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Political determinants of government transparency: Evidence from open government data initiatives

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Abstract

The increasing availability of extensive governmental data, technological advancements, and a rising standard for government openness are encouraging global governments to implement open data initiatives. While some governments are actively adapting to these trends, others remain behind, despite the pressure. This research explores the political and administrative reasons behind these differences. By analyzing how local governments in South Korea handled requests for open data from citizens between 2007 and 2016, the study highlights the importance of political competition and administrative strength in fostering government transparency and effectively addressing citizen data requests. The study assesses open government data based on its scope, time, and quality, finding that higher levels of electoral competition and better administrative capabilities contribute to increased transparency and responsiveness. However, the study's use of a regression discontinuity design reveals that the political party controlling local governments had minimal influence on these factors.

KEYWORDS

Asia, citizenship, data, democracy, electoral competition, local government, open government data initiatives, openness, participation, policy responsiveness, public administration, South Korea, transparency

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This study investigates the motivations behind local governments' decision to share data with the public, specifically examining the incentives and expected benefits driving their participation in open government data initiatives. While previous research (see e.g., Attard et al., 2015; Chatfield & Reddick, 2017; Conradie & Choenni, 2014; Dawes et al., 2016; Gonzalez-Zapata & Heeks, 2015; Harrison & Sayogo, 2014; Ruijer et al., 2017; Sieber & Johnson, 2015; Vetrò et al., 2016; Wang & Lo, 2016) has explored various theoretical and practical aspects of open government data, there is a notable gap in empirical studies due to the challenge of comparing a large number of government institutions with varied open data outcomes. This gap is critical and warrants attention to enhance our theoretical understanding and practical application of open data practices. By focusing on empirical evidence, this study aims to refine existing theories and provide insights beneficial for the effective implementation of open data initiatives.

In a properly functioning democracy, it is crucial for citizens to be informed about their government's actions. Dahl (1961) emphasized that democracy relies on citizens voting in their best interests, which necessitates access to information on government practices to assess if policies align with their interests, as supported by scholars like Arendt (1968), Habermas (1989), and Baum and Jamison (2006). Furthermore, well-informed citizens are better equipped to engage in democratic processes, including participating in decision making and coproducing public services, highlighting the importance of transparency for democratic engagement (Attard et al., 2015; Dawes & Helbig, 2010; Janssen, 2011; Lourenço, 2015; Ruijer et al., 2017). As Bimber (2003) succinctly states, information is fundamentally "vital to democracy in myriad ways."

The emergence of extensive government datasets, technological advancements, and increasing demands for government transparency constitute environmental factors necessitating adaptation by public organizations. While disseminating information about governmental actions is crucial for democracy, responses to these changes vary among local governments. Some have proactively embraced these shifts to enhance transparency, yet others remain behind. This discrepancy raises a critical inquiry: What factors contribute to the varied outcomes of open data practices among local governments?

This research adopts the framework of rational choice theory, positing that decisions stem from individuals purposefully acting to satisfy their preferences (Oppenheimer, 2012). Within this framework, scholars suggest that politicians, motivated by their desire to win reelection, are inclined to enact policies that serve their objectives. Ames (1987) contends that, in the face of a political crisis, an administration may prioritize its survival leading to policies aimed solely at maintaining power. Similarly, Geddes (1991) posits that politicians are likely to pursue reform when they perceive the benefits to exceed the associated costs.

Local politicians primarily aim for re-election, driving them to adopt policies that boost their re-election prospects. This study explores the political incentive as a key motivator for governments to engage in open data practices. It suggests that local governments weigh the political benefits against the costs when considering the adoption of transparency-enhancing social norms.

Open data practices offer a mix of benefits and challenges for local politicians. Such initiatives can bolster citizen trust and satisfaction, as highlighted by existing research (Blais et al., 2017; Janssen et al., 2012). However, they may also pose risks by exposing information that could undermine policy makers' objectives. A pertinent example is U.S. Senator Marco Rubio's experience during a 2018 CNN town hall debate on gun control. Following a tragic school shooting in Florida, Rubio's participation aimed to show solidarity with the community but instead drew criticism for his financial ties to the National Rifle Association revealed through transparency efforts. This case underscores the delicate balance policy makers must navigate, adopting open data initiatives when they believe the political advantages surpass the potential for transparency to backfire.

We propose that policy makers use a rational choice approach to determine their actions, balancing the anticipated benefits and costs of participating in open data initiatives. Policy makers facing elections may perceive an advantage in enhancing government transparency and responding to citizens' open data requests, as these actions can bolster public support, especially in areas with intense electoral competition. Consequently, we hypothesize that higher electoral competition correlates with increased local government responsiveness to open data requests, a hypothesis our data supports. In addition, we identify administrative capacity as a crucial factor in the adoption and success of open data practices, necessitating investment for effective policy implementation (Lee & Kwak, 2012). In this article, administrative capacity indicates diverse resources, including financial resources, human resources, and information technology, in the right place at the appropriate time to effectively implement their policies (Ingraham & Donahue, 2000; Ko et al., 2021). Our findings indicate that local governments' administrative capacity significantly improves open data outcomes. However, our analysis reveals limited or inconclusive evidence that the partisan affiliations of policy makers substantially impact open data practices.

