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“What’s in a name? A comparison of ‘open government’ definitions across seven Open Government Partnership members”

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Abstract

No longer restricted to access to information laws and accountability measures, “open government” is now associated with a broad range of goals and functions, including public participation, open data, the improvement of public services and government efficiency. The 59 country strong Open Government Partnership (OGP) suggests that consensus on the value of open government is emerging amongst public officials. Similarly, academics have shown a renewed interest in open government as they discuss, debate and critique the meaning and role of open government reforms today. Yet, despite the diverse aims and tools characterizing contemporary open government, public officials and academics typically approach the subject as a cohesive unit of analysis, making sweeping—and generally non-empirical—claims about its implications, without accounting for the homegrown flavours that may characterize open government in practice. Simply put, the practice and study of contemporary open government suffers a lack of definitional clarity: what exactly is open government today, and how does it vary across governments? In response to these questions, this paper analyses the content of open government policy documents in seven OGP member states (Azerbaijan, Brazil, Canada, Netherlands, Kenya, United Kingdom, and the United States), providing the first systematic, empirically-grounded multi-country comparison of contemporary open government. The paper suggests where the term departs from and retains its original meaning, and how its definition varies across different governments.

Keywords: open government, Open Government Partnership, freedom of information, open data, transparency, accountability, citizen participation

Introduction

The term open government has a long history. It can be traced to debates in the 1950s regarding the introduction of freedom of information legislation (Parks 1957). Some of the ideas underpinning different understandings of open government have a longer tradition. In the digital age, the term ‘open government’ has been revived and become widely used since President Obama first took office in 2008 and issued the Open Government Directive (Whitehouse). However, a survey

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of existing literature and use of the term suggests that the term has expanded beyond its traditional bounds, and is not always employed with the same meaning. There is a lack of definitional clarity.

This article seeks to address the issue of clarity. It is driven by two inter-related questions. First, do contemporary definitions of open government depart from traditional definitions of the term? Second, do current definitions of open government vary across jurisdictions? By answering the first question, the paper responds to work which suggests that contemporary open government is fundamentally different from its 1950s conception. The response to the second question will provide more nuance to our understanding of open government, a term which was once a relatively defined, straightforward term, but now appears to have become much less contained.

To be clear, this article does not purport to assess the value or effectiveness of current open government initiatives. This is a useful and necessary exercise for future research that will benefit from the greater conceptual clarity offered here. We can start to grasp the benefits of having a more clear definition of this term if we consider the utility of language.

Wilson (1986) notes “language serves a social purpose” (p. 104). He returns to Locke to remind us that words are used to “stand for the reality of things” (Locke 1690). It is a way for thoughts and ideas to be organized and communicated, ideally with similar meaning. Words are a way of relaying ideas. It requires, as this articles endeavors, effort, discussion and analysis to ensure that words evoke similar understanding of ideas among different people. A common understanding is important as “language is maybe the main tool for collaborative remembering, thinking, problem solving and acting” (Chang-Wells & Wells 1997, p. 149). Thinking about language and meaning in this way, we can identify three main rationales for definitional clarity in use of the term open government.

First, clarity helps provide a better understanding of government action and promises made in the name of open government. Many governments internationally have promised open government reform. A more coherent understanding of the term itself will help citizens, media and other governments to better grasp what is being promised in practice. For example, if open government no longer refers to freedom of information as much as it does collaboration with citizens or third parties, or reducing cost of services, then we should not assume that governments promising open government reform are committed to changing freedom of information regimes.

Second, discrepancies in the use of the term should prompt us to consider attempts to internationalize discourse and standards in the area of open government. Here, we can think of the international multilateral Open Government Partnership (OGP) which has a membership of 59 countries and states that it represents a “global

commitment to open government.” The definitional clarity advocated here would allow for a more solid answer to the question of what form of open government?

Third, those studying open government need to be aware of the evolution and different meanings of the term. Indeed, it is difficult to theorize, evaluate or to offer policy prescriptions across cases if we are not aware of the different ways that the term is currently being used.

In the search for a better, more nuanced understanding of open government, and in addressing the two research questions outlined above, this paper proceeds as follows. It begins with an overview of the literature and history of open government, touching on the different ways the term has been employed. This provides a foundation for understanding what open government means and how these contemporary approaches may depart from traditional understandings of the term. Next, the paper reports on and discusses the findings of content analysis of the open government action plans of seven OGP member states: Azerbaijan, Brazil, Canada, Netherlands, Kenya, the United Kingdom, and the United States¹. The data provides insight into the links between traditional understandings of open government, and those emerging in the digital age. The data also reveals how definitions of open government vary (or remain consistent) across OGP members. Finally, the paper concludes with a return to the original research questions outlined above and suggests questions for future study.

The Evolution and Uses of the Term Open Government

While many of the ideas behind the various understandings of open government predate the term—access to information and interaction between government and its citizens, for example—this article starts with the first known use of the term itself. This can be traced to the 1950s in the United States leading to eventual passing of Freedom of Information legislation in 1966. Yu and Robinson (2012) discuss the pressure put on government by the American Society of Newspaper Editors for greater openness following the restrictive regime of the Second World War, when withholding and censoring information was commonplace. Eventually this led Congress to establish what became known as the Moss Committee, a Subcommittee on Government Information (Yu & Robinson 2012). One member of the committee, Wallace Parks, is widely credited for coining the term open government.

Parks (1957) authored an article titled *The Open Government Principle: Applying the Right To Know Under the Constitution*. In this first incarnation open government was solely about freedom of information. Parks believed that making government information available to the public should be a norm and that information should only be withheld in limited circumstances “where there are substantial rights, interests, and considerations requiring secrecy or confidentiality and these are held

¹ All action plans can be accessed on the OGP website

by competent authority to overbalance the general public interest in openness and availability” (Parks 1957). In this historical context, the debate about open government and the need for government to make the provision of information its default position, related specifically to the idea of accountability.

