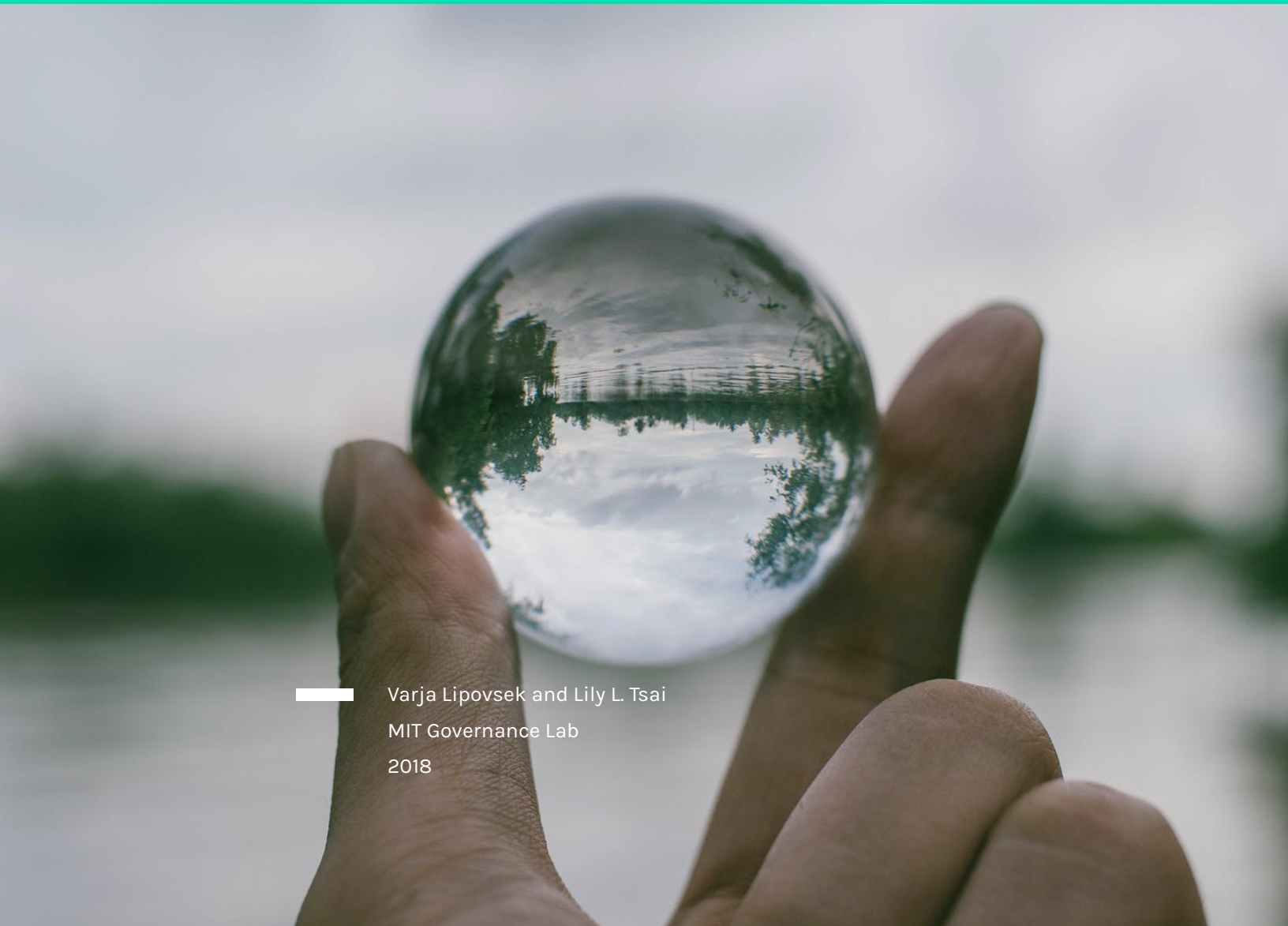


# How to Learn from Evidence:

— A Solutions in Context Approach

— Varja Lipovsek and Lily L. Tsai  
MIT Governance Lab  
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MITGOV/LAB

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The Learning from Evidence series documents a learning process undertaken by the Transparency and Accountability Initiative to engage with and utilize the evolving evidence base in support of our members' transparency and accountable governance goals. We are pleased to have partnered with MIT's Governance Lab and Twaweza on this initiative. This series comprises a variety of practice- and policy-relevant learning products for funders and practitioners alike, from evidence briefs, to more detailed evidence syntheses, to tools to support the navigation of evidence in context.