Before delving further, it is essential to address a significant semantic distinction relevant to this study. Our analysis focuses on South Korean local governments' handling of public requests for information disclosure, facilitated by a centralized online system developed through open government data initiatives. It is important to note, as prior research has highlighted (Janssen, 2011, 2012), that the concepts of "freedom of information" or "right to information" are distinct from the open government data movement. Yet, in the context of South Korea, these movements converge under a unified policy framework, particularly at the local government level, where public access to government data predominantly occurs through information disclosure requests. Consequently, in this study, the terms "open government data" and "information disclosure" are used interchangeably to reflect this policy integration.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON OPEN DATA AND GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY

Previous research on open government data can be categorized into distinct themes. One significant area of study investigates the characteristics of open data portals—online platforms that facilitate government data release. For example, Chatfield and Reddick (2017) analyzed open data portals across Australia's major cities, noting considerable differences in their service capabilities, which likely affect citizen engagement levels. Sayogo and others (2014) assessed open government data portals from 35 countries, developing a framework to evaluate open data initiatives. Furthermore, numerous studies have pinpointed limitations within these portals, offering recommendations to enhance their functionality and address existing challenges (see e.g., Lourenço, 2015; Marienfeld et al., 2013; Matheus et al., 2014; Musyaffa et al., 2018; Safarov et al., 2017).

Research has also delved into the obstacles hindering the effective use of open government data by citizens. Zuiderwijk and others (2012) identified ten major sociotechnical barriers, including issues of availability, access, usability, and quality. Barry and Bannister (2014) focused on the perspectives of senior managers in Irish governments, exploring the challenges to data sharing. Martin and others (2013) highlighted governance and institutional barriers, noting the risks associated with government participation in open data initiatives. Janssen and others (2012) compiled an extensive list of benefits and barriers to open government data, addressing economic, political, social, technical, and operational dimensions. Moreover, Mergel (2018) examined the factors influencing the adoption of Online Open Innovation platforms within the public sector and identified several organizational challenges (see also Mergel, 2015).

Studies have also sought to understand the factors influencing the adoption of open data policies by countries and public agencies. Bates (2014) analyzed the UK government's embrace of open government data, arguing that it serves neoliberal policy objectives. Zuiderwijk and Janssen (2014) proposed a framework to assess open data policies across various organizations, suggesting improvements through enhanced cross-organizational collaboration and cultivating a culture of data sharing within daily operations. Wang and Lo (2016) investigated the adoption of open data initiatives in Taiwanese public agencies, identifying a positive correlation between the agencies' perception of benefits, organizational readiness, and external pressures, and their willingness to adopt such initiatives.

While existing research has significantly contributed to our understanding of open data and government transparency, there are three areas ripe for future exploration. First, there is a limited amount of empirical research concerning the adoption and effects of open government data. Although theoretical insights have enriched our collective knowledge, empirical studies are essential to validate and expand upon these theories. Second, despite the undeniable influence of political dynamics on public organizations, prior studies have predominantly concentrated on social, technical, and operational aspects, often overlooking the impact of democratic forces on open data practices, with some exceptions (see e.g., Bates, 2014). Third, there is a lack of focus on the role of administrative capacity, despite its importance for successful policy implementation. Our research aims to fill these gaps through a comprehensive analysis of open government data services outcomes, contributing valuable empirical insights to the field.

RATIONAL CHOICE OF POLICY MAKERS

Research has explored how policy makers decide on their courses of action, offering predictive and universal models of their behavior. Grounded in economic principles, rational choice theory has been a key framework in this area (Ostrom & Ostrom, 1971; Tullock et al., 2002), portraying policy makers as engaging in behaviors aimed at maximizing their self-interest and utility (Niskanen, 1979; Wilson, 1980). This theory posits that policy makers operate based on a set of stable, prioritized preferences, employing methodological individualism and deductive reasoning to make decisions (Griggs, 2017). It suggests that policy makers are driven by self-interest, often disregarding social structures in their decision-making processes and focusing instead on the expected costs and benefits to optimize their outcomes (Laver, 1997; Lichbach, 2003; Ward, 2002).

Rational choice theory is valued for its predictive power across diverse environments, notably in understanding the actions of elected officials (Zamir & Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2018). However, it faces critiques from alternative theories that emphasize different motivations and cognitive processes. Public service motivation, for instance, underscores public officials' intrinsic prosocial drive (Perry, 1997), while the heuristics-and-biases framework points to the impact of bounded rationality and systematic biases (Hong, 2019, 2020; Hong et al., 2020;

Simon, 1972). Yet, in the context of elections, the predictability of elected officials' behaviors aligns more closely with rational choice theory. Given their primary focus on reelection, officials meticulously weigh costs and benefits to maximize votes, often placing this goal above other considerations. This framework helps explain even seemingly prosocial actions as strategies aimed at vote maximization (Frohlich & Oppenheimer, 2004; Mueller, 2003). Research has detailed how such motivations influence various political behaviors, including spending patterns, veto usage in presidential systems, and the timing of elections and public inquiries in parliamentary systems (Grier et al., 1995; Smith, 2003; Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2010; Wright, 1974).

OPEN DATA INITIATIVES IN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONTEXT

Rational choice theory posits that policy makers carefully consider all potential benefits and costs associated with various policies, choosing to implement those that are expected to maximize their chances of reelection. This might lead them to undertake counterintuitive or risky actions if such actions are believed to increase their likelihood of being reelected (Frohlich & Oppenheimer, 2004; Mueller, 2003). If the anticipated benefits of adopting a policy surpass its costs, the policy will likely be pursued. Conversely, if the costs are deemed to exceed the benefits, the policy may be abandoned or not pursued. This decision-making logic is applicable across a wide array of policy decisions, including the choice to disclose certain data to the public.

Local policy makers often view sharing government data with the public as involving considerable risks and costs (Huntgeburth & Veit, 2015; Lee & Kwak, 2012; Martin et al., 2013). Open data requests, which can be made by any citizen, including those critical of government policies, pose the risk of backfiring. Data made public can be used to scrutinize and criticize policy makers' decisions. Huntgeburth and Veit (2015, p. 291) highlight this concern, noting that "Open Government Initiatives… can also get out of control," suggesting that such transparency can lead to negative feedback from citizens and journalists (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). Faced with these potential adverse outcomes, policy makers may question whether open data initiatives serve their self-interest, such as maintaining their positions. Consequently, recognizing these potential drawbacks, policy makers might adopt a cautious stance, balancing the perceived benefits against the risks of engaging in open data, which could lead some to decide against implementing such initiatives if they deem them unnecessary (Bearfield & Bowman, 2017).

