# The effects of transparency regulation on political trust and perceived corruption: evidence from a survey experiment

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# The effects of transparency regulation on political trust and perceived corruption: Evidence from a survey experiment

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## Abstract

Scholarly evidence of transparency's beneficial effects on trust and perceptions of corruption remains debated and confined to the study of public administration. We contribute to this debate by extending the study of its effects to transparency legislation concerning members of parliament (MPs), political parties, and business interest groups. In an online experiment conducted in Ireland with 1373 citizens, we find that transparency in political donations improves trust in political parties, while asset declaration for conflict of interest prevention reduces perceptions of corruption toward MPs. However, transparency in lobbying is found to have no impact on attitudes toward business interest groups. This supports the common expectation that transparency improves political trust and reduces perceptions of corruption, but also confirms its complex effects. The study improves our understanding of transparency beyond open government providing an evaluation of different regulatory policies aimed at making the activities of parties, MPs, and lobby groups transparent.

Keywords: integrity, interest groups, political parties, regulation, transparency, trust.

## 1. Introduction

The beneficial effects of transparency in politics have been long debated. While some studies present inconclusive findings (Bauhr & Grimes, 2014; De Fine Licht, 2011; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012; Worthy, 2010), others recognize that political transparency improves political trust and reduces perceptions of corruption (Porumbescu et al., 2022; Schmidthuber et al., 2021; Wang & Guan, 2022; Žuffová, 2020). Against this backdrop, international organizations and initiatives, such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP), the Open Government Initiative (OGI), and the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), are promoting transparency reforms as panacea to combat decline in political trust and improve corruption perceptions.

While we welcome such efforts, we argue that the study of transparency's effect has been so far conducted without consideration for the different types of transparency legislation which regulate the disclosure and public availability of information concerning the activities of government and other organizations involved in public affairs (Porumbescu et al., 2022). Existing studies focus almost exclusively on public administration and open government transparency, typically in relation to freedom of information laws, open data policies and/or transparent organizational and managerial practices (Alessandro et al., 2021; De Fine Licht, 2011; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014; Park & Blenkinsopp, 2011; Porumbescu et al., 2022; Wang & Guan, 2022). The effects of other transparency laws, for instance, electoral, ethics, and lobbying regulations which concern political actors, such as MPs, political parties, and interest groups remain largely overlooked when assessing the

influence of transparency on political trust and perceived corruption (Djankov et al., 2010; Kanol, 2018; Sances, 2013; Vadlamannati & Cooray, 2017).

In this paper, we focus on the effects of these transparency legislations and their forms of information disclosure. In doing so, we fill two major gaps in the literature. First, we address an *empirical* gap and test the application of transparency theory to so-far underexplored contexts and forms of transparency. This endeavor also supports the work of international organizations that advocate the introduction of this kind of transparency legislation with evidence-based arguments. Our second contribution is *theoretical*. Much of the literature assesses the impact of transparency on generalized attitudes, such as overall perceptions of corruption, trust in government institutions, or the perceived legitimacy of the democratic process (Mabillard & Pasquier, 2016; Schmidthuber et al., 2021; Wang & Guan, 2022). Transparency, however, establishes an actor-specific (principal–agent) relationship between the discloser and the consumer of the disclosed information. As such, the nature of the relationship may vary depending on who discloses political information. Building on findings from public opinion research and focusing on citizens as consumers of political information, we argue that the effects of transparency are different depending on whether the disclosing agents are political parties, members of parliament (MPs), or business interest groups. These are political actors with comparable roles of democratic representation in contemporary politics, whose activities are regulated by comparable transparency rules often conjointly adopted by governments. However, we argue that the way citizens relate to the different political actors and the information they disclose will influence the effects of transparency differently.

Our theoretical framework builds on agency theory and bounded rationality to derive testable expectations. We argue that transparency improves information asymmetries between the principal and the agent and signals honesty and openness thereby positively affecting evaluations and trust and perceptions of corruption. Moreover, we posit that citizens use different criteria when assigning trust and other attitudes to different political actors (Fenno, 2003; Fisher et al., 2010; Valgarðsson et al., 2021). While perceptions of fairness and integrity of an actor are important, these are not prioritized to the same degree for all political actors. More specifically, performance evaluations and ideological proximity are better predictors of trust and perceptions of corruption towards parties and MPs than messages of probity (André & Depauw, 2017; Butler et al., 2023; Galeotti & Zizzo, 2014; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; Klašnja, 2017; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016). Thus we hypothesize that information that signals honesty and integrity may not necessarily improve evaluations of trust and corruption for these actors. On the other hand, for business interest groups, the disclosure of comparable information about lobbying could signify that these organizations, while representing private interests do not intend to harm public interests (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2019; Rasmussen and Reher 2022).

We test our hypotheses using data from a pre-registered survey experiment ($n = 1373$) conducted in the Republic of Ireland. The experiment tested the *direct* effects of disclosure of political donations by political parties, disclosure of financial assets by MPs, and disclosure of lobbying activities by business interest groups on citizens' political trust and perceptions of corruption toward these actors. In line with some existing works (Porumbescu et al., 2022; Schmidthuber et al., 2021; Wang & Guan, 2022), we find that transparency increases trust and decreases perceptions of corruption. We also find that transparency affects evaluations of political actors differently, but in a way that runs contrary to our initial hypotheses: First, high transparency in donations to political parties, which we operationalize as more information being available on electoral registers, positively affects trust in political parties. Secondly, transparency in MPs' potential conflicts of interest, operationalized as asset declarations, reduce perceptions of corruption for both low and high levels of transparency. Finally, transparency in lobbying has no effect on attitudes toward business interest groups. We conduct additional post hoc analyses to explain the unexpected findings. We conclude that such results can be traced back to the differences in interest for and understanding of the role of disclosing actors and their activities, and differences in the way citizens interpret transparency in relation to each political actor.

## 2. Political trust, perceived corruption, and transparency

Political trust and perceived corruption, although conceptually different, are closely related (Wroe et al., 2013). In principal–agent terms, the former defines a situation in which the principal willingly puts herself in a vulnerable position, since the agent can harm or betray her (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Relatedly, the second concept defines the

principal's judgment on whether an agent's behavior is indeed harming or betraying the principal for private gain (Blackburn et al., 2004; Wroe et al., 2013). Perceptions of corruption strongly feed into political trust (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Bowler & Karp, 2004; Chanley et al., 2000) and there is some evidence that perceptions of corruption influence political trust (Graham et al., 2003; Mortimore, 1995).

Political trust and corruption perceptions depend on the information and cues that allow the principal to judge the integrity of the agent's behavior (Hardin, 1999; Levi & Stoker, 2000). Transparency, by increasing the availability of information and by providing cues about an agent's integrity is expected to improve these attitudes. However, research on the effects of transparency on public evaluations of trust and corruption has revealed contradictory findings. On the one hand, some studies found positive associations between transparency, trust, and reduced corruption perception in the context of local government transparency (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012) or specific policies and government activities, such as public works programs (De Fine Licht, 2014; Park & Blenkinsopp, 2011). On the other hand, by unveiling misbehavior or incompetence, transparency may also increase corruption perceptions (Bauhr & Grimes, 2014; Chauchard et al., 2019; Vadlamannati & Cooray, 2017) and decrease political trust (Worthy, 2010).