— For more information contact:  
Transparency and Accountability Initiative  
OpenGov Hub, 1110 Vermont Ave NW #500  
Washington, DC 20005

[www.transparency-initiative.org](http://www.transparency-initiative.org)

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# How to Learn from Evidence: A Solutions in Context Approach

*We lay out an approach for how donors and practitioners can more usefully engage with evidence to inform their work on information and non-electoral accountability. The focus of this approach is twofold: be more precise in specifying accountability actors of interest, and look for evidence from contexts that are similar to where you want to work in terms of how your accountability actors of interest relate to one another. Below we explain these points in more detail, and provide a step-by-step approach to applying solutions in context, including an online pilot tool. This is a work in progress and feedback is welcome through [mitgovlab@mit.edu](mailto:mitgovlab@mit.edu).*

■ Evidence reviews do not generate new findings; they look for patterns across studies and often provide confirmation of what we think we know. Arguably, this is an important function for implementers and funders alike: by subjecting our prior assumptions to the cumulative knowledge of an evidence review, we either confirm them, or, perhaps more interestingly, realize that some of our assumptions may be wrong. The trouble is that evidence pertaining to a specific question is seldom uniform, and evidence reviews often struggle to weave together disparate findings into a common narrative of “what works.”

Building off previous reviews ([Gaventa & McGee 2013](#), [Fox 2015](#)) we set out to update the current state of evidence of “what works in promoting better governance (increased transparency, accountability, and citizen participation).” In dialogue with members of the Transparency and Accountability Initiative (TAI) we selected a limited number of specific questions that were of common interest. We generated three

substantive memos on the available scientific evidence on these specific topics: taxation and accountability (Tsai, Toral, Read, & Lipovsek 2018), international standards on accountability (Tsai, Morse, Toral, & Lipovsek 2018) and information and accountability (forthcoming).

This process of iterative discussions with practitioners, TAI, and its members also generated **two reflections** which we believe are important insights as to how we ought to think about and engage with existing evidence on governance outcomes.

First, requests or questions for evidence reviews are commonly under-specified. We learn more about our own assumptions and from the ensuing evidence reviews if we first develop more nuanced and specified hypotheses, or causal pathways, to guide how we investigate the evidence.

Second, most evidence reviews identify studies with rigorous methodologies, but do not account for – or discuss – the contextual factors that might enable particular interventions to have an impact (or prevent them from doing so). As a result, users of evidence (i.e., practitioners and funders) tend to overlook contextual factors when making decisions as to how the evidence relates to their own questions, even though . “common sense suggests that we are more likely to find a similar result in a new context, if the new context is similar to the one where the program was first tested” (Bates & Glennerster, 2017). Further, Sandefur and Pritchett recommend “the need to evaluate programs in context, and avoid simple analogies to clinical medicine in which “systematic reviews” attempt to identify best-practices by putting most (or all) weight on the most “rigorous” evidence with no allowance for context” (2013).

Taken together, these two reflections mean that the questions posed by practitioners and funders to guide evidence reviews are often too vague, and the evidence reviews produced often take little notice of core contextual factors that affect the intervention’s impact on the outcomes of interest.

