

## **The History of Transparency**

Analyzing the Long-term Socio-Political Construction of Transparency in the Netherlands

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### **Abstract**

The paper presents a specific analysis of the history of transparency in the Netherlands over the past 250 years. While this analysis is to a certain extent idiosyncratic and specific to the Netherlands, the analysis will also identify more general patterns that are arguably relevant to the development of transparency in other European and Western countries. The analysis shows that the historical development of transparency is directed related to the development of the modern state towards a polity with formalized, more horizontal relations in the public sector. On the basis of the historical analysis, transparency is conceptualized as an institution with four historical layers: a formal broadly defined right of openness, a practice embedded in the polity as a representative system, a detailed legislative transparency framework and a practice embedded in direct relations between government and society. Insight in historical developments helps to understand this multi-layered nature of transparency.

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#### **1. Introduction**

Many analyses of transparency focus on new – and even future – developments. Information and communication technologies are seen as an important driver of transparency and it is often equaled to information on a government website. These analyses are helpful for understanding current issues but often fail to put these issues in (historical) perspective. This results in an overemphasis on the ‘newness’ of current developments and a failure to position these within long-term transitions in governance.

Hood (2006) and Roberts (2006) have indicated that transparency has a long history and describe how transparency has developed over time. They highlight that transparency can be qualified as a ‘modern’ idea that is connected to the Enlightenment. Hood stresses that the French Revolution has played an important role in the growing attention for transparency as a means to check the abuse of power.

The historical analyses of Hood (2006) and Roberts (2006) are important but they do not qualify as – neither were they meant to be – systematic analyses of the social, political and technological construction of transparency over time. Their analyses are meant to introduce and position the subject of transparency before moving on to current issues and they do not analyze the various interrelations systematically. This paper builds upon their historical analyses and takes these one step further by systematically analyzing the roles of societal trends (cultural, economic and infrastructural) and political developments (state reform, general legislation, party politics).

The first aim of this paper is to show how the historical development of transparency should be seen in relation to the development of the modern state. Transparency is not only an idea: it is a practice that has been constructed in societal and political interactions over the past centuries and present forms of transparency can only be full understood from that perspective. The second aim is to show that there is a certain direction in the construction of transparency. The analysis highlights that the construction of transparency can be understood as an aspect of the modernization of the state with formalized, more horizontal relations in

the public sector. The third aim is to identify recurring themes in debates about government transparency. The debate will identify trust, or sometimes national unity, as a key theme in debates about transparency throughout history.

The paper presents a specific analysis of the history of transparency in the Netherlands over the past 250 years. The paper will present an in-depth analysis of the construction of ideas, transparency laws and administrative practices. While this analysis is to a certain extent idiosyncratic and specific to the Netherlands, the analysis will also identify more general patterns that are arguably relevant to the development of transparency in other European and Western countries. In that sense, this historical analysis can be regarded as a case study that provides more general insights in the development of transparency. This paper will help transparency scholars to position current debates and developments in relation to long-term societal and political transformations.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. Historical Sociology**

The perspective of historical sociology is used to study and analyze the history of transparency. Historical sociology is a branch of sociology that analyzes societal changes over time by positioning them in historical trends and developments. Hall & Taylor (1996) highlight that historical institutionalism puts an emphasis on the creation of sets of rules in a certain moment of times based on the ideas and preferences of that situation. The premise of this approach is that current situations can only be understood if we know how they have developed over time. The idea of path dependency is at the heart of this approach. Pierson (2000: 251) stresses that this focuses our attention on the idea that we should not only question what happens but also when it happens to understand the ‘process of increasing returns’ as Levi (1997: 28) put it: ‘Path dependency has to mean, if it is to mean anything, that once a country or region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. There will be other choice points, but the entrenchments of certain institutional arrangements obstruct an easy reversal of the initial choice.’ The sequence of events matters for the outcome.