These inconclusive results may be explained by differences in levels of transparency, the moderating effects of media circulation, press freedom, and differences in institutions (Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010; Porumbescu et al., 2022; Vadlamannati & Cooray, 2017; Žuffová, 2020), the area of government in which disclosure is introduced (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012), the policy domain (De Fine Licht, 2014; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2021), and the content and complexity of information (Alessandro et al., 2021; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014). While we acknowledge these as important moderating factors, we also note another important shortcoming in existing studies: Most of the research on transparency's effect focuses on information disclosure in government institutions and public administration (Alessandro et al., 2021; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014; Park & Blenkinsopp, 2011; Porumbescu et al., 2022; Wang & Guan, 2022), ignoring a set of transparency regulations which deal with disclosure requirements of different political actors. In fact, a recent meta-analysis of 49 studies of transparency and trust mentions only one study that considered transparency requirements of MPs in relation to conflict of interest prevention (Wang & Guan, 2022). None of the studies included in the meta-analysis considered transparency in donations to political parties and candidates or lobbying transparency.

We argue that specific attention to the disclosure of information[1] and the processes by which individuals assign trust and perceptions of corruption to different political actors is needed to evaluate the effects of these transparency regulations. In the last decades, transparency advocates have prioritized implementing reforms that aim at increasing trust in the democratic process and reducing perceptions of corruption, specifically by making political donations, lobbying, and potential conflicts of interest more transparent (Bolleyer, 2018; Chari et al., 2020; Coroado & de Sousa, 2022). The combined (or coupled) reform of party finance, conflict of interest declarations, and lobbying transparency is a standing action plan of intergovernmental initiatives like GRECO and the OGP that involve more than 50 countries globally. Yet, the effectiveness of these specific reforms on trust in different political actors remains largely unclear. This is because the state of the art favors an approach that puts generalized attitudes, such as trust in government and legitimacy at the center (Mabillard & Pasquier, 2016; Schmidthuber et al., 2021; Wang & Guan, 2022). We therefore lack a comparative assessment that zooms into the processes by which individuals assign trust and perceptions of corruption to different political actors. To address this gap, we propose a novel theory that incorporates previous research indicating that trust and perceived corruption evaluations depend on the disclosing agent and released information (Fisher et al., 2010; Galeotti & Zizzo, 2014, 2018).

## 3. Theory and expectations

Trust and corruption evaluations rely upon the qualities of the trustee. An agent should possess certain characteristics that signal to the principal that it will not betray or harm her (Levi & Stoker, 2000), that it will follow prescribed rules and norms (Citrin & Stoker, 2018), pursue fairness and honesty (Grimes, 2006), and represent citizens' interests as opposed to private or special ones (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). The public administration literature identifies at least two distinct mechanisms by which transparency may affect these evaluations.

The first, called *knowledge-based mechanism*, assumes that better informed citizens make better informed judgments (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). By accessing information that would otherwise not be available, citizens *learn* something they did not know before. This allows them to evaluate the performance and activities of the disclosing actor and update their perceptions (Crepaz & Arikan, 2021).

This mechanism assumes that citizens rationally process information and calculate assessments of trust and perceived corruption based on the evaluation of the disclosed information. New information about political actors allows citizens to evaluate whether political actors have been acting in their best interest. Unless information about negative performance or incompetence is disclosed, the additional information may reduce information asymmetries leaving citizens in a less vulnerable position than before. Accordingly, a lower sense of vulnerability reduces the cost of delegation for the principal who becomes more confident that the agent can be trusted (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Similarly, new information improves the monitoring capacity of the citizens. This increased scrutiny empowers citizens and influences their perception that political actors are acting according to "the rules of the game," are not corrupt, and are therefore less likely to take advantage of them for private gain (Brusca et al., 2018).[2]

The second mechanism suggests that the effect of transparency is *disclosure-based*. It emphasizes that the act of disclosure itself is enough to signal commitment to openness and virtue. According to this mechanism, transparency is a shortcut that allows citizens to react to disclosure with increased trust and the perception that no corrupt behavior has taken place (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012; Crepaz & Arikan, 2021). In principal–agent terms, principals take disclosure as a signal that the agent is honest—because agents are open about their activities—and competent—because they follow rules and norms by making information available to principals (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). Therefore, the act of disclosure alone signals to citizens that political actors can be trusted. At the same time, disclosure is interpreted as a demonstration that the latter has "nothing to hide" reducing the citizens' perceptions that the political actor's behavior is corrupt (Worthy, 2021).

Based on these two mechanisms, we expect transparency to have beneficial effects on both political trust and perceptions of corruption:

Hypothesis 1a. Transparency is expected to increase citizens' trust in political actors.
Hypothesis 1b. Transparency is expected to decrease citizens' perceptions that political actors are corrupt.

We further suggest that the effect of transparency would differ depending on the disclosing political actor. We consider three political actors, namely political parties, MPs, and business interest groups.[3]

We suggest that these actors have three common characteristics that facilitate a *suitable comparison*. First, all three actors have a role of representation in the political process. Second, all are involved in the formulation of policy. Third, there are similar expectations around ethics and integrity of these actors in the political process. These allow for a comparative analysis of the attitudes toward these political actors, which instead would not been feasible had we focused on other organizations or institutions considered in transparency research, such as the court system or police forces (Grimmelikhuijsen & Klijn, 2015; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015).[4]

Despite these similarities between political parties, MPs, and business interest groups, we argue that transparency has different effects on the formation of attitudes toward these three actors due to the different weight individuals assign when evaluating each actor (Fisher et al., 2010; Pedersen & Pedersen, 2020; Valgarðsson et al., 2021; Whiteley et al., 2016). For example, while citizens are overly concerned about political parties pursuing special rather than public interests (Ansolabehere et al., 2005; Primo & Milyo, 2006), research suggests that individuals rely mostly on performance evaluations (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016), and issue or ideological proximity (André & Depauw, 2017; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008) when assigning trust to political parties. As a result, when political parties disclose their donations on electoral registers, citizens may not necessarily update their evaluations of trust and perceived corruption toward parties as political organizations.

We expect this to also apply to the case of transparency of politicians' financial assets. While politicians' messages of probity play a role in trust and other evaluations (Faulkner et al., 2015; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; Pedersen & Pedersen, 2020), these are often less important than policy or issue proximity, performance, and authenticity (Fisher et al., 2010; Keele, 2007; Valgarðsson et al., 2021). "Getting things done" and focusing on

improving voters' (financial) position is assumed to be a priority in an individual's evaluation of elected representatives. There is evidence that citizens heavily rely on performance-related factors such as the quality of public services when assigning trust in politicians (Gustavsen et al., 2017). Even when these are weighted against issues of integrity, voters often prioritize politicians' competences over trustworthiness, especially if this is expected to benefit them (Galeotti & Zizzo, 2014, 2018; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2016).