**A solutions-in-context approach requires, first, that we specify who the accountability actor is and whom they seek to hold accountable, and second, that we look for evidence in contexts where the relationship between these actors is similar to our context of interest.**

Social science has long struggled with the generalizability question – that is, whether and how do findings in one context translate to another. Policy and program implementers will always consider a range of factors and information in making decisions; when it comes to research evidence, we would like them to use the “best” evidence possible. In our view, “best” is not only rigorous, it is also contextually relevant, yet common approaches of reviewing literature do not systematically include contextual factors.

In the rest of this memo, we explain what these reflections mean for the governance questions we addressed in conducting evidence reviews for TAI. We include a description and link to a beta-version online tool which illustrates how future evidence reviews can enable readers to take both of these reflections into account.

## How to engage more meaningfully with evidence? First: who is taking the accountability actions, and acting on whom

Many of our initial discussions revolved around establishing which accountability relationships were of interest to TAI members. We realized that the conversations are made easier if we offer a simple categorization of the most common accountability actors, the possible accountability behaviors they can undertake, and some of the more salient hypothesized accountability relationships.

For instance, non-governmental accountability actors (e.g., civil society organizations, journalists, media) can monitor governmental actors, but they cannot sanction them. They can also increase the capacity or motivation of citizens to monitor governmental actors, although citizens are also largely unable to sanction non-elected officials.

We developed a “[Pathways to Change Map](#)” (the Map) to guide these conversations, and ultimately the selection of the specific questions for which we reviewed evidence. The Map is now part of TAI’s strategic document. Although not a comprehensive representation of all accountability pathways, it does capture the combined hypotheses of accountability of the TAI members.

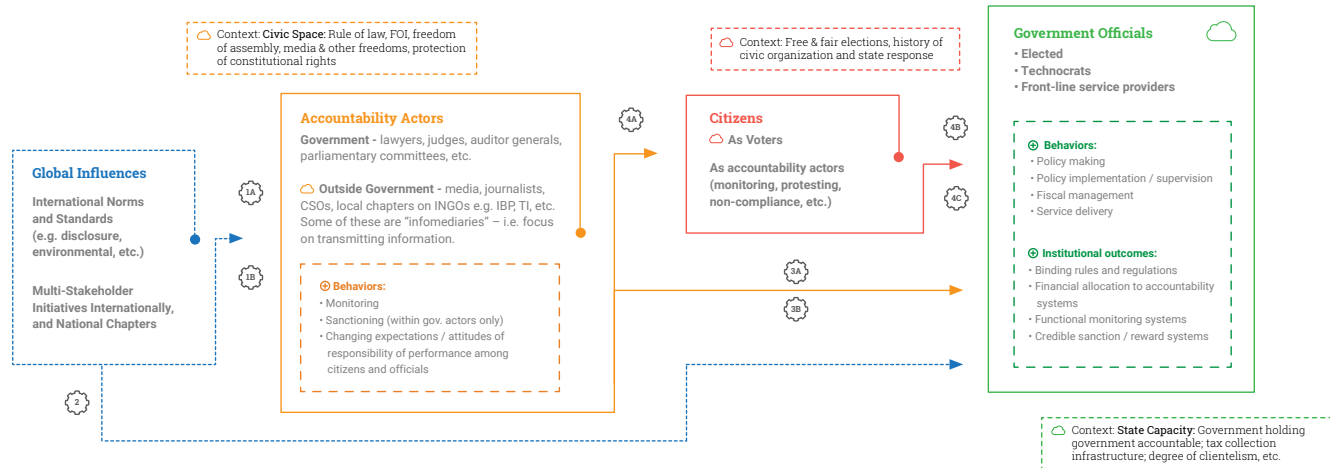
Many of the “gaps” in knowledge that currently exist in accountability evidence are more clearly visible through this lens of accountability actors and actions. These gaps suggest where we should turn for future implementation and research. Moreover, specifying the accountability actors and actions can inform expectations of what outcomes can be achieved realistically through a particular initiative.