Policy makers recognize the potential benefits of engaging in open data initiatives, which can enhance citizen trust and satisfaction by providing access to government information (Blais et al., 2017; Janssen et al., 2012). This engagement is particularly impactful when governments actively respond to citizens' requests for data, creating a two-way dialogue rather than merely disclosing information unilaterally. Furthermore, involvement in open data initiatives allows local policy makers to bolster their reputation, aligning with global public management trends (Grimmelikhuijsen & Feeney, 2017). Such initiatives place governments in line with international norms and standards, making noncompliance or inaction in the face of citizens' requests potentially damaging to a politician's public image. Consequently, the pressure to adhere to these global standards incentivizes local governments to enhance administrative capacities for open data (Lnenicka et al., 2024; Web Foundation, 2016). By adopting global open data practices, governments not only introduce new governance structures (like public hearings for policy feedback), but also invest in the necessary infrastructure for data sharing, including digital portals and the allocation of financial and human resources. Ultimately, the proactive expansion of open data initiatives can serve as a strategic tool for politicians to attract broader citizen support.

The notion that providing government data fulfills a civil right and constitutes public service delivery (Halberstam, 2015) positions open data initiatives as critical for both governance quality and electoral support. Effective public service delivery is pivotal for enhancing citizen satisfaction and can significantly influence election outcomes (Boyne et al., 2009; Greasley & John, 2011). When local governments deny requests for information, it can lead to negative perceptions among citizens regarding their government's transparency and responsiveness. Inadequate provision of services such as access to government data may tarnish the government's image in the eyes of its citizens. Conversely, the successful delivery of public services, including open data, presents an opportunity for incumbents to mitigate partisan biases among voters (Jilke, 2018; Jilke & Baekgaard, 2020). This approach underscores the strategic importance of open data initiatives in building a positive public image and securing electoral advantages by meeting citizens' expectations for transparency and accountability.

In summary, local government policy makers weigh the benefits and costs associated with sharing and disclosing information through open data initiatives. Engaging in these initiatives can enhance citizen trust and satisfaction, yet it also carries the risk of certain disclosures potentially harming their reputation. The perceived advantages and disadvantages of open data sharing by local governments are shaped by a range of social, political, and administrative factors. We will next explore how political competition and administrative capacity influence these assessments and impact decision-making processes within local governments.

HYPOTHESES

Research indicates that policy makers often exhibit risk aversion, prioritizing the avoidance of negative outcomes over the pursuit of positive ones (Hood, 2010; Wilson, 1980). This tendency toward risk aversion can lead organizations to resist adapting to environmental changes, particularly when adaptation requires innovation, which inherently carries risks (Rose-Ackerman, 1980). Consequently, local policy makers may hesitate to implement open data initiatives due to the unpredictable effects such initiatives might have on their interests. The demand for government data varies among citizens, as do their experiences with it. Therefore, the overall cost-benefit balance of open data initiatives can fluctuate based on the local context, and their impacts may be minimal in communities where awareness of these initiatives is low.

The tendency of policy makers to avoid adaptation due to risk aversion may diminish in the face of intense electoral competition. When candidates compete in an election, they typically propose public services appealing to median voters to improve their chances of winning office (Romer & Rosenthal, 1979). This indicates that a highly competitive election, functioning as a political accountability system, motivates candidates to offer services that satisfy the majority of voters (Ponce & Ponce Rodriguez, 2020). Conversely, in less competitive elections, where the electoral system does not effectively enforce political accountability, politicians lack incentives to attract a broad voter base and may focus more on appealing to their traditional supporters. In such cases, they might believe that the strategies used in previous campaigns are sufficient to secure victory.

Policy makers anticipating tough electoral battles may leverage their incumbent status to bolster public support, recognizing that genuinely addressing citizens' requests for open data can be a strategic approach to showcase their governance efforts, thereby boosting public trust and satisfaction. This approach could give a positive impression on the majority of voters, including both supporters and nonsupporters. Government open data promotes political efficacy in a democratic system (Attard et al., 2015; Toka, 2008). Through open government data, citizens can be better informed, and it provides room for citizens to actively engage in political and policy issues, which improves political efficacy. Further, the rejection of disclosing information breaches the legitimacy and social norms (Halberstam, 2015), and it may threaten incumbents to hold their position again. Although it is less likely to be an issue in a

less competitive election (Grossman & Michelitch, 2018), it may be different in circumstances where citizens and interest groups need more information. Candidates and interest groups may demand information to develop policies that are expected to enhance citizen satisfaction and find the issues in the governance of the former term. As a high level of political competition may enhance the risk of electoral fraud and willingness to make better decisions, citizens may seek more information to crosscheck the arguments from incumbents and challengers (Dawson, 2022; Iyengar et al., 2004). In this setting, hesitation to open government data may give a negative impression to citizens and interest groups, which harms public trust and citizen satisfaction. Consequently, increased responsiveness to open data requests might serve as a strategic asset for incumbents in competitive elections, even when the direct electoral benefits of such initiatives seem minimal. This implies that heightened political competition could incentivize policy makers to prioritize the perceived benefits of open data practices over potential risks. Hence, we hypothesize that greater political competition leads to a decrease in policy makers' risk aversion and an increased valuation of open data benefits.

> **Hypothesis 1.** Higher levels of electoral competition are expected to be associated with increased engagement by local governments in open data initiatives.