This does not mean voters do not care about the integrity of their representatives. People are still "amazingly attuned, hypersensitive even, to the possibility that decision makers will attempt to improve themselves at the expense of everyone else" (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002: 85). However, research unveiling such hypersensitivity mostly concerns instances when politicians are (or appear to) seeking private gains at the public's cost (Chauchard et al., 2019; McAllister, 2000; Mortimore, 1995; Pedersen & Pedersen, 2020; Vargas & Schlutz, 2016). Even in these extreme circumstances, democratic accountability studies show that voters can be quite forgiving of politicians' and political parties' unethical behavior, also when their actions are tainted by scandals (Basinger, 2013; Chang et al., 2010). We derive that, unless corruption is on top of the agenda, voters care more about performance, regardless of anything else. We therefore infer that matters of integrity such as MPs' *disclosure* of their private assets and gifts will have only weak or null effects on the way individuals ascribe trust and perceived corruption to politicians.

As far as business interest groups are concerned, less is known about public perceptions of these organizations (Kollman, 2004). However, recent studies on the perceived legitimacy of interest group involvement in policymaking have suggested that citizens view business groups as legitimate actors lobbying government policy, especially when their involvement in policymaking is counterbalanced by other interest groups representing non-business interests (Rasmussen and Reher, 2022). Still, most citizens are aware that "lobbying by business representatives can result in policies that may not be in the public interest" and support rules "to ensure a balanced participation of different interests in decision-making."[5] Transparency in lobbying, which makes the lobbying attempts of business groups and other organizations known to the public, is therefore expected to have a positive effect on trust toward business interest groups and reduce their perceived corruption as it demonstrates the organization's commitment to public interests. Such effect is expected to be stronger compared to other actors such as political parties and MPs, whose evaluations of trust may be less dependent on integrity signals.

Hypothesis 2. The effect of transparency on citizens' levels of trust and perceived corruption is expected to be stronger when the disclosed information concerns business interest groups compared to MPs and political parties.

## 4. Research design

Our study considers transparency in three processes of information release concerning political parties, MPs, and business interest groups. The first is considered with a focus on transparency in political donations. The second is considered with attention to the disclosure of their financial assets. Finally, the third is with regard to transparency in lobbying.[6] The three policies, which introduce transparency in these actors' activities are electoral laws, ethics regulations, and lobbying laws. All three require the disclosing actor (party, MP, or business interest group) to make information available in publicly accessible registers (generally managed by the same state agency). As explained below, such laws release comparable types of information, all relating to the prevention of potential conflict of interest. The information reveals a political actor's activity and integrity, and its disclosure has comparable objectives to improve citizens' trust in these actors and reduce perceptions of corruption. Additionally, recent research suggests that this information is used in a comparable way by external stakeholders, such as journalists, in their line of work (Crepaz & Kneafsey, 2022).

We conducted a pre-registered survey experiment[7] which manipulated the level of transparency in donations to political parties, asset disclosures of *Teachtai Dála* (Members of Dáil, the Lower House of the Irish Parliament, and we abbreviate this with MPs for sake of simplicity and comparability) and lobbying activities of business interest groups in Ireland. Trust in these political actors tends to be slightly higher in Ireland, compared to other Western countries. According to the latest Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

report on public attitudes towards government, trust in MPs and political parties in Ireland lies at approximately 50% and 25%, respectively, compared to OECD averages of 39% and 24%. On the contrary, perceptions of corruption are slightly above the OECD average, with 4 in 10 individuals in Ireland considering it *likely that a public employee would accept a bribe* (average at 35%). Finally, the perception that Ireland is transparent, and that information is open and accessible lies at 80%.[8]

Data were collected between May 8 and June 7, 2020, by *Ireland Thinks* using age, gender, and education quotas.

Respondents were randomly assigned to either the control or one of six treatment conditions. The experimental treatments consisted of vignettes that varied the actor and the type of disclosed information (donations to parties, financial disclosure of MPs, information disclosure of lobbying activity) and the level of transparency (low and high) (3 × 2 factorial design). The respondents in the control group read a short vignette of no political relevance concerning a cultural event. This establishes a common and neutral baseline against which all other experimental groups can be compared against.

Because citizens are unlikely to directly access data on publicly available registers themselves, our vignettes were written in the form of newspaper articles that reported the requirements of the discloser under the transparency laws and release of the most recent disclosed information from transparency registers. For illustrative purposes, we report an example for the treatment concerning political parties below. However, all vignettes follow the same structure, language and can be accessed in Supplementary Appendix 1.

*Figures released today by the Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPO) in its annual report of political party donations show that political parties disclosed donations valued at €180,000 for 2018.*

*There were 19 political parties registered during 2018 to contest European and Dáil elections. Each of these parties was required to furnish a Donation Statement in respect of 2018 to the Commission by 31 March 2019, disclosing donations exceeding €1,500 in value received during 2018. The maximum value of donations which a political party may accept from the same donor in the same year is €2,500. All information is open and can be accessed on the website of SIPO. A summary of the donations to the main political parties represented in the Houses of the Oireachtas is shown below.*

We also included a table containing a replica of an extract of the disclosed information present on these kind of transparency registers. The vignettes concerning donations to parties displayed the total yearly sum of donations by political party in the low transparency (LT) condition, and in addition displayed whether the donors were individuals or corporations, the number of donations, and the average donation in the high transparency (HT) condition. For asset disclosures of MPs, the LT condition displayed ownership of shares and property, and the HT condition added reporting of gifts to this information. As far as lobbying transparency is concerned, the LT condition displayed information about the lobbying organization, the lobbyist, and the number of meetings held with public officeholders. The HT condition also disclosed the expenditures related to the lobbying activity and the target of the activity (e.g., the government department). Table 1 summarizes these cues for each condition and Supplementary Appendix 1 contains the full description of the treatments.

We selected such features for the transparency conditions for two reasons. Firstly, the disclosed information is comparable to and representative of measures of public integrity advocated by transparency activists and international organizations (Chari et al., 2020). Despite the differences in content, the disclosed information for different actors all shed light into the integrity of the political process when private interests threaten to distort it. The more information about the potential influence of private interests on the political process, the better respondents can evaluate whether a conflict of interest exists. Secondly, the literature associates certain details in disclosed information, such as donor information disclosure, gift reporting, and lobbying expenditure disclosure to features of more robust, hence more transparent, regulations (Bolleyer, 2018; Chari et al., 2020; Coroado & de Sousa, 2022; Djankov et al., 2010). This justifies our otherwise arbitrary cut-off point between what qualifies as low and high transparency.