### **WE TURN TO ONE OF THE MAIN QUESTIONS IN THE EVIDENCE REVIEW: WHEN DOES TRANSPARENCY INCREASE ACCOUNTABILITY?**

It sounds overly simplistic, but we often fail to specify the pathway and actors through which a change is meant to occur. To give examples of typical (and real) questions posed for evidence reviews: “When do fiscal transparency efforts contribute to accountability?”; or “What is the role of ‘infomediaries’ in promoting

## Pathways to Change Map

This represents critical causal pathways common to TAI donor members' theories of change. It is in no way a representation of pathways to change for the TAP field as a whole.



accountability?" In both of these questions it's not clear who is acting on whom, and what the outcome is meant to be.

To identify the evidence that should inform your decision about whether and how to use transparency and information provision to increase accountability, we first define which government actors we want to hold accountable and who we want to hold them accountable.

Take the following example: "How useful are community scorecard interventions at holding health care providers accountable in India?" The accountability actor is the "community," the accountability action or tool is a scorecard, and the government actors to be held accountable are health care providers.

Another question might be, "Is information obtained through right to information (RTI) requests in places with dominant-party regimes likely to enable citizens to hold local politicians accountable for better performance?" Here, the accountability actors are "citizens", the accountability action or tool is obtaining information through RTI mechanisms, and the government actors to be held accountable are local politicians.

Even if you have a more general question – "How well do informational interventions work in fragile states?" – you will learn far more if you can break it down into a series of smaller questions, for example: "How well do informational interventions work to enable citizens in weak states to hold frontline service providers accountable? To hold politicians accountable? To hold bureaucrats accountable?"

**First define which government actors we want to hold accountable and who we want to hold them accountable**

We argue that more specificity is better at the time of articulating the original question. The production of rigorous evidence is structured by hypotheses that investigate specific actors and outcomes, and thus the findings are specific to these actors and outcomes.<sup>1</sup> The Pathways to Change Map is meant to aid in this specification, by identifying some of the main government actors and their behavioral outcomes, as well as accountability actors and their behaviors.

## How to engage more meaningfully with evidence? Second: Look for solutions in context

As noted earlier, Pritchett and Sandefur (2013) demonstrate that evidence from an observational study with a high degree of uncertainty about its conclusions but conducted in your context is, on average, going to be less wrong than a randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted in a very different context. In other words, evidence about an intervention comparable to the one you're considering is more likely to be applicable when its context is also similar to your context.

### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CONTEXT?

There are an infinite number of contextual factors; how do we know which ones are important when we want to identify contexts that are similar to ours?

The relevant factors are aspects of the context that are likely to affect how information and transparency affect the actor(s) whose behavior you want to change, whether those are citizens whom you want to encourage to monitor politicians, higher-level bureaucrats whom you want to motivate to supervise frontline service providers more closely, or media organizations whom you are convincing to run public awareness campaigns. (These factors are the variables that we would typically control for in a regression analysis.)

Take, for example, a transparency initiative that makes information about government budgets widely available to citizens. We would want to know: Do they live in a *competitive democracy* where they can vote politicians unable to account for the misuse of public funds out of office? Do they live in an *extremely poor country* where taking the time to travel to the district capital to obtain the information or register a complaint is simply too costly? Do they live in a *clientelist system* where they are so dependent on goodies distributed by vote brokers that they don't feel they can afford to vote their patrons out of office even if they learn new information about how much their politicians are stealing?

1. For meaningful intervention design, we would argue that considerably higher levels of specificity are needed. For example, when thinking about accountability actors, who is meant by community and citizens? We also know from experience and research that identifying and understanding motivations, opportunities and barriers to action for a specific target group is of critical importance in designing an intervention that will be effective in promoting action among that group.



## HOW DO WE DETERMINE COMPARABLE CONTEXTS?

For simplicity, we consider three main types of actors: citizens, politicians, and bureaucrats (or other unelected officials, including frontline service providers).

To start with, we draw on existing theoretical literature to identify a few basic contextual factors for each of these actors. Then, we looked for indices that measure the factor (or a core component of the factor) and are available for a large number of countries. The list of indices included can be found in the Annex. Note that these lists of contextual factors are preliminary and intended as a starting point for further discussion rather than as definitive and exhaustive.

