

Editorial

Rethinking Open Government Data for Citizen Participation. An Introduction to a Special Issue

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Abstract. Citizen participation has always been considered one of the key pillars of open government: providing citizens with government information should enable them to participate effectively in decision-making or other government procedures. Despite this obvious connection between open government data (OGD) and citizen participation in theory, their relationship turns out to be much more complicated in practice, as OGD is hardly used in practice to hold the government accountable or change government policy. This introduction argues for a reconceptualization of the idea of citizen participation in relation to OGD, moving away from the ‘more is better’ approach towards a more refined understanding of different levels of citizen participation.

Keywords: Open government, open government data, citizen participation

1. Introduction

Open government is the idea that government information and decision-making should be accessible and transparent to the public. It is based on the principles of openness, participation, and collaboration, and aims to increase the accountability and responsiveness of public institutions. Open government initiatives increasingly involve the public release of government information in a machine-readable format, also known as ‘open government data’ (OGD). Well-known examples of such ‘raw data’¹ disseminated by governments to the general public are geographical information, statistics, weather data, and data from publicly funded researched projects. But OGD can also relate to other government information, including public data used in rule-making or even more sensitive information in single-case decision-making.

Strengthening citizen participation is considered one of the key dimensions of open government more broadly, and OGD in particular (McDermott, 2010; Gil-Garcia et al., 2020). It has even been claimed that the normative essence of open data is participation (Noveck, 2017). However, even though the open government movement has gained traction globally (Andraško & Mesarčik, 2018; Moon, 2020), the last decade has also shown that ‘opening up’ government data will not necessarily lead to increased citizen

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¹Though, ‘raw data’ may be an oxymoron as all data is collected and processed in some way (Gitelman, 2013).

participation (Safarov et al., 2017). Merely providing citizens with government data will not mean that these citizens feel empowered by this information and are able to hold policy makers accountable based on this information (Meijer et al., 2012).

While the academic literature on open government and OGD is expanding rapidly (Tai, 2021), the theoretical and empirical understanding of this specific relationship between OGD and citizen participation is still limited. Meijer et al. (2012) already observed that the dimension of participation is underrepresented in open government literature in comparison with transparency, especially in the legal sciences. Tai (2021) has recently characterized literature on open government by its technology- and transparency-driven emphasis, neglecting issues of participation and collaboration, which he considers a clear gap between open government theory and open government practice. In the same vein, Gil-Garcia et al. (2020) observe that literature is focusing more on dimensions of information availability and transparency than on dimensions of participation and collaboration.

There are still important gaps in our knowledge regarding how OGD can lead to more or at least better citizen participation. For instance, the way in which information is shared is bound to have an impact on the level of citizen participation, in the sense that sharing government information in a more ‘citizen-friendly’ way can be an important prerequisite for more meaningful citizen participation. However, there are currently insufficient legal and other stimulants that encourage governments to share data with citizens in such a participation-oriented way, as existing guidance seems to focus more on preventing administrative burden than on empowering citizens (Nugroho et al., 2015; Schnell, 2016). Thus, the connection between OGD and citizen participation is still far from crystallized.

After more than a decade of research on OGD and citizen participation, it is therefore time to take stock of how these concepts have evolved and how our thinking about them might further evolve. Therefore, this special issue aims to collect state-of-the-art theoretical and empirical research on the specific intersect (or lack thereof) between OGD and citizen participation. This introduction disentangles the concepts of both citizen participation (Section 2.1) and open government data (OGD) (Section 2.2) before introducing the contributions in this special issue (Section 3). Finally, some directions for further research are sketched briefly (Section 4).