In the decades to follow Park’s essay and the passing of the Freedom of Information Act in the United States, the term open government was heard less frequently. It appeared periodically, particularly in legislative debates aimed at amending the Freedom of Information Act. There was continuity in use during this time. As Yu and Robinson (2012) note, the term was always used “as a synonym for public access to previously undisclosed government information” (p.186). It was not until Barack Obama’s first campaign for the presidency that the term was given new life and became widely used. Obama and his campaign team drew on the idea inherent in the open source movement, that technology is a valuable means for collaborating, mobilizing and engaging citizens for a range of purposes.

Since Obama’s revival of the term open government, its context and use has evolved. As Yu and Robinson (2012) state, Obama and his campaign team started to use the term in a much more “ambitious way” than Parks (p.193). While traditional notions of transparency were still an underlying theme, the team married it with digital technology, drawing on language and foundations of the open source and open data movements along with the idea that “Internet technologies could open doors for innovation, efficiency, and flexibility in government” (Yu & Robinson 2012, p.194). Since this time, digital media has been inherently linked to contemporary understandings of open government and the term has been afforded increased attention and importance worldwide.

The last six years has seen a political push to explore the ways that government can embrace digital media for a variety of purposes. In the United Kingdom this came in the form of a Taskforce on the Power of Information. In Australia a study culminated in the publication of a report on ‘Government 2.0’. In Canada, parliamentarians studied the issue at length and lamented Canada’s lack of progress only to find out, after months of study, that an open government initiative was launched seemingly without input or consultation (Francoli 2011; Parliament 2011). These studies preceded the establishment of an American led multi-lateral initiative called the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in September 2011.

The goal of the OGP is “to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance” (OGP, About). To participate in the partnership countries must demonstrate that they have met minimum standards in four areas: fiscal transparency, access to information, disclosure related to elected or senior public officials, and citizen engagement (OGP, Eligibility). They also have to sign onto an open government declaration, develop an action plan for moving forward based on citizen consultation, and commit to independent reporting. As of

time of writing there were 85 eligible countries, 59 of which have sought membership.

In light of this renewed emphasis on open government by countries around the world, a number of researchers have revisited the concept, attempting to clarify its meaning. A survey of the literature uncovers a range of themes and understandings centred on the theme of transparency. Here there is overlap with the access to information literature from the 1950s which included discussions of accountability. Writing since Parks (1957), however, tends to contextualize discussions about access to information and accountability as part of governments' transparency goals. Dawes and Helbig (2010), for example, outline two transparency-related goals. The first is providing information to citizens so they are able to assess the work of government and hold it to account. The second goal is to release government data so that this data may then generate additional value (p. 50).

Given this, we can say that related to, or included in, the theme of transparency is the idea of utility. Here, we see the ideas of open data emphasized. The underlying idea is that by releasing data, government enables citizens to re-use it in ways that improve services and policy development, and stimulates the economy through innovative applications of the data (Dawes 2010; Lathrop & Ruma 2010). Such work classifies government held information and data as public assets and sees value in its widespread publication with a corresponding license for reuse and manipulation.

Inherent in the idea of open data is the theme of citizen participation, a theme which manifests in the literature on contemporary open government in two ways. In the context of the literature looking at open data and utility outlined above, participation means the ability for citizens to collaborate and interact with government by taking data that has been released and manipulating it for any number of purposes. In addition, certain authors discuss open government as an extension of an older body of literature related to e-democracy, where digital technology is used to facilitate dialogue between government and citizens, allowing the public more of a voice in policymaking (Hague, B & Loader, B 1999; Chadwick 2003; Lathrop & Ruma 2010). Here, governance itself becomes much more of a collaborative exercise.

There is a smaller body of literature that departs slightly and focuses on the idea of corruption prevention in government in a much more direct way than the work looking at accountability or transparency. Rose-Ackerman (2008), for example, does not specifically refer to the current open government debates, but does relate the sharing of information to strategies necessary to rebuild post-conflict states. She suggests that freedom of information, along with independent oversight agencies are among some of the mechanisms that might be used in peace building strategies where avoiding government corruption is a foundational goal.

Reflecting on the literature discussing contemporary open government, it is evident that the term has become associated with a much broader range of ideas than its

originally strict focus on access to information and accountability. Moreover, many of today's definitions see a vital role for digital technology in the fulfillment of open government. Some authors have criticized the expansive bounds of the term today, arguing that the focus on technology and open data belies an emphasis on the more noble aims of ensuring an accountable public sector (Morozov 2013).

Whether defining or critiquing open government, academics thus far have tended to assume a homogenous, globally consistent definition of open government and it is commonly used interchangeably with other terms such as transparency. A quick survey of public statements and policy documents describing open government suggests that the phenomenon may not be defined the same ways by different governments. There is reason to question whether the term retains a coherent meaning at a time when so many meanings have been attached to it. Open government appears to be a shape shifter, associated with transparency, accountability, public engagement, collaboration, better governance, and economic growth, depending on the government invoking the term. If this variation does indeed exist, then academics studying open government should account for the homegrown flavours that characterize open government policies in practice; generalizations may no longer be appropriate if the policy does not have a common meaning amongst governments implementing it. Unfortunately, authors commenting on open government thus far have not systematically and empirically evaluated how open government is being defined today, leaving us without the data required to identify and assess variations in use of the term. This study seeks to fill this gap in empirical data, contributing another layer of knowledge and richness to the growing literature on open government.