The reporting of this type of information used in our treatments is not unprecedented in the Irish media. We found several instances where Irish broadsheets directly reported from these transparency registers, some news stories even using screenshots from the registers and tables (in a similar fashion to what we do in our

**Table 1**  Summary of information used in treatment groups

|  | Group | Information details for low transparency condition (LT) | Additional information for high transparency condition (HT) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Control | NA | NA |
| 2. | Donations to political parties | Total sum of donations for each political party | |
| 3. | Donations to political parties | Total sum of donations for each political party | Donor (individual/corporate); total number of donations; size of average donation |
| 4. | Asset disclosure of MPs | Declarations concerning ownership of shares and property for a list of MPs | |
| 5. | Asset disclosure of MPs | Declarations concerning ownership of shares and property for a list of MPs | Accepted gifts for a list of MPs |
| 6. | Lobbying activity | List of lobbying organizations (a business organization, a trade union, and an NGO); the name of the responsible person for lobbying; the number of lobbyists employed by the organization; and the number of meetings the lobby group had with public institutions | |
| 7. | Lobbying activity | List of lobbying organizations (a business organization, a trade union, and an NGO); the name of the responsible person for lobbying; the number of lobbyists employed by the organization; and the number of meetings the lobby group had with public institutions | The name of the lobbied public office holder; the total lobbying expenditure for each registered lobby group |

MPs, members of parliament; NGO, non-governmental organization.

experiment).[9] These stories often involve suspected cases of corruption, undue influence or questions about conflict of interest. In our experiment we refrain from providing such angle and opt for a neutral approach. In fact, only 3.5% of our respondents indicated that they found the tone of the vignettes to be biased.

## 5. Operationalization of variables

Our first dependent variable is an additive index of *political trust* combining perceived honesty and competence of political actors (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; Levi & Stoker, 2000). *Honesty*, defined as "truth-telling and responsible behavior that seeks to abide by the rules," is an important component of trustworthiness (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Still, "a person may be honest but incompetent and so not worthy of trust" (Rose-Ackerman, 2001: 526). We therefore include *competence* as another key component of political trust (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014). We prefer this nuanced approach to an approach that measures trust directly (Fisher et al., 2010).

To capture these dimensions, we asked respondents to rate to what extent they believed [*actors*] (political parties, MPs, and business interest groups) were *competent* and *honest* on a 5-point scale.[10] We combine these two items into an additive index standardized it so that it varies from 0 to 1, where 0 indicates no trust while 1 indicates the highest levels of trust (all items carry equal weight; $\alpha_{\text{trust in political parties}} = 0.79$; $\alpha_{\text{trust in TDs}} = 0.82$; $\alpha_{\text{trust in business groups}} = 0.52$).[11]

Our second dependent variable is an additive index of perceived corruption. Our survey items follow the definition of corruption as "illegal, or unauthorized, profiteering by officials who exploit their positions for personal gain" (Blackburn et al., 2004: 5). We asked respondents to rate the extent to which they agreed that an [actor i.e., *political parties*] "engage in illegal activities," "disclose all information about its activities," and "favor private interests" (all measured on a 5-point scale). The first question captures the perception that actors act according to

the rules and regulations. The second relates more specifically to their willingness to be transparent. The final one taps the perception that these actors follow special as opposed to public interests ($\alpha_{\text{perceived corruption-political parties}}$ = 0.72; $\alpha_{\text{perceived corruption-TDs}}$ = 0.83; $\alpha_{\text{perceived corruption-business groups}}$ = 0.58).[12] As expected, there is a small, negative, and statistically significant correlation between the two, suggesting that the two concepts are related but are not collinear ($r_{\text{political parties}}$ = −0.28, $p < 0.000$; $r_{\text{MPs}}$ = −0.24, $p < 0.000$; $r_{\text{business groups}}$ = −0.19, $p < 0.000$).

In addition to a comparison between average levels of trust and perceived corruption across treatment- and the control groups, and ANOVAs, we also test our hypotheses using regression analysis and control for the effects of age, gender, level of education, geographical origin, income, political interest, political ideology, and pre-treatment levels of trust in political parties, MPs, and business interest groups. Summary statistics for all variables are shown in Table A2 in Supplementary Appendix 2.

The distribution of demographics and socio-economic variables per treatment group appears to be balanced with averages not differing significantly by group (Table A3 in Supplementary Appendix 3). Randomization was successful, and in most cases, demographics, political orientations, and previous trust do not seem to significantly predict assignment to experimental treatments (Table A4 in Supplementary Appendix 3).

## 6. Analysis and results

### 6.1. Effects of transparency on trust and perceived corruption

To investigate H1a and H1b, we first merge the treatment groups and test whether average levels of trust and perceived corruption in the high or low transparency conditions statistically differ from average levels of trust and perceived corruption in the control group. Average levels of trust are calculated by taking the mean between the actor-specific post-treatment (or post control treatment) attitudes, that is, *trust in political parties*, *trust in MPs*, and *trust in business groups*. Average levels of perceived corruption are the mean of *perceived corruption of political parties*, *perceived corruption of MPs*, and *perceived corruption of business groups*. All scores vary between 0 (lowest average trust and low perceived corruption) and 1 (highest average trust and high perceived corruption). Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations (in parentheses) between treatment and control groups.

Findings presented in Table 2 confirm our expectations on the effects of transparency. As hypothesized in H1a, mean level of trust for all political actors is higher in the treatment groups compared to the control group. As far as our expectations in H1b are concerned, findings in Table 2 indicate that perceptions of corruption in the LT group are lower than in the control group (equivalent to a drop of 3.5%) as expected according to the disclosure-based mechanism, *and* are even lower in HT (a decrease of about 6.3%) as expected according to the knowledge-based mechanism.

To investigate the effects of treatments further, we conducted a one-way ANOVA to test the hypothesis that there are significant differences in the mean scores of three groups (control, LT, and HT) on political trust and perceived corruption. The tests revealed a significant main effect of group ($F$ (2, 1370) = 3.11, $p$ = 0.045) for political trust. Post hoc analysis using Tukey's HSD test was conducted to determine which group means significantly differ from each other. The tests revealed that there were significant differences between the HT and LT groups (mean difference = 0.025, SE = 0.011, $p$ = 0.058) meaning that more information may be beneficial for trust. On the other hand, for perceived corruption, ANOVA test does not reveal significant main effect ($F$ (2, 1366) = 1.68, $p$ = 0.187). These findings *partially* confirm H1a, which expected levels of transparency to increase

**Table 2** Means and standard deviations of level of political trust and perceived corruption between control and treatment groups

| | Control group | Treatment group: low transparency | Treatment group: high transparency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mean level of political trust | 0.532 (0.16) | 0.533 (0.19) | 0.557 (0.19) |
| Mean level of perceived corruption | 0.633 (0.22) | 0.611 (0.28) | 0.593 (0.27) |
| $N$ | 203 | 561 | 609 |

citizens' trust in political actors, but not H1b. However, these findings consider transparency effect at aggregate level only, meaning that differences may still be found at the actor level (H2). We explore this next.

### 6.2. Effects of transparency for different political actors

To investigate H2, we disaggregate the treatment groups for political parties, MPs, and business interest groups and test whether political trust and perceived corruption differ between control group, LT and HT treatment groups for each actor. We are particularly interested in testing whether the effect of transparency is stronger when business interest groups disclose their lobbying activity than when political parties disclose political donations and MPs declare financial assets.