2. Open government data for citizen participation

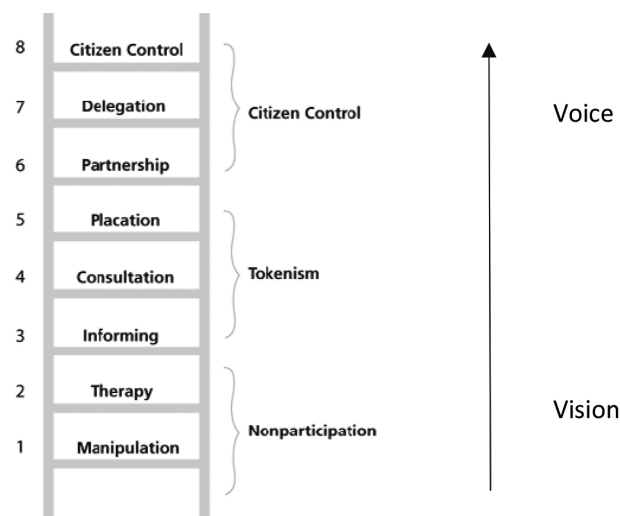
2.1. Levels of citizen participation

Citizen participation is often referred to as one of the key objectives of open government, next to other socio-economic goals that all aim to improve society, such as transparency, accountability, co-creation, technological innovation, economic growth, public service development and democracy. With transparency and collaboration, participation was proclaimed as one of the three pillars of Obama’s Open Government Directive, which is often referred to as one of the starting points of ‘modern’ open government (McDermott, 2010; Tai, 2021). Gil-Garcia et al. (2020) characterize participation, understood as ‘the ability of citizens to be involved in government decision-making processes’, as one of the five dimensions of open government, next to information availability, transparency, collaboration and information technology.

Fostering citizen participation through open government data can be challenging due to a number of factors. One of the main challenges is the limited digital literacy and technical skills of some citizens, which can prevent them from fully engaging with open government data (Janssen, 2012). Another challenge is the lack of accessible and user-friendly interfaces for accessing and using open government

data, which can limit its usefulness for some citizens (Graves & Hendler, 2014). Additionally, the sheer volume of open government data can be overwhelming and difficult to navigate, making it difficult for citizens to find the information they need and to make use of it effectively (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). The applicable legal framework can also encourage insufficiently or even impede the realization of citizen participation (Zuiderwijk & Janssen, 2014). Finally, the cultural attitudes of government and citizens towards openness and participation can also play a role in determining the success of open government data initiatives in promoting citizen engagement (Ruijter & Huff, 2016). Overcoming these challenges requires a commitment from both government and citizens to invest in digital skills, user-centered design, and cultural change.

Moreover, citizen participation can mean many things. The most well-known typology of citizen participation is perhaps Arnstein's 'ladder' (Arnstein, 1969). This ladder shows it can be helpful not to consider citizen participation as a monolith, but to think about the many flavors in which citizen participation comes. Arnstein distinguishes eight levels of citizen participation, ranging from citizen manipulation and more symbolic forms of participation (such as informing or consulting) to actual citizen empowerment. This might be positioned alongside Meijer et al.'s (2012) well-known distinction in open government between information availability and transparency ('vision'), on the one hand, and participation and collaboration ('voice'), on the other hand. They consider true participation as open access to decision-making arenas where citizens can actually use OGD to hold governments accountable.



Arnstein's Ladder (1969)
Degrees of Citizen Participation

However, the special issue also takes a more critical stance on what can be perceived as 'good' citizen participation. In line with common criticisms on Arnstein's hierarchical ladder (Theyyan, 2018), perhaps full citizen control is not (always) desirable. Even Arnstein herself admits that each problem or decision is unique and can require different levels or types of participation. Despite this, more citizen participation is still heralded as a key objective, dimension, or pillar of OGD. Several of the articles in this special issue posit that more participation is not necessarily better. This is in line with the typology of democracies introduced by Meijer et al. (2017), who make a distinction between monitorial, deliberative and participatory democracy. Within each type of democracy, the role of the citizen in dealing with

government information differs. The citizen can act either as a watchdog in monitorial processes or as a partner in dialogue in deliberative processes or as a partner in joined action in participatory democratic processes. A broader understanding of citizen participation would therefore also include situations in which citizens are well-informed, but do not act immediately on the basis of that information. This implies that we should take these many flavors of citizen participation seriously. Perhaps more citizen participation is not necessarily better, and we should rethink what meaningful citizen participation with open government data looks like.

