Richter Presentation 2013

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Project

• I am helping Professor Marquardt research for his book, *Obama and the Politics of Public Transparency*.

• My research involves chapters three and four
Obama and the Politics of Transparency

- **Part I**
  - Chapter 1  Transparency and politics in the American experience
  - Chapter 2  Obama’s theory of public transparency

- **Part II**  Public transparency at home
  - Chapter 3  Transparency of the executive branch
    - Government agencies and Freedom of Information (FOIA)
    - Data.gov: Information dissemination on the Web
    - Federal spending disclosure
    - Open Government Initiative: public engagement
    - White House Transparency
  - Chapter 4  Classification and desclassification: Leaks, state secrecy, and the proper disclosure of “sensitive information”
  - Chapter 5  Transparency and executive-legislative affairs
Obama and the Politics of Transparency

• **Part III** Transparency and international politics
  - **Chapter 6** Open societies and the advancement of liberal democracy
  - **Chapter 7** Public diplomacy
  - **Chapter 8** Transparency and international cooperation
    - Security: arms control and confidence building measures
    - Economics: trade and monetary affairs
    - Environment: climate change negotiations
Purpose

• The purpose of the book is to identify the dynamics between power politics and transparency in the United States under the Obama administration.

• The thesis for the book is that public transparency—or open government—is a paradox. It is a mechanism to reduce mutual suspicion and overcome the competition for power in political life. But it is also part and parcel of suspicion and competition, since support for and opposition to open government is a function of power politics. Actors support open government when doing so enhances their power, and they oppose it when it does not.
Open Government Initiatives

- On February 1, 2009 President Obama took office and upon doing so, he signed the Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government. Some of the details in the memorandum involve:
  - reducing the influence of special interests by writing new ethics rules that prevent lobbyists from coming to work in government or obtaining any powerful role in government that could be used to benefit his or her group.
  - tracking how government uses the people’s tax money with easy to understand websites like recovery.gov, USASpending.gov, and IT.usaspending.gov.
Government Watchdog Groups

• President Obama’s transparency is constantly evaluated by several watchdog groups such as:
  - Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington
  - the Data Transparency Coalition
  - the Sunlight Foundation
  - Judicial Watch
Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington

• Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington or CREW, is considered a “liberal” or “non-partisan” watchdog group founded in 2003.
• Its founding was said to be as a way to counteract Judicial Watch, a conservative watchdog group.
• In 2010, journalist for politico.com claimed that CREW made charges on mostly Republican targets for ethics violations, but not entirely conservatives.
• Although CREW believes that the Obama administration has made some steps toward transparency, the group is still critical of the administration’s slow response to Freedom of Information Act requests and Director Melanie Sloan stated, “experience indicates there is still a long way to go.”
The Data Transparency Coalition

• The Data Transparency Coalition was founded in February of 2012 by Hudson Hollister.
• The Coalition is made up of six different data integration companies as regular members (Adaptive, IPHIX, Level One Technologies, RR Donnelley, Smartronix, and WebFilings).
• Each member does not endorse every aspect of the Coalition’s proposals “but are committed to helping the U.S. government move toward greater efficiency and better transparency by deploying consistent data standards.”
• Hollister is rather critical of the Obama administration and was quoted in in a Washington Post article saying “they’ve been reluctant to take positions and translate that to real action.” This statement is regarding Obama’s transparency.
The Sunlight Foundation

• The Sunlight Foundation is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization that was founded in 2006 by Ellen S. Miller and Michael R. Klein.

• Upon its founding, Sunlight’s goal has been to call to arms greater government transparency by engaging individual citizens and communities, while demanding policies that will enable “us all to hold the government accountable.”

• In 2007, conservative blogger Mark Tapscott was quoted saying, “I think Sunlight is doing more good things on a wider front than anybody has ever done before.”

• Some of Sunlight’s main accomplishments are the Exposing Earmarks campaign which led to a bill calling for a publicly accessible online detailing earmarks for all bills before Congress, and Congresspedia, which is a “citizen’s encyclopedia of Congress,” where citizens can write about the issues that are before Congress.

• Sunlight policy director John Wonderlich was quoted saying in 2011 regarding the Obama administration’s transparency, “the results are decidedly mixed,” regarding agencies meeting their goals for making data available, “Often, however, agencies have failed to live up to the standards that they set for themselves as a result of the Open Government Directive.”
Judicial Watch

• Judicial Watch was founded in 1994 and is considered a “conservative, nonpartisan” foundation.

• Judicial Watch’s consistent investigations against members of the Democratic Party have led to accusations that the group is more politically driven to help Republicans rather than motivated to ensure transparency.

• In 2012, Judicial Watch was denied a Freedom of Information Act request by President Obama involving the Department of Energy and upon this denied request Watch President Tom Fitton was less than pleased saying, “the Obama administration’s response to this simple FOIA request is not only dishonest it is insulting to the American People.”
State Secrecy

• Recently, President Obama has come under much scrutiny regarding an alleged cover-up related to the attack on the American diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya on September 11th, 2012.

• There has also be a charge that the Internal Revenue Service targeted conservative interest groups for higher scrutiny in 2012.
Benghazi “Cover-Up”

• Arizona Senator, John McCain recently called into question the Obama administration’s forth coming with all of the facts regarding the attack, saying “I would call it a cover-up in the extent that there was willful removal of information which was obvious.”

• In the days following the Senator’s statement, the release of emails between the White House, FBI, CIA, State Department and Justice Department revealed that the initial talking points regarding the attack were edited multiple times as opposed to the one change that White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said was made.

• Congress is currently investigating whether or not the Obama administration had previous knowledge of the attack days before it happened, and altered their talking points to cover up that they had knowledge of it.

• If it comes out that the President had previous knowledge and did nothing to increase security or get the Ambassador Stevens or the three Americans out of Libya before hand, there would be great outrage from the American people as well as backlash from Congress.
IRS “Scandal”

• In 2012, the IRS targeted Tea Party (Republican) groups, whose applications for tax-exempt status were delayed or strongly looked into just because of the group name.

• Both Joseph Grant, head of the tax-exempt and government entities division and former IRS Commissioner Steven Miller have resigned from the IRS in the wake of the investigation, so it is clear that there was some wrongdoing.

• The White House has not been directly tied to the issue but it calls into question whether or not the IRS should be responsible for carrying out the Affordable Care Act, that is President Obama’s health care legislation that was passed by Congress in 2012.
Summary

• President Obama has made great strides in making government data available to citizens, more than any other President.

• However, many government watchdog groups are not satisfied because in some cases the information has not been released on time, and many groups including, Judicial Watch and Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, believe that Freedom of Information Act requests are seldom granted.

• Recent scandals involving government agencies and the White House itself, have also led to an increase in the number of Americans that call the Obama administration’s transparency into question.
Sources

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