Research Design

As the paper aims to bring more empirical evidence to bear on debates surrounding contemporary definitions of open government, the analysis focuses on the language used to describe the concept of open government by policy makers and officials across various jurisdictions. This follows in the tradition of policy analyses that focus on policy paradigms (Hall 1993; Geddes 2004), and policy framing (Daviter 2007; Dudley 1999; Schön & Rein 1994). Such approaches assert that in order to understand policies we should consider how they are communicated, since the language used to describe policy both reflects and informs 'real world' design, implementation and evaluation of policy programs. These perspectives support the ideas espoused by those such as Locke outlined above, suggesting that when studying policy, words matter. Accordingly, this paper looks to policy documents describing contemporary open government policies and programs to identify how the concept is defined and communicated across various jurisdictions. Again, it should be noted that the paper does not assess the practice or success of open government in each of these jurisdictions. This choice is deliberate: the paper is not addressing the *outcomes* of open government, but is instead focused on the definitional *inputs* that reflect and shape approaches to open government in various jurisdictions. Guided by the larger definitional question "what's in a name?", the

paper is interested in the conceptualization of open government, as captured in the language used to describe the term, not the operationalization of open government, as captured in the practice of each policy's dictates.

Choice of the policy documents

In any given country there exists a range of policy documents describing open government policies and programs, including, for example, press releases, memoranda, speeches, and guidelines. These documents vary widely by format, length, audience, and date of creation. This variation complicates efforts to compare content of these documents systematically across various jurisdictions. Similarly, researchers interested in comparing the content of policy texts across countries with different official languages face the practical challenge of language barriers. In light of these challenges, the OGP's 'Country Action Plans' provide a unique opportunity to conduct the comparative research proposed here.

Each OGP member state must develop an action plan. The document must follow fairly rigid guidelines. It must be approximately eight pages, be written in English, and follow a standard format, beginning first with existing open government measures in place in the country, followed by commitments to be achieved as a member of the OGP (OGP Action Plan). All of the action plans were written in the past two years, coinciding with the founding of the OGP in 2011. Given the common language, format, and date of creation, the action plans provide an ideal opportunity to examine how different jurisdictions frame and define a public management concept—open government—at a particular moment in time, in a systematic and controlled way.

Country choice

While future studies would benefit from a comparative exploration of all 59 countries that have signed on to the OGP, this study begins with a focus on seven countries. The countries were chosen to reflect a variety of geographic regions, government types, levels of socio-economic development, country size, and tradition of democratic governance. The seven countries included in the study are: Azerbaijan, Brazil, Canada, Kenya, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These case studies provide evidence of existing similarities, differences and approaches to open government that could be built upon in the future.

Method of analysis

Due to the common use of document analysis as a methodological technique in policy studies, most comparative policy analyses rely, to some extent, on the comparison of policy texts. That said, the ways in which these documents are analyzed and compared varies significantly. One way to organize these analytical techniques is on a continuum from holistic interpretive approaches toward syntactic

analyses and purely lexical approaches (Lowe et al. 2011). This continuum follows a line from most qualitative and subjective toward most quantitative and objective, and from most manual to most automated. On the left of this continuum—holistic interpretive approaches—we place qualitative, manual policy analyses, in which researchers read a text and draw conclusions about its relevance to a larger argument based on themes and pieces of information they draw from the text. At the far right of this continuum we can locate automated, computer-based approaches that treat individual words or collections of words in a text as pieces of data to be quantified and analyzed. Somewhere in between these two extremes are studies like the one presented here, which rely on manual human coding to identify relevant pieces of information in a policy text. This information is then systematically recorded as counts and used as the basis for quantitative analysis of the text in question. This paper adopts this intermediary position in order that the strengths of the two extremes can be combined. Manual human coding produced through a close reading of the text can produce more thoughtful, contextualized analysis, while the use of a quantifiable coding scheme allows for a more systematic comparison across and within the texts in question.

This intermediary position has proven popular amongst researchers comparing policy approaches across jurisdictions (Daugbjerg et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2008; Kaptein 2004). In these cases, researchers create a checklist of policy responses to policy issues, and award a document a check for a particular policy response if it is referenced in the text. This manual coding process is then used to inform conclusions such as ‘x% of the jurisdictions surveyed rely on ‘policy response A’ to address the policy issue.’

However, this paper seeks to systematically catalogue how a range of jurisdictions define a policy—open government—as opposed to cataloguing the specific measures used to implement that policy in practice. Accordingly, the checklist approach common in public administration studies falls short of the aims of this paper, as it does not capture the more nuanced question of the *salience* of a particular theme or idea in a policy text. That is, the checklist approach only identifies the *presence* of a concept in a policy text, but not the relative *emphasis* placed on the concept—its salience. When comparing the definition of a policy—in this case, open government—the relative emphasis of particular ideas and concepts over others is a paramount consideration. For example, it is likely that almost all country action plans will reference the concept of accountability. The checklist approach would lead us to conclude that 100% (or very near) of the jurisdictions surveyed include accountability in their definition of open government. This is hardly an insightful or helpful conclusion. On the other hand, by considering the salience of the concept of accountability across jurisdictions—as measured by the relative emphasis placed on the concept in the text—the comparative analysis provides a more telling picture of each country’s unique approach to open government (ex. ‘Discussion of accountability accounts for 50% of Country A’s Action Plan, while accountability only accounts for 10% of the content in Country B’s Action Plan’).

The best precedent for the approach described above is not found in previous studies of government policy documents, but rather in the well-established comparative analyses of political party manifestos, as conducted by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP). Since 1945, the CMP (formerly the Manifesto Research Group) has conducted content analyses of party platforms in all democratic elections from over 50 countries. The well-cited² and award winning dataset³ provides a reputable methodological forbearer for the study proposed here. The CMP methodology emphasizes not simply the presence of particular themes or ideas in a policy text, but also the salience of particular themes and ideas in these texts, as measured by the percentage of the text allocated to those themes and ideas relative to others in the text.