Previous research underscores the significant role of citizens' partisan affiliations in shaping their views on government-run open data programs. A Pew Research Center survey found that in the United States, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to recognize the benefits of open government initiatives (Horrigan et al., 2015). This difference in perception can be partly attributed to the Obama Administration's efforts to enhance transparency, marking a notable advancement in open government practices (Rocco, 2016). Similarly, our study in Korea reflects the influence of partisanship on open data reforms. The Roh Administration, affiliated with the left-leaning party, implemented significant open data reforms, in contrast to the administrations of Lee from the right-leaning party, which were seen as a step back in the progress of open data policies. This pattern suggests that partisan alignment not only influences public perception but also the direction and intensity of open data initiatives undertaken by governments.[1]

This study does not seek to explore the underlying reasons for partisanship's critical role in shaping both policy makers' and citizens' attitudes toward government transparency. Instead, we proceed with the understanding that partisanship significantly influences attitudes toward government data sharing. If citizens with left-leaning preferences value government data sharing more highly than their right-leaning counterparts, as suggested by Horrigan and others (2015), this disparity in citizen perception is likely to impact local politicians' actions as well. In democracies marked by political polarization, such as Korea, policy makers aligned with left-leaning ideologies are expected to see more benefits in engaging with open data initiatives than their right-leaning counterparts, driven by the heightened value their potential supporters place on such transparency. Consequently, we propose the following hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 2.** Local governments with liberal (left-leaning) orientations are expected to participate more actively in open data initiatives compared to those with conservative (right-leaning) orientations.

Our focus is on examining how political dynamics—specifically, political competition and policy makers' partisan affiliations—shape the open data practices of local governments. However, we recognize that the impact of these political factors can be influenced by the

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[1]For instance, see http://www.peoplepower21.org/Government/557264.

administrative characteristics of the local governments themselves. A key factor likely to influence local decision making is the administrative capacity of these governments.

Several studies highlight that administrative capacity has a significantly positive impact on initiatives of government openness and transparency in that they demand human and financial resources to establish the infrastructure and operate services (Lee & Kwak, 2012; Mensah, 2019; Rodríguez Domínguez et al., 2011). Governments with limited administrative capacities may find it challenging to fulfill citizen requests for open data, regardless of policy makers' willingness to engage in such practices. Therefore, administrative capacity can act as a limiting factor in a government's ability to participate in data-sharing initiatives. Based on this understanding, we hypothesize that the level of administrative capacity within local governments will significantly influence their approach to open data practices in two primary ways:

> **Hypothesis 3.** Higher administrative capacity is expected to be associated with more active involvement by local governments in open data initiatives.

> **Hypothesis 4.** The association between political competition and government involvement in open data practices is expected to be positively moderated by the level of administrative capacity.

## INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT: OPEN DATA INITIATIVE IN SOUTH KOREA

This study presents findings from the open data practices of South Korean local governments over a decade, from 2007 to 2016.[2] During this time, the central government of Korea mandated all local governments to adopt open government initiatives. To improve government transparency, the Korean government enacted the Information Disclosure Act (which is comparable to the Freedom of Information Act of the United States) in 1996. This enactment was one of the earliest cases of similar adoptions in the world, and the very first case among Asian countries (Lee & Jung, 2011). This law underwent a major change in 2004, which expanded and clarified the scope of information that may be requested by citizens. It was not until 2007, however, that an abrupt and rapid increase was seen in the number of open data requests by citizens as the Korean government launched a centralized online system through which people could freely request information from any public organization. When the online system was launched in 2007, the number of open data requests was approximately 200,000, which increased by a factor of nine by 2022, when 1,800,000 requests were received (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2023; see Figure 1).

According to the Information Disclosure Act, citizens could request information from both central and local governmental organizations. Interestingly, a predominant part of citizen requests was made to local governments (rather than to central ones), probably because they deliver a host of essential services, including fire protection, trash removal, water, and public transit, to name a few. Another notable observation is that there is a substantial disparity in terms of how local governments responded to this environmental change. Some localities actively adapted to the change by responding to citizens' data requests, while others lagged. This variation in responsiveness was seen because the Information Disclosure Act does not stipulate any penalties for organizations that do not disclose data.[3]

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[2]In the South Korean governmental system, there are two tiers of local governments. In this study, we focus on the higher level as this type of government tends to attract the largest share of citizens' open data requests.

[3]If a governmental organization does not disclose the requested data, the citizen who initially made the request may file for either an administrative appeal or a judicial trial. If either the administrative tribunal or the court determines that there is no proper reason for refusing information disclosure, then the governmental organization must comply with the data request.
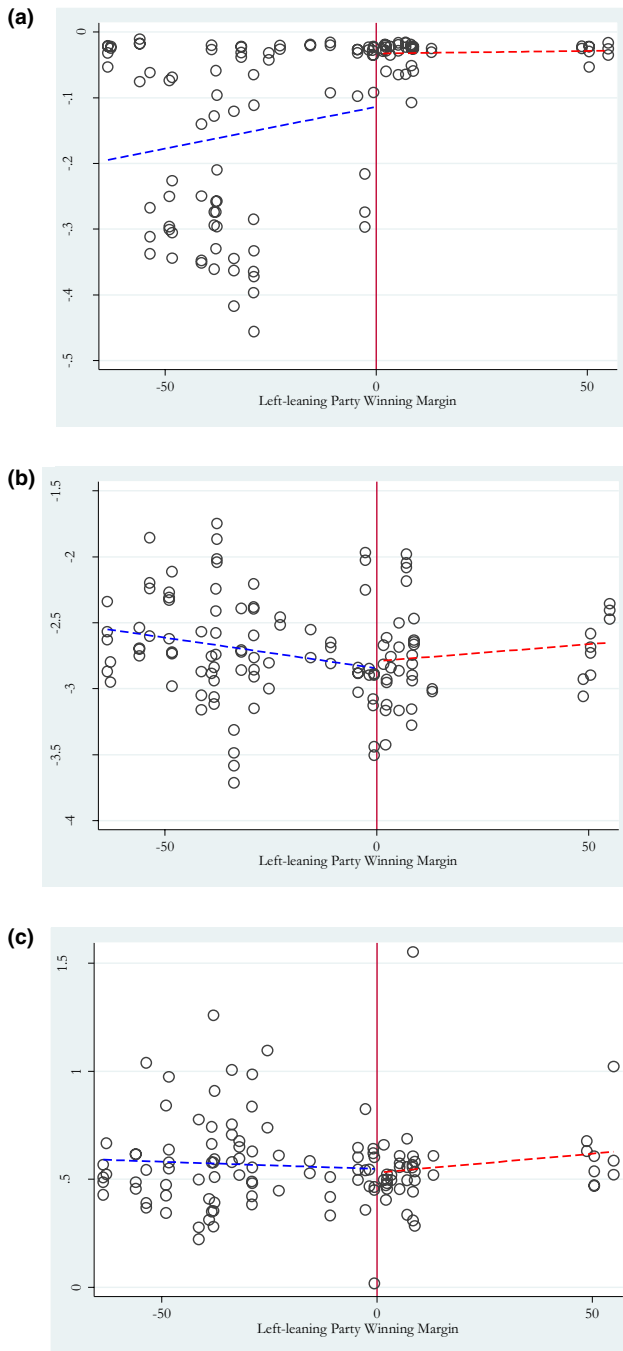
FIGURE 1 The effect of local governments' partisanship on open data service. (a) The scope of open government data. (b) The time taken to disclose open government data. (c) The quality of open government data.