Table 3 presents mean levels of trust and perceived corruption and their standard deviation for the control group, LT and HT treatments for the two dependent variables. We start by analyzing the effects of the treatments for political parties. ANOVA tests reveal that at least one group's mean score on political trust is significantly different from those of the others ($F$ (2, 594) = 7.98, $p < 0.001$). The post hoc Tukey test indicates that there are significant differences between the control group and the HT treatment group (mean difference = −0.08, SE = 0.025, $p < 0.001$) and between the HT and LT treatment groups (mean difference = 0.084, SE = 0.025, $p < 0.001$), confirming the expectation that transparency, and especially HT increases trust in political parties. For perceived corruption (although means presented in Table 3 drop in the expected direction) there is no evidence that transparency significantly decreases perceived corruption ($F$ (2, 592) = 1.76, $p = 0.173$).

For MPs, there is no evidence that transparency has a statistically significant effect on political trust ($F$ (2, 590) = 0.44, $p = 0.642$). However, ANOVA tests show a significant main effect of group for political corruption of MPs ($F$ (2, 588) = 7.73, $p = 0.000$). The Tukey post hoc tests reveal significant differences in perceived corruption between control group and LT treatment group (mean difference = 0.109, SE = 0.031, $p = 0.002$) and between the control group and HT treatment group (mean difference = 0.105, SE = 0.031, $p = 0.002$). There were no significant differences in perceived corruption between LT and HT treatment groups.

As far as business interest groups are concerned, Table 3 shows that the substantive means for both outcomes are essentially the same, which is a first indication that transparency in lobbying may have had no impact on the attitudes toward this political actor. ANOVA tests confirm this statistically for political trust ($F$ (2, 568) = 0.57, $p = 0.566$) and for perceived corruption ($F$ (2, 565) = 0.31, $p = 0.732$).

ANOVA tests confirm that the effects of transparency vary across different types of information disclosure by different political actors. However, they do not provide empirical support for H2 because we find no effects of treatments for lobbying transparency but statistically significant effects for trust in political parties and perceptions of corruption toward MPs. We compare these effects across political actors in more detail using multivariate regressions to further evaluate these findings.

We run multivariate regressions to predict political trust and perceived corruption with experimental treatments with control group as the baseline. This allows us to compare the *substantive effect* of the results presented so far when also controlling for a range of demographic factors and political variables (age, gender, geographical origin, income, political ideology, political interest, and previous trust in [actor; political party, MP, or business interest groups]). Figures 1 and 2 present the marginal effects of the treatments on political trust and perceived corruption based on these models (see Supplementary Appendix 4, Tables A5 and A6 for full results). As can be

**Table 3** Means and standard deviations of level of trust and perceived corruption for different political actors

|  | Political parties | | | MPs | | | Business groups | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Control | LT | HT | Control | LT | HT | Control | LT | HT |
| Mean level of political trust | 0.48 | 0.49 | 0.55 | 0.52 | 0.54 | 0.52 | 0.60 | 0.59 | 0.59 |
|  | (0.20) | (0.19) | (0.21) | (0.21) | (0.20) | (0.20) | (0.18) | (0.15) | (0.15) |
| Mean level of perceived corruption | 0.63 | 0.65 | 0.60 | 0.60 | 0.49 | 0.49 | 0.69 | 0.70 | 0.69 |
|  | (0.25) | (0.25) | (0.25) | (0.26) | (0.34) | (0.32) | (0.20) | (0.21) | (0.19) |
| N | 194 | 200 | 203 | 203 | 187 | 203 | 194 | 174 | 174 |

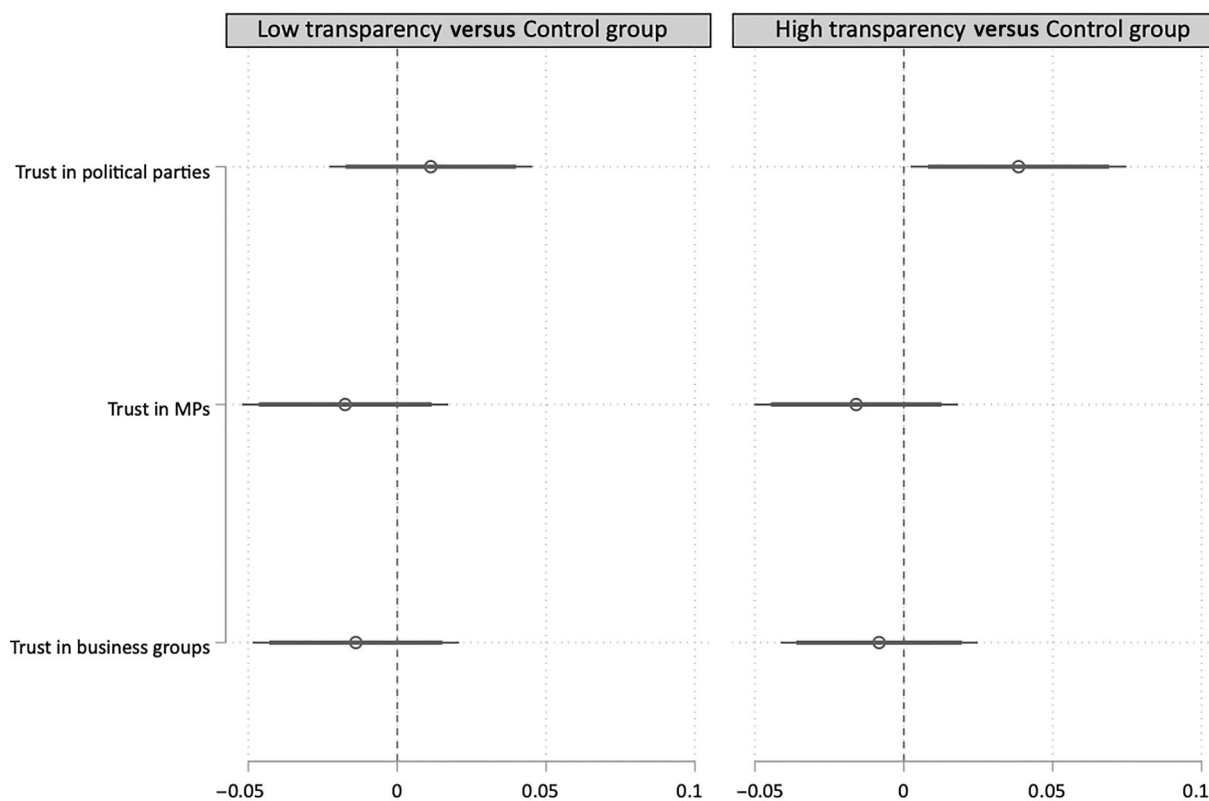HT, high transparency; LT, low transparency; MPs, members of parliament.