The studies in this tradition focus on enhancing our understanding of the origins of current institutions. The studies describe and analyze the origins of institutions within the context of the power relations, value patterns and cognitions of the time of origin to understand the current make-up (Zwaan, 2001). Transparency can be seen as an institution in the sense that it contains a set of (formal and informal) rules that regulate social behavior around access to information (cf. Hall & Taylor, 1996). A historical analysis will help to understand why we have these rules in the existing form in the current situation and how they originated from previous power relations, values and cognitions.

Classical work in historical sociology has been conducted by Karl Marx and Max Weber but one could argue that the dividing line between history and sociology has become more distinct since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Zwaan, 2001). Most sociologists started to focus on the analysis of contemporary society while historians did not use their historical analyses to enhance our understanding of current structures. The historical sociology is an academic sub-discipline that reconnects sociology and history.

Norbert Elias (2000) played a crucial role in reconnecting sociology and history. Elias studied the process of civilization and focused on the development of European standards regarding violence, sexual behavior, bodily functions, table manners and forms of speech. He shows how internalized self-restraint was imposed by increasingly complex networks of social connections in early modern societies. This study provided important insights in the relations between changes in societal structures and behavioral norms.

The principles of historical sociology have also been used in the study of public administration to analyze the development of administrative structures. Van Bockel (2009) studied the balance between bureaucratic and professional regulation of civil servants in the Dutch Golden Age to enhance our understanding of this same balance modern bureaucracies. Groenveld et al. (2010) studied Pre-Napoleonic centralization in the Netherlands to understand current debates about centralization and decentralization.

I will use the perspective of historical sociology to analyze the development of transparency in the Netherlands. The development will be analyzed by mapping when different forms of transparency were created and how the creation of these forms of transparency relates to societal and political developments.

## 2.2. Socio-Political Construction of Transparency

Transparency is widely debated and many different definitions are provided in the literature (for an overview: Meijer et al., 2012). This paper follows the Utrecht definition of transparency and defines it in general sense as the availability of information about an actor allowing external actors to monitor the actions and decisions of that actor (Meijer, 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2012). The availability of information can be provided through documents but also through access to meetings or publications of performance or decisions (Meijer et al., 2012). A fishbowl is a good metaphor for transparency: those outside the fishbowl can see what those inside of it are doing.

The idea of historical sociology is that the origins of current institutions such as government transparency can be understood by analyzing them in the context of the societal and political situation of the time. Societal and political developments are highly related but not in a deterministic manner: similar societal developments in different countries may result in different political developments. Political developments can be conceptualized as changes in power relations based on new positions and roles in the political system. In their study of the unification of the Netherlands, Knippenberg and Pater (2002) make a distinction between three types of societal developments: infrastructural, economic and socio-cultural developments.<sup>1</sup> The authors acknowledge that, again, these trends are interrelated but they can be analyzed separately to enhance our understanding of these complex processes of change. For this reason, I will analyze societal and political developments both separately and in relation to one another. These developments are studied to understand the social construction of transparency in a specific context (Meijer, 2013).

The socio-political construction of transparency refers to the cognitive, strategic and institutional processes that give meaning and content to transparency (Meijer, 2013). Transparency is not just an idea developed by philosophers, enacted by law-makers and implemented by civil servants. It is a disputed domain that is the subject of much debate between politicians, governments, stakeholders, journalists, scientists, citizens, etc. The complex dynamics of these interactions between the various groups need to be studied to

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<sup>1</sup> Knippenberg and De Pater (2002) also analyze political developments as a societal trend but in this analysis of government transparency I have chosen to analyze political trends separately.

understand specific forms of transparency. In earlier work, I have presented a framework for studying this socio-political construction at the meso-level of transparency in a policy domain over decades. This paper will present an additional perspective to study this construction at the macro-level of a country over a period of hundreds of years.

