topic and, therefore, it was not considered valuable.

In her 2017 report, Mills presents existing evidence “about initiatives to promote transparency among legislators, MPs, and legislative processes and what impact this has had on legislative accountability.” Mills focuses on the effects of increased information about UK MPs including through information and communication technology (such as parliamentary websites), disclosure of MPs’ assets, and disclosure of MPs’ election expenses and funders. The paper presents a small base of evidence that publicly disclosed information about MPs’ assets resulted in lower levels of corruption. On the other hand, “while conventional wisdom predicts that more transparency in political finance, including public disclosure of MPs’ expenditures and sources of funding, would have positive effects on accountability, there is very little empirical evidence supporting this claim” (Mills 2017).

In addition to regulation and disclosure, parliaments are establishing internal codes of conduct, which “impose concrete rules of conduct on MPs, as a means of enhancing trust (Bovend’Eert 2020). Codes of conduct can include measures related to conflicts of interest, circumstances mandating financial disclosures, and lobbying. Bovend’Eert reviewed the “code of conduct in the US House of Representatives (strict model), the code of conduct in the UK House of Commons (moderate model) and the standards of conduct in the Lower House of the Dutch Parliament (lenient model) to assess their content, enforcement, and impact.” The extent to which these codes lead to greater trust has not been established, as empirical research does not exist, but the author posits that there “seems to be more willingness to act against MPs for misconduct in personal life” than their public work. And as with all efforts to regulate conduct, compliance must be monitored and enforced (Bovend’Eert 2020).

While the imposition of codes through external oversight can “generate backlash,” ethical self-regulation “can be a promising strategy to promote ethical conduct and restore public trust” (Pereira et al. 2023). In a peer-reviewed paper on a conjoint experiment conducted in Spain and Portugal, which included a survey of MPs and local elected officials in both countries and a nationally representative survey of Portuguese voters, the authors found that both politicians and voters reward political party self-regulation, such as codes of conduct and financial and lobbying activity disclosure.

Vidačak and Šelo Šabić’s (2023) mapped best practices on transparency and integrity from various parliaments around the world, with much of their paper focused on lobbying regulations and conflicts of interest. They present mechanisms including disclosure of outside activities and work, post-employment lobbying jobs, and foreign entity lobbying. “By requiring members to disclose these activities, the public can be made aware of any potential conflicts of interests, hold MPs accountable for their actions and have more confidence that they are acting in the public interest rather than for personal gain” (Vidačak and Šelo Šabić 2023). For most of the examples presented, the authors find that success is contingent upon well-crafted regulations that are consistently applied with effective enforcement mechanisms and disclosures of information that is updated, accessible, and meaningful for the public’s understanding and to hold legislators accountable (Vidačak and Šelo Šabić 2023).

Nevertheless, “citizens’ perception that lawmaking is dominated by special interests undermines their trust in democratic institutions and lawmaking processes,” including in the EU, where the lobbying regulations remain weak and voluntary (Ammann 2021). In Ammann’s article on the EU lobbying register, she argues that the regulation is too narrow in its focus. As a result, even when lobbying practices are compliant, they do not fundamentally improve transparency or accountability. Further, increased transparency does not address other problems with lobbying, “such as well-known imbalances caused by unequal distribution of political resources” and inequitable participation. (Ammann 2021). Like other authors, Ammann speaks to the “pseudo-transparency,” which “deceives the broader public” into believing that there is meaningful compliance.

To engage with EU lawmakers, interested parties must join the EU’s voluntary Transparency Register and agree to its disclosure requirements. Using an online questionnaire, a study conducted in 2017 examined whether stakeholders—the special interest groups and members of the public—assessed this “targeted transparency” to be effective and sustainable. “The findings describe a transparency regime that scores low in perceived effectiveness and moderate to low in sustainability. The Register did not effectively bridge the information gap between the public and interest groups about supranational lobbying.” (Bunea 2018). Survey respondents perceived the data quality of the Register’s disclosures to be problematic, and citizens shared concerns with the Register’s website (search function, accessibility, and access via mobile devices), the information available, and the costs to special interest groups. Bunea (2018) posited that “by proposing a mandatory Register without significantly improving the quality of information disclosed, users’ engagement with information and tightening penalties for noncompliance, the Commission runs the risk of institutionalising a regulatory regime that is ineffective and contributes to the EU democratic deficit instead of rectifying it.”

