

SGI Sustainable Governance
Indicators 2009

Accountability

Citizens report



Indicator Policy knowledge

Question To what extent are citizens informed of government policy-making?

30 OECD countries are sorted according to their performance on a scale from 10 (best) to 1 (lowest). This scale is tied to four qualitative evaluation levels:

- 10-9 = Most citizens are well-informed on a broad range of government policies.*
- 8-6 = Many citizens are well-informed of individual government policies.*
- 5-3 = Few citizens are well-informed. Most have only rudimentary knowledge of policies.*
- 2-1 = Most citizens are not aware of government policies.*

Iceland

value 10

Icelandic citizens are well informed, but much more so with respect to domestic policies than to international politics. The media is very differentiated for a small country like Iceland. There are several national newspapers, and the number of books printed per capita is among the highest in the world. In addition, Iceland's political landscape is not too complex, so it is relatively easy to get a comprehensive overview. Iceland is a small country where many people know each other. The country's relatively isolated island status also contributes to its citizens' inward-looking domestic focus.

Ireland

value 9

Irish citizens are well informed and unusually interested in politics, and political issues are even regular topics for lively discussion in cafes and bars. Since votes are cast directly for candidates on a preferential ballot that can cross party lines, the electoral system provides voters with the maximum degree of influence.

In the absence of a body of studies of Irish citizens' knowledge of government policy across a range of areas, it is difficult to access more detailed aspects of political knowledge. As is the case in most other developed democracies, knowledge of government policies is typically highest where the policy is either salient to the citizen or is attributed high levels of salience by the media or politicians themselves. Under these circumstances, moreover, policy knowledge regarding more technical areas may be somewhat scarce. However, the presence of a free media and the open provision of policy information and strategy by all government departments mean that information on government policy is readily available.

Norway

value 9 Norwegian public opinion is generally well informed about government policies, measures and operations. This is partly attributable to the country's small size, but also to the population's high educational attainment, the very high circulation of newspapers and the widespread access to Internet and television. Moreover, the Scandinavian tradition of transparency in government helps the free press to report accurately about public policies.

Sweden

value 9 Sweden is one of the world's premier so-called "information societies." Indeed, despite its small size, Sweden has many interest groups and an impressive media market. Moreover, the government's open information policy and the citizenry's generally high level education result in their having a very high degree of policy knowledge. However, since specific political representation in Sweden is typically handled through the political parties, people tend to have less knowledge about specific candidates than they do about general party ideologies and policies.

Canada

value 8 The average Canadian has a fair amount of general knowledge about the political process and the policy stands of the various political parties. However, Canadians often choose to familiarize themselves only with information that they consider to be most relevant to them. Moreover, surveys indicate that a third of the population aged 19-64 and more than half of all university graduates are engaged in non-voting political activities (e.g., searching for political information). Likewise, it would seem that the average citizen is capable of making reasonable judgments on the basis of the general policy alternatives provided by the political parties.

Denmark

value 8 Citizens in Denmark get most of their information via the traditional media (i.e., TV, radio and newspapers), and most Danes also have access to the Internet. Government documents are often available free of charge and can also be read in one of the many public libraries. Moreover, campaigns for election also serve the purpose of presenting and providing a forum to debate the policies of the government and the opposition. Relatively high turnout at national elections suggests a certain degree of interest as well as sufficient knowledge to consider voting important. Within the European Union, the Danes are considered among the most knowledgeable about EU issues, owing partly to the use of referendums.

Nevertheless, turnout at elections for the European Parliament are much lower, presumably because the issues are considered less important. The standard, everyday issues of Danish politics (e.g., jobs, health care, education and pensions) are what drive the Danes to seek information about and take part in politics.

New Zealand

value 8 New Zealand's citizens seem to be relatively well aware of policy issues. The government actively supports the dissemination of information on policy initiatives. In a cross-country survey by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems program, New Zealand's population correctly answered questions about political facts at a rate of 57 percent, while the international average was 52 percent. According to the findings of another study, the 2004 International Social Survey Program, 69 percent of New Zealand respondents felt that they had a good or very good understanding of important political issues.

Annotation: International Social Survey Program, "Citizenship," (ISSP 2004). http://www.gesis.org/en/data_service/issp/data/2004_Citizenship.htm (accessed April 3, 2008).