The framework used for this analysis is summarized in figure 1 below:

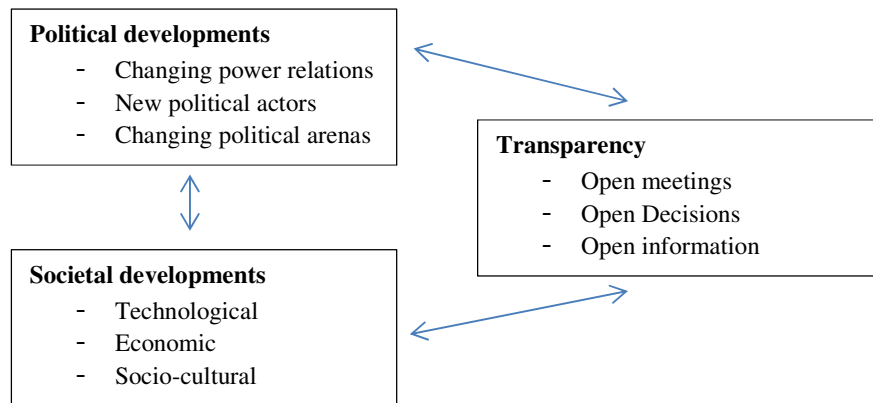


Figure 1. Research Model

This figure highlights that both political and societal developments influence transparency but also one another. In return, both political and societal developments are influenced by changes in transparency.

### 3. Research Methods

This study is based on a review of primary and secondary literature about the history of transparency and relevant societal and political trends in the Netherlands. For additional information, government documents, newspaper articles and Internet-sites with information about transparency were analyzed. The search was limited to documents, reports and websites that could be accessed directly through the website of Utrecht University. Separate searches were conducted for reconstructing the changes in government transparency and societal and political developments.

The difficulty of finding relevant sources is that terms such as ‘transparency’, ‘access to information’ and ‘open government’ (in Dutch: transparantie, openbaarheid van bestuur en

open overhead) are of a recent date and, therefore, yielded few historical sources. The references that were found on the basis of these terms were relevant for the last part of this study, the analysis of developments in the second half of the twentieth century, but provided little information about earlier developments. The methodological problem here is that the term itself has changed over time from a term as publicity (in Dutch: 'publiciteit') to open government (in Dutch: 'open overhead'). This change of terms is part of the study but requires that a variety of terms is used to find relevant information sources. Historical overviews of government transparency were used to identify a variety in search terms (De Haan & Te Velde, 1996; Janse, 2007; Sas, 1988).

The reconstruction of societal and political trends was based on a variety of historical books that provide comprehensive overviews of developments in the Netherlands. Specific searches were conducted to find sources that related to the various societal developments (infrastructural, cultural, economic) and political developments (state development, legislation, politics). The analysis of these trends focused on the most prominent and for the development of transparency most relevant trends. A comprehensive reconstruction of these trends would require a separate research project. This line of argument resulted in four periods that were analyzed:

- Building the fundamentals of transparency (1750 – 1801)
- One step backward, one step forward (1813 – 1848)
- Stability in transparency rules and practices (1848 – 1966)
- Development of access to information (1966 – 2012)

The start date is 1750 and the final date is 2012. On the basis of a first reading of the literature, the French period (1801 – 1813) was identified as a crucial period for the first development of transparency legislation and practices. To be able to position this period, the analysis starts in the period before the French occupation. 1750 is a rather arbitrary date and was chosen only to include societal and political developments leading onto the French period in our analysis. 2012 is just as arbitrary and only constitutes our present situation.

## **4. Reconstructing the History of Transparency in the Netherlands**

### 4.1. Revolution and building the fundamentals of transparency (1750 – 1813)

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was not a wealthy period in Dutch history. After the ‘Golden Century’ when the Netherlands had developed into a world economic power, it fell back after losing a series of wars with England. It lost another war to England in 1780 and the English blockade of Dutch trade resulted in a further decline of the economy. Unemployment was at a high and this resulted in societal unrest. The country seemed ready for political change.

At that time, the Netherlands had a form of elitist rule. Even though the Netherlands was one of the first modern republics and even though citizens had been playing a key role in public administration since the 1600s, it had developed into a form of elitist government with participation of only rural nobility and the urban upper-class (Pots, 2000). This political situation was largely accepted until the 1750s when the (English and French) ideas of the Enlightenment started to influence political debates. Some people started to wonder ‘whether they should not be involvement in debates about affairs related to the public interest’ (Pots, 2000: 434).

