

# Examining Level of County Government Transparency Through County Government Web Sites

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## Summary

- Internet access is not the only determinant of government website transparency.
- Population density of a county, size of the minority population, educational level, and the council-manager style of government are also important factors in predicting government website transparency.
- In Missouri:
  - Counties with higher average levels of education are more likely to have higher levels of government website transparency.
  - Counties with high levels of poverty are more likely to have less county government website transparency.

## Introduction

In 2009, President Barack Obama discussed the importance of transparency in promoting accountability and providing citizens information about their government (President Obama 2009). Scholars have argued that government transparency is a key to good governance, allowing citizens the opportunity to have control over their government (Bonsón et al. 2012; Hood 2006; Piotrowski and Ryzin 2007; Conradie and Choenni 2014). Increasingly, the internet provides a forum for citizen oversight via government websites. The internet is used as a platform for citizen and government interaction and for local governments to provide more efficient service delivery and transaction activities (Moon 2002). Governments are also increasingly expected to provide up-to-date information on their websites (Harder and Jordan 2013; Manoharan 2013; Pina, Torres and Royo 2010). The level of government transparency, evaluated based on the information available on the county website, varies greatly in Midwestern counties. Many counties do not have a government website, and for those with websites, few counties offer extensive information online.

This brief summarizes research by Lowatcharin and Menifield (2015) that examined the impact of internet access as well as other geographic, demographic, socioeconomic and institutional factors on governmental transparency in 816 counties in 12 Midwestern states. They looked at factors that impact website transparency at the county level. Lowatcharin and Menifield (2015) tested the idea that increased internet access leads to higher levels of governmental transparency.



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Policy Brief

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## Transparency

The notion of transparency has multiple definitions, largely due to its multidimensional nature. Thinking of transparency in two perspectives, outside-in and inside-out, condenses the broad range of definitions. An outside-in perspective of transparency focuses on external entities *seeking* information from an organization. The inside-out approach, on the other hand, focuses on the organization *informing* external entities about their activities. This research focused on the inside-out, informing, aspect of transparency where county governments provide local government information on their website.

## Literature on transparency, the internet and local government

There is a wide range of factors that contribute to whether or not a local government has a website and, if it has a website, its level of transparency. Factors affecting web presence include demographic and socioeconomic characteristics as well as institutional, organizational and local government characteristics (Lowatcharin and Menifield 2015). Research using government websites to determine government transparency, however, is relatively new (Huang 2007; Harder and Jordan 2013; Bernick et al. 2014). Nonetheless, some findings from the literature include:

- Older constituencies are less likely to use the internet (Piotrowski and Ryzin 2007);
- Rural areas are less likely to have a local government website (Borry 2012);
- The IT capability of local government employees impacts whether or not the entity has a website (Manoharan 2013); and
- There is an inverse relationship between citizens' confidence in their local government officials and their demands for transparency (Piotrowski and Ryzin 2007).

In a time where internet users are increasing their demands on governments to provide up-to-date information on the internet (England, Pelissero, and Morgan 2011), Lowatcharin and Menifield (2015) examine how internet access affects government transparency.

## Data

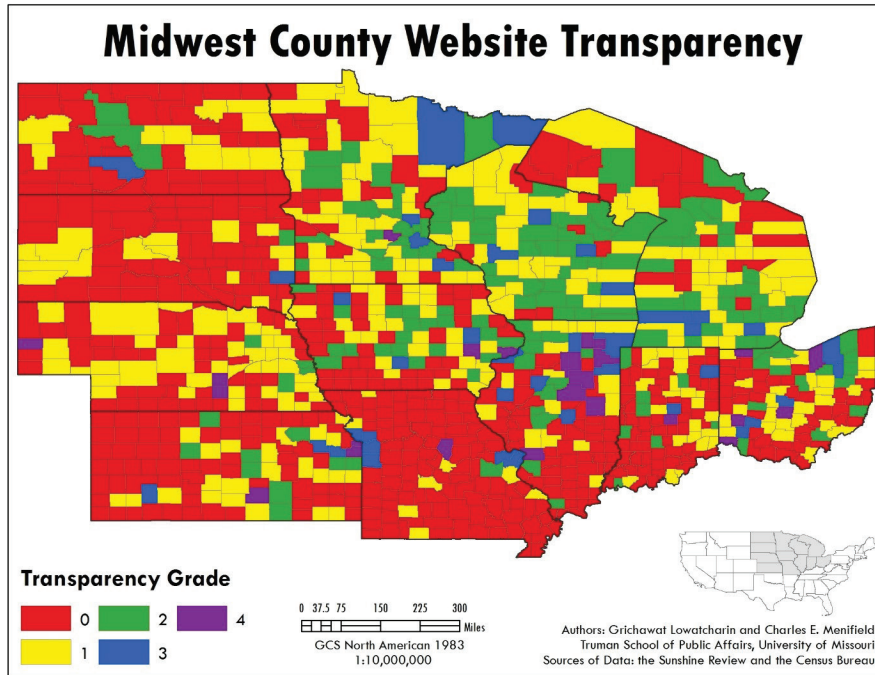
Following previous research, Lowatcharin and Menifield (2015) examined the significance of internet access and geographic characteristics in levels of county government website transparency. According to the Sunshine Review, a nonprofit that collected and shared transparency information, 10 basic items should be available on a government website to be considered transparent<sup>1</sup>:

- The current government budget;
- Notices about public meetings and minutes of previous meetings;
- Names and contact information of elected officials and key administrators;
- Building and zoning permit applications;
- Audit information;
- Government contracts for purchases of more than \$10,000;
- Lobbying information or membership of lobbying associations;
- The name and contact information of the person in charge of public record requests; and
- Tax information schedules (Ballotpedia 2015).