2.2. OGD on the move

Whereas citizen participation should not be considered a monolith, the same holds for open government data (OGD). Despite its well-known and generally accepted definition as government data in an open format that can be freely used, re-used and shared by anyone for any purpose (Open Knowledge Foundation, 2011), Yu and Robinson (2012) signal that new ‘open government’ policies have blurred the binary distinction between the technologies of open data and the politics of open government. They argue that the popular term ‘open government data’ is deeply ambiguous in itself, as it might mean either of two very different things. According to them, if ‘open government’ is a phrase that modifies the noun ‘data’ OGD deals with politically important disclosures, whether or not they are delivered by computer. On the other hand, if the words ‘open’ and ‘government’ are separate adjectives modifying ‘data’, OGD is about data that is both easily accessed and government-related, but that might or might not be politically important (Yu & Robinson, 2012).

Due to the non-legal origins of the concept of ‘open government data’ (Cerrillo-i-Martínez, 2012b), OGD – unlike freedom of information (FOI) – has often been associated with technology rather than regulation (Afful-Dadzie & Afful-Dadzie, 2017). As a consequence, it should be no surprise that OGD as such as well as its underlying aims have been largely absent in legislation and that OGD is often contrasted with existing legislation on freedom of information (FOI) or the right to information (RTI). Several authors have therefore characterized the relationship between FOI and OGD by *discontinuity*, as both phenomena are said to differ in underlying motives, timing for disclosure, types of information, and audience: where FOI is often characterized as legislation dealing with (i) publication at request of (ii) ‘political’ information (iii) to facilitate accountability, OGD, by contrast, is said to deal with proactive dissemination of raw datasets for citizen participation (Afful-Dadzie & Afful-Dadzie, 2017; Noveck, 2017; Žuffová, 2020).

Over a decade, this opposition between OGD as a non-legal, primarily tech-driven phenomenon and FOI as a rights-based gatekeeper towards government information has become more blurring. First, OGD has been connected more closely with well-established legal concepts such as access to government information and re-use of public sector information (Janssen, 2012; Andraško & Mesarčík, 2018), thereby transcending the traditional distinction between (government) information and (government) data. Besides, FOI legislation has been modernized in the last decade in different jurisdictions by incorporating underlying ideas of OGD, covering not only publication at the request of citizens but also publication at the initiative of governments themselves (Pozen, 2017; Wagner, 2018) and increasingly acknowledging the importance of having access to raw data in a machine-readable format, thereby incorporating a ‘right to data’ in FOI legislation (Janssen, 2012). From that angle, the relationship between OGD and FOI could better be considered as a continuum, where OGD, with its emphasis on proactive dissemination of government information (or data) in a machine-readable format, constitutes the next generation of FOI (Pozen, 2018; Berliner et al., 2018; Moon, 2020).

Where the applicable legal framework is sometimes considered the most important determinant for

actual governmental practices of OGD (Shkabatur, 2012; Zuiderwijk & Janssen, 2014), this regulatory shift incorporating OGD in open government legislation, might not only steer our conceptual understanding of OGD, but might also affect to what extent citizen participation is feasible with OGD. The Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Council of Europe, 2009), for example, which entered into force at the end of 2020, acknowledges the importance of proactive disclosure of government information, requiring public authorities to make public official documents ‘to encourage informed participation by the public in matters of general interest’. In the same vein, the EU Open Data Directive (European Parliament and Council, 2019), adopted in 2019, is moving into the direction of proactive disclosure of government information by requiring EU Member States to make available certain high-value datasets. Admittedly, the rationale and justification for this directive is still found in its contribution to the realization of an internal market with citizens being considered as the end users or beneficiaries of newly created innovative products. Nonetheless, the European Commission has also acknowledged the objective of citizen participation explicitly, stating that ‘open data helps in reducing the distance between government and citizens as regards access to information and generates significant benefits in the areas of social inclusion and civic participation’ (European Commission, 2018). Thus, the incorporation of OGD in the changing regulatory framework does not only formalize OGD practices, but might also play a role in fostering citizen participation with OGD.