The CMP's coding process begins with a human coder dividing up a political party manifesto into discrete, non-overlapping text units, which are termed 'quasi-sentences.' Each quasi-sentence expresses a single idea. It may be one complete natural sentence, or the quasi-sentence may be part of a natural sentence, where the sentence in question relays multiple discrete ideas. Once the quasi-sentences have been identified, the coder assigns each unit to one of the 56 mutually exclusive codes included in the CMP codebook. After all quasi-sentences have been assigned a code, the codes are counted and converted into percentage values (i.e. divided by the total number of codes—equal to the number of quasi-sentences, since each quasi-sentence receives one code). With this data, researchers can discuss the extent to which certain ideas are conveyed relative to others within and across different party manifestos.

To be sure, the CMP approach is not without its critics. However, these critics generally take issue with the scaling indices that have been developed using the CMP data and the underlying codebook applied in the analysis—for example, indices which suggest that a manifesto is more left wing or right wing based on the presence of certain policy preferences over others (Lowe et al. 2011). Other critiques question the extent to which the methodology supports conclusions about the positive or negative treatment of a policy position in a manifesto (Laver & Garry 2000). As this study does not make use of such indices or attempt to determine directional (positive or negative) policy stances from the text, these critiques are not relevant here.

A more relevant criticism of the CMP approach for the purposes of this study is that which challenges the use of the quasi-sentence as the unit of code. Here, authors argue that the concept of quasi-sentences is too vague and uncertain, giving coders far too much personal discretion in the coding of the document (Laver & Garry

² According to the CMP: “the project currently facilitates about 2,500 users from more than 750 academic institutions around the globe. Its data is cited in more than 1,750 papers according to Google Scholar.” (Manifesto Project Database)

³ The American Political Science Association awarded the CMP the prize for the best dataset in comparative politics in 2003.

2000). Where one researcher may identify 50 quasi-sentences in a document, another may perceive more nuanced distinctions between strings of text, and identify 100 quasi-sentences. As this count is the denominator in percentage calculations of code occurrences, the subjective determination of quasi-sentences may call into question the reliability of results. Laver and Garry (2000) apply the CMP methodology using strings of ten words as the coding unit as opposed to the more subjectively defined quasi-sentence. Taking this one step further, this study accounts for the number of individual words assigned to particular codes within the document, and uses this number, divided by the total number of coded words in the document, in its analysis. In doing so, the method remains true to the spirit of the CMP approach—the idea that the *proportional frequency* with which an idea is referenced in a text is a meaningful indicator of the salience of the idea in the text of which it is a part. However, by measuring salience using the proportional number of words assigned to certain ideas, as opposed to the proportional number of quasi-sentences assigned to certain ideas, the ambiguity of defining the unit to be coded is removed (since words are objectively-defined units, while quasi-sentences are subjectively-defined).

To measure salience, the researchers used QDA Miner, a commercial qualitative text analysis software. Each of the seven country's OGP action plan was uploaded to QDA Miner. A pilot codebook was developed inductively through an initial reading of three action plans (Kenya, the Netherlands and the United States). Whenever the text discussed a theme or idea that reflected the definition of open government in the country in question, a code was created to represent that theme or idea. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss 1967) codes were deleted, combined, refined, and added during the pilot stage, leading to a final codebook with 14 codes (see Table 1 below). The codebook was then applied manually by a human coder to each of the seven action plans, with codes tagged to any piece of text in the action plan that spoke to ways in which open government was defined by the government in question. For example, text which discussed “accountability” would be highlighted and tagged under that category. As in the CMP codebook, the codes were mutually exclusive, meaning that each piece of text could only receive one code.

Once each action plan had been coded, analysis functions in QDA Miner were used to determine (1) the number of words in each action plan assigned to each of the codes, and (2) the proportion of words assigned to the 14 codes in each of the action plans (determined by dividing the total number of words assigned to a code by the total number of coded words, and generating percentage values). As an example, if a text had 100 coded words (i.e. 100 words that reveal how the country defines open government, since only such text was coded) and 15 words in that coded text were coded as accountability, the researchers would then conclude that accountability accounted for 15% of the action plan's text. As discussed above, this percentage value was then used as a proxy for the salience of the theme—in this case, accountability—in the country's approach to open government.

It is important to note that the OGP itself may have had an influence on each country’s approach to open government, as captured in their Action Plans. The OGP requires that countries address at least one of five “Grand Challenges” in their action plans (improving public services; increasing public integrity; effective management of public resources; creating safer communities; and increasing corporate accountability). In addition, the OGP suggests that specific commitments should reflect “four core open government principles” (transparency; citizen participation; accountability; technology and innovation). With these requirements in place, countries were, to a certain extent, already obliged to focus on particular themes when discussing their approach to open government in their Action Plans. That said, the “Grand Challenges” and “core open government principles” laid down by the OGP are far reaching, and still leave individual governments much latitude to ensure that their unique approach to the policy can be expressed in their action plans.

Findings and Discussion

The codebook and the corresponding results for each of the 14 codes explored can be seen in Table 1 below. Together this allows us to better see what aspects of open government are being emphasized by the different countries surveyed.