**Figure 1**   Point estimates of levels of political trust for political actors.  *Note*: Figure based on Models 3, 6, and 9, Table A5 (Supplementary Appendix 4). Intervals at 95% and 90% level of confidence.

seen in Figure 1, HT treatment has a statistically significant effect on trust in political parties. The *size* of this effect is also substantial with an 8% increase compared to the control group (from 0.49 to 0.53 on a 0–1 scale). This confirms the limited support for H1a documented so far. While we find transparency to have a positive effect on political trust, this is only the case for political parties and only in the HT condition; that is, when information about donors is disclosed in detail.

With regard to perceived corruption, *both* LT and HT treatments decrease perceptions of corruption of MPs by approximately 14% (from 0.56 to 0.48 on a 0–1 scale) (Fig. 2). These results provide empirical support for H1b on the beneficial effects of transparency on perceptions of corruption. The evidence is however limited to transparency in asset declarations and attitudes toward MPs.

We do not find any evidence that transparency has statistically significant or substantive effects on political trust or perceived corruption of business groups in the multivariate analysis. These run contrary to our expectations in H2 in which we predicted that transparency would influences citizens' attitudes toward business groups. To the contrary, transparency significantly affects attitudes toward political parties and MPs, for which we expected small or null effects, based on the assumption that citizens would pay less attention to matters of integrity about these actors unless actual unethical behavior had been disclosed.

## 7. Discussion and post hoc interpretations

What explains these positive yet unexpected effects of transparency across political actors? A possible answer concerns the level of political interest and engagement with the information disclosed by political actors as part of our experiment. Existing research already suggests that transparency is meaningful only if information receivers have the capacity and the interest to understand and process the information provided (Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010; Roberts, 2015; Schmidthuber et al., 2021). We cannot test this systematically with our data. However, we can provide proxy evidence from open-ended questions that we posed to respondents after the
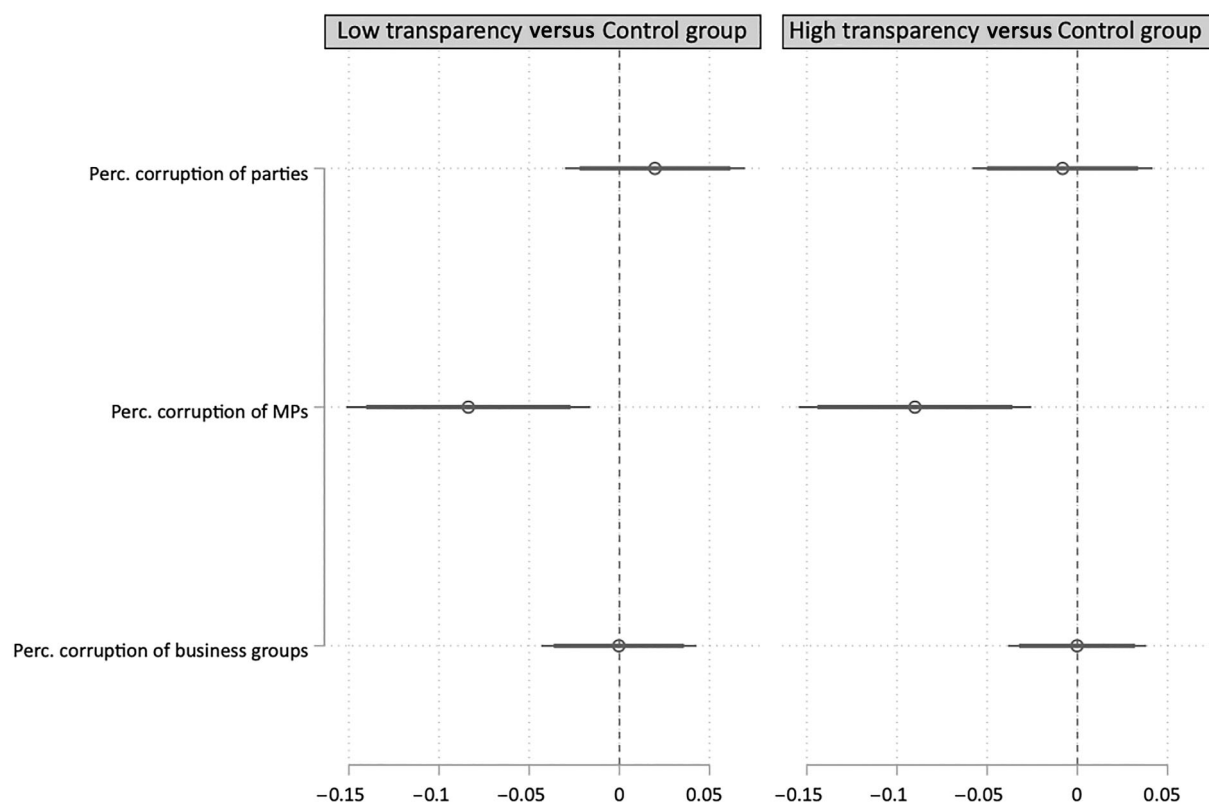
**Figure 2**  Point estimates of levels of perceived corruption of political actors.  *Note*: Figure based on Models 3, 6, and 9, Table A6 (Supplementary Appendix 4). Intervals at 95% and 90% level of confidence.

treatments. The answers to these responses provide a tentative interpretation of our unexpected findings. In addition, they shed light on the mechanisms by which transparency not only signals honesty and integrity but also produces citizens' improved understanding of political processes which then translate into a positive update of attitudes.

After reading the randomly assigned vignettes, respondents in our experiment were asked to describe what *the article* [used for the treatment] *was about and whether they found it interesting* in an open-ended format. The majority simply responded that the article concerned "donations to political parties," "asset disclosure of MPs," or "lobbying activities of business interest groups" and that they "did [or did not] find it interesting." Other respondents used the question as an opportunity to express political cynicism. This was relatively more common in the treatment group on donations to political parties, followed by the MPs.[13] In the case of business interest groups, political cynicism was almost absent.

In this latter treatment group, more common answers suggested that respondents struggled to understand or were unfamiliar with information about lobbying. Some confused lobbying expenditures with "funding received from the state"; one respondent confused lobby groups with political parties; some declared that they found the information "complicated" and that they were not aware that "this kind of information was publicly available" or that they did not know "that lobbying was happening in Ireland." This lack of understanding about lobby groups and their activities may have prevented the respondents from updating their evaluations about business actors.

While there is little research about what people know about lobbying(Benedict, 2004; Kollman, 2004), the general perception is that citizens know very little about it. Historical poll data from the United States reveals that when asked for the definition of "lobbyist," half of the respondents were not familiar with the term (Gallup Poll 1949, Roper poll, 1984 cited in Benedict, 2004: 137) and when lobbies were defined as *special interests*, "half of respondents could not name any group in this category" (CBS/*New York Times* 1984 cited in Benedict, 2004: 137). This finding relates to the United States, where lobbying tends to receive media coverage and attention in the public debate (Kollman, 2004). It may therefore be that in the case of Ireland (and Europe), individuals do not have a sufficient understanding of lobbying to engage with the information presented to them.