The Enlightenment also resulted in new forms of citizen involvement in politics and public affairs. These ideas about popular sovereignty came to be discussed in coffee-houses where societies met to discuss public affairs. In addition, a national press in the form of magazines was emerging. These national magazines contributed to the sense of national unity and ‘government actions, (...), foreign affairs, religious conflicts and societal problems were now discussed permanently’ (Mijnhardt, 2006: 431).

The combination of the societal unrest that had been nourished by the bad economic situation and the lost was and the availability of idea about new forms of government and popular rule resulted in significant changes. With French support, the ‘patriots’ seized power and in 1798 they enacted a constitution that effectively turned the Netherlands into a unitary state with democratic representation and citizenship for all people living in the country. This constitution was to lead a short life since a small group seized power in 1801 with French support and created a new constitution. Still, the constitution of 1801 was a key moment in



Dutch history since it created the Netherlands as a unitary state and that is what it has been since that moment.

The Enlightenment had resulted in a new form of government, in a constitution and also in transparency of meetings, decisions and information. For transparency, it was important that the meetings of Parliament were public and could be attended by all citizens. In addition, decisions of Parliament were to be made public so that all citizens could know what had been decided by their representatives. and these transparency ideals of Enlightenment became, for the first time, to be enacted in the form of a legal obligation for government. The constitution of 1798 contained articles about 'open government' which mainly consisted of transparency of public finances. Government was obliged to present its budget in October to Parliament. Its annual report was to be presented before the end of July and this report was also to be published and publicized. This highlights that the basic fundamentals of transparency, even though limited according to our current standards, were created in this period of Dutch history: open decisions, open meetings and open information.

#### 4.2. One step backward, one step forward (1813 – 1848)

The defeat of the Napoleon and the creation of a large Dutch state – consisting of the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg – resulted in a strong monarchy. The revolutionaries kept silent and national unity was considered to be of the utmost importance. King William I presented himself as the father of the Dutch nation (Aerts, 2004: 69) and pledged to strengthen the economic and political power of the Netherlands in Europe. The new constitution of 1815 did away with all the rights that had been given to citizens and restored the authoritarian situation that had existed before the revolution and the French occupation. The old revolutionary Van der Palm now considered the previous democratic experiments as 'follies' and he hoped that the nation would now be 'one happy family' (Van der Palm in: Aerts, 2004: 65).

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were a few unsuccessful attempt to change the constitution. There was no strong movement that pushed for change and, as a result of this, all attempts to make the nation more democratic were stalled. This suddenly changed in the revolutionary year of 1848. The revolutions all over Europe and worker strikes in Amsterdam convinced King William II that he needed to grant more power to the people. 'Not out of

conviction but out of panic' the king himself took the initiative to change the constitution (Van Oudheusden, 2000: 93). The king created a commission to draft a new constitution and within nine months the new constitution was drafted and enacted.

The new constitution of 1948 is considered to be the most important constitution in the history of the Netherlands since it changed the Netherlands from a monarchy to a democracy (although then still limited to male citizens that were paying taxes). Current political debates still refer to this constitution in relation to issues of ministerial responsibility and relations between local and central government. This constitution emphasized that the ministers were responsible while the king was 'inviolable' and was not allowed to do politics (Blom, 2002: 320). In addition, the constitution granted an important role to citizens and publicity was to play a key role in a system of control on the abuse of power.

In terms of transparency, the first part of this period can be characterized as 'one step backward'. The 'family ideal' encouraged citizens to not interfere in matters of the state (de Haan & Te Velde, 1996: 92). Many affairs such as foreign affairs, national defense and finances were the king's affairs and therefore not a subject of parliamentary oversight and transparency. The decisions, meetings and information of Parliament were still transparent but the power of this institution had been reduced drastically. Parliament could only discuss the budget once every ten years and these periods were characterized by more attention for transparency.