Code	Canada	Azerbaijan	Brazil	Kenya	Netherlands	UK	US
Access to information	33.4%	16.4%	14.1%	16.3%	10.8%	6.6%	23.1%
Accountability	23.9%	27.7%	25.0%	38.6%	14.9%	6.9%	32.0%
Public participation	11.6%	10.4%	21.2%	8.3%	3.9%	6.1%	17.7%
Open Data	9.0%	0.0%	14.0%	0.0%	10.9%	44.7%	4.4%
Reuse of government information and data	6.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	9.5%	9.9%	3.9%
Drive economic growth/promote innovation	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%	4.6%	2.3%
Improve Information Management	3.1%	8.1%	0.0%	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Improve public services	2.7%	15.4%	10.4%	20.5%	25.6%	16.4%	2.1%

Protect civil rights and privacy	2.0%	0.0%	0.3%	2.4%	0.0%	3.2%	0.0%
Transparency	1.9%	10.0%	2.5%	0.7%	0.4%	0.0%	4.2%
Alternative Service Delivery	1.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	16.2%	1.5%	3.7%
Make government more efficient	0.5%	7.9%	4.9%	1.4%	5.3%	0.1%	4.0%
Preventing corruption	0.2%	4.0%	4.6%	6.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%
Promote corporate accountability	0.0%	0.0%	3.0%	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 1: Salience of codes by country action plans (measured as % of total coded words)

While many interesting observations can be made about variations in the understanding of open government presented across countries, there are four that are particularly relevant to the questions guiding this paper; namely, how does the definition of contemporary open government relate to traditional definitions of the term, and do understandings of open government vary across jurisdiction? Considering the results in light of these questions it can be seen that (1) traditional understanding of open government are still dominant, but, (2) contemporary open government also includes a new focus on public participation and the improvement of public services. It can also be observed that (3) there is little variation in the definition of open government across jurisdictions, with a few notable exceptions that deserve mention. Finally, (4) there is early evidence of some geographic variations.

1. *Traditional understandings of open government remain dominant*

Open government as it was first used by Parks in the 1950s related solely to access to information and the related notion of accountability. As can be seen in Figure 1, these two elements remain vital and continue to be dominant in contemporary understandings of open government across all jurisdictions studied. In Canada, access to information policies and legislation occupy 33.4% of the total text making it the top ranked theme in the action plan. In Azerbaijan and the United States it was the second most common theme at 16.4% and 23.1% respectively. For Brazil and Kenya, access to information was the third most salient theme, representing 14.1% and 16.3% of the total coded text in their action plans respectively. The Netherlands and the United Kingdom are somewhat exceptional, here, with access to information ranking as the fifth most salient theme at 10.8% and 6.6%, respectively. Still, as fifth

most salient theme of a possible 14, access to information remains a relatively prominent component of their action plans.

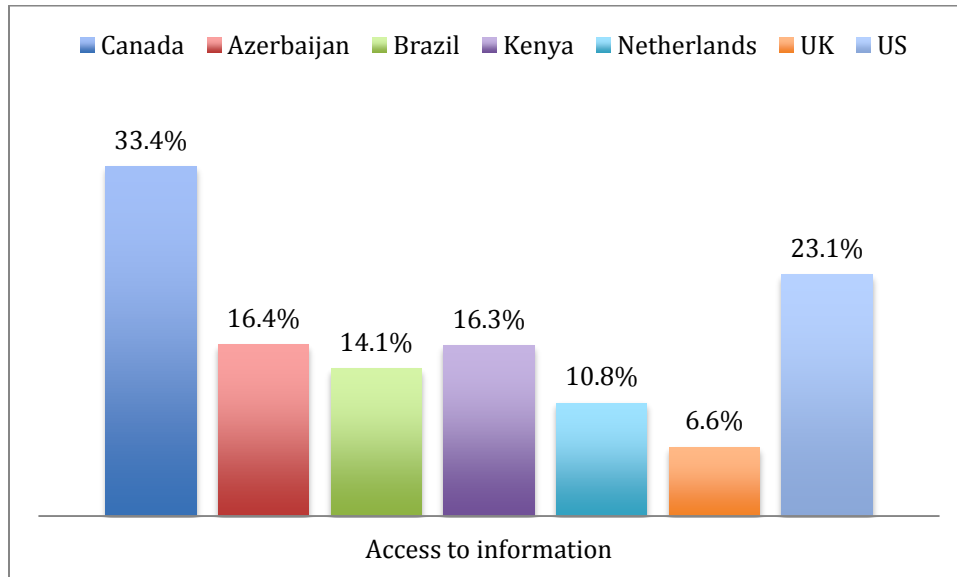


Figure 1: Salience of the code “Access to information” by country action plan

Similarly, aligning with traditional definitions of open government, accountability is the top most salient theme in four of the seven countries as can be seen in Figure 2. This represents 27.7% of the total coded text in the action plan of Azerbaijan, 25 % of coded text in Brazil’s action plan, 38.6% of Kenya’s action plan, and 32% of the United States’ action plan. Accountability is the second most salient theme in the Canadian action plan, at 23.9% of the coded text, and a close third in the Netherlands’ plan at 14.9% of the coded text. The only country where this theme was not a dominant theme was the United Kingdom where it only occupied 6.9% of the total text. However, even here, it is the fourth most identified theme.