The South Korean case is ideal for testing our hypotheses as the country is generally known as one of the democracies that have actively pursued open data policies. According to the Open Data Barometer published by Web Foundation (2017), South Korea is one of the five (along with the UK, Canada, France, and the United States) among the investigated 115

countries that implemented open data policies most closely meeting the Open Data Charter principles, a set of norms developed and supported by several governments, civil societies, and experts from around the world. In Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) policy reports on open, useful, and reusable data in 2019 and 2023, South Korea ranked first among all OECD countries (OECD, 2019, 2023); this suggests that the country is a world leader in data availability, accessibility, and reuse. Moreover, South Korea is also a homogeneous society with few differences in social, cultural, and demographic characteristics across local jurisdictions. Despite the homogeneity, however, there exists a surprisingly high variation in the level of electoral competition across localities; in some jurisdictions, there are fierce electoral competitions with constant switching between governing political parties, whereas in others there is little competition, with one party almost always winning the elections.[4] Such a unique set-up may allow researchers to accurately estimate the impact of electoral competition on the outcomes of local open data practices.

METHOD AND DATA

OLS model

To test the previously stated hypotheses, we analyzed how political competition, partisanship, and administrative capacity affect local governments' practices in open data. We utilized ordinary least squares (OLS) and regression discontinuity design (RDD) methods to determine the effects of these variables. Our primary method was OLS, but RDD was also applied to enhance the reliability of our estimates concerning the influence of partisanship. The specific OLS model used in this study is detailed as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \mu + \rho P_{it} + \sigma A_{it} + \tau L_{it} + \varphi R_{it} + X_{it}\gamma + \nu_t + \pi_i + \eta_{it} \tag{1}$$

$$Y_{it} = \mu + \rho P_{it} + \sigma A_{it} + \omega P_{it}A_{it} + \tau L_{it} + \varphi R_{it} + X_{it}\gamma + \nu_t + \pi_i + \eta_{it} \tag{2}$$

In Equation (1), we assess the individual effects of three factors—political competition, administrative capacity, and partisan affiliation—on local governments' open data service. Conversely, in Equation (2), we examine the hypothesis (specifically, Hypothesis 4) that administrative capacity moderates the influence of political competition.

In both equations, the dependent variable Y_{it} represents the level of participation of local government i in the open data initiative during year t. We chose the following three variables to gauge the extent of active participation by local governments in the initiative. At each local government level, (1) the *scope* or extent of open government data, defined by the percentage of citizen requests that are fulfilled by sharing data (whether fully or partially) relative to all citizen disclosure requests; (2) the responsiveness (i.e., the *time* taken to disclose data) of open government data disclosure, quantified by the proportion of citizen requests answered within 24 hours against the total number of disclosure requests; and (3) the *quality* of open government data, determined by the ratio of citizen complaints to the total number of disclosure requests. The three variables assess how and to what degree local governments have conformed to the centrally mandated open data initiative by addressing citizen requests, each from a unique angle: the scope, timing, and quality of the governments' responses. These variables can, in some ways, be seen as indicators of local government's performance in providing open data services.

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[4]During the study period, electoral outcomes varied significantly across regions. For instance, in Chungcheongnam-do, a swing state in South Korea, the vote margin between the top two candidates was less than 3%. On the contrary, in the cases of Jeollanam-do and Gyeongsangbuk-do, a candidate from a specific party often won nearly 70% of the vote.

In Equations (1) and (2), we focus on three main variables: political competition (P_{it}), administrative capacity (A_{it}), and partisan affiliation (L_{it} and R_{it}). P_{it} represents the level of political competition in local government i in year t. Consistent with prior research, we define political competition by subtracting the vote margin between the winning candidate and their closest competitor from 100; thus, a higher score indicates more intense electoral competition. This method assesses the "closeness" of elections and is commonly employed in political science to measure competitive intensity (see e.g., Hong & Lee, 2018; Hong et al., 2022). Given that local elections are held every four years in June, we align the measured level of political competition from a specific election year with the dependent variables observed over the subsequent four years, with a one-year delay. For example, the political competition level from the June 2010 election is correlated with dependent variables for the years 2011 through 2014.

