

ThinkBox: An Open Government Agenda for Academics

Introduction

Academic research is fluid and dynamic and has been accelerating due to technological advancements such as artificial intelligence, pressure for scholarly productivity, international integration of researchers, new interdisciplinary fields, and the availability of open data – both in terms of big data and open-access scientific articles. In this context, Asian countries have played a significant role in the growth of global scientific production (Elsevier/Scopus, 2024; NSF, 2024).

Additionally, we are witnessing the hyper-specialization of specific topics. In the field of administration, an applied social science, we see a distinction between public and private administration. In our view, a topic that connects both fields is open government, which involves discussions on participation, transparency and accountability. We understand open government as a public sector reform movement centered on three central values: transparency, accountability and participation. Technology is prominent in advancing these values in many individual reform initiatives, but it is not a requirement (Piotrowski, Berliner, & Ingrams, 2022). Within this paper, we present a brief overview of current research trends and propose areas academics can consider focusing on going forward.

While open government typically refers to the executive branch, depending on a country's structure in terms of state definition and the division of powers, open government can also be incorporated into the concepts of Open Parliament and Open Justice and openness in other public institutions. In some countries, the idea of an Open State is gaining relevance (Oszlak, 2025; Brelaz & Teixeira, 2024). This structure affects and is related to private and public organizations. Integrity and fight against corruption policies focus on budgetary transparency, Freedom of Information Acts and their implementation, monitoring and impact at all levels of government. Open data platforms are examples of transparency initiatives implemented worldwide (Berliner, Ingrams, & Piotrowski, 2019). Initiatives that focus on accountability include general comptroller institutions, anti-corruption agencies and courts (Grin, Fernandes, Teixeira, & Angelico, 2024), plain-language public reporting tools (Langella, Anessi-Pessina, Botica Redmayne, & Sicilia, 2021), legislation and procedures for whistleblowers, open contracting and public/private bidding contract regulations. Researchers who analyze state oversight across its three branches of government and at the three federal levels focus on accountability and government transparency (Piotrowski et al., 2022; Cruz Rubio & Alujas, 2024; Fernandes, Fernandes, & Teixeira, 2023; Porumbescu, Meijer, & Grimmelikhuijsen, 2022).

Researchers of participatory spaces and institutions focus on a better understanding of how participatory practices and governments can be institutionalized, deepening and strengthening democracy or, in some cases, deinstitutionalize, exclude or demobilize grassroots organizations and social movements (Bezerra, Almeida, Gurza Lavalle, & Dowbor, 2024; Gurza Lavalle & Szwako, 2023). Public consultations (Cranstachaninov & Marques, 2025), co-creation processes (Romão, Rodrigues, & Serafim, 2025; Brelaz, Annunziata, Ribeiro, & Spicer, 2025),



public hearings (Brelaz & Alves, 2013), participation in public policy councils (Tatagiba, 2002; Gurza Lavalle, Guichenev, & Bezerra, 2024), citizens' assemblies' initiatives (Landemore, 2022; Cervellini, Rodrigues & Sendretti, 2024), education for participation (Lima & da Silva Craveiro, 2025) with gamification (Lerner, 2024), participatory budgeting (Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022; Porto de Oliveira, 2021), smart city initiatives and collaborative apps are examples of open government initiatives implemented in its participation pillar (Piotrowski *et al.*, 2022; Brelaz, Dias, Reinecke, Nascimento, & Rodrigues, 2025).

Research on open government

Academic publications on open government have been increasing, especially on open government data (Lourenço, Piotrowski, & Ingrams, 2017). However, most bibliometric analysis studies are conducted in English, presenting an opportunity to incorporate research in Spanish, Portuguese, German and other languages. This increase is strongly connected to the emergence in 2011 and worldwide development of the Open Government Partnership during the Barack Obama Administration, where the United States of America, Brazil, Indonesia, México, Norway, the Philippines, South Africa and Great Britain, together with nine civil society organizations[1], founded this transnational multi-stakeholder initiative “of reformers inside and outside of government working to transform how government serves its citizens” (OGP, 2025) by promoting transparent, participatory, inclusive and accountable governance. The Open Government Partnership includes 77 countries and 150 local governments, and its ecosystem is working to improve openness and strengthen democracy.

According to Tai (2021), there has been significant growth in academic studies on open government in the last decade. However, research gaps still hinder a better understanding of the phenomenon and the advancement of existing practices. For example, there are some opportunities to understand better how the concept of open government has been defined and conceptualized in literature. Researchers can explore how open government is used and implemented and the results or impacts that are attributed to open government initiatives. Part of Tai's research findings involves the conceptual ambiguities surrounding open government, the lack of empirical evidence regarding its effects and impacts and methodological concerns with some studies, mainly qualitative. According to the author, the reasons for these ambiguities are related to three things: (1) the lack of a theoretical foundation structuring open government knowledge and the causal relationships between different elements, (2) the variety of ways of open government programs and practices and (3) the multiple objectives and dimensions behind these initiatives.