The constitution of 1848 can be considered as a 'step forward' in government transparency. The liberal Thorbecke that played a key role in drafting the new constitution emphasized that 'the public cause wants to be dealt with in public' (Te Velde, 2004: 104). The emphasis on transparency did not only result in transparency legislation, as had happened in the revolutionary period, but also in concrete actions to ensure that the open decisions and open meetings would actually be effective. The meetings of Parliament were to be transcribed fast and efficiently to ensure that the public could have timely access to this information. To this end, stenography as a technology for recording information was introduced in 1849. This shows that this period did not show an increase in the domain of transparency compared with the revolutionary period but it did result in improved transparency practices.

#### 4.3. Stability in transparency rules and practices (1848 – 1966)

The period between 1848 and 1966 covers nearly half the period under study but, still, the changes in transparency are limited and that is the main reason why this period is not divided up in shorter periods. This does not mean that the period is not full of societal and political changes but, surprisingly, these changes had relatively little effect on transparency.

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be characterized as the unification of the Netherlands. Infrastructures played an important role in this process of nation-building and the shrinking of regional differences (Blom, 2002: 322). In this century, roads, canals, railways, mail, telegraph and telephone infrastructures were constructed to facilitate travelling, trade and communication (Knippenberg & De Pater, 2002: 51 – 60). In parallel, the mass media expanded from 14 newspapers in 1869 to 760 newspapers in 1894. The Netherlands developed into a nation and this also meant that national government and politics became increasingly important.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was also a period of steady economic growth in the Netherlands. The industrial revolution spurred economic development and strengthened the economic position of the country. The colonies in Asia and America added to the increasing wealth. The construction of factories resulted in much more visibility of the poverty of certain people to the rich urban elites and fed the debate about the ‘social question’. Economic growth also resulted in growing self-consciousness of workers and new forms of political organization in the form of unions and political parties. Politics transformed from small meetings in coffee houses to mass gatherings. The right to vote was expanded to all male citizens and, in 1917, also to women.

The process of nation-building and the process of industrialization resulted in an expansion of the state and legislation to protect workers and safeguard their health and economic position. These new forms of government intervention needed to be based on sound knowledge of society and therefore in 1894 the Central Bureau for Statistics was created to provide information for government policies (De Haan & Te Velde, 1996: 196).

World War I passed the Netherlands by but generated the sense that the Netherlands should stand united in difficult times (De Rooy, 2004: 188). This was specifically challenging in the

Netherlands in view of the religious division between Protestants and Catholics and, in addition, the strong position of Liberals and Socialists. To be able to build a nation with these differences the so-called Pacification was developed. The country developed a system of 'pillars' that existed in many domains of society. National government was to facilitate societal activities but was not to impose upon the different groups. The elites of the four 'pillars' negotiated about general issues and secrecy was a key element of the system of Pacification to ensure that these (precarious) negotiations were not to be interrupted by public debate.

As one will understand, government transparency during the German occupation in World War II was extremely limited. This was clearly a period of government secrecy. In the period after the war the whole country dedicated itself to the reconstruction. After being criticized for a brief period, the polarized system was reinstalled and survived for a long period. The Dutch received Marshall help from the Americans and the country was quickly rebuilt. Economic and technological progress continued from the 1950s onwards and in the 1960s the country had become a relatively wealth nation (Woltjer, 2005: 362). Government communications had been important during the war – from London – and continued to be important after the war to create support for government policies (Hajema, 2001: 28).

This period can be characterized as a 'normalization' of transparency: there are no fundamental changes in legislation but practices of transparency expand. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the growing role of newspapers and the introduction of political organizations played an important role in transforming transparency from an elite practice to something that was relevant to all citizens since they could read about parliamentary decisions and meetings in newspapers and could hear about them at party gathering. This indicates that the 'effective transparency' (Heald, 2006) increased while the 'formal transparency' (Heald, 2006) stayed at the same level. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a reverse movement. Parliament had the instruments to push for greater government transparency but was reluctant to use these instrument to not disturb the 'pacified situation'. Citizens only obtained access to limited information within their own pillar. Lijphart (1984) emphasized that the newspapers played a key role in the system of non-transparency since editors and journalists had effectively become part of the elites of the pillars and therefore supported the system of elite negotiations. After World War II, government communications about policies and results became increasingly important and became a dominant source of information for citizens

even though this form of transparency was sometimes criticized for bordering on government propaganda.