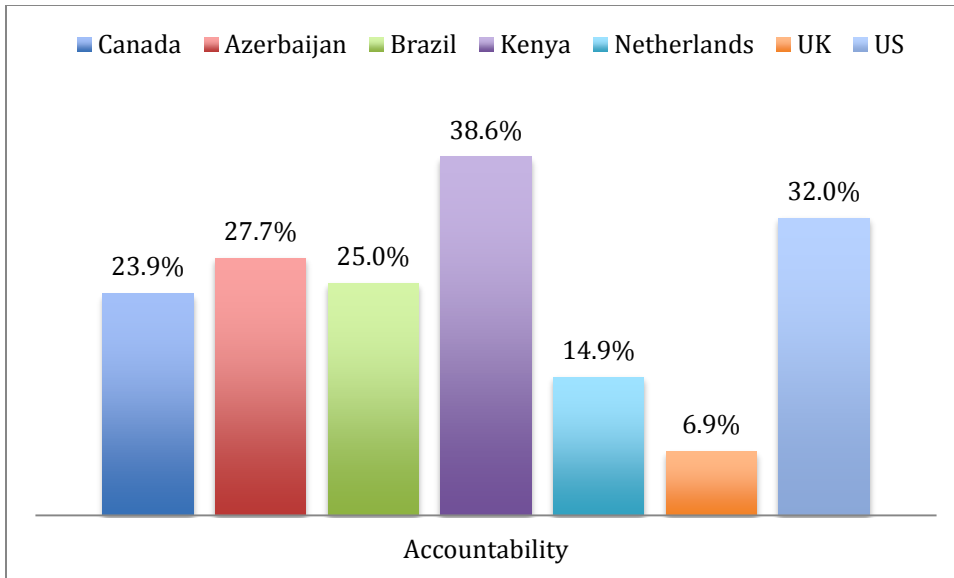


Figure 2: Salience of the code “Accountability” by country action plan

These results provide important insight to the first research question guiding this study—do contemporary definitions of open government depart from traditional definitions? We can conclude from the data that much of the original emphasis on access to information and accountability endures in contemporary approaches to open government.

2. The definition of open government has expanded to include public participation and improving public services

While access to information and accountability continue to dominate the framing of open government today, two new themes emerge as relatively prominent components of the action plans surveyed: public participation and improving public services.

As can be seen in Figure 3, public participation in Canada is the third most salient theme at 11.6%. It is second most salient theme in Brazil at 21.2%. In the United States, public participation is the third most salient theme at 17.7%. It is fourth most salient in Azerbaijan and Kenya at 10.4% and 8.3% respectively. Again, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands are outliers, as public participation is less significant in their action plans. It is the sixth most salient theme in the United Kingdom’s action plan, representing 6.1% of the coded text, and eighth most salient theme of the Netherlands’ action plan at only 3.9% of the coded text.

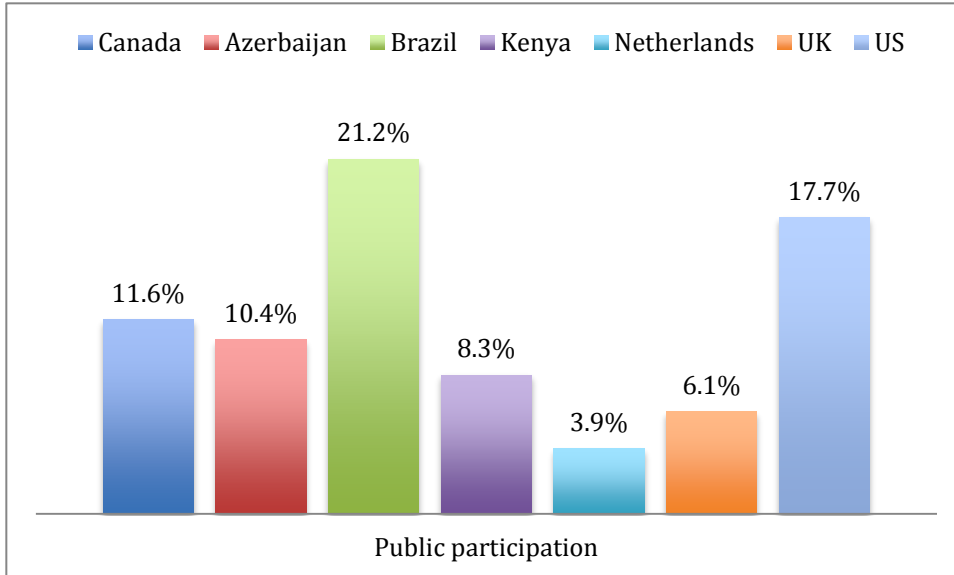


Figure 3: Salience of the code “Public participation” by country action plan

In addition to public participation, the relative prominence of the theme improving public services in the action plans deserves mention, as this also represents a new dimension of open government that has not traditionally been associated with the term. In the Netherlands it is the most salient theme, accounting for 25.6% of the total coded text. In Kenya and the United States, it is the second most salient theme, representing 20.5% and 16.4% of the coded text, respectively. In Azerbaijan it is the third most salient theme (15.4% of the total coded text). In Brazil, this theme ranks fifth relative to others, but still accounts for 10.8% of the coded text. Here, the two North American countries are outliers, with improving public services representing less than 3% of the total coded text in Canada and the United States’ action plans.

