Perceptions of City Managers About Open Government Policies:

Concepts, Development, and Implementation in the Local Level of Government in Spain

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ABSTRACT

At this point, the role of the concept Open Government (OG) has been key promoting transparency, participation and collaboration in public administration worldwide. This article presents research about the open government (OG) phenomena in Spanish municipalities over 50,000 inhabitants (146 municipalities), using a questionnaire. Particularly, the research objective of this article is looking at the perceptions of city managers responsible for OG policies in order to understand more about this emergent public policy in the local layer of government. The results are consistent with a notion of OG associated to terms like transparency or access to information, and less to collaboration, co-production, of technologies or electronic government. In addition, the results confirm the intention of city managers to promote transparency or access to information with OG policies, while other possible outcomes (collaboration, managerial improvements or reduction of management costs) are less popular. Finally, the implementation of OG policies remains in its initial stages, whereas they are much expanded in strategic plans or units/departments at the local level of government in Spain.

KEYWORDS

Adoption, City Managers, Open Government, Public Policy, Spain, Survey Research

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is examining the diffusion of the Open Government (OG) policy in the local level of government in Spain and the perception of those responsible of its implementation. This research departed from the need of empirical research about the OG concept and its application as a public policy. Particularly, this study addresses the perceptions of city managers responsible of its implementation in the Spanish local level of government. From here, this paper aims at expanding the dialogue about the research on OG, as well as the implementation of this emergent, albeit not new, policy field.

The evolution of OG has been enormous during recent times. The concept seems to be in continuous evolution, and a number of authors have contributed with valuable insights and evidence with very different research perspectives and objectives (Abu-Shanab, 2015; Criado, 2013; Ganapati & Reddick, 2012; Gascó, 2014; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012; Lathrop & Ruma, 2010; Meijer, Curtin & Hillebrandt; 2012; Oszlak & Kaufman, 2014; Ruvalcaba-Gomez, Criado, & Gil-Garcia, 2017; Scholl,

Kubicek, Cimander, & Klischewski, 2012; Wijnhoven et al 2015; Yang, Pardo, & Wu, 2014). However, it is unclear that all of those who write, speak, and research about OG have the same realities in mind; on the contrary, it seems to be different ideas about this slippery concept.

The aim of this research implies the approximation to the institutional perception of local governments in Spain from the opinions of those responsible for managing this policy field. The research seeks to publicize the institutional point of view of local governments in what is understood as OG. This study presents three research questions: (1) What is the perception of those who manage OG about this concept? (2) What is the perception of those who manage OG regarding the level of development in their organization? (3) What are the realities of implementation of OG in local public administrations?

This paper offers the results of a questionnaire responded by those responsible of OG policies in the city councils of more than 50,000 inhabitants in Spain. The statistical analysis has permitted an exploratory answer of the abovementioned research questions; however, it also displays valuable conclusions that will support future investigation in the field. From this exploratory perspective, we tackle with a country that is recently very involved in the development of openness in government at different levels. The research assumes the hypothesis that OG is a concept widely used, but dispersed, and there are multiple perceptions about its contents and contours, both academically and in the governmental practice. Then, as a popular concept among academics and practitioners, it is interesting to know about the meaning among public managers, because this layer has closer links with citizens in everyday life.

The next section of the article offers the theoretical and conceptual framework of the research, including the attention to the OG antecedents, its conceptual scope, and the interest on perceptions of public managers. Then, the analytical strategy and the research methods are presented, including the questionnaire delivered to gather the data of the study. Fourth, the findings and analysis section present the data with descriptive statistical analysis, regarding three dimensions: (1) the perceptions about the OG concept; (2) the perceptions about the OG development; and (3) the realities of OG implementation in the units of analysis. At the end, the conclusion/debate section will sum up the most relevant findings of the study, opening the discussion for future contributions in this same policy field.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section presents the theoretical and conceptual framework of the paper. Broadly speaking, Open Government (OG) is not a recent concept. Parks (1957) entitled an article "The open Government Principle: Applying the Right to Know under the Constitution", in which he focused on the access and freedom of information in a political momentum characterized by the need of improving accountability. That article highlighted the importance of the context to understand OG, and the relationship of this concept with the political agenda of the moment. Here, our paper assumes the uniqueness of the actual wave of interest about OG, not only for the distinctiveness of the moment, but also because OG seems to claim its place as a public policy field in the governmental landscape.

A Few Antecedents About the Open Government Phenomenon

This new wave of OG derives from different reasons. One of them is the relatively recent revitalization coming from the "Memorandum for Transparency and Open Government", first antecedent adopted under the Obama administration (January 21, 2009). Complementary, different international organizations, including the OECD, the World Bank or the Inter-American Development Bank, have contributed to put OG initiatives as an issue on top of the political and administrative agendas elsewhere. Additionally, the Open Government Partnership, a multilateral organization founded in 2011 and now including 69 national governments, has contributed to spread the voice of OG and, at the same time, boosting the adoption, and annual evaluation, of national action plans.

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