#### 4.4. Development of access to information (1966 – 2012)

The growing economic wealth, secularization, depillarization and technological progress resulted in drastic political changes in the Dutch political landscape in the 1960s. 1968 is sometimes referred to as the revolutionary years of this period but part of the ‘revolution’ took place earlier. Blacks called for civil rights in the US, students protested against the hierarchical university system in Paris and Berlin. Citizens called for freedom in Czechoslovakia in 1969. There was societal unrest all around the world and the Netherlands was no exception. The marriage of princess – later queen – Beatrix with the German Claus von Amsberg in 1966 led to riots and smoke bombs, students protested for more university democracy and progressive politicians founded the political party D(emocracy)<sup>66</sup>. The political system was shaking (Hajema, 2001: 47).

Television played an important role in this push for change. There were 2.2 million televisions in the Netherlands in 1966 and for the first time in history people could get direct, visual information about situations in other parts of the country and other parts of the world (Lindner, 2003: 14). The growing influence of television also had an impact on the broader media system: newspapers loosened their ties with the ‘pillars’ they originated from and emphasized free and critical news reporting (Hajema, 2001: 54). These changes contributed to a looser tie between citizens and political parties and more political changes after elections. The so-called Korsten Affaire resulted in a push for more transparency. Ben Korsten was an advisor to ministers from a Christian-Democratic party and he openly spoke about his influence on politics. Parliament was ‘not amused’ and demanded more openness. The prime minister created a commission to revise government information and this commission published their report in 1970 (Commissie Heroriëntatie Overheidsvoorlichting, 1970). This commission concluded that communication between government and citizens was hampered by a lack of knowledge among citizens about policies and their foundation and a lack of knowledge among government about the position of citizens. The commission emphasized that more transparency was needed and they emphasized that this does not only require obligations but also a culture of openness in government. Specific recommendations were

presented for weekly press conferences to inform citizens about government plans and decisions.

The most important part of this report was presented an outline for Access to Information Legislation. This outline stressed that a citizen request for government information was to be granted unless one of the grounds for secrecy applied. This proposal was received with much appreciation from all except government. The prime minister highlighted that this level of openness would frustrate government decision-making. Government promised to come with Access to Information Legislation but this law was only sent to Parliament in 1975. The law was approved and finally came into effect in 1980. The law was evaluated in 1983 and renovated in 1992 without fundamental changes but with more precise articles about (passive and active) access to government documents (Scholtes, 2013). More recently, in September 2013, the need to strengthen the active component of access to information has been legalized and the minister of Internal Affairs send an open government vision and action plan to Parliament

New forms of transparency in government were also related to administrative reform. The introduction of New Public Management in the Netherlands This movement put an emphasis on measuring the performance of public sector organizations and also on customer choice (Meijer, 2007). This resulted in the publication of growing numbers of performance tables and benchmarks of public sector organizations. Citizens could easily retrieve information about the inputs, throughputs, outputs and sometimes even outcomes of these organizations. Technological changes in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century called for new adaptations to the transparency regime. There was a shift towards more actively making government information through websites. These changes highlight how the push for more democracy in the 1960s in combination with technological developments resulted in a strong increase in transparency in the Netherlands in the past decades.