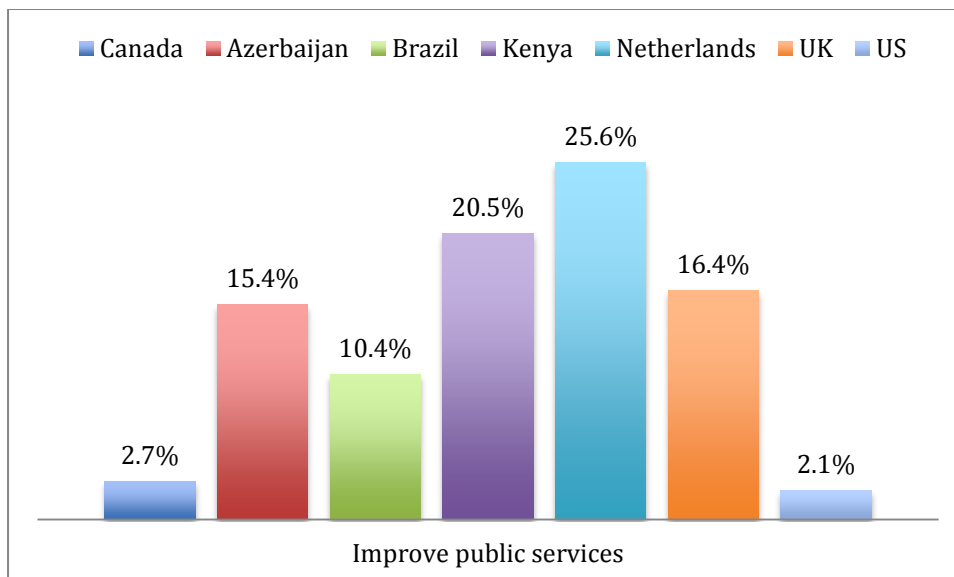


Figure 4: Salience of the code “Improve public services” by country action plan

The salience of public participation and improving public services across the cases surveyed suggests that while open government has not departed radically from its original meanings, it is becoming a more complex concept as new meanings are attached to it in the digital age. Importantly, though, these two new themes were still less salient than access to information and accountability, indicating that these original foci have not been overshadowed at this point.

3. Definitions of open government do not vary significantly across countries

As the analysis above suggests, definitions of open government were relatively consistent across the seven countries surveyed, with the themes of access to information, accountability, public participation and the improvement of public services tending to dominate the texts of the action plans.

The bubble chart shown as Figure 5 below illustrates this consistency. Here, the size of the circles represents the salience of codes in each action plan (i.e. the percentage of the coded text allocated to the code). The larger the circle, the higher the salience of the code. The four themes discussed thus far—access to information, accountability, public participation, and access to information—are the most consistently sized circles across the action plans (i.e. similarly salient), and are also amongst the largest circles overall.

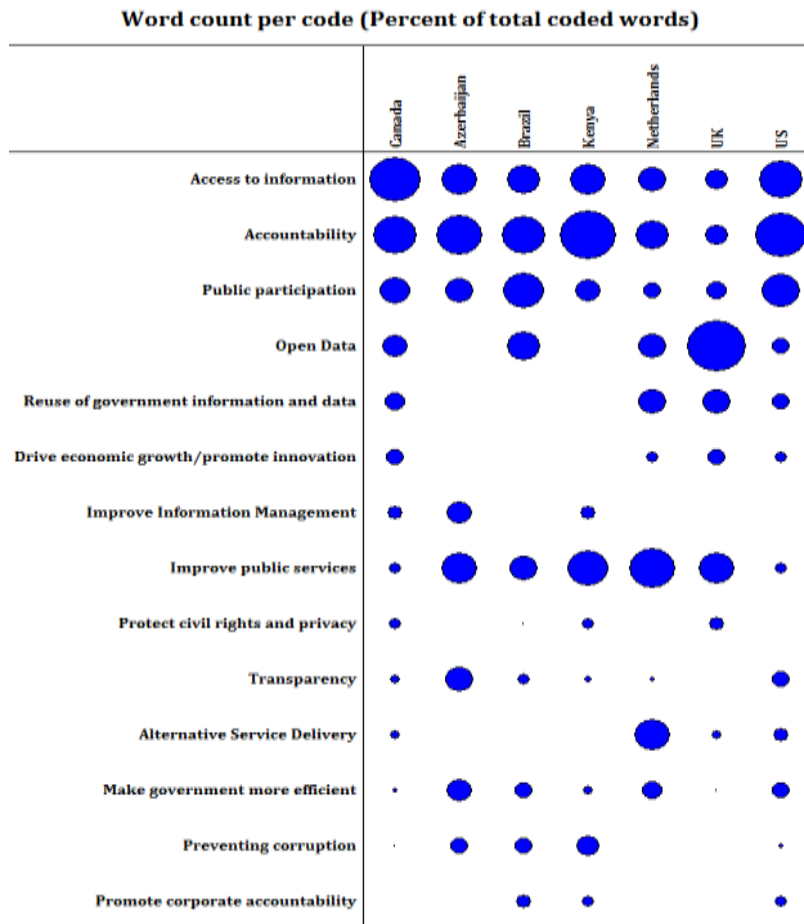


Figure 5: Salience of codes by country action plans (measured as % of total coded words).

There are, however, some variations that deserve attention. Perhaps most obviously, open data is not represented consistently across the cases surveyed as can be seen in Figure 6 below. It is a dominant theme in the United Kingdom's action plan, accounting for 44.7% of the total text, the top most salient theme in the text. In Canada, Brazil, the Netherlands and the United States, open data is featured, but it is much less salient than it is in the United Kingdom, representing 9%, 14%, 10.9%, and 4.4%, respectively. In Azerbaijan and Kenya, open data is not referenced.