**All actors.** There are a few basic contextual factors that we would argue affect the incentives, resources, and political power of all these actors. They are:

- Level of economic development
- Strength of rule of law
- Regime type
- Degree of corruption/clientelism

**Citizens.** What other contextual factors enable or constrain the ability of citizens to take advantage of transparency mechanisms, use information, and influence government actors? Some important factors include:

- Degree of civic space and protection for civil freedoms
- Strength of civil society sector and social movements
- Professionalization of bureaucracy /bureaucratic capacity  
*Is there a professionalized civil service with meritocratic selection and formal institutions for rewarding good performance (and punishing bad performance), which may serve as a potential ally for citizens?*
- Social capital

**Bureaucrats /judicial bodies.** What contextual factors affect the ability of bureaucrats, unelected officials, and judicial bodies to take advantage of transparency and information to hold other government actors accountable?

- Professionalization of bureaucracy /bureaucratic capacity  
*Are there likely to be formal channels within the bureaucracy for bureaucrats to report and sanction other government actors? Are there likely to be incentives for bureaucrats to do so?*
- Existence or strength of horizontal accountability institutions  
*Are there independent institutions such as auditing agencies, courts, or anti-corruption agencies that enable bureaucrats to report and sanction other government actors? And are there protections for bureaucrats who do so?*

We draw on existing literature to identify relevant contextual factors for each of these accountability actors



**Politicians.** What contextual factors affect the ability of politicians to hold each other and other government actors accountable? What factors enable politicians to be immune to these pressures?

- Degree of procedural democracy
- Degree of civic space and protection for civil freedoms
- Strength of civil society sector and social movements

These are not intended to be comprehensive lists. Rather, we use them to illustrate *how* to think about the contextual factors that are likely to matter in a governance initiative. We have limited ourselves to factors for which there were available indices with data for a large number of countries; there are other factors which may be equally or more important but for which such indices do not yet exist. The point we are making, though, is that thinking through contextual factors is critical when considering what kind of evidence is most relevant to a specific governance question in a particular context.

## Combining better questions and context in one interactive evidence tool

In the [Information and Non-Electoral Accountability: Evidence Review](#) (Tsai & Lipovsek 2018) we combine the two main points made in this memo: specifying the question better, then considering relevant contextual factors.

We have created this interactive evidence tool – beta version – to illustrate how a searchable database version of our approach could work. This is not only for ease of use, but also because all evidence reviews become dated the moment they are finished. Having a living tool, which could be updated as new information becomes available, might be a better approach to ongoing learning.

There is a brief [demonstration video](#) on the interactive evidence tool site that explains how to interact with the evidence.<sup>2</sup> We also describe those steps below.

In the tool's query menu, you start by answering two questions.

- **Which government actors do you want to hold accountable?** *Select different government actors in the “Whose behavior do you want to change?” and “Government level” filters.*
- **Who has the power (or whom do you want) to hold them accountable?** *Select actors — citizens, government, politicians — in the “Who is doing the change?” filter.*

2. You can find the Information and Non-Electoral Accountability: Evidence Review Tool online: <https://mitgovlab.org/results/information-and-non-electoral-accountability-evidence-in-context/>

The Information and Non-Electoral Accountability: Evidence Review illustrates how we can apply the 'solution' in our approach to transparency and accountability is that this approach allows governments to frame CSOs as foreign, with little legitimacy, and its leadership as a privileged elite

Transparency and information are likely to have very different success rates and effects on increasing citizen monitoring of frontline service providers in, for example, the Philippines where the civil society sector is highly developed and the bureaucracy is functional, as compared to Liberia, which suffers from weak social organizations and a minimal state. An intervention that works in the Philippines should not be exported to Liberia without careful consideration and piloting.

The Information and Non-Electoral Accountability: Evidence Review gives two options for specifying the context in which you are working.

