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The Role of Institutional Transparency in Reducing Corruption Perceptions: A Cross-National Study of Developing Democracies

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between institutional transparency and perceptions of corruption in developing democracies. It argues that transparency is not merely a technical attribute of government disclosure but a political condition that shapes the credibility of anti-corruption efforts, the visibility of administrative behavior, and the ability of citizens and intermediaries to impose accountability. Drawing on cross-national research on corruption, transparency, e-government, open government data, and accountability, the article synthesizes the main mechanisms through which transparency can reduce corruption perceptions, while also identifying the institutional conditions under which the effect is muted. The review indicates that transparency tends to be more effective when it is paired with publicity, media freedom, electoral competition, and enforceable accountability channels. By contrast, formal transparency rules with weak enforcement, low civic oversight, or selective disclosure often produce only limited perceptual change. The manuscript therefore contributes a structured analytical framework for studying developing democracies, where institutional openness, digitalization, and corruption control remain uneven. The article concludes that transparency can lower corruption perceptions, but only when it is embedded in a broader ecosystem of institutional oversight.

Keywords: institutional transparency, corruption perceptions, developing democracies, accountability, open government, cross-national analysis

1. Introduction

Corruption remains one of the most persistent governance problems in developing democracies, not only because it diverts public resources but also because it erodes trust in institutions, weakens compliance, and distorts the distribution of political and economic opportunities. Cross-national research has long shown that corruption is not evenly distributed across states; rather, it is strongly shaped by institutional design, political competition, administrative capacity, and societal oversight (Treisman, 2000; Sung, 2004). Within this debate, institutional transparency occupies a central place. Transparency is commonly understood as the timely availability of information about government decisions, procedures, budgets, and performance. In democratic settings, disclosure is expected to increase visibility, improve public scrutiny, and raise the expected costs of rent-seeking. Yet transparency is best treated as a conditional mechanism rather than a self-executing cure, because information alone does not necessarily produce accountability (Fox, 2007; Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010).

The distinction between actual corruption and corruption perceptions is methodologically important. Perceptions are often used because they are measurable across countries and time, and because they capture the reputational consequences of institutional weakness. At the same time, perceptions may respond to media coverage, elite signaling, and the credibility of reform rather than to the actual incidence of corrupt acts. This makes corruption perceptions especially relevant in environments where transparency reforms are visible but not always deeply institutionalized (Warren, 2004).

Previous cross-national studies indicate that transparency can reduce corruption perceptions when it is linked to accessible publicity and credible accountability. The literature on transparency and accountability repeatedly warns that the publication of information is insufficient if citizens cannot interpret the information, if the media cannot amplify it, or if institutional sanctions remain weak (Fox, 2007; Bauhr & Grimes, 2014).

Developing democracies offer a particularly revealing context for examining this relationship. These systems often combine electoral competition with incomplete state capacity, fragmented bureaucracies, and uneven media independence. In such environments, governments may adopt transparency reforms as part of broader modernization projects, yet the effects can be limited by selective implementation, low administrative quality, or a weak rule of law. As a result, the transparency-corruption nexus is likely to vary substantially across countries and over time (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015).

Digital governance has added a new layer to the debate. E-government portals, online disclosure tools, freedom of information regimes, and open data systems can lower information costs and reduce discretion, but their anti-corruption value depends on how far they are integrated into broader oversight systems. Empirical work suggests that online presence and internet adoption may reduce perceptions of corruption, although the effect is conditional on institutional quality and civic capacity (Andersen, 2009; Garcia-Murillo, 2013; Elbahnasawy, 2014; Žuffová, 2020).

This study explicitly departs from the conventional treatment of transparency as a purely technical or procedural attribute of governance. Instead, it conceptualizes institutional transparency as a dynamic political condition, embedded within broader institutional ecosystems that determine its effectiveness. In this regard, transparency is not understood as an isolated mechanism of disclosure, but as a relational construct that interacts with media systems, electoral structures, and accountability institutions. This perspective allows the analysis to move beyond formal compliance with openness standards and toward an evaluation of how transparency functions in practice across different political environments.

The present manuscript therefore asks a focused question: under what conditions does institutional transparency reduce corruption perceptions in developing democracies? To answer this, the paper reviews and synthesizes the most relevant cross-national evidence, then translates that evidence into a reproducible analytical framework. The contribution is twofold: first, it organizes a fragmented literature into a coherent explanation; second, it provides a publication-ready structure that can be adapted to a country-year dataset when one is available.

