

# Government Transparency: What Does It Mean, and How's the President Doing?

by Diana Lopez

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The Cato Institute hosted a panel on Capitol Hill with Representative Darrell Issa in late September. The panel, "Publication Practices for Transparent Government: Rating the Congress," also included Policy Director at the Sunlight Foundation John Wonderlich and Director of Information Policy Studies at the Cato Institute Jim Harper.

Jim Harper from the Cato Institute was the first to speak. Harper authored a study for the Cato Institute titled "Publication Practices for Transparent Government," where he notes that transparency transcends political divisions, but it is often broadly defined--we all want transparency, but we don't know exactly what it is.

The solution is to make transparency mean something.

Transparency needs determinacy. It needs to have aims and it needs to be about meaningful access to government. Harper's solution is to address publication practices for government data and documents, and to make these practices explicit. He recommends four focuses:

- Authority. Governments should publish data where people will look, and where people can trust.
- Availability. Data should be accessible and complete. Harper notes that often, poor planning sabotages this criterion.
- Discoverability. The data should be easy to find using a computer search.
- Machine readability. Data should be structured so that meaning can be drawn out by computers.

Harper's guidelines are a practical solution to defining transparency. Drafting procedures for ensuring meaningful government transparency helps citizens hold governments to clear standards.

As far as the President on transparency, Harper criticized President Obama for the lack of forward movement on transparency. He's not alone. While many applaud the president for bringing attention to transparency, others note that Obama's transparency initiatives have been mixed (and even ironic at times).

A new project of the administration does have promise. Harper sees "We the People" as valuable. The site allows any user (registration is required) to submit suggestions to the President's administration. However, the initiative doesn't give us core insight of what goes on in government. So it falls short of ideal government transparency.

The most conspicuous transparency effort of the Obama Administration has been Data.gov. Data.gov was defined under a memorandum from the Desk of the President and tasks federal agencies with publishing three high value datasets on the site. However, Harper notes that the definition of "high value" is broad and subjective. As a result, while the President's office released high value sets, but not all agencies did.

This again speaks to the problem of determinancy in government transparency: without clear expectations as to what transparency means and compliance left up to interpretation, many government entities just won't live up to high standards. Data.gov also drives home Harper's point there is a lot more to transparency than mere data disclosure. For example, while Obama's office did release the high value data sets in accordance with the open data memorandum, there are still serious concerns that the President's administration is clouded by secrecy and broken transparency promises.

What is the solution? A good place to start is Harper's approach to distinguish between meaningful access to government and minimum compliance to transparency laws. And to enact strict definitions for the jargon used in transparency legislation.