## **5. Transparency as a layered concept**

The historical analysis helps to understand and deconstruct transparency as a layered concept. The analysis shows how transparency developed from a formal broadly defined right of openness, to a practice embedded in the polity as a representative system, to a detailed

legislative framework and, finally, to transparency embedded in direct relations between government and society. The following layers can be distinguished:

	<b>Layer of transparency</b>	<b>Changes in formal transparency</b>	<b>Changes in actual transparency</b>	<b>Driving force</b>
<b>1990s, 2000s</b>	Transparency embedded in individual government-society relations		Widespread availability of government documents on websites	Internet revolution
<b>1980</b>	Detailed transparency legislation	Access to information legislation		Revolution of 1960s
<b>1800s, 1900s</b>	Transparency embedded in the polity		Media and political parties divulge transparency to broader population	Industrial revolution
<b>1801</b>	Legal fundaments of transparency	Access to political meetings, to minutes of Parliament and to formal documents		French Revolution

Table 1. Transparency as a layered concept

The analysis presented in this paper is a specific analysis of the development of government transparency in the Netherlands. Several elements make this a specific case and the observed patterns can certainly not be generalized to other European countries (let alone countries on

other continents). The case clearly highlights the importance of the French revolution which was important in other European countries but certainly not the whole continent. The central role of the French revolution certainly does not apply to all European countries let alone countries in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, this study highlights several patterns that are of general interest for those interested in studying transparency. Firstly, we can draw some conclusions about how the socio-political construction of transparency takes place:

1. *The increase in transparency reflects long-term, structural changes.* The study highlights the connection between long-term contextual developments – political and societal changes – and changes in transparency. The empowerment of citizens both in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and from the 1960s onwards and the introduction of new technologies for disseminating information through printed newspapers and digital websites called for more transparency. In that sense, this study forms an addition to studies that highlight the influence of political conditions at one point in time (e.g. Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012) by showing that structural changes in transparency are linked to structural political and societal changes.
2. *But this increase is not a continuous process: it takes place through ‘transparency revolutions’.* The analysis highlighted that key moments in the development of transparency could be identified: the constitutions of 1801 and 1848 and the Access to Information Law of 1980. This shows that the long-term structural changes built up momentum for changes in transparency but the specific timing and form was still dependent on political dynamics at a certain moment in history. These findings highlight Pierson’s (2000) assertion that political development is punctuated by critical moments that shape the basic contours of social life.

Secondly, we can draw conclusions about the direction of these changes. The analysis provides some insight in the development of transparency over time.

3. *The increase in transparency is tightly connected to the modernization of the state.* The study also highlights the progressive character of transparency. Transparency was reversed during a few periods in history – French rule, German rule – but clearly rose over the period of time we studied. This highlights that an increase in transparency can be seen as a component of the development towards a modern state. I do not



conclude that transparency can only increase more but the analysis shows that, thus far, it has only been increasing.

4. *Temporary drawbacks are related to pleas for national unity.* In the period of study, there were several periods, e.g. after the French period in the early 1800s and after World War I, where there was more emphasis on national unity in the face of external threats. These periods witnessed a (temporary) drawback in transparency as this is seen as a source of conflict with the ‘family’. In line with Pierson (2000) and Levi (1997) these drawbacks stall rather than actually reverse the movement towards more transparency.

Thirdly, we can identify a recurring theme in history on these basis of this analysis:

5. *Trust in government.* The current debate about the question whether transparency strengthens or undermines trust (O’Neill, 2002; Etzioni, 2010) has old roots. In each period of history there were opponents highlighting the drawbacks of transparency and arguing for less openness. Proponents argue that transparency will empower citizens and, in the end, these empowered citizens will trust the system that has empowered them. In contrast, opponents in all periods argue that citizen empowerment will nurture discontent and undermine the legitimacy of government.

The key message of this paper that as administrative scholars we may – and need to – focus on specific issues such as transparency to be able to study these and develop a theoretical understanding of the causes and effects. However, at the same time we should position specific issues as transparency within the broader framework of societal, political and administrative developments to understand the roots of current situations and to understand the way transparency is embedded in the development of the modern state. A better understanding of the critical moments in the history of transparency – most prominently the French revolution, the Revolutionary Year 1848 and the Revolution of 1968 – helps to grasp the roots of transparency.

### **Acknowledgement**

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