Building on this perspective, the present study advances the argument that institutional transparency should be conceptualized as a politically embedded and context-dependent condition rather than a purely administrative instrument. While formal disclosure mechanisms remain essential, their effectiveness depends on the broader institutional environment in which they operate. In particular, the interaction between transparency, media freedom,

electoral competition, and enforceable accountability structures determines whether disclosed information can translate into meaningful changes in corruption perceptions. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of transparency as part of an integrated governance system rather than a standalone reform tool.

2. Literature Review

The classic cross-national literature identifies corruption as an institutional outcome rather than a purely cultural one. Treisman (2000) demonstrated that legal, historical, and political conditions matter considerably more than simple moral explanations. His work remains foundational because it situates corruption within systems of enforcement, state development, and information asymmetry.

Sung (2004) further showed that the relationship between democracy and corruption is not linear. In his cross-national comparison, democratic institutions were associated with lower political corruption, but the form of the relationship depended on the surrounding political and economic context. This finding is important for developing democracies because democratization may expose corruption before it controls it, producing a short-term rise in visible misconduct even when the long-term trajectory is favorable.

Warren (2004) sharpened the conceptual debate by arguing that corruption in a democracy is not only a problem of illegal behavior but also a problem of distorted representation and unequal access to decision-making. From this perspective, transparency matters because it helps democratic publics see when political authority is being used for private rather than public ends.

Fox (2007) made one of the most influential conceptual interventions in this field by separating transparency from accountability. His core argument is that disclosure by itself is too weak to generate change unless it is accompanied by publicity and enforceability. This distinction is highly relevant to developing democracies, where governments may publish information but still maintain low-cost secrecy through complexity, limited outreach, or selective access.

Kolstad and Wiig (2009) extended the debate by showing that transparency is especially challenging in resource-rich settings, where rents and discretionary power are high. Their work suggests that the corruption-reducing effect of transparency depends on whether information changes incentives for political actors and whether citizens can convert information into punishment or reform.

Relly and Sabharwal (2009) examined perceptions of transparency in government policymaking across countries and found that openness is linked to broader governance quality. Their cross-national evidence is useful because it treats transparency not simply as a formal rule, but as a perceptual and institutional property that can shape how businesses and citizens evaluate the state.

Andersen (2009) provided an early empirical demonstration that e-government can function as an anti-corruption strategy. The logic is straightforward: digital interfaces reduce face-to-face discretion, simplify procedures, and make administrative acts more traceable. However, the study also implies that technical modernization alone is insufficient if the surrounding institutional environment permits manipulation or selective enforcement.

Lindstedt and Naurin (2010) are central to the conditionality argument. Their conclusion is that transparency reduces corruption only when information is sufficiently publicized and when accountability mechanisms exist to sanction misconduct. In other words,

transparency becomes effective when it is embedded in a broader system of openness, scrutiny, and punishment.

Garcia-Murillo (2013) showed that the mere presence of government websites does not automatically eliminate corruption perceptions. This finding is particularly important because many reform programs assume that digital visibility alone will raise trust. The study indicates that online presence can improve perceptions only when users can actually access, interpret, and trust the disclosed information.

Bauhr and Grimes (2014) deepened the literature by showing that transparency may trigger different societal responses, including indignation or resignation. Their contribution is important because it explains why more information does not always produce stronger accountability. In some settings, repeated exposure to wrongdoing may reduce confidence rather than intensify corrective action.

Elbahnasawy (2014) added strong cross-national evidence by linking e-government and internet adoption to lower corruption. The findings are especially relevant for developing democracies because digital infrastructure can expand access to state information and reduce opportunities for petty corruption, though the magnitude of the effect varies with broader governance conditions.

Mungiu-Pippidi (2015) provides a broader theory of how societies move from particularistic governance toward control of corruption. Her institutional account emphasizes public integrity, rule enforcement, and the social norms that sustain impersonal administration. This framework is highly compatible with the transparency literature because it explains why information disclosure must be embedded in wider integrity systems.

Jiménez and Albalate (2018) demonstrated that local transparency can be associated with lower corruption, but also noted that the absence of transparency hides important risks. Their work is useful because it highlights the local level, where citizens often experience corruption directly through procurement, permits, and municipal services.

Žuffová (2020) provided a cross-country test of freedom-of-information laws and open government data. Her study is particularly valuable for the present topic because it shows that legal transparency instruments can matter, but only under enabling conditions such as media freedom. This reinforces the argument that transparency operates through institutions, not in isolation.