**Option 1:** You can simply select the country in which you are working. If a country is selected, the tool will provide all the studies in that country as well as a list of studies from similar contexts based on your answers to the two questions above. You can specify whether you'd like results for between one and ten most similar countries.

Select context for your project: ⓘ

**Who is doing the change? (principal)**

Citizens

**Whose behavior do you want to change? (agent)**

Bureaucrats

**What levels of government are addressed?**

Any  Local / Municipal  Province / State  National

**Country of interest?**

Indonesia

0 total studies found for selected context. Please specify a different context or a search range for similar countries to your selected country (with available studies) below.

Select the actors, government level, and country context for your project

**Option 2:** You can answer a specific list of questions about context tailored to your answers to the two questions above. The list tailored by our tool corresponds to the contextual factors discussed above for citizens, politicians, and bureaucrats.

Expand your search to studies from comparable country contexts: ⓘ

10 most contextually comparable countries (with available studies) to **Indonesia** regarding the behavior of **Citizens** and **Bureaucrats** \*

Kenya, Peru, Uganda, India, Pakistan, Madagascar, Benin, Brazil, China, Chile

\*Comparability factors ▼

Filter on additional study criteria:

Sector	Setting	Information delivery mode	Research methodology
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Any	<input type="checkbox"/> Any	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Any	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Any
<input type="checkbox"/> Education	<input type="checkbox"/> Urban	<input type="checkbox"/> Trainings	<input type="checkbox"/> Experimental
<input type="checkbox"/> Entitlements	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Rural	<input type="checkbox"/> Media campaign	<input type="checkbox"/> Quasi experimental (SOO)
<input type="checkbox"/> Health	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Peri-urban	<input type="checkbox"/> Pamphlets or letters	<input type="checkbox"/> Quasi experimental (FE)
<input type="checkbox"/> Other		<input type="checkbox"/> Information requests	<input type="checkbox"/> Quasi experimental (DiD)
		<input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Quasi experimental (RDD)
			<input type="checkbox"/> Quasi experimental (IV)
			<input type="checkbox"/> Correlational
			<input type="checkbox"/> Qualitative case study

Expand the search by also looking at the most similar country contexts and filter by additional criteria

### CURRENT LIST OF CONTEXTUAL FACTORS AVAILABLE IN THE INTERACTIVE EVIDENCE TOOL

The categories are listed below. For details on the data (indices) that are used for each category please refer to the Annex.

1. Level of economic development
2. Rule of law
3. Regime type
4. Degree of corruption and clientelism
5. Degree of procedural democracy
6. Degree of civic space and protection for civil freedoms
7. Strength of civil society sector and social movements
8. Professionalization of bureaucracy /bureaucratic capacity

Once the parameters are set, the tool suggests which countries are most similar to the "country of interest" and the table is populated with relevant studies

- 9. Level of social capital (as one component of the embeddedness of agents and strength of community social institutions)
- 10. Existence or strength of horizontal accountability institutions

Once the parameters are set, the tool suggests which countries are most similar to the "country of interest" and the table is populated with relevant studies. This is where the real work starts: once the studies are suggested, the user still has to read through them (the tool includes abstracts, but not full papers) to determine, in more detail, the actual applicability and relevance of the study and its findings.

17 total studies for query (click on a circle to download PDF summary of corresponding studies):

What the study measures →	Ability to hold government to account		Effort to hold government to account		Government accountability		Government performance
	Knowledge of how to monitor government	Knowledge of how to sanction government	Monitoring of government	Sanctioning of government	Government effort	Government corruption	Government services
Information provided ↓							
Redress mechanisms			●	●	●	●	●
Government duties and obligations			●		●		●
Civic duties and responsibilities			●		●		●
Government resources	●		●	●	●	●	●
Government effort			●		●		
Government services			●		●		●

An output showing studies by what they measure and the information provided

This Information and Non-Electoral Accountability: Evidence review tool is a work in progress. We have created the tool to illustrate the main points we make in this memo about how evidence should be parsed in order to yield more nuanced and relevant answers. There is much that could be done to make it easier to use, more intuitive and more visually appealing. However, to decide whether additional effort is merited, we believe two conditions ought to be met: interest from potential users, and possibility for keeping the tool alive by updating it with new studies. We think the most likely users would be program or research officers in funding organizations or practitioner organizations, and research help-desks which are already expected to provide answers to "what works?" questions, mostly for funders. The approach illustrated in this memo would require those posing the question to be more rigorous, more specific in their requests, and it would equip those tasked to find answers with a more nuanced and efficient method of parsing the available evidence.