The second variable, A_{it}, represents the administrative capacity of local government i in year t. Previous studies typically assessed administrative capacity based on staffing size or revenue (e.g., Terman & Feiock, 2015). In our study, we measured administrative capacity by dividing the total number of administrators in each local government by the number of citizen requests for open government data. This method allows us to specifically gauge administrative capacity in the context of open data sharing.

The third key variable we examined is the partisan affiliation of local policy makers, categorized as L_{it} for those affiliated with left-leaning parties and R_{it} for right-leaning parties. We classified all political parties participating in local elections from 2007 to 2016 into these two groups. Both L_{it} and R_{it} were included in Equations (1) and (2) to account for some candidates who ran as independents without any party affiliation. In addition, X_{it} represents a vector of control variables that include the size of local government expenditure, the total number of citizen requests, and the electorate size. We also incorporated both year and local government fixed effects (v_t and π_i) to adjust for variations across different localities and over time. η_{it} is the error term in the model.

RDD model

In the following section, we discuss that the OLS results indicate the low impact of local policy makers' partisan affiliation on the outcomes of open data services. However, these results should be approached with caution. A significant concern is that localities with left-leaning partisanship might differ substantially in many unobservable characteristics from those with right-leaning partisanship. To tackle this issue, we employ a RDD that estimates the causal impact of electing a left-leaning versus a right-leaning policy maker on open data services (e.g., Ferreira & Gyourko, 2009). If the RDD reveals a statistically significant effect, we may need to reassess the effect of partisan affiliation indicated by the OLS results.

The empirical approach used in the RDD leverages the almost random variation from close local elections, where left-leaning and right-leaning candidates have nearly equal vote counts, to assess the impact of electing a left-leaning policy maker. Essentially, localities where a left-leaning leader wins in a tight race are presumed to be similar in characteristics to those where a right-leaning leader wins narrowly. We then analyze if there is a significant difference in data-sharing outcomes between these two types of localities. Our RDD model utilizes a global polynomial regression, described as follows:

$$Y_{it} = \mu + \tau L_{it} + F(MV_{it}) + X_{it}\gamma + \eta_{it} \quad (3)$$

Here, Y_{it} is defined the same way as in Equations (1) and (2). The primary variable of interest is L_{it}, which indicates localities led by officials with a left-leaning party affiliation. Unlike in Equations (1) and (2), the indicator for right-leaning partisanship (R_{it}) is excluded because

localities lacking any partisan affiliation were omitted from the RDD model. MV_{it} is the forcing variable in RDD, representing the margin of victory in the election during year t in locality i, calculated as the difference between the vote share of the winning candidate and that of the runner-up. Similar to the OLS model, the level of political competition in a specific year is aligned with observations of the dependent variable over the next four years, with a one-year delay. $F(MV_{it})$ is a smooth function of the forcing variable, modeled using a pth-order polynomial that varies below and above the discontinuity. We present RDD results using first order polynomials. X_{it} includes the set of covariates as outlined in Equations (1) and (2). η_{it} represents the error term.

Data

This study analyzes evidence from the open data practices of South Korean local governments over a decade, from 2007 to 2016. The dependent variable in this study pertains to the results of these open data practices at the local government level. Specifically, the study measures: (1) the percentage of citizen requests that are met by sharing data, whether fully or partially; (2) the percentage of citizen requests responded to within 24 hours; and (3) the ratio of filed citizen complaints to the total number of citizen disclosure requests. Data for these variables were gathered from the information disclosure requests submitted to each local government.

The primary variable of interest, the level of political competition, was sourced from a public website operated by the South Korean National Election Commission. Information on the partisan affiliations of local politicians was also gathered from this site. The measure of local governments' administrative capacity was calculated by dividing the number of administrators, as listed on a public website (http://www.laiis.go.kr/) maintained by the South Korean Ministry of the Interior and Safety, by the number of citizens' open data requests, which were obtained from our information disclosure requests. The covariates were compiled from various public sources. The size of local government spending was obtained from a website called Local Finance 365, the total number of citizen requests from our information disclosure requests, and the size of the electorate was taken from the South Korean National Election Commission database. In Table 1, we report the key statistics for all variables included in the analyses.

TABLE 1 Summary statistics.

Variables	Obs.	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max.
Scope of open government data (in log)	160	−.117	.127	−.456	−.011
Time taken to disclose open government data (in log)	160	−2.630	.432	−3.714	−.857
Quality of open government data (in log)	160	.585	.229	.018	1.722
Political competition (in log)	160	4.263	.302	3.541	4.599
Administrative capacity	160	.588	.523	.156	3.499
Right-leaning party affiliation	160	.550	.499	0	1
Left-leaning party affiliation	160	.381	.487	0	1
Size of budget (in log)	160	15.22	.570	14.21	16.78
Total number of information disclosure requests from citizens (in log)	160	9.222	.784	7.292	11.04
Size of electorate (in log)	160	14.39	.741	12.93	16.09

RESULTS

OLS results

To assess the performance of local governments' open data practices, we utilized three different dependent variables: (1) the scope of open government data, defined by the ratio of citizen requests fulfilled through data sharing (either fully or partially) to the total number of citizen requests; (2) the responsiveness in disclosing open government data, measured by the fraction of citizen requests responded to within 24 hours relative to all citizen disclosure requests; and (3) the quality of open government data, calculated as the ratio of filed citizen complaints to the total citizen requests. The outcomes for each of these variables are presented separately in Tables 2–4.

Table 2 shows that political competition could be an important factor influencing how extensively governments share data; increased electoral competition correlates with greater transparency in government data. Specifically, a 10% rise in electoral competition is linked to a 30% increase in the proportion of citizen requests fulfilled through government data sharing. In addition, administrative capacity plays a significant role in the effectiveness of government open data services. Governments with robust administrative capacities are more adept at handling citizen requests for open data. Last, as predicted, administrative capacity markedly influences how political competition impacts open data service outcomes. In regions with strong

TABLE 2 OLS models for the scope of open government data.