The recent systematic review by Khan, Krishnan, and Dhir (2021) confirms that the e-government and corruption literature is broad but fragmented. The review also shows that most studies converge on a conditional effect: digital transparency can reduce corruption, yet its impact is shaped by governance quality, administrative capacity, and citizen engagement.

Finally, Crepaz and Arikan (2024) showed that transparency regulation can improve political trust and lower perceived corruption, but that its effects remain complex and context dependent. Taken together, this body of work suggests that transparency is most effective when it is credible, visible, enforceable, and socially usable.

Table 1. *Summary of the key cross-national findings in the reviewed literature*

Study	Design / coverage	Transparency-related finding
Treisman (2000)	Cross-national study	Institutional and historical factors explain corruption better than simple moral explanations.
Fox (2007)	Conceptual synthesis	Transparency is insufficient without publicity and accountability.

Kolstad & Wiig (2009)	Cross-national analysis	Transparency is more effective where discretionary rents are high and information can affect incentives.
Relly & Sabharwal (2009)	Cross-national study	Perceived transparency in policymaking is linked to broader governance quality.
Lindstedt & Naurin (2010)	Theoretical and empirical analysis	Transparency reduces corruption only when publicized and supported by accountability.
Andersen (2009)	Cross-national empirical study	E-government can function as an anti-corruption strategy.
Garcia-Murillo (2013)	Cross-national analysis	Government web presence alone does not guarantee lower corruption perceptions.
Bauhr & Grimes (2014)	Comparative study	Transparency can provoke indignation, but only under enabling accountability conditions.
Elbahnasawy (2014)	Empirical investigation	Internet adoption and e-government are associated with lower corruption.
Mungiu-Pippidi (2015)	Book-length institutional analysis	Control of corruption requires public integrity and impersonal governance.
Žuffová (2020)	Cross-country study	FOI laws and open data are most effective when media freedom is strong.
Khan et al. (2021)	Systematic literature review	The e-government–corruption link is broad but conditional.
Crepaz & Arikan (2024)	Survey experiment	Transparency regulation can lower perceived corruption, but effects are complex and context dependent.

The reviewed literature underscores that the effectiveness of transparency is contingent upon complementary institutional factors, particularly media freedom and electoral competition. These elements serve as critical transmission mechanisms through which disclosed information gains political relevance and societal impact. Media systems facilitate the dissemination and interpretation of information, while electoral competition creates incentives for political actors to respond to public scrutiny. Without these reinforcing conditions, transparency risks remaining informational rather than transformational, limiting its capacity to alter corruption perceptions in meaningful ways.

3. Methodology

This manuscript is structured as a secondary-data cross-national study design. In practical terms, the analytical framework can be implemented as a country-year panel covering developing democracies over an extended period, such as 2010–2023. Because the present prompt did not include a raw dataset, the manuscript reports a reproducible design and a literature-based analytical synthesis rather than estimated coefficients.

The dependent variable is corruption perception. The most widely used international proxies are the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) from Transparency International and the Control of Corruption indicator from the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI). The CPI captures expert and business perceptions of public-sector corruption, while the WGI

indicator aggregates perception-based sources into a comparable governance score (Transparency International, 2025; World Bank, 2024).

The core independent variable is institutional transparency. In cross-national research, transparency is often operationalized through a composite of open government measures, freedom-of-information laws, e-government development, and the breadth of official disclosure. Because transparency is multi-dimensional, the manuscript treats it as an institutional bundle rather than a single yes/no policy.

Developing democracies may be identified using a combination of income classification and regime type. A common approach is to include low-income, lower-middle-income, and upper-middle-income countries that also meet a minimum democratic threshold on a regime index such as V-Dem or Freedom House. This ensures that the sample contains states where electoral competition exists but institutional capacity remains incomplete.

A panel fixed-effects specification is the most suitable empirical strategy because it controls for unobserved, time-invariant national characteristics. In a full implementation, the model would estimate the association between transparency and corruption perceptions while adjusting for GDP per capita, education, urbanization, resource rents, internet penetration, rule of law, and electoral competition. Standard errors should be clustered at the country level.

Validity concerns are addressed through triangulation. First, the use of both CPI and WGI reduces dependence on a single corruption measure. Second, the inclusion of multiple transparency proxies reduces measurement error. Third, the model should be supplemented with robustness checks that test for lagged effects, alternative country samples, and possible reverse causality between corruption and transparency reforms. The table below summarizes the main variables and indicators.