3. Introducing the papers

3.1. OGD and citizen participation: A manifold relationship of supply and demand

Different conceptual perceptions of both citizen participation and OGD (and its relationship with FOI and access to information) will impact the answer on the issue to what extent OGD is capable of contributing to citizen participation. Each of the contributions to this special issue further deepen our understanding of this intersect between OGD and citizen participation. In this, it is perhaps useful to distinguish between a government-oriented perspective (information supply) and a citizen-oriented perspective (information demand).

Whether OGD is capable of contributing to citizen participation, will first of all depend on the supply side, hence on the way how government information is made available to citizens. In fact, making government information available in a citizen participation-friendly way, is a *necessary* condition for fostering citizen participation. Specific attention should be paid here to the legal framework regulating OGD, which is key in whether or not citizen participation can be achieved. Moreover, governments themselves make important decisions regarding the characteristics of the information being shared and the formats in which data is shared, which will affect whether citizen participation is actually feasible.

However, though government measures enabling the use and re-use of OGD is a necessary condition for fostering citizen participation, it will not be *sufficient* for realizing citizen participation. In the end, whether or not citizens participate in decision-making processes on the basis of OGD, will depend on their willingness to participate. This citizen-oriented perspective of citizen participation is still underrepresented in literature (Safarov et al., 2017; Van Loenen, 2018). This willingness can, for example, depend on the cost of information or the context in which data is relevant. What is more, in many cases, citizens may have other priorities in their daily life and cannot be bothered with consulting or using OGD. The (perceived) control that citizens have over data can also be relevant in the context of citizens using OGD, as citizen control might contribute to trust in government, a central motive which is also underlying many open government initiatives.

Ultimately, this all should also be connected to more critical questions: To what extent should we see knowledge as the key good to get access to? Will more data and more transparency ever contribute to voice? Should citizens want to use OGD?

The papers in this special issue reflect these different perspectives on the manifold relationship between OGD and citizen participation. Together, these contributions do not only show the variety in citizen participation and OGD, but also the geographical spread and methodological richness of OGD research. In Table 1, we present an overview of the papers included in this special issue, and elaborate on their key contributions below.

Table 1
Different perspectives on OGD and citizen-participation

	Paper	Topic	Type of OGD	Level of citizen participation	Country/jurisdiction	Methodology
Government-oriented	Bloomfield	Open government legislation	Re-use	Citizen control	European Union	Legal document analysis
	Wolswinkel	Open government legislation	FOI	Tokenism	Netherlands	Legal document analysis
	Mettler and Miscione	Data portals	Open data	Tokenism	Switzerland	Qualitative/quantitative analysis
	Booth	Open government partnership	FOI	Citizen control	Mexico	Book review
	Kempeneer	Dashboards as a format	Open data	Tokenism	United Kingdom, Brasil	Book review
Citizen-oriented	Hanbal et al.	Data portal on livelihoods program	Open data	Uninterested in participation	India	Ethnographic case-study
	Ingrams	Costs of FOI requests	FOI	Citizen control	United States	Quantitative survey experiment
	McBride et al.	OGD in crisis management	Open data	Citizen control	Czech Republic, Estonia and Latvia	Comparative exploratory case study
	Kleizen and Van Dooren	Citizen control over personal data exchange	Non-open data	Citizen control/tokenism	Belgium	A/B test experimental design
	Van Maanen	Critical understanding of OGD	Open data	Citizen control	n/a	Commentary

3.2. Government-oriented perspectives

Heather Broomfield questions in her paper whether the new EU Open Data Directive (2019/1024/EU), formally known as the Public Sector Information Directive (2003/87/EC), really contributes to OGD by analyzing where this new directive aligns with and diverges from the rationale and requirements of open data. She argues that while ‘Open Data’ and ‘PSI’ are now seemingly synonymous and interchangeable under this new EU directive, these concepts are built upon fundamentally different foundations and have distinct identities and values. In particular, the key principles of open data, including citizen participation, are largely absent in the new directive.

The evolution of the legal framework is also central in the country report of *Johan Wolswinkel*, who discusses recent legislative developments in the Netherlands. Like many other jurisdictions, the Dutch legislature adopted some kind of Freedom-of-Information Act in the seventies of the twentieth century.