Switzerland

value 8 Swiss citizens have comparatively good knowledge about their country's political system, being well-informed about its politics and policies. One reason for this is the Swiss system's heavy reliance on direct democracy. Approximately 30 federal, cantonal and communal issues are voted upon each year, and are often accompanied by information campaigns.

Austria

value 7 Many Austrian citizens are well-informed about individual government policies. According to surveys on the self-perception of political knowledge, around two-thirds of Austrians describe themselves as interested in and well-informed about government policies. Newspapers and the public radio and television broadcaster (ORF) are the main sources of information.

Finland

value 7 Although no empirical evidence on the actual policy knowledge of Finnish citizens is available, citizens are in general well-informed about political and societal matters.

Information on governmental policies and decisions is widely available online, and many policy fields are widely debated in the mass media. The relatively high consumption of newspapers, and Finns' general perception of political institutions as trustworthy, might indicate citizens' degree of political awareness. How comprehensively individual citizens are informed about political issues naturally varies with individual interests and behavior.

France

value 7

The level of knowledge French citizens have on government policy fluctuates and is dependent on social status. During electoral campaigns, or in the run-up to political events such as the referendum on the EU constitution in 2005, citizens are much better informed on individual political positions than they are usually. In these exceptional circumstances, when such themes dominate public debate and media coverage, policy knowledge is at its highest. The Economic and Social Committee in France could have a significant role, as it produces reports and brochures to inform citizens on current political issues. The problem is that these reports are practically unknown. Here, the challenge France has in relating to its central core and periphery is highlighted; the differences in knowledge of people who watch, read and listen to the national Paris media and those who are only informed by regional media should not be understated.

Germany

value 7

After World War II, the Western allies and German politicians promoted a civic education program aimed at the formation of a real civic culture. On the federal and state levels there are Centers for Civic Education, which help to broaden the public's policy knowledge by circulating high-quality information. Empirical data sources such as the European Social Survey show that Germans are interested in politics, and that they rank in the middle of most surveys that try to evaluate public levels of political knowledge. As in other European countries, German citizens' level of knowledge about government policy varies substantially by social status and age.

Japan

value 7

Japan has a highly saturated media market in which daily newspapers and public television (NHK) still play a substantial role. The media infrastructure required for an informed citizenry thus exists in Japan. To what extent Japanese citizens use the information available or to what degree they actually feel informed are altogether different questions. According to the 2006 AsiaBarometer, 56 percent of respondents in Japan stated that they were very or somewhat satisfied with the scope of the right

to be informed about the work and functions of government. Based on the very high level of media consumption, one can guess that, on average, Japanese citizens tend to be better informed about current politics than are citizens in most other OECD nations.

Luxembourg

value 7

A fair judgment about the extent of information possessed by Luxembourg citizens is difficult to reach. This is mainly due to the fact that about 40 percent of residents are foreign nationals, who do not have the right to vote. However, recent surveys say that 50 percent to 70 percent of Luxembourg nationals regard themselves as well informed and interested in politics. This is bolstered by the fact that the Chamber of Deputies distributes all its proceedings free of charge to every household in Luxembourg.

Australia

value 6

The main means of informing the public about policy options are elections, as they are held under a system of compulsory voting. Australia conducts state and territory elections every three or four years, and Commonwealth elections every three years. The moderate level of understanding of government policies indicated by opinion surveys increases substantially during election campaigns, when the electorate gives such matters greater attention. The Australian Election Study (AES) surveys show a high level of policy knowledge on socioeconomic issues, which form the main area of conflict between the main parties. Issues that are not regularly debated by political elites, such as immigration, defense or foreign affairs, are less well understood by the public.

Italy

value 6

Information over major policies (such as pension, labor or taxes) is rather well disseminated among the general population, although information often doesn't concern many specific policy details. More sectoral policies are less well known to the majority of citizens. As television is by far the predominant information source in Italy, citizens learn about politics through TV's extensive coverage of political power struggles and single political issues. Other and more serious topics get attention only in the fall, when the government and parliament discuss the following year's national budget.

Indeed, the budget discussion is related to hard policy issues and might give citizens a good opportunity to know the government's political projects and the positions of its parliamentary majority. In-depth information is retrievable via newspapers, which

reach a small part of the population, and online media, such as the government's Web site.

As the parliament is strongly divided between the two antagonistic center-left and center-right camps, substantial information and debate about government policy-making is often lost in the turmoil.

People generally claim either little interest in the country's political debates or the inability to understand the content of the debates.