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn, considering the evidence that transparency increases trust, changes parliamentarians' behavior and representation, or improves policy, several conclusions can be drawn. Perhaps most critically, there is a clear need for further empirical evidence related to the impacts on legislatures of the various transparency mechanisms and tools presently being applied. Importantly, research on the role that information disclosure can play in better policy formation and increased trust—particularly in light of the increased use of artificial intelligence within legislatures and dis/misinformation—should be prioritized. As more countries are passing lobbying regulations and reforms, research should be undertaken to identify whether there are demonstrable impacts and under what circumstances. Research should also explore strategic means of public engagement and the development of effective feedback loops as a complement to internal transparency mechanisms, with a focus on empirical evidence of impact.

Moreover, much of the existing literature focuses on the West, particularly on the US House of Representatives, the UK House of Parliament, and the EU. More research should be supported and evidence should be collected from developing countries and emerging democracies related to the introduction and impacts of transparency mechanisms, including the role of technological advances and positive changes that these transparency tools have had to the functioning of legislative bodies.

While more regulation and disclosure requirements may not result in major impacts, the papers reviewed indicate that citizens want and expect transparency and that elected officials are aware of this and do feel “watched.” Positively, the argument that transparency inhibits debate or negatively impacts legislators' ability to negotiate may be overstated and while there may not be total “success,” the existence of transparency and accountability mechanisms within the parliaments is certainly better than none. Problematically, there remains a potential for performative transparency, which provides the illusion of openness without the concomitant benefits and creates a risk that lobbyists and special interest groups will be the main profiteers. Political parties still hold great sway, leading to more party-line voting and the potential for less representativeness of citizens, but with their continued power they can institute self-regulation, which benefits both the legislators and the electorate.

Importantly, internal legislative transparency mechanisms can be improved and their impacts can be enhanced. Many of the papers promoted the use of a mix of transparency mechanisms, including better and more consistent communication, as well as other governance reforms for the greatest effect. In several cases, the researchers argued that effective enforcement efforts, such as oversight and audit bodies, would enhance transparency mechanisms. Furthermore, assuring quality data that is meaningful and accessible to the public, increased parliamentary monitoring from outside groups or internal watchdogs, effective enforcement processes and penalties for noncompliance, and additional citizen engagement will enrich the existing tools.

In sum, more evidence-based research is needed with particular emphasis on developing countries to better identify the most impactful transparency and accountability mechanisms. Moreover, resources should be employed to support complementary measures, including enforcement mechanisms, parliamentary monitoring, and citizen engagement. Finally, legislative transparency efforts should continue while being balanced with other openness and accountability measures.

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Appendix

Transparency Mechanism	Title	Author and Publication	Impact on Dependent Variables
Access to Information	Mapping best practices on transparency, integrity, accountability, and anti-corruption: Case studies from selected parliaments	Igor Vidačak and Senada Šelo Šabić European Parliament, 2023	Positive relationship
Access to Information	The Value of Confidential Policy Information: Persuasion, Transparency, and Influence	Clement Minaudier <i>The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization</i> , 2022	Negative relationship <i>If too much of the information used for decision-making is shared, it can adversely empower lobbyists.</i>
Access to information Open Meetings and Hearings	Does Transparency Inhibit Political Compromise?	Jeffrey J. Harden and Justin H. Kirkland <i>American Journal of Political Science</i> , 2021	No relationship <i>Transparency does not impact a legislator's ability to deliberate or negotiate.</i>
Open Meetings and Hearings	Committee hearings as parliamentary public engagement: A global perspective	Maya Kornberg and Sven T. Siefken <i>The Journal of Legislative Studies</i> , 2023	Potential positive relationship <i>Public hearings have the potential to share information, increase engagement, and improve legitimacy.</i>