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# Annex: The composition of the interactive solutions in context evidence tool

We have made a first selection of the available indices that measure the contextual variables of interest, for the purpose of creating the demonstration version of the interactive evidence tool. Further work would be warranted if we wished to iterate and improve on this tool (e.g., a thorough review of a larger body of indices and datasets, setting of inclusion criteria such as minimum number of countries covered by the dataset, etc.).

There are 10 context variables in total that are currently used to determine comparable country contexts:

1. Level of economic development (UN Statistics: GDP Per Capita in Current Prices (US Dollars); 2014; N=193)
2. Strength of Rule of Law (Freedom House; 2014; N=194)
3. Regime type (five categories from Hadenius & Teorell; 2017; N=185)
4. Degree of corruption/clientelism (Corruption Perceptions Index, Transparency International; 2016; N=181); Election Vote Buying; 2016; N=162 (Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM))
5. Degree of procedural democracy (Revised Polity Score IV; 2014; N=165)
6. Degree of civic space and protection for civil freedoms (Freedom House - Civil Liberties; 2014, N=194)
7. Strength of civil society sector and social movements (Bertelsmann Transformation Index - Civil Society Traditions indicator; 2015; N=128)
8. Professionalization of bureaucracy/bureaucratic capacity (International Country Risk Guide, the PRS Group Indicator of Quality of Government; 2014; N=139)
9. Social capital (Bertelsmann Transformation Index - Social capital indicator; 2015; N=128)
10. Horizontal accountability institutions Checks on Government (International IDEA; 2014; N=152)

Note that only a subset of these variables is "activated" depending on what is relevant for the accountability actor (or "principal-agent") relationship that the user cares about. These decisions are based on political science theory. For example, social capital is deemed to matter for the Citizens-Politicians relationship, and thus, is an important variable in deciding whether a study about this relationship

in country A can be relevant to country B. But social capital no longer matters when looking at the Bureaucrats-Politicians relationship, and thus, does not appear if that relationship is selected.

Note also that the variables are not weighted equally; i.e., variables with greater range (difference between the maximum and the minimum) values are weighed more heavily (since they contain more information), and variables that are missing for both countries are weighed zero.

Because of data availability issues there are missing values for some of the variables. This happens commonly with small countries (<500,000 population) because some data sources just skip them entirely.





**MIT Governance Lab (MIT GOV/LAB)** is a group of political scientists focusing on innovation in citizen engagement and government responsiveness. MIT GOV/LAB collaborates with civil society, funders, and governments on research that builds and tests theories about how innovative programs and interventions affect political behavior and make governments more accountable to citizens.

**Transparency and Accountability Initiative** is a collaborative of leading funders of transparency, accountability and participation worldwide. It envisions a world where citizens are informed and empowered; governments are open and responsive; and collective action advances the public good. Toward this end, TAI aims to increase the collective impact of transparency and accountability interventions by strengthening grantmaking practice, learning and collaboration among its members. TAI focuses on the following thematic areas: data use for accountability, strengthening civic space, taxation and tax governance, learning for improved grantmaking.

## MIT GOV/LAB

Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
30 Wadsworth Street, Building E53-380,  
Cambridge, MA 02142

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[www.mitgovlab.org](http://www.mitgovlab.org)

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TRANSPARENCY &  
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1110 Vermont Ave NW #500,  
Washington, DC 20005

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[www.transparency-initiative.org](http://www.transparency-initiative.org)

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