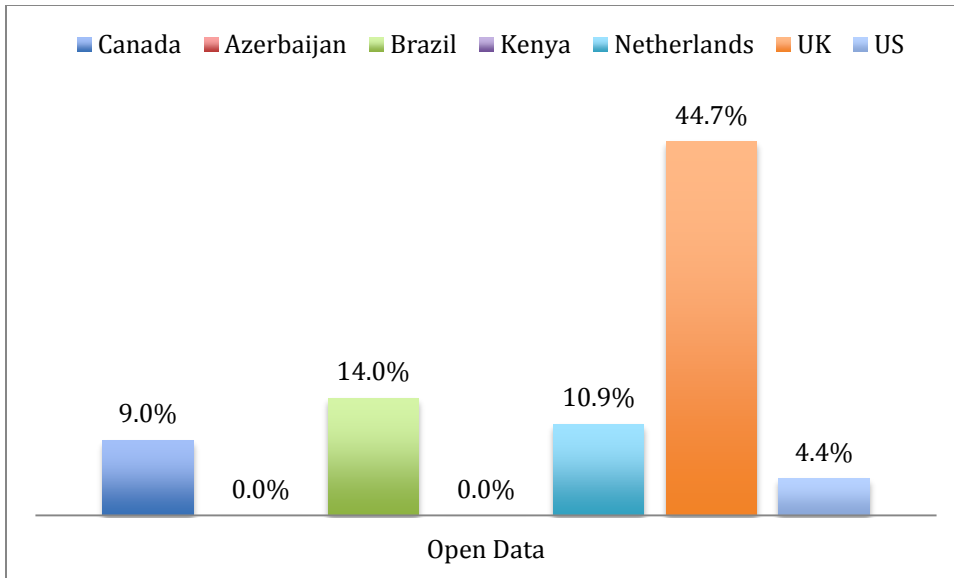


Figure 6: Salience of the code “Open Data” by country action plan

In addition to signifying variation amongst the action plans surveyed, the lack of emphasis on open data with the exception of the United Kingdom signifies a disruption between the academic literature on contemporary open government, which heavily emphasizes open data, and actual open government policies as communicated by governments themselves. Put simply, while open data may represent an exciting new area of study, the data presented here suggests that it should not be conflated with open government policies in general; the two concepts overlap, but are not synonymous.

Another notable inconsistency is the Netherlands’ focus on alternative service delivery. It is its second most salient code, representing 16% of the coded text. Yet, in Azerbaijan, Brazil and Kenya this code is not present at all. In the action plans of Canada and the United Kingdom alternative service delivery only represents 1.5%. In the United Kingdom’s action plan, the code is slightly more salient at 3.7% of the text, but this still represents a much more marginal component of the text than seen in the Netherlands. This emphasis on improving public services and alternative service delivery renders the Netherlands somewhat of an outlier. Together, these two aspects of service delivery dominate its action plan representing 41.6% of the total plan, yet these were much more marginal components of the other action plans studied.

4. There is early evidence of geographic variations

While these discrepancies were relatively minor, a number of differences were patterned along geographic lines, and deserve mention as they suggest avenues for future studies that seek to understand these potential patterns. For example, we can see that the reuse of government information and data, driving economic growth, and alternative service delivery were only referenced in North American and

European countries. These themes were not found in the action plans of Azerbaijan, Brazil or Kenya.

Prevention of corruption is another interesting example of these patterned geographic differences. This was not emphasized as a theme in any of the North American or European countries. It was, however, salient in Azerbaijan (4%), Brazil (4.6%), and Kenya (6.8%). This points to a potential trend by which countries with relatively less developed cultures of public sector accountability and stability in government are more likely to focus on corruption prevention. That said, the fact that corruption prevention is not an underlying theme of North American and European action plans is somewhat surprising given that many of the documents which preceded the adoption of open government programs, such as the United Kingdom's Power of Information report discussed above, were born, in part, from concerns related to government corruption and scandal.

Conclusions and avenues for future research

This paper began with a modest but important aim: to provide an empirically grounded analysis of contemporary definitions of open government. More specifically, the paper sought responses to two research questions. First, do contemporary definitions of open government depart from traditional understandings of the term? Second, is open government still a cohesive, tightly defined policy concept, or does its contemporary definition vary by government?

As explored in the literature review, authors have used the term open government in a number of different ways. These contributions are limited insofar as they do not tend to be grounded in systematically generated empirical data describing open government policies and programs as they are formulated by governments themselves. This paper sought to address this empirical gap by systematically analyzing the content of Open Government Partnership action plans. The data generated support an empirically-based assessment of contemporary open government, thus extending the literature on this topic from one of rhetoric to one born of 'real world' policy definitions.

The data revealed a number of interesting findings. First, despite what some have suggested in the literature, contemporary open government has not strayed significantly from its original focus on access to information and accountability. These themes were prominent across the case studies. That said, the analysis also revealed that public participation and the improvement of public services are rising as relatively prominent components of open government, suggesting that the term may be expanding while also sticking closely to traditional definitions. Interestingly, an area one might have expected to see well represented in the action plans—open data—was only a prominent theme in one case study. In recent literature on open government, open data features heavily, with some questioning whether or not it is a distraction from open government's original emphasis on public sector integrity. The analysis presented here suggests that such claims are not legitimated in

practice, and that open data should perhaps be treated distinctly from the broader topic of open government in academic studies. Open government does not always equal open data, and vice versa.

Second, while references to open government today span a broad range of themes, definitions of the term are relatively consistent across jurisdictions. That said, the paper also identified small, but intriguing differences across cases that were patterned along geographical lines, while also noting that the Netherlands and the United Kingdom were significant outliers on a few particular dimensions. So, while the data presented here suggests that researchers can still study open government as a relatively cohesive global phenomenon, care should be taken to avoid applying lessons or theories to all cases without discrimination.

These findings suggest scope for future studies which either (a) use a larger set of country action plans to test for other patterns across countries (ex. patterns by geography, socio-economic status, or government type), or (b) drill into the two outliers identified, questioning why open government is being defined so differently by these two governments. For studies using a larger set of case studies, researchers might consider applying automated classification techniques, for which the codebook developed here could serve as a training set. Studies focusing on interesting outlier cases might benefit from more qualitative approaches, perhaps combining interviews with local officials and civil servants, or historical analysis to better understand how national policy styles and governing cultures shape local open government definitions.

Whatever tactics taken, this paper argues that discussions of contemporary open government will suffer if they do not begin with a clear definition of the concept itself. Without this definitional clarity, we run the risk of open government becoming a shape shifting buzzword, invoked by governments and academics in varied and potentially misleading ways. Differently, when open government is clearly defined and understood, governments promising reforms in its name can be evaluated accordingly, and academics discussing the term can construct theories and evidence bases that speak meaningfully to each other. Simply put, those discussing open government need to ensure they are speaking the same language, so to say, when referencing this term. By providing an empirically informed analysis of open government definitions, this paper makes an important contribution to this much-needed common language.

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