PARLIAMENTARY TRANSPARENCY

Transparency Mechanism	Title	Author and Publication	Impact on Dependent Variables
Open Meetings and Hearings	Rejecting Compromise: Legislator's Fear of Primary Voters	Sarah Anderson Cambridge University Press, 2020	Negative relationship <i>Fear of primary challengers deters legislators from compromise, particularly if done in public.</i>
Open Meetings and Hearings	The Illusion of Accountability: Transparency and Representation in American Legislatures	Justin Kirkland Cambridge University Press, 2022	No relationship, though there is a potential for negative impact <i>Provides an illusion of transparency—while making the public complacent, it also opens the door to special interest groups and lobbyists.</i>
Key Data (Roll calls)	Time-dependent legislative behavior and election outcomes	Lauren M. Rowlands and Ryan J. Vander Wielen <i>Party Politics</i> , 2021	Positive relationship <i>Roll call voting can impact legislative behavior when it occurs close to elections.</i>
Key Data (Open roll call voting)	Transparency in parliamentary voting	Christine Benesch, Monika Büttlerb, and Katharina E. Hoferb <i>Journal of Public Economics</i> , 2018	Negative relationship, with the potential for positive <i>Roll call voting may encourage more party-line voting, which is less representative of citizens. But if MPs are concerned that their reputation related to efforts would be impacted, it can have a positive impact.</i>
Key Data (Open roll call voting and electronic voting)	Legislators in the Crossfire: The Effect of Transparency on Parliamentary Voting	Hélöise Cloléry <i>European Journal of Political Economy</i> , 2023	Negative relationship Legislators are concerned with reputation and will not participate in voting if risk is perceived.

PARLIAMENTARY TRANSPARENCY

Transparency Mechanism	Title	Author and Publication	Impact on Dependent Variables
Key Data (Roll calls)	Roll-Call Vote Selection: Implications for the Study of Legislative Politics	Caitlin Ainsley, Clifford J. Carrubba, Brian F. Crisp, Betul Demirkaya, Matthew J. Gabel, and Dino Hadzic <i>The American Political Science Review</i> , 2020	No relationship <i>Roll calls are often discretionary and called only to demonstrate strong party unity.</i>
Key Data (Television cameras)	Politics of Constituency Representation and Legislative Ambition under the Glare of Camera Lights	T. Murat Yildirim <i>Legislative Studies Quarterly</i> , 2020	No relationship or negative relationship <i>The existence of television cameras in the legislature in Turkey induced junior and vulnerable MPs to strategically use the televised days to play to the cameras, potentially impacting both debate and the legislative agenda.</i>
Key Data (Open data, websites, or online platforms)	Mapping best practices on transparency, integrity, accountability, and anti-corruption: Case studies from selected parliaments	Igor Vidačak and Senada Šelo Šabić European Parliament, 2023	No relationship to positive relationship <i>Some research shows that members refer to online contributions, but other research says this is not much political use—rather, it encourages more citizen engagement.</i>
Key Data (Open data)	Does watching MPs make them behave better?	Ben Worthy mySociety, 2023	Positive relationship <i>MPs felt more “watched” and so behaved better.</i>

