

Magic Wand or Pandora's Box?

How transparency in decision making affects public perceptions of legitimacy

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- de Fine Licht, J. 2011. Do We Really Want to Know? The potentially negative effect of transparency in decision making on perceived legitimacy. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 34(3): 183-201.
- de Fine Licht, J. 2014. How increased transparency affects public trust in healthcare priority-setting: an experimental approach. Manuscript.
- de Fine Licht, J. 2014. Transparency actually: how transparency affects public perceptions of political decision making. *European Political Science Review*, 6(2): 309-330.
- de Fine Licht, J., Naurin, D., Esaiasson, P., and Gilljam, M. 2014. When does transparency generate legitimacy? experimenting on a context-bound relationship. *Governance*, 27: 111-134.
- de Fine Licht, J. 2014. Policy area as a potential moderator of transparency effects: an experiment. *Public Administration Review*, 74(3): 361-371.

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Abstract

According to conventional wisdom and political rhetoric, increased transparency in political decision making is a powerful tool to increase public acceptance of decisions and trust in decision makers. The question of *why* transparency would generate legitimacy in the eyes of the public remains, however, largely under-theorized, and the empirical evidence supporting the assumption remains scant.

Without questioning the normative claim of transparency as a fundamental democratic value, this dissertation sets out to explore the empirical relationship between transparency in decision making and perceived legitimacy. In the introduction chapter, it identifies four main mechanisms that might explain positive effects of transparency on public acceptance and trust: that transparency enhances policy decisions, which indirectly makes people more trusting; that transparency is generally perceived to be fairer than secrecy; that transparency increases public understanding of decisions and decision makers; and that transparency increases the public feelings of accountability. The subsequent empirical analyses build on five scenario-based experiments that are reported in five separate papers. Each study manipulates different degrees and versions of transparency for individual policy level decisions.

Taken together, the answer to the question posed in the dissertation's title: "Magic wand or Pandora's box?" seems to be somewhere in between. The results show that transparency might have the power to increase public perceptions of legitimacy, but also that the effect is more complex than often presumed. In some cases, most notably when decisions involve questions relating to life and death, transparency can even have a negative effect. In addition, results indicate that a quite limited kind of transparency where people are primarily provided with justifications for decisions can be as good or even better in shaping public legitimacy beliefs compared to more demanding kinds of transparency.

Key Words: Transparency, Legitimacy, Trust, Healthcare priority-setting.