P287 / The Institutional and Organizational Architecture of Public Policies on Access to Information for Accountability: A Comparative Perspective

Topic : Politics, Institutions and Political Regimes

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Since the 1990s, access-to-information (ATI) laws have spread across every world region, turning the right to know into a standard component of democratic governance (Michener, 2011; Worthy, 2017). Yet adoption says little about effect. Who enforces the right, whether an information commissioner, an ombudsman, an autonomous collegiate body, a court or a unit within the executive, is a decisive yet poorly understood variable. This choice is not stable. Mexico, long a regional reference for its autonomous constitutional guarantor, dissolved it in 2025 and transferred its functions to an agency subordinate to the Ministry of Anti-Corruption and Good Government (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2025), while Chile created a separate autonomous Data Protection Agency (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile, 2024). Elsewhere, governments merge access and privacy mandates, cut budgets or reshape appointment rules without formally abolishing the right.

Research has explained why governments adopt transparency laws (Berliner, 2014; Michener, 2015) and how strong those laws are on paper, as measured by the Global Right to Information Rating (Centre for Law and Democracy & Access Info Europe, n.d.). A second strand shows that the link between transparency and accountability is uncertain: disclosure produces answerability only when actors can turn information into voice or sanctions (Fox, 2007; Hood & Heald, 2006; Meijer, 2013). Studies of oversight bodies have mapped their models and functions (Holsen & Pasquier, 2012; OECD, 2019), and the literature on democratic backsliding shows how executives reshape bureaucracies (Bauer et al., 2021). Two gaps remain: comparative evidence on how the institutional and organizational design of guarantor bodies conditions effective accountability (Salgado, 2019), and on why these bodies are redesigned, merged or dismantled.

The panel asks: under what conditions do institutional and organizational designs for access to information turn the formal right to know into effective accountability, and what makes the bodies that guarantee it resilient or vulnerable to political redesign?

It can explore five hypotheses. H1: formal autonomy (appointment rules, tenure, budget and binding powers) increases compliance only when the guarantor is embedded in a chain of horizontal accountability with courts, audit institutions and legislatures. H2 (autonomy paradox): the more visible and powerful the guarantor, the more likely it becomes a target of executive backlash. H3: bundling access and data protection in a single body shapes how disclosure and privacy are balanced. H4: digital infrastructures, such as national transparency platforms, create path dependencies that outlive organizational redesign. H5: journalists, civil society and requesters are the main counterweight that sustains the right when guarantors weaken.

By comparing regions and regime types, the panel shifts the debate from whether countries have ATI laws to how their institutional and organizational architecture works, erodes or recovers, offering evidence for policy design amid democratic stress. The panel seeks to update research on ATI policies worldwide, trace the historical trajectory of the processes that have advanced this human right, and foster comparisons of two or more cases through the comparative method, in order to strengthen accountability.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites theoretical, empirical and methodological papers that treat access to information as a problem of institutional and organizational design and accountability. We welcome single-country studies with explicit comparative ambition, small-N and large-N comparisons, and cross-regional analyses covering Latin America, Europe, Africa, Asia and North America, in consolidated democracies as well as hybrid regimes. We are particularly interested in papers addressing:

• updates of comparative research on access-to-information policies worldwide in light of recent reforms;

• the design of guarantor bodies (information commissioners, ombudsmen, collegiate autonomous bodies,

courts and executive units) and its effects on compliance, response times, reversal rates and proactive disclosure;

• the creation, merger, budget cuts, capture, dismantling or restoration of oversight bodies, including recent reforms in Mexico and elsewhere;

• the relationship between access to information and other accountability institutions, such as courts, supreme audit institutions, anti-corruption systems and legislatures;

• the bundling or separation of access-to-information and personal data protection mandates;

• digital transparency platforms, open data and algorithmic decision-making as new frontiers of the right to know;

• the role of journalists, civil society organizations and requesters in sustaining the right when institutions weaken;

• sectoral applications where information is critical, such as public procurement, health, extractive industries or security.

Papers should compare two or more cases (countries, subnational units or guarantor bodies) and show how their institutional and organizational architecture fosters or hinders accountability. Methodologically, we welcome comparative legal and institutional analysis, qualitative comparative analysis, process tracing, analysis of request data and administrative records, survey and experimental designs, and mixed methods. Papers that develop indicators of de jure and de facto independence, or datasets on institutional change, are especially encouraged.

Proposals should state the research question, the cases and period analyzed, the data and method, and the expected contribution to at least one of the panel hypotheses. Contributions from early-career researchers and scholars from the Global South are warmly encouraged. Papers that contrast at least two institutional models, or that trace a single guarantor body through its full life cycle, will be given priority when organizing the sessions.