Netherlands

value 6

According to data from the second round of the European Social Survey (ESS), Dutch respondents claim to typically spend slightly more time than the average European respondent on gathering political information via television, radio or newspapers. While the average ESS respondent spends between 1.5 and 2 hours a day consuming news, Dutch respondents spend between 2 and 2.5 hours.

Nevertheless, the broader public does not seem to be well-informed on a broad range of government policies. This is not due to a lack of information, as there are abundant information sources and thresholds to accessing information are low. However, information must catch the attention of potential recipients if information is to be effective. As many people find political information emanating from the Hague complicated and/or uninteresting, they often fail to pay attention to it. At the same time, however, Dutch society is generally characterized as being civically very active with numerous active political groups. Members of these groups are usually very well informed, although their knowledge is often focused on specific areas of government policy.

South Korea

value 6

According to an opinion survey in November 2006, the public's interest in government policy had increased as compared to 2004 and 2005. A majority of citizens consider themselves to be well informed about government policy-making, especially in the fields of education and culture (63.5 percent), economy (62.2 percent), and social and welfare policy (53.3 percent). For environmental and gender policies the results were somewhat lower (45.3 percent). Citizens obtained information on policy through television (59.1 percent), newspapers (21.5 percent), on the Internet (18.1 percent) and radio (1.15 percent). Fifty percent of respondents thought they were well informed by the government on its policies.

United Kingdom

value 6

There are large disparities among groups in the British population regarding their knowledge of politics. Surveys show that one-half to two-thirds of the electorate

have at least some interest in politics, and that this level of interest has been consistent over the last three decades. Nonetheless, most adults in the UK – 61 percent – do not feel they know much about politics. Only 14 percent of the population consider themselves politically active.

Most problematic is an utterly disengaged minority who knows little about politics and cares even less: 14 percent of the UK population are “not at all interested” in politics; 17 percent do not want to have a say in how the country is run; and 12 percent would not be willing to do anything to influence or protest against a decision by a local or national government body.

Belgium

value 5

Many Belgian citizens do not feel well-informed about government policies. They feel that all the important decisions for the country are made behind closed doors; and in fact, this is often the case. A lack of policy understanding is aggravated by the government’s complex institutional structure, which makes it very difficult to understand government procedures in addition to the actual substance of policy-making.

Interest in politics is low in Belgium. Only 30 percent of people in Flanders say they are interested in politics; in Wallonia, the percentage is not much higher. Only one in 20 Flanders residents can name the parties governing the country (there are no respective figures for Wallonia).

Czech Republic

value 5

Most citizens have only a limited knowledge of government policy-making. Only about half of the adult citizens of the Czech Republic have a sustained interest in politics. Interest in current political events is frequently focused exclusively on personalities and scandals. This limited interest results from a widespread belief that decisions are affected by certain lobbying groups and secretive influences possibly linked to corruption. This belief is associated with and strengthened by a feeling that citizens wield only minor influence. Policy decisions are often made along a left-right divide, which reflects an awareness that different policies favor particular social interests, or by reference to the policy’s relationship to practices in the communist past.

Mexico

value 5

There is probably more awareness of politics than of policy among Mexico’s general populace. Nevertheless, there is evidence of public awareness of big issues such as the reform of the tax system or the maintenance of the state oil monopoly Pemex.

Opinion polls show that most people have reasonably formed views on most subjects. Public opinion tends to be led by opinion formers such as church leaders, the media and public intellectuals rather than government. Public opinion played a significant part in undermining Lopez Obrador's protests against what he believed was an unfair election result in 2006. Once he was seen as going beyond the boundaries of legality, support for his efforts fell sharply.

However, the percentage of citizens who are well informed on a broad range of government policies and on the specific functions and responsibilities of different state entities is still rather small, although it has grown over the past decade. This can be attributed to the relatively low average level of education, to the priority given to daily economic issues, which prevents poor citizens from investing time in gaining more political knowledge, and to the country's low level of political transparency.

Poland

value 5

The general public is not very well-informed about government decisions. The main reason is a lack of interest in politics. Given the frequent corruption, scandals and the confrontational style of Polish politics, many citizens are fed up with politics and do not pay attention to information provided by the media.

Portugal

value 5

Surveys conducted in Portugal on social and political attitudes yield findings that tend to indicate a low level of awareness or information for a substantially higher percentage of the population than the European average. In addition, surveys dealing with self-perceptions of knowledge and information about politics and policies tend to show that the Portuguese consider themselves particularly uninformed about such topics. Moreover, although research shows that they are declining, feelings of political inefficacy are strong and permeate the population.