	Dependent variable: Scope of open government data	
	(1)	**(2)**
Political competition	.028**	.034**
	(.012)	(.012)
Administrative capacity	.039**	.032**
	(.018)	(.012)
Political competition × Administrative capacity		.063**
		(.016)
Right-leaning party affiliation	.005	.016
	(.014)	(.014)
Left-leaning party affiliation	.007	.020
	(.016)	(.017)
Size of budget	.044	.016
	(.072)	(.069)
Total number of information disclosure requests from citizens	.015	.008
	(.039)	(.037)
Size of electorate	.031	.129
	(.119)	(.125)
N	160	160
R^2	.968	.970

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the scope of open government data, as measured by the proportion of citizen requests that is addressed by governments' data sharing (either fully or partially) out of the total number of citizen requests.

**$p < .05$.

TABLE 3 OLS models for the time taken to respond to citizen requests for open government data.

	Dependent variable: Time taken to disclose open government data	
	(1)	(2)
Political competition	.443**	.477**
	(.093)	(.098)
Administrative capacity	.433**	.390**
	(.158)	(.124)
Political competition × Administrative capacity		.412**
		(.141)
Right-leaning party affiliation	−.079	−.005
	(.094)	(.101)
Left-leaning party affiliation	−.174	−.088
	(.115)	(.118)
Size of budget	.476	.295
	(.515)	(.498)
Total number of information disclosure requests from citizens	−.580	−.623*
	(.389)	(.372)
Size of electorate	−2.455**	−1.817**
	(.828)	(.863)
N	160	160
R^2	.822	.829

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the time taken to disclose the requested open government data, as measured by the proportion of citizen requests that are responded to within 24 hours out of total number of citizen disclosure requests.

*$p < .10$; **$p < .05$.

administrative capacities, the level of political competition is more significantly associated with the transparency of government data.

In Table 3, we present the outcomes using a second dependent variable that tracks the response time to citizens' data disclosure requests. The findings align with the three main observations from Table 2. First, higher levels of electoral competition correlate with faster government responses; local governments in areas with greater electoral competition tended to respond more promptly to citizen inquiries. Second, administrative capacity proved to be a crucial factor; governments that are better administratively equipped responded more swiftly to open data requests from citizens. Third, the results underscore the enhancing effect of administrative capacity; the influence of political competition on the speed of government responses was more pronounced in localities with robust administrative capacities.

In Table 4, we examine if the quality of government responses to citizen requests is influenced by political competition and administrative capacity. The results show minimal evidence that higher levels of either political competition or administrative capacity enhance the quality of government responses, as the coefficients for both variables are not statistically significant (see column 1). However, the interaction of these two factors in column 2 is significantly positive, suggesting that both political competition and administrative capacity need to be strong to effect a meaningful improvement in the quality of open government data. Specifically, we observe that higher electoral competition leads to better quality in open government data (e.g.,

TABLE 4 OLS models for the quality of open government data.

	Dependent variable: Quality of open government data	
	(1)	(2)
Political competition	.035	.002
	(.078)	(.081)
Administrative capacity	−.244	−.203*
	(.157)	(.112)
Political competition × Administrative capacity		−.396**
		(.179)
Right-leaning party affiliation	.138	.067
	(.095)	(.097)
Left-leaning party affiliation	.086	.003
	(.142)	(.146)
Size of budget	.750	.925*
	(.481)	(.468)
Total information disclosure requests from citizens	−.652*	−.612*
	(.373)	(.357)
Size of electorate	−.816	−1.429
	(.881)	(.941)
N	160	160
R^2	.372	.394

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the quality of open government data, as measured by the number of filed citizen complaints divided by the total number of citizen requests.

*$p < .10$; **$p < .05$.

fewer citizen complaints) only when administrative capacity is also high. This finding supports the idea that insufficient administrative capacity acts as a barrier; organizations lacking in administrative capabilities struggle to respond effectively to citizen requests, regardless of the potential benefits.

RDD results

In Tables 2–4, we illustrate the significant effects of political competition and administrative capacity on the performance of government open data services. It is important to note that the OLS analysis provided scant evidence supporting the hypothesis that a local government's partisan affiliation significantly affects these outcomes. As indicated across Tables 2–4, the coefficients for both left-leaning and right-leaning parties are not statistically significant. Despite this lack of effect, we further validate our findings by employing RDD to test the robustness of the OLS results. This additional verification is crucial because localities governed by left-leaning administrations may differ substantially in many unobserved aspects from those governed by right-leaning ones, potentially undermining the reliability of the OLS findings (see e.g., Ferreira & Gyourko, 2009).

As visual inspections are illuminating in a regression discontinuity context, we first provide graphical evidence of the RDD coefficients in Figure 1. Figure 1a–c shows the correlation between the margin of victory (with a positive value indicating the left-leaning party's

win) and the three measured outcomes of open data services (i.e., the scope, time, and quality of open government data), respectively. The lines in Figure 1a–c are the predicted values from a linear polynomial fit of the left-leaning party's winning margin, with no control variables. The graphical investigation produced somewhat mixed results for the impact of partisan affiliation. In Figure 1a, the left-leaning party's victory over the right-leaning party has a significantly positive impact on the scope of the governments' openness as evidenced by the clear discontinuity between the two lines. On the other hand, in Figure 1b,c, we find little evidence of discontinuity, which suggests that the left-leaning party's victory has little impact on either the time to disclose the requested information or the quality of the information disclosed.