**11**

In line with this reasoning, we find higher levels of engagement and understanding of the disclosed information among respondents dealing with political parties and MPs. Arguably, citizens are more familiar with these actors and their activities compared to business interest groups. As such, their answers to open-ended questions unveil *why* an effect of transparency was found for political parties and MPs.

Respondents in the political party group reported that the information about political donations was "insightful" and "surprising" because it revealed that "donations are lower than expected" and "where the money and influence comes from." This suggests that the disclosed information has provided the respondents with new knowledge which may have contributed to update their trust evaluations (cf. Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014). This seems to support the *knowledge-based mechanism* behind the effect of transparency by which respondents update the attitudes toward political actors based on newly available information.

As far as the MPs' treatment is concerned, answers, stressed "the importance of knowing these things [refers to disclosed information] to ascertain whether TD's [MPs] might be conflicted or subject to bribery/external pressures." Other respondents commented that the disclosed information "prevents vested interests and bribery" and with it "the public can decide if they [MPs] may have conflicts of interest." These responses stress the conflict between private and public interests, the potential for corruption and the value of the disclosure for respondents to judge an MPs' integrity. Interestingly, very few respondents commented specifically on the disclosed information, and even fewer commented that they had "learned" from the information unlike in the case of political parties. This difference does not seem to be related to a lack of interest in the disclosed information in the MP treatment group but indicates that disclosure itself can help improve the perceived integrity of elected representatives. This finding resonates with new evidence on perceptions of integrity recently reported by Renwick et al. (2022) in the United Kingdom. Their survey indicated that voters overwhelmingly care about politicians' honesty, whether they "act within the law" and "transparently." In light of our own findings, Renwick et al.'s (2022) results may not be unique to the case of the United Kingdom where the decline in politicians' integrity has received much space in British press.

A final unexpected finding in our analysis is the inconsistent effect of transparency on our two dependent variables. To further inspect this finding, we test whether the analysis of the disaggregated components of both trust and perceived corruption indices can reveal more about this differential effect of transparency. For this, we re-run the regressions separately for the components that form our index of trust (*honesty* and *competence*) and perceived corruption (*private interest*, *non-disclosure*, and *illegal behavior*) (see Supplementary Appendix 5, Tables A7–A12). The results indicate that for political parties, HT drives perceptions of *competence* more than *honesty* as indicated by the substantially larger coefficients for the former variable (Table A7). This finding echoes arguments in the literature about the importance of *performance* in relation to trust in political parties as opposed to integrity (Galeotti & Zizzo, 2014; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016). Even when the disclosure of information concerns donations that could signal potential undue influence of special interests on the activities of political parties, citizens interpret this information in terms of the parties' competence in carrying out their representational role. It may be that, unless the disclosed information portrays what is perceived as inappropriate influence (e.g., with an exceptionally large donation or a donation by an actor of poor reputation), citizens do not change their perceived honesty. Even in these circumstances, the democratic accountability literature has shown that partisanship may distort such assessment (Anduiza et al., 2013; Klašnja, 2017).

Looking at the effect of transparency on the components of the perceived corruption for MPs (Table A11), we see that information disclosure has significant effects for all three components of the index. The most substantial effect, however, is for the component on *MPs serve private interests*. This aligns with the findings derived from the open-ended questions. Respondents in our experiment *used* the information to *check* for potential conflicts of interest of MPs. The information, however, neither helps citizens assessing an MP's competence; nor does it impact their perceived honesty. Asset disclosure reveals a *potential* conflict of interest but may not stop an MP from incurring in one. If we apply these findings to a real-world context, then this would be evidence that conflict of interest regulations achieve one of their key objectives, namely the improvement of the mechanisms that allow citizens to hold decision-makers accountable.

## 8. Conclusion

Overall, our findings support the claim that transparency has a direct positive effect on evaluations of trust and reduces perceptions of corruption (H1a and H1b) (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014; Porumbescu et al., 2022; Schmidthuber et al., 2021; Wang & Guan, 2022). Importantly, the effects we observed were positive or at worst null. We did not find any backfiring or polarizing effects of transparency. This is good news for policymakers and international organizations who advocate for transparency reform. They also raise further questions about the circumstances under which transparency leads to undesired outcomes such as attitude polarization (Crepaz & Arikan, 2021; De Fine Licht, 2011; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012; Worthy, 2010).

However, our findings also indicate that the effect of information disclosure on trust and perceived corruption varies by political actor. This finding challenges some conventional approaches that view transparency as having a *universal positive effect* on political trust. Existing research has already pointed out to the "complex effects" of transparency: On the one hand, because it depends on factors, such as timing, context, form and level of disclosure (De Fine Licht, 2014; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014; Porumbescu et al., 2022). On the other hand, because, in the real world, disclosing organizations are sometimes found to manipulate and curate transparency in order to avoid potentially negative consequences (Heimstädt, 2017; Heimstädt & Dobusch, 2020). These perspectives, however, focus predominantly on transparency of government institutions and public administration and give less attention to transparency regulations where disclosing agents are other political actors. Zooming into transparency regulations concerning donations to political parties, asset declarations of MPs, and lobbying, our study shows that the effects of transparency depend on the discloser. However, such differences differ from what we had theorized.

Contrary to our expectations, we found that transparency improves trust evaluations of political parties, reduces perceptions of corruption of MPs and has no effect on attitudes toward business interest groups. We offered two potential explanations for such unexpected finding. The first, concerned citizens' understanding of and interest in the disclosing actor, its activities, and the information. This confirms the importance of political interest and knowledge as potential moderator of transparency (Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010; Schmidthuber et al., 2021). However, it also suggests that a knowledge basis and minimum interest toward disclosed information may be required for citizens to make use of less familiar forms of transparency. This is important as it may have implications for the design of transparency initiatives that have improved citizens' involvement in public affairs as objective. For policymakers, this means that where resources for transparency are limited, and improvement of citizens' attitudes is an objective, it may make sense to focus on increasing transparency in the activities well-known (central) actors.

The second explanation concerns the way citizens interpret disclosed information. We observed that transparency affects dimensions of trust and perceived corruption differently. These differences are important because they point at complex mechanisms of attitude formation for yet similar forms of transparency and comparable political actors. Future research could disentangle these mechanisms further and, with regard to political trust, the work by Fisher et al. (2010) which challenges the one-dimensionality of the concept and differentiates between *moral, strategic*, and *deliberative* components of trust may offer a potentially interesting theoretical framework. In this context, the public's evaluations of trust in different actors may be contingent on not only their existing knowledge concerning specific actors as well as their motivation to acquire information about them.