A systematic review of open government data research by Gao, Janssen and Zhang (2023) also brings critical reflections and challenges. According to Gao and coauthors, publishing governmental information in free, open formats increases governmental transparency, can increase civil society engagement and helps generate public value through innovation. The benefits of these initiatives for economics, transparency and accountability are incontestable. However, for these possibilities to prosper, it is essential to have civil society organizations and private companies analyze this data and extract information that can have a positive impact on governmental and societal functioning. Competencies and abilities to extract and analyze massive databases with quantitative methods are not widespread in society, especially in developing countries. In this sense, the challenge for scholars is to teach quantitative skills and techniques and prepare students to use open government as a human right, obtain information through freedom of information act-type requests in a “do it yourself” or unlock open government sense with the support of artificial intelligence.

Future research agenda

Within this paper section, we highlight areas that academics should consider when developing their short- to mid-term research agendas.

Range of methodological approaches. There are significant opportunities for future research, including exploring a wider variety of methods. Qualitative research focuses more on case studies and the transformations that open government initiatives bring at the local and national levels. While these case studies are invaluable, we also need to work towards having a standard impact assessment that compares initiatives across different countries and quantitatively measures this impact. Research may consider using qualitative comparative analysis, referred to as QCA, to understand the link between theories and outcomes (Marx, Cambre, & Rihoux, 2013; Ragin, Shulman, Weinberg, & Gran, 2003). Researchers may consider using more mixed methods and, where appropriate, quantitative approaches to answer their research questions. The field should embrace new tools such as large language model analysis (Kamath, Keenan, Somers, & Sorenson, 2024) and experiments (Grimmelikhuijsen, Piotrowski, & Van Ryzin, 2020).

Policy cycle. Researchers should consider analyzing open government under a policy cycle framework. It is relevant to understand the *de jure* and *de facto* institutionalization of open government as a policy or as a public management reform under the lenses of historical approaches (Evans, Rueschemeyer, & Skocpol, 1985), rational choice (March & Olsen, 1989) and sociological institutionalism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2013) and its forms mimetic, normative and coercive (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Policy evaluation, the final stage of the public policy cycle, is often relegated to a secondary level and is frequently not performed due to governmental disinterest, fear of unsatisfactory results, lack of data collection and systematization, discontinuity of the policy or changes in management due to the electoral cycle.

Subnational-level research. Another important initiative is the focus on open government at the local level. The expansion in 2024 from 100 cities to 150 as part of the Open Government Partnership strategy is part of this multi-stakeholder organization to develop initiatives close to the people directly affected by them in their 2019 strategy. At the local level, citizens' participation and mobilization are more likely to occur effectively and enduringly. Researchers can tackle a series of questions: How do cities' and countries' political and cultural differences, civil society empowerment, democratic histories and regulatory frameworks affect the development of subnational open government practices? How do national governments induce or coerce local governments to adopt open government initiatives? What is the impact of the leadership role in open government? What is the influence of civil society on open government adoption? What are the strategies of bureaucratic activism (Abers, 2019)?

Policy diffusion. Another important line of research is understanding the history and diffusion of open government initiatives on different continents. Researchers can explore questions such as, why do the American countries (North, Central and South) embrace the Open Government Partnership and other continents not in the same way? How does institutional mimetism influence the adoption of open government policies? How do political parties and ideologies influence the adoption of open government policies? How does an open government ecosystem function as a diffusion network? What are the most successful strategies and why? How is open government at the executive power diffused and incorporated by the parliament and judiciary powers? How is the open state being constructed as a transnational movement?

Final thoughts

We have observed a notable rise in open government initiatives – alongside instances of “open-washing” – particularly in the areas of open data and transparency platforms, driven by regulatory and legal requirements. Scholars must continue expanding their research agendas to deepen our understanding of these initiatives and their implications. Beyond research, academics can enhance their teaching by integrating these topics into undergraduate and graduate curricula.

Scholars can also engage with citizens, governments and civil society organizations through a range of activities. Academia plays a crucial role in training public managers, citizens and activists from social movements, grassroots organizations and non-governmental organizations. Training can equip these groups to monitor and analyze data from open data platforms, make freedom-of-information-type requests to enhance government transparency, pressure for participatory spaces and hold these organizations accountable.

Moreover, there is significant potential to explore how participation, one of the main pillars of open government and the least systematically institutionalized among government initiatives, is implemented. Beyond co-creating open government plans, participation can be more broadly integrated into governmental practices by bringing society systemically into co-design, co-creation, co-implementation and co-evaluation. In some cases, these spaces already exist but are underutilized, as seen in the case of policy councils in Brazil. As the field continues to evolve, the responsible use of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, presents a valuable area for academic exploration.

How open are governments to these initiatives? How prepared are bureaucrats to manage the mediation of citizens' interests and needs, as well as possible restraints from representative democracy actors? These are critical questions we need to continue to examine. Open government, both as a research agenda and as a focus of academic teaching and training, is crucial in strengthening the pillars of transparency, participation and accountability. By engaging students, academia can help build more open and responsive governance. The hope is that these efforts contribute to deepening democracy and reinforcing its core values.

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Notes

1. The founding civil society members of the Open Government Partnership were International Budget Partnership, Mexican Institute for Competitiveness, Natural Resource Governance Institute, Transparency and Accountability Initiative, Africa Center for Open Governance, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (Workers and Peasants Strength of the Union), Twaweza, National Security Archive and Institute of Socioeconomic Studies.

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