In Table 5, we report the RDD coefficients to check whether the findings from the graphical inspections survive with full control variables. In columns 1, 3, and 5, we report the coefficients without any covariates, which correspond to the graphical results we presented in Figure 1. On the contrary, in columns 2, 4, and 6, we controlled for various covariates that may potentially affect the outcomes of open data services. In all columns, we used the first-order global polynomial to model the forcing variable, but the conclusion is unaffected even when we assumed different functional forms. As can be seen, the RDD results supported the significance of partisan affiliation only in column 1. Local governments with left-leaning partisan affiliation tend to treat citizen requests of open data more attentively; the left-leaning partisanship was associated with an 8% increase in the measured scope of open government data. However, this result became nonsignificant when covariates were included in column 2. Further, we find little evidence that partisanship matters for how quickly governments responded to citizens' open data requests (see columns 3 and 4) or whether the requested citizens are satisfied with the outcomes (see columns 5 and 6). Overall, we could not find evidence to suggest that the partisanship of local governments significantly impacts the effectiveness of government open data services.

TABLE 5   RDD models for the outcomes of open government data.

	Dependent variables					
	Scope of open government data		Time taken to disclose open government data		Quality of open government data	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Left-leaning party affiliation	.081**	.040	.055	.006	−.017	.040
	(.026)	(.027)	(.114)	(.108)	(.057)	(.071)
Administrative capacity		−.216**		.016		.255*
		(.070)		(.285)		(.129)
Size of budget		.391**		−.491**		.019
		(.065)		(.185)		(.129)
Total information disclosure requests from citizens		−.193**		−.166		−.029
		(.059)		(.203)		(.111)
Size of electorate		−.175**		.340**		.047
		(.038)		(.094)		(.095)
N	119	119	119	119	119	119
R^2	.231	.487	.046	.280	.012	.114

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

*$p < .10$; **$p < .05$.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this study, we sought to examine how political dynamics—specifically, political competition and policy makers' partisan affiliations—influence open data practices of local governments (Hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively), and how administrative capacity affects open data initiatives and moderates the relationship between these political dynamics and open data initiatives (Hypotheses 3 and 4, respectively). Our findings uncover three key insights. First, there is robust support for the idea that increased political competition enhances government transparency and openness, confirming our Hypothesis 1. This suggests that policy makers view improving transparency as a means to garner public support, with earnest responses to open government data requests serving as an effective method to showcase their accomplishments and boost citizen trust and satisfaction. Second, the positive effect of administrative capacity on open data initiatives is evident, supporting our Hypothesis 3. This confirms that open data initiatives demand significant resource investment from governments for successful launching and operation, and those with inadequate administrative capacities struggle to meet citizen demands. At last, our findings reveal that political competition and administrative capacity act synergistically; the positive effects of political competition on transparency and openness are more pronounced in areas with higher administrative capabilities. That is, Hypothesis 4 is supported by our empirical model. Meanwhile, we find no distinct disparity between liberal local governments and conservative ones in open data initiatives, even in the results of RDD, indicating that our Hypothesis 2 is not supported.

Despite examining the influence of partisan affiliation on government responses to open data requests, we found limited evidence that it plays a significant role. Previous research suggests that individuals with left-leaning (liberal) orientations are more likely to value open government initiatives compared to those with right-leaning (conservative) views. We theorized that this difference in public perception might affect policy maker behavior, anticipating that left-leaning officials would be more inclined to engage in open data initiatives, aligning with their supporters' values. However, our analysis, using both OLS and RDD methodologies, did not strongly support this hypothesis. While RDD models initially suggested that governments affiliated with left-leaning parties showed a broader scope of open government data, indicating higher responsiveness to open data requests, this "partisan discontinuity" diminished upon adjusting for control variables.

This study underscores the significant impact of political and administrative dynamics on the efficacy of local governments' open data practices and, more broadly, on government transparency. Previous studies have examined the effects of open government initiatives on enhancing accountability, curbing corruption, and spurring economic development (e.g., Attard et al., 2015). Yet, there has been less emphasis on understanding the factors driving the adoption or nonadoption of these initiatives by governments. Our research addresses this gap by exploring how recent technological advancements and the push for greater transparency have set new standards for public organizations. Despite these pressures, there's notable variation in organizational responses to public requests for open government data. Through the lens of rational choice theory, we pinpoint the scenarios under which local policy makers are most likely to accommodate citizens' requests for information. We find that heightened political competition and superior administrative capabilities encourage governments to adhere to evolving social norms for transparency and to be more responsive to the needs of their citizens.

This study adds nuance to our understanding of how public agencies are politicized, especially in the context of enhancing political accountability through increased electoral competition. It suggests that more electoral competition can benefit local policy makers by fostering a dynamic governance environment responsive to citizens' needs, potentially contradicting previous findings on the effects of politicization on agency responsiveness (Mergel, 2023). Prior research, such as that by Wood and Lewis (2017), indicates that politicized agencies, defined

as those where politics significantly influence administration, tend to be slower in responding to information requests. This discrepancy between our findings and those of Wood and Lewis can be reconciled by considering the orientation of politicized agencies toward higher political powers rather than serving the public. We propose that higher electoral competition, while seemingly paradoxical, may reduce the negative effects of politicization by aligning public servants' priorities more closely with public demands rather than with political pressures. In essence, this perspective suggests that increasing electoral competition might serve as an indirect mechanism for depoliticizing local governments, challenging traditional views on the relationship between politicization, and public agency responsiveness.

Despite thoroughly analyzing the relationship between electoral competition, administrative capacity, and open government data with RD design, there would be a limitation regarding external validity. As mentioned earlier, while the political environment exhibits some heterogeneity, South Korea is a relatively homogeneous society with only minor variations in social, cultural, and demographic characteristics across local jurisdictions. Therefore, our findings may be less applicable to countries with different characteristics from South Korea. To ensure external validity, further analysis is necessary in diverse international contexts.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors of this manuscript declare that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose about the submission of this manuscript to the academic journal. All research and findings presented have been conducted impartially and without any external influence.

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