PARLIAMENTARY TRANSPARENCY

Transparency Mechanism	Title	Author and Publication	Impact on Dependent Variables
Key Data (Open data or registers)	Who is Watching Parliament? Monitory Democracy at Westminster	Ben Worthy, Stefani Langehennig, and Cat Morgan Birbeck College, University of London, 2022	Positive relationship with some potential negative aspects <i>Disclosure and reporting requirements and the act of monitoring MPs does make them more accountable. But it does not necessarily alter the behavior of voters, who are negatively impacted by poor data quality—in turn, this can create distrust.</i>
Key Data (Voting records)	Members of Parliament are Minimally Accountable for Their Issue Stances (and They Know It)	Chris Hanretty, Jonathan Mellon, and Patrick English <i>American Political Science Review</i> , 2021	No relationship <i>The effect on voting behavior is low and parliamentarians perceive limited accountability for votes.</i>
Ethics and Conflict of Interest	Politicians Support (and Voters Reward) Intra-Party Reforms to Promote Transparency	Miguel M. Pereira, Susana Coroado, Luís de Sousa, and Pedro C. Magalhães <i>Party Politics</i> , 2023	Positive relationship <i>Politicians support and voters reward financial disclosures, lobbying registries, and sanctions for corrupt behavior. Both voters and politicians support self-regulation by political parties with regard to ethics.</i>
Ethics and Conflict of Interest (Asset declaration and lobbying regulations)	The effects of transparency regulation on political trust and perceived corruption: Evidence from a survey experiment	Michele Crepez and Gizem Arikan <i>Regulation and Governance</i> , 2023	Positive relationship <i>Asset declaration for conflict of interest prevention reduces perceptions of MPs' corruption.</i>

PARLIAMENTARY TRANSPARENCY

Transparency Mechanism	Title	Author and Publication	Impact on Dependent Variables
Ethics and Conflict of Interest (Asset disclosure and ICTs)	Parliamentary transparency and accountability	Linnea Mills K4D Helpdesk, 2017	Positive relationship <i>Information in disclosure must be specific, credible, and available</i>
Ethics and Conflict of Interest (Disclosure of outside activities and work)	Mapping best practices on transparency, integrity, accountability, and anti-corruption: Case studies from selected parliaments	Igor Vidačak and Senada Šelo Šabić European Parliament, 2023	Positive relationship <i>Data is most effective when consistent, updated, and reviewed with public access. It is also important to combine various preventive mechanisms.</i>
Ethics and Conflict of Interest (Lobbying regulations)	Transparency at the Expense of Equality and Integrity: Present and Future Directions of Lobby Regulation in the European Parliament	Odile Ammann European Papers, 2021	Potential positive relationship <i>Under specific circumstances, such as when mandatory and effective compliance, lobbying regulations can be good for transparency.</i>
Ethics and Conflict of Interest (Lobbying registers)	Legitimacy through targeted transparency? Regulatory effectiveness and sustainability of lobbying regulation in the European Union	Adriana Bunea European <i>Journal of Political Research</i> , 2018	Negative relationship <i>If the information in the mandatory register is not of good quality, then it can institutionalize an ineffective regulatory regime.</i>

PARLIAMENTARY TRANSPARENCY

Transparency Mechanism	Title	Author and Publication	Impact on Dependent Variables
Ethics and Conflict of Interest (Lobbying registers and published list of meetings)	Opaque: An empirical evaluation of lobbying transparency in the UK Correction to: Opaque: an empirical evaluation of lobbying transparency in the UK	Amy Melissa McKay and Antal Wozniak <i>Interest Groups & Advocacy</i> , 2020a and 2020b	No relationship <i>Lobbying registers do not serve as great transparency mechanisms—to be more effective, such registers would need to be more rigorous and collect better data.</i>
Ethics and Conflict of Interest (Lobbying regulations)	Mapping best practices on transparency, integrity, accountability, and anti-corruption: Case studies from selected parliaments	Igor Vidačak and Senada Šelo Šabić European Parliament, 2023	No relationship <i>As presently designed, registries are not sufficient for positive impacts.</i>
Ethics and Conflict of Interest (Codes of conduct)	Public Office and Public Trust: Standards of Conduct in Parliament: A Comparative Analysis of Rules of Conduct in Three Parliaments	Paul Bovend'Eert <i>Parliamentary Affairs</i> , 2020	No relationship <i>The public is more inclined to hold legislators accountable for private life infractions instead of political ones (i.e. bad behavior in personal life). The enforcement of codes of conduct is also needed.</i>