Chapter 9
Exploring the Socio-Political Determinants of Open Budget: A Cross-National Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In a study of budgetary transparency and accountability, this chapter examines how a country’s disclosure of budget information is related to a set of socio-political factors. The authors analyze data from the biennial Open Budget Survey conducted by the International Budget Partnership for the years of 2008 and 2010. The study compares three types of disclosure practices: online, hardcopy, and unpublished distribution for six types of budgets: pre-budget proposal, executive budget, citizens’ budget, mid-year review, end-year review, and audit report. They find that the level of democracy in a given nation has considerable impact on its level of budgetary transparency and accountability, when these qualities are defined in terms of types of budgetary documents that are available to the public online. It is clear that online publication, most probably in the context of e-government efforts, is key to making this information available. The quality of governance is found to be critical for the availability of a citizens’ budget online, and the numbers of Internet users is related to the online availability of the executive budget.

INTRODUCTION

The international drive to “open” government reflects global demands for greater civic participation and for more transparent, responsive, accountable, and effective government. Harnessing the capabilities of new information technologies, open government initiatives seek to bring the processes of democratic government more prominently within public awareness. One effort spearheaded by the U.S. Department of State based on the Obama Administration’s Open...
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Government Directive is the Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiative, which seeks to use new technology, among other resources, to create more transparent, participative, and accountable relationships between citizens and organizations at the federal/national level globally. Within the OGP, the level of fiscal transparency is regarded as one of the significant indicators of the extent of a government’s commitment toward opening its internal decision making processes to the public. Democratic advocates and civil society organizations have turned to fiscal transparency as a key feature of good governance, and budgets are the most important fiscal tool. Budgets are considered “the single most important policy document of governments, where policy objectives are reconciled and implemented in concrete terms” (OECD, 2002).

The importance of promoting budget transparency is recognized by civil society organizations and governments around the world. For instance, as recently as November, 2011, over one hundred civil society organizations representing 56 countries joined together in support of the Dar es Salaam Declaration of Budget Transparency, Accountability, and Participation (First Global Assembly for Budget Transparency, Accountability and Participation, 2012, http://www.makebudgetspublic.org). This statement argues that, since public budgets are founded on citizens’ contributions and public assets, participation in decisions related to the formulation and adoption of public budgets is a “fundamental right and responsibility of all citizens.” The Declaration proclaimed that “[p]ublic budgets must be transparent, meaning that all information related to the way in which public money is raised, allocated, spent and accounted should be made available to the general public in an accessible, timely and comprehensible way” (First Global Assembly for Budget Transparency, 2012). In her recent address to the annual meeting of the OGP in Brazil, Hillary Rodham Clinton noted the high level of commitment worldwide toward increasing budget transparency, which is reflected in actions taken by countries such as Bulgaria, Croatia, and Tanzania to create a “citizens’ budget” that translates complicated terminology into plain and accessible language more easily consumed by the general public (Clinton, 2012). Moldova’s recent OGP commitment indicates their strong commitment toward ensuring budget transparency by opening, releasing and regularly updating all public government data related to revenue, expenditure, budget execution and external assistance (OGP, n.d.).

Open budget advocates view budget transparency as key to numerous governmental objectives as it plays a significant role in service delivery, alleviation of poverty, realization of human rights, social justice, and environmental sustainability (First Global Assembly for Budget Transparency, 2012). Further, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) regards budget transparency as a tool to combat corruption and manipulation in developing countries (OECD, 2002). But despite the importance of budget transparency for the open government movement, the outcomes of the biennial open budget survey by the International Budget Partnership (IBP) point to the poor state of budget transparency around the world for the year 2008 and 2010 (De Renzio & Masud, 2011) in terms of lack of public access.

The Internet’s ability to make vast quantities of information accessible to users and enable two-way interaction has fueled the optimism of international democracy advocates both inside and outside government. This has included social science scholars (Harrison & Falvey, 2001) as well as public administrators, who have understood the potential to increase transparency within public sector organizations, as well as the possibility that citizen’s expectations for such transparency might increase over time (Bellamy & Taylor, 1994; McIvor, McHugh, & Cadden, 2002). However, faith in this somewhat simple technological determinism is not warranted; just because such technological capabilities exist does not necessarily mean they will be used. Despite the expectation that the Inter-