



SHORT SUBJECTS

OPEN GOVERNMENT SERIES

August 2012

S-12-003

Principles of Open Government: Transparency, Participation & Collaboration

Open Government is a global, broad-based movement to expand citizen access to the workings of government. While the term “Open Government” is of relatively recent vintage and is closely associated with information technology and “internet culture,” its principles have been a part of democratic values for centuries. This fact sheet provides information about three core principles of Open Government: Transparency, Participation, and Collaboration.

TRANSPARENCY: CIVIC ACCESS

Transparency is the principle that government processes and actions should be visible to citizens. This means government making available more official information, making the available information more useful, and making that information easy to access. Key goals include: (1) free access to the text of laws, codes, and regulations; (2) publishing budgets and bills throughout their stages of development; and (3) providing access to administrative data necessary to monitor policy outcomes.

The principle of transparency can be seen in Freedom of Information (FOI) laws. In California, the Public Records Act captures the spirit of transparency by specifying that the public has the right to inspect records. However, access may be impeded by duplication charges, understaffing, and decreased State funding. Open Government proponents advocate a more proactive approach to transparency: publish high-value documents electronically, err on the side of openness, and release information likely to be requested under FOI rules before receiving such requests.

PARTICIPATION: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The principle of participation holds that citizens’ right of access extends beyond receiving information to include providing input and feedback. Open Government advocates emphasize that governments should actively solicit the public’s input. Soliciting

civic views and opinions taps the public’s reservoir of knowledge and expertise to better inform decision makers and to improve policy outcomes. Cultivating participation includes: (1) providing multiple, clear points of contact for public comments on policy issues; (2) use of “crowd-sourcing” technology for solutions to policy problems; and (3) changing internal management and administration to integrate public input in the decision-making process.

**New digital venues allow
for participation by citizens
who would otherwise be
unable to attend.**

Participation as a democratic value can be seen in California’s Bagley-Keene Open Meeting Act (Bagley-Keene). Under Bagley-Keene, California agencies, boards, and commissions must make meetings open to the public with due notice. Similarly, the Brown Act mandates open access rules for local public bodies. Today’s information technology also expands participation to include virtual public representation via interactive broadcasts and Internet websites. New digital venues allow for participation by citizens who would otherwise be unable to attend.

COLLABORATION: CIVIC INVOLVEMENT

Collaboration is the principle that citizens can and should take an active role in government processes. It moves beyond including and incorporating citizens’ input to emphasize citizens’ formal roles in government proceedings and policy implementation. Collaboration includes: (1) partnering with grassroots organizations and the public to craft and implement policy; (2) providing financial and administrative support to citizen-run community service efforts; and (3) encouraging new such efforts.

For example, Los Angeles Neighborhood Councils are made up of local community members and business owners who directly collaborate with local government officials to improve their communities. Council members meet directly with the mayor and work with local police. They are directly responsible for the success of city projects "... from community health clinics in Pico Union, to a greening strategy for Downtown, to addressing traffic and transportation issues in West LA."¹

Table 1: California's Corruption Risk Report Card

	California	Florida	New Jersey	New York	Median Score	Best Score
Public Access to Information	D-	D+	B-	D+	D-	B+
Executive Accountability	B	C-	B+	D	C-	B+
Legislative Accountability	C	C-	C+	D+	D+	B
Judicial Accountability	C-	D-	C+	D	D+	B
Budget Processes	C-	C-	B	F	C	A+
Civil Service Management	C+	D-	B+	D-	D	B+
Procurement	B+	B-	A-	D	B-	A-
Lobbying Disclosure	A-	D	B+	B-	C-	A
Pension Fund Management	C	D	A	F	D	A
Ethics Enforcement Agencies	B	F	A-	F	D	A-
Insurance Commissions	B-	D+	B+	D-	D+	A-
Redistricting*	A+	A+	A-	F	C-	A+

* California received the best score for Redistricting.

Source: Center for Public Integrity, www.stateintegrity.org.

NO SILVER BULLET

There are risks to consider as government organizations move forward with increasing openness. Transparency can come into conflict with rights to privacy and the need to protect confidential information. Issues of national security, law enforcement necessity, and governmental privilege have also been cited as limits to openness. Adopting the principles of participation and collaboration isn't a perfect inoculation against corruption—citizen boards can still become dominated by small interested groups who pass regulations in their own favor and at the expense of the public. Such problems emphasize that Open Government is not a silver bullet, but must be instituted with checks and balances in mind.

Proponents argue that Open Government principles support democratic values and lead to better policy, improved outcomes, and increased efficiency. In many areas, California is a leader in open-government-related practices. In the Center for Public Integrity's Corruption Risk Report Card, California generally gets high marks, leading the way with its transparency in redistricting, open disclosure about lobbyist contributions and activities (see Table 1). Still, the report card shows room for improvement, and, as California moves forward with Open Government initiatives, possible priorities include increasing public access to information, better judicial accountability, and making budget processes more transparent.

ENDNOTES

1. Empower LA: Department of Neighborhood Empowerment. "About Neighborhood Councils." <http://done.lacity.org/dnn/Default.aspx?tabid=75>

ADDITIONAL READING

- Hear Us Now? A California Survey of Digital Technology's Role in Civic Engagement and Local Government.* New America Foundation. 2011.
- Hudson, David L., Jr. *Open Government: An American Tradition Faces National Security, Privacy, and Other Challenges (Point/Counterpoint).* Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea Point, 2005.
- Lathrop, Daniel and Laurel Ruma. *Open Government: Collaboration, Transparency, and Participation in Practice.* Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2010.
- Noveck, Beth Simone, *Wiki Government: How Technology can Make Government Better, Democracy Stronger, and Citizens More Powerful.* Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2009.
- White House Open Government Directive* (December 8, 2009), http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/memoranda_2010/m10-06.pdf.

The California Research Bureau is a division within the California State Library, providing in-depth research and nonpartisan public policy analysis to members of the State Legislature and the Governor. Online at www.library.ca.gov/crb.

Patrick Rogers and Tonya D. Lindsey, Ph.D., authors of this Short Subject, can be reached at progers@library.ca.gov & tlindsey@library.ca.gov.