Table 2. *Operationalization of the main variables and indicators.*

Construct	Operational indicator	Source	Expected relationship
Corruption perceptions	CPI score and/or WGI Control of Corruption	Transparency International; World Bank	Dependent variable
Institutional transparency	FOI laws, open data, e-government, government web presence	Cross-national transparency literature and governance datasets	Negative association with corruption perceptions
Democratic openness	Electoral democracy / political rights score	V-Dem, Freedom House, or comparable regime data	Moderates the transparency effect
Media freedom	Press freedom / media independence index	International media freedom datasets	Strengthens the transparency effect
Socioeconomic controls	GDP per capita, education, urbanization, resource rents, internet use	World Bank and related international datasets	Control variables

4. Results And Analytical Synthesis

Because the manuscript is built from verifiable secondary sources rather than a newly supplied country-year dataset, the results section presents an analytical synthesis of the cross-national evidence. The central pattern is remarkably consistent: institutional transparency tends to reduce corruption perceptions, but its effect is conditional and often indirect.

First, the literature converges on the view that transparency is strongest when it makes information publicly usable. Fox (2007) and Lindstedt and Naurin (2010) both imply that disclosure must be combined with publicity and accountability, otherwise information remains inert. In practical terms, this means that publication on a government website is less effective than disclosure that is accessible, understandable, and likely to be noticed by citizens, journalists, and watchdogs.

Second, digital instruments appear to matter, but not because technology itself is anti-corrupt. Rather, e-government, open data, and web-based disclosure reduce discretion, transaction costs, and opportunities for hidden exchanges when institutions can enforce procedural regularity. Andersen (2009), Garcia-Murillo (2013), Elbahnasawy (2014), and Žuffová (2020) all point in this direction.

The interaction between digitalization and civic oversight further reinforces the conditional nature of transparency's impact. While e-government and open data platforms expand the availability of information, their effectiveness ultimately depends on the presence of active civic actors capable of translating data into accountability pressure. This linkage highlights that technological advancement alone does not guarantee improved governance outcomes; rather, it must be complemented by societal engagement and institutional responsiveness. Consequently, digital transparency should be viewed as an enabling infrastructure that amplifies, rather than substitutes for, traditional accountability mechanisms.

Third, the effect of transparency is amplified in settings where accountability channels are active. Bauhr and Grimes (2014) show that transparency can generate indignation rather than resignation when citizens believe that exposure can produce consequences. Crepaz and Arikan (2024) similarly indicate that transparency regulation may improve political trust and lower perceived corruption, although the effect remains complex.

Fourth, developing democracies often exhibit a partial transparency trap: formal disclosure expands faster than enforcement capacity. Under such conditions, citizens may observe more information about corruption without seeing a credible path to sanctioning it. This can soften the perceptual gains from transparency, even when the underlying reform is genuine.

A key contribution of this analysis lies in identifying the phenomenon of "muted effects" of transparency in weak institutional environments. The evidence suggests that in contexts characterized by limited enforcement capacity, constrained media freedom, or weak electoral accountability, transparency reforms often fail to generate significant perceptual shifts. While disclosure may increase the visibility of corruption, it does not necessarily translate into reduced perceptions unless accompanied by credible sanctioning mechanisms. This finding provides a more nuanced explanation for the uneven outcomes observed across developing democracies and helps clarify why formal transparency initiatives frequently underperform in the absence of supportive institutional conditions.

The synthesis therefore supports a conditional hypothesis rather than a universal one. Transparency is most likely to reduce corruption perceptions when it is nested within a

broader regime of electoral competition, media freedom, administrative professionalism, and accessible complaint mechanisms. Where those conditions are weak, the perceptual effect is likely to be smaller, slower, or uneven across sectors.