Alternatively to the interpretations offered here, some could argue that the three forms of transparency regulations we have chosen as treatment are not suited for comparison. We do not see this as a likely explanation. First, existing research already treats these forms of transparency regulations as overlapping (Bolleyer, 2018; Chari et al., 2020; Coroado & de Sousa, 2022). Second, a recent study of these regulations shows that monitoring actors, such as journalists, make regular and combined use of these transparency registers (Crepaz & Kneafsey, 2022). Third, our analysis shows a consistent interpretation among participants in our study of the information being disclosed as shedding light over the role of money in politics, conflict of interest, and power and influence in politics. We conclude that these forms of transparency are comparable and do not see the design of the treatments biasing our results. On the contrary, we believe these to be important findings suggesting that more research into these forms of regulations is needed to comprehensively understand the effects of transparency on trust and perceived corruption.

Overall, we found that the effects of transparency are more complex than we expected. As some researchers have also commented, studying the effects of transparency seems to be "a difficult task" (Flyverbom, 2019; Michener, 2019). However, we argue that moving away from a universal approach to the study of transparency is a potentially beneficial way forward within the discipline. Scholars have already taken this path, with, for example, layered approaches to the study of its effects (Porumbescu et al., 2022). These enrich transparency theory, consolidating it. Our study however suggests that in some of its aspects, transparency theory may benefit from further theoretical development. Our findings suggest that more attention to the way information consumers view disclosing actors is needed to understand the micro-mechanisms underlying the effects of transparency. Literature that unveils what makes a good politician (Valgarðsson et al., 2021), a good public servant (Neo et al., 2023) in the eye of citizens could help nuance transparency theory further.

In sum, our findings have implications for the trust and integrity scholarship by suggesting that exposure to information about different political actors may trigger different mechanisms underlying evaluations. At the same time, they contribute to the transparency and public policy literature with an evaluation of transparency regulation widely advocated by national and international actors, but that we know relatively little about.

While experiments are the golden standard for causal inference, they have certain weaknesses such as concerns over their external validity and generalizability. We believe that our results would hold across different scenarios for at least two reasons. Firstly, our experiment relied on a representative sample of the population, which overcomes the limits of experimental research using convenience samples (Druckman & Kam, 2011). Secondly, Ireland is comparable to other Western European countries as far as socio-economic factors, levels of trust, and perceived corruption are concerned. Party, legislative, and interest group systems are relatively comparable and so are the laws which regulate them. We would therefore expect that our results would travel, or at least be comparable to, other similar cases.

There are of course limits to our approach. First, this experiment is a "one-off" test of the direct effect of transparency taking only what Porumbescu et al. (2022) have defined as the micro-perspective to the study of transparency. The long-term and lagged effects of transparency and its socializing impacts cannot be captured with this approach. While some research on such long-term effects exists, it focuses entirely on elite behavior, and the long-term effect of transparency on public attitudes remains underexplored.

Second, our study was conducted in Ireland, where trust in political actors and average levels of education are high compared to other European countries. At the same time, partisanship and polarization of the public debate is (still) relatively low compared to other recent European contexts. It could therefore be that our results do not apply where political cynicism is higher, and partisan identification matters more. A replication of our study in other cases or in comparative perspective could help test the validity of our findings and post hoc interpretations.

Third, our approach neglects nuances of the information's content. The respondents' trust evaluations may in fact vary when exposed to, for example, positive or negative information about parties, MPs, and business interest groups. Finally, little can be concluded about the effects of transparency in lobbying. While existing research focuses on the effects of transparency on lobbyists themselves (Naurin, 2007), more needs to be done to explore how information about lobbying activity impacts citizen's perceptions of interest groups.

## Acknowledgments

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on OSF at osf.io/842wp.

## Endnotes

[1] Note that by "discloser" we do not mean the agent controlling and managing the disclosure of information (e.g., state agency) but the agent that reports about its activity submitting information to registers for public scrutiny.

2  For both, the extent to which the disclosed information portrays a positive or negative performance is crucial (Alessandro et al., 2021). Previous research shows that when exposed to negative outcomes and poor performance, the effects of information disclosure are not as positive as one would hope for (De Fine Licht et al., 2014; Faulkner et al., 2015). We refrain from testing this effect here but build on work that shows that tests the effect of the disclosure of neutral or positive information (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014).

3  In this case, we do not formulate separate hypotheses for trust and perceived corruption. While mechanisms may be distinct as theorized in H1a and H1b, we do not expect these to lead to different outcomes for different political actors. For simplicity, we include them both as expected outcomes of transparency in H2 (as stated in the pre-registration).

4  We could have included civil servants in our study but opted to exclude them to reduce the cost associated with data collection.

5  See    https://www.access-info.org/wp-content/uploads/Infographics_EU_citizens_Opinion_Poll_summary_ENGLISH_ONLINE.pdf.

6  Our pre-registered experiment also considers trust in NGOs. In this study, we decide to focus on business interest groups as, compared to the generally higher levels of trust toward NGOs, business organizations register comparable levels of trust to members of parliament and political parties (Eurobarometer data). The results of our study and the test of our hypotheses in relation to NGOs is reported elsewhere (Crepaz & Arikan, 2021).

7  The link to preregistration document is: https://osf.io/tgxvc/?view_only=9d603962915c4b11b101b51a064f0ad6.

8  For details, see Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy at https://www.oecd.org/governance/trust-in-government/. We have no information about attitudes toward business interest groups, which tend not to appear in this kind of study.

9  For an example on asset declarations see https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/revealed-half-of-irelands-tds-are-millionaires-and-heres-how-much-theyre-worth-36901002.html. For political donations see https://www.thejournal.ie/sipo-donations-5277047-Nov2020/ and for lobbying information see https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/big-tech-lobbying-coalition-against-curbing-data-centres-1.4617306. Last accessed October 29, 2021.

10  The pre-registration stated a three-item political trust index combining honesty, competence, and perceived legitimacy of each actor. The additive index resulted in poor alpha values, and two of the three reviewers suggested that we drop legitimacy from the additive index. Key findings when using the originally proposed three-item political trust index are largely the same.

11  We realize that these reliability scores for business groups are somewhat lower than what may be considered as acceptable. This may be due to the fact that the key conceptual components of trust found in the literature are tailored to conceptualize and measure trust in other political actors. It may be that trust in interest groups are formed by different dimensions. In Appendix 5, we conduct our analysis for each component of our trust index separately to explore this further.

12  Components of corruption perceptions of business groups may differ from those that define attitudes toward political parties and MPs, which may explain the lower scores for Cronbach's alpha for business groups. In Appendix 5, we conduct our analysis for each component of our index of perceived corruption separately to explore this further.

13  For example, respondents assigned to the political party treatment group commented that the article showed "how rich political parties maintain the status quo," that "no party should get money from anyone," that donations equaled to "bribery," "backhanders," "buying favors," "money for old rope," and "corruption." In the MPs' treatment group, fewer messages of political cynicism are found. Some respondents commented that "MPs are lying" or "hide their wealth" in disclosure or that information shows "favors to politicians." In the case of business interest groups, some asked "Why is so much time and money spent lobbying?" or "I would believe they [interest groups] spend much more" or "nothing but money" or "lobbyists trying to lawfully influence or bribe politicians" or "[it shows] lobbying expenditures […] I think lobbying should be illegal."

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## Supporting information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site:

**Appendix S1.** Supporting Information.