At the same time, however, general measurements of political knowledge show that the Portuguese public is not only more informed than it thinks it is, but also that it is more informed than the citizens in several older and more developed European democracies are. In fact, the levels of attention to political information and political interest have been rising and, at least comparatively speaking, the content of media information – and even that of television – is rich in information. Thus, although the level of information Portuguese citizens have about economic, wage and labor policies is low in absolute terms, it cannot be said to be particularly low from a comparative point of view.

The situation regarding other policies, however, is quite different. For example, a recent survey showed that the overwhelming majority of the population had no knowledge of the amount of public spending on health, measured in both per-capita terms and as a percentage of GDP. Moreover, those who ventured a guess about the

amount missed by a long shot (and, of course, seriously underestimated it). The same is also likely to be the case when it comes to other policies, such as education and social security.

Slovakia

value 5

Slovak citizens have only limited knowledge of their government's policies. The public's general lack of interest in politics combined with the government's poor communication policy and the sheer number of reforms account for the low degree of knowledge of public affairs.

Spain

value 5

Spanish citizens are infrequent consumers of political news. In two post-election surveys in 1993 and 2004, just 21 percent of respondents said that they follow politics by reading newspapers every day or almost every day. This percentage is substantially below the western European which has fluctuated around 65 percent since the early 1980s. The same holds true with regard to the consumption of radio news. (It is only with television viewing levels that Spaniards come close to an average among modern democratic societies.)

As is to be expected, limited exposure to politics through the media results in generally limited knowledge about government policy-making. There are several behavioral manifestations of this lack of knowledge. One is a low-level of interest in politics, which in Spain is overall remarkably low. Concomitant with a lack of interest in politics are two features which are important to preserve the quality of the country's democratic functions. One is the feeling of a lack of control in what political leaders do, particularly in the outcome of political decisions; the other is the perception of a lack of horizontal accountability by political leaders, particularly in the outcomes of elections.

Turkey

value 5

Most citizens are poorly informed about government policies. In fact, large groups have little knowledge about the country's political system and its constitutional arrangement even at the most fundamental level. In general, citizens are not informed about the content or development of government policies. Government officials always highlight policies from the start as a promising objective, but do not often provide follow-up announcements or status reports.

While there is no available survey that looks at how citizens are informed about government policy-making, it is evident that policy-making is not transparent, participatory or interactive. Many policies become known to the public only after the

implementation process has started. The level of public knowledge about government is as low as the level of satisfaction with the government, but people do not complain about this fact.

United States

value 5

A large amount of public-opinion research on a wide range of issues spanning half a century has consistently documented that U.S. citizens generally are informed about politics and policy to a comparatively low degree. However, these surveys prominently focus on political institutions, processes and leaders, rather than on policies. There are no standardized instruments for measuring political or policy knowledge.

In a comparative survey undertaken by the University of Michigan, which was based on surveys conducted between 1996 and 2001 and which measured the proportion of respondents in 33 countries who were able to correctly identify a candidate in the last election, the United States ranked in sixth place. Nevertheless, it can still be assumed that the general level of information regarding government policy is low.

Hungary

value 4

Most citizens have only a rudimentary knowledge of government policy. This partly reflects a traditional attitude of political apathy with roots stretching back to the communist-era János Kádár regime, as well as widespread dissatisfaction with the results of economic transformation. More importantly, the increasing levels of political polarization also undermine widespread policy knowledge. In the clashes between parties, even basic facts are contested, and public attention is drawn to politics rather than policies. The lack of independent think tanks able to bridge the gap between experts and the public, or between the two political camps further aggravates these problems.

Greece

value 3

Greece's daily newspaper readership has been declining since the late 1980s, accompanied by a public loss of interest in politics- and policy-focused TV and radio programs. Citizens often do not understand the motives, objectives, effects and implications of policies. Some new policies, notably including pension reform (last attempted in 2001) and higher education reform (attempted in early 2007), have met with extremely radical resistance from certain social groups, mass media organizations and political parties. In neither case were citizens given a full explanation explaining the need for reform, opposing views, alternative policy options and the long-term consequences of both policy inertia and proposed changes.

This report is part of the Sustainable Governance Indicators 2009 project, which assesses and compares the reform capacities of the OECD member states.

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