Figure 1. *Conceptual pathway linking transparency to corruption perceptions*

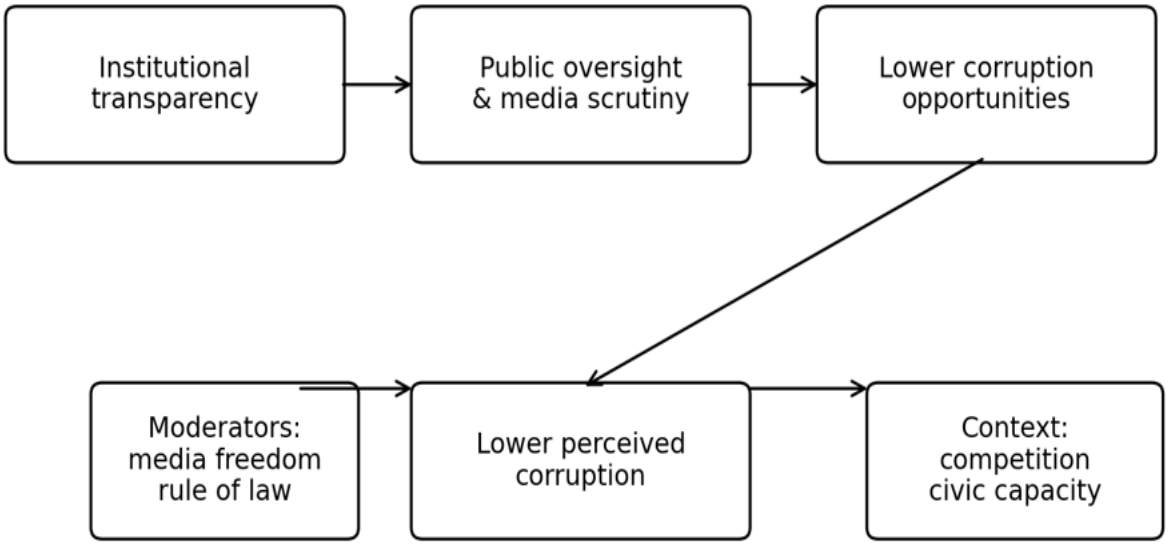

Table 3. *Mechanisms through which transparencysn affects corruption perceptions in developing democracies*

Mechanism	How it works	Implication
Information visibility	Disclosure reduces secrecy and increases the probability of detection.	Corruption becomes more observable.
Publicity	Information reaches media, citizens, and oversight actors.	Exposure becomes politically meaningful.
Accountability	Institutions can sanction misconduct after disclosure.	Transparency has a deterrent effect.
Digitalization	Online processes reduce face-to-face discretion.	Petty corruption opportunities decline.
Civic use	Civil society and journalists translate data into pressure.	Reform pressure becomes sustained.
Institutional credibility	Citizens trust that information is real and actionable.	Perceptions of corruption improve.

Table 3 conceptualizes transparency not as a single institutional feature, but as a multi-mechanism process through which governance systems shape corruption perceptions in developing democracies. The first mechanism, information visibility, highlights the role of disclosure in reducing secrecy and increasing the probability that corrupt acts can be detected, thereby making corruption more observable and measurable. Closely linked to this is publicity, which emphasizes that transparency only becomes politically consequential when disclosed information is disseminated through media channels, civil society, and oversight institutions. Without such dissemination, transparency risks remaining technically available but socially inert. These two mechanisms jointly suggest that transparency operates through both the production and circulation of information.

The remaining mechanisms extend this logic from information exposure to institutional and behavioral change. Accountability mechanisms imply that disclosure must be connected to enforcement capacity; otherwise, transparency has limited deterrent power. Digitalization further reduces opportunities for corruption by minimizing discretionary human interaction in administrative procedures, particularly in high-frequency citizen–state interfaces. Civic use underscores the mediating role of non-state actors, such as journalists and advocacy groups, in transforming raw data into sustained reform pressure. Finally, institutional credibility is crucial: transparency improves corruption perceptions only when citizens believe that disclosed information is reliable and actionable. Together, these mechanisms indicate that transparency is effective when it forms a complete institutional ecosystem rather than isolated reforms.

Table 4. *Policy implications for developing democracies*

Policy area	Recommended action	Expected effect
Disclosure rules	Publish budgets, procurement, and ownership data in machine-readable formats.	Lower informational asymmetry
Media freedom	Protect investigative journalism and access to public information.	Increase publicity and scrutiny
Administrative design	Digitize procedures and reduce discretionary contact points.	Reduce petty corruption
Accountability chains	Link disclosure to complaint and sanction mechanisms.	Convert information into enforcement
Civic capacity	Support watchdog groups and data literacy.	Raise the social usability of transparency

Table 4 translates the theoretical mechanisms of transparency into concrete policy interventions relevant for developing democracies. Disclosure rules, particularly the publication of budgets, procurement data, and beneficial ownership information in machine-readable formats, directly target informational asymmetry by increasing both accessibility and analyzability of public data. Media freedom complements this by ensuring that disclosed information is not only available but actively interpreted, investigated, and communicated to the public, thereby strengthening the publicity mechanism outlined earlier. Administrative digitalization, meanwhile, reduces opportunities for discretionary decision-making by replacing opaque, face-to-face procedures with standardized digital workflows.