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<sup>1</sup>This 10-item checklist comes from Sunshine Review, a nonprofit dedicated to collecting and sharing transparency information. The Sunshine Review evaluated counties based on this 10-item transparency list.

Based on these criteria, Sunshine Review evaluated county transparency and awarded grades. For example, if a county had nine or ten items accessible on their website, they received an “A” grade; whereas if two or fewer items were present, the county received an “F” grade (Ballotpedia 2015). In Lowatcharin and Menifield’s study, they excluded counties without a website and used a four-point collapsed grading scale: A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, and F=0.



Grading Score: A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, and F=0<sup>2</sup>

The 12 Midwestern states examined in the study were Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin. Out of the 1,055 counties in these 12 states, 816 (77 percent) had county government websites. Lowatcharin and Menifield used the 10-item Sunshine Review checklist to measure the level of website transparency. To analyze the county level data, Lowatcharin and Menifield used ordered logistic regression models and following the literature on government and website transparency, they used 10 hypotheses to predict the relationships they expected from their data.

The hypotheses Lowatcharin and Menifield used to guide their study related to internet access; county and individual demographic characteristics (county geographical size, population density, population growth, minority population and age of residents); socio-economic characteristics such as educational attainment, income and poverty; and institutional characteristics including the style of county government.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Map created by Lowatcharin and Menifield for this policy brief.

<sup>3</sup> For the full list of hypotheses and justification, please refer to Lowatcharin and Menifield (2015), pages 107-109.

## Results

The majority of county government websites (73 percent, 597 county websites) in this study provided limited information on county government information (Grade D or F, 0-4 items from the 10-item Sunshine Review checklist visible on the county website). Only three percent (24 county websites) provided extensive information (Grade A, 9-10 items from the 10-item checklist visible on the county website).<sup>4</sup> In Lowatcharin and Menifield's basic model, including only land area, population density and internet access, internet access was a significant determinant of government website transparency. When controlling for all of the variables in their model, however, Lowatcharin and Menifield found that their variable of interest, internet access, was not significant in predicting government website transparency. The population density of a county, size of the nonwhite population, educational level, and the council-manager style of government, however, were important in predicting a higher degree of government website transparency. The geographical area of a county, population growth, median age of the county population, per capita income, and the poverty level were not significant in predicting higher government website transparency.

One significant finding from Lowatcharin and Menifield's (2015) study found that county governments using a council-manager style of governance are more than two times more likely to have an A transparency score, compared to counties with a different form of government. In Missouri, however, the style of county government was not a significant predictor of increased government website transparency. This is possibly because the majority of Missouri counties have a commission form of government, whereas the literature has shown that council-manager government styles are more likely to be proactive in providing online information about government services (Moon 2002). Factors predicting government website transparency in Missouri were also slightly different from Midwest state results, likely due to the limited sample size and specific characteristics of Missouri.

### What does this mean for Missouri?

Missouri has 115 counties including St. Louis City, an independent city. From these 115 counties, only 55 counties (48 percent), have a county government website. Out of the 55 counties with websites, only eight counties received a transparency grade of B or better based on Sunshine Review's 10-item website transparency checklist. Boone County was the only county receiving an A in Missouri for county government website transparency (Ballotpedia 2015).

To determine the internet transparency factors pertinent in Missouri, the same data and model from the larger study were utilized, but only included the 55 Missouri counties with a county government website. The Missouri level data gave a slightly different result compared to the Midwest level study. In Missouri, the average educational level and the level of poverty were significant factors in explaining county government website transparency. In Missouri, as predicted by Lowatcharin and Menifield, counties with higher average levels of education were more likely to have higher levels of government website transparency. In the larger study of Midwestern counties, poverty was not a significant determinant of county government website transparency, whereas in Missouri, counties with a high level of poverty were more likely to have lower county government website transparency.

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<sup>4</sup> To receive an A or A-, 9-10 items from the Sunshine Review 10-item checklist need to be visible on the county website. A county would need 7-8 items for a B- or B grade; 5-6 items for a C or C-, 3-4 items for a D or D-, and 0-2 items from the Sunshine Review 10-item checklist would need to be visible on the county website for an F grade (McMurray 2013).

<sup>5</sup> The eight counties that received a transparency grade of B or higher include: Boone County (A-); Cass County (B-); City of St. Louis (B); Clay County (B-); Jackson County (B-); Platte County (B-); St. Charles County (B-) and St. Louis County (B-) (Ballotpedia 2015).



If government websites are increasingly providing a platform for citizen oversight, it seems logical that having an up-to-date government website is important for a functioning democracy. Citizen and government interaction are increasingly taking place on the internet through service delivery (online-applications and information) and other transaction activities (Moon 2002). Only 48 percent of Missouri counties have a web-presence, therefore, the ability for citizens to know what is happening in their county government and to demand accountability from their county government officials is limited. While increased internet access does not appear to impact county government transparency, areas of high poverty and low education in Missouri have less government website transparency compared to areas with higher socio-economic standing and higher education.

*Boone County Transparency Grade Taken from  
[http://ballotpedia.org/Boone\\_County,\\_Missouri](http://ballotpedia.org/Boone_County,_Missouri)*

Transparency Grade	
<b>GRADE: A-</b>	
Budget	✓
Meetings	✓
Elected Officials	✓
Administrative Officials	✓
Permits, Zoning	✓
Audits	✓
Contracts	✓
Lobbying	✗
Public Records	✓
Local Taxes	✓
 Present  Missing  Incomplete	

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