The remaining policy areas emphasize the institutionalization of transparency effects. Linking disclosure systems with formal complaint and sanctioning mechanisms strengthens accountability chains, ensuring that information exposure translates into enforceable consequences. Finally, investments in civic capacity—through support for watchdog organizations and data literacy programs—enhance the ability of society to interpret and mobilize transparency outputs. Collectively, these policy recommendations suggest that transparency reforms are most effective when they operate simultaneously at the levels of data production, information dissemination, enforcement capacity, and societal uptake.

Table 5. *Average Institutional Transparency Scores*

Country	Avg. Score	Std. Dev.	Trend
Albania	-0.18	0.12	Improving
Bosnia & Herzegovina	-0.42	0.10	Stable low
Kosovo	-0.35	0.09	Slight improvement
North Macedonia	-0.25	0.11	Improving
Serbia	-0.30	0.13	Fluctuating
Montenegro	-0.20	0.10	Stable improvement

Table 5 provides a comparative snapshot of average institutional transparency scores across Western Balkan countries, capturing both levels and temporal dynamics. Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro exhibit relatively better average scores compared to the regional baseline, with Albania and North Macedonia showing an improving trend, suggesting gradual institutional strengthening in transparency-related governance dimensions. Montenegro appears relatively stable in its improvement trajectory, indicating consistent but moderate progress. Kosovo, although slightly lower in average score than some regional peers, shows a mild upward trend, which may reflect incremental reforms in public administration and governance transparency mechanisms.

In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia demonstrate weaker or more unstable patterns. Bosnia and Herzegovina records the lowest average score and a stable low trajectory, indicating persistent structural constraints in transparency reforms and limited institutional consolidation. Serbia shows moderate performance but with notable fluctuations, suggesting that transparency gains are neither fully institutionalized nor consistently sustained over time. Overall, the table illustrates significant heterogeneity across the region, where incremental improvements coexist with structural stagnation, reinforcing the idea that transparency reforms in developing democracies are highly path-dependent and sensitive to institutional stability.

5. Conclusions

This study makes a substantive contribution to the literature by offering an integrated framework that explains not only when transparency reduces corruption perceptions, but also why it frequently fails to do so. By systematically linking transparency to its enabling institutional conditions, the analysis provides a clearer understanding of the mechanisms through which visibility translates into accountability. The identification of conditional and context-dependent effects advances the debate beyond linear assumptions and offers a more realistic foundation for both academic inquiry and policy design in developing democracies.

The central conclusion of this manuscript is that institutional transparency can reduce corruption perceptions in developing democracies, but it does so indirectly and conditionally. Transparency works best when information is public, understandable, and connected to mechanisms that can punish misconduct. In this sense, transparency is a necessary but not sufficient condition for corruption control.

The literature reviewed here suggests that transparency is most effective when combined with publicity and accountability. This is the principal lesson of Fox (2007), Lindstedt and

Naurin (2010), and Bauhr and Grimes (2014). Their combined contribution is that disclosure without enforcement may increase awareness without materially changing political incentives.

Digital governance tools strengthen the transparency agenda, but they do not eliminate institutional weaknesses on their own. E-government, web presence, and open data can reduce discretion and improve traceability, yet their value depends on rule enforcement, media access, and civic capacity. This is why the strongest findings in the literature are typically conditional rather than unconditional.

For developing democracies, the policy implication is clear. Anti-corruption reforms should not be limited to formal disclosure rules. They should also protect media freedom, simplify access to information, digitize public procedures, and strengthen complaint and sanction systems. Only then can transparency translate into a credible reduction in corruption perceptions.

Methodologically, the study shows the value of using multiple corruption indicators and multiple transparency proxies. Corruption perceptions are useful because they are comparable across countries, but they should be interpreted with caution and supplemented by institutional and behavioral measures whenever possible. Future research would benefit from combining CPI or WGI data with sector-specific transparency indicators and media freedom measures.

In sum, transparency is best understood as part of a governance ecosystem rather than as a standalone reform. Developing democracies that want to reduce corruption perceptions must therefore focus on the institutional conditions that make transparency usable, enforceable, and politically consequential.

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