This FOI legislation has been replaced by an Open Government Act in 2022, which reflects several dimensions of modern open government, including more obligations to disclose government information proactively and a stronger preference to disclose this information in a machine-readable format, thereby enabling the re-use of this information as OGD.

Tobias Mettler and *Gianluca Miscione* provide a critical examination of the government data portal in Switzerland. They argue that the altruistic and philanthropic notion that is often associated with open (government) data needs to be reconsidered. Although open data policies often specify a general mandate to publish data, the leeway for each agency is relatively large, especially since it decides which data are published and which are not. In other words, agencies enjoy a certain level of freedom to implement the mandate. When implementing this mandate, agencies are increasingly faced with other concerns than the societal interests usually associated with OGD. The authors therefore argue for a realistic acknowledgement of costs as much as the concrete risks that powerful actors rather than the people and businesses take advantage of “true” openness. Moreover, they call for a more clear legal framework.

Keitha Booth discusses the open government movement from a more global perspective in her review of *The Power of Partnership in Open Government: Reconsidering Multistakeholder Governance Reform*, written by Suzanne Piotrowski, Daniel Berliner and Alex Ingrams. This book discusses how the Open Government Partnership (OGP) has impacted domestic public sector reform. The authors argue that the more traditional direct pathway approach, which looks at compliance mechanisms for assessing international initiatives, has been less promising in driving public sector reform than the indirect pathway approach, which focuses on the process-driven mechanisms set in train by membership of the OGP. By referring to the successful example of multi-stakeholder forums (MSF) prescribed by the OGP, Booth nuances the opposition between direct and indirect pathways in establishing interactive and participatory processes between state and non-state actors.

Shirley Kempeneer introduces a final consideration on the format in which governments choose to share data. This is done by way of a book review of Nate Tkacz’ ‘Dashboarding of everyday life’. Though the book does not explicitly speak to OGD, it does discuss how formats matter in interacting with data. Formatting and displaying data by way of a dashboard, as is increasingly common for OGD, affects how people engage with this data. On the one hand, Tkacz argues that dashboard data is supposedly easy to act on immediately, as it has a high ‘decision value’ and ‘time-value’, which might positively affect citizen participation. On the other, Tkacz argues that dashboard data is data in motion, and we need to regard the consequences of being with this uncertain and contextual knowledge – which might hamper true citizen involvement.

3.3. Citizen-oriented perspectives

Keegan McBride, *Anastasija Nikiforova* and *Martin Lnenicka* show that it sometimes take a crisis to give the use of OGD a boost. Based on an exploratory comparative study of the use of OGD in the COVID-19 pandemic, they find two ways of OGD having societal impact. First, the availability of OGD has increased the spread of information on the pandemic. In particular, the authors found that the usage of the OGD portal increased when COVID-19 data was made available there. Secondly, OGD also contributed to another level of citizen participation, namely co-creation of services to tackle the pandemic. In this respect, they note that the ability of an OGD-driven co-creation ecosystem to thrive is highly dependent on governmental support and involvement.

Alex Ingrams, *Wesley Kaufmann* and *Daan Jacobs* consider how citizens respond to costs involved in a FOI request. Their findings show that even low costs can have a large influence on how willing citizens

are to submit requests as well as on their satisfaction with the procedure and perception of fairness. Their findings have important implications for citizen participation policies given that citizen attitudes to the right to information depend strongly on trade-offs between the value of information and financial costs of requesting. Their findings are also relevant to proactive disclosure policies, as the costs of these policies will not be borne by the individual citizen requesting the information.

The ethnographic case-study of *Rajesh Hanbal*, *Amit Prakash* and *Janaki Srinivasan* provides another important angle at the tension of state-centric and citizen-centric perspectives. They stress that citizens often have no interest in participating in decision-making (e.g. fighting corruption) but instead in getting their things done (e.g. securing income through the welfare program) due to the realities of political society. Thus, even though the legislation underlying the Indian data portal under study is considered a landmark for its explicit commitment to enable citizens' participation and government transparency, its actual use turns out to be limited. This is due to the fact that citizens do not necessarily want to participate in the spaces where they are formally invited by the government (such as OGD). Instead, they conclude, citizens should be empowered in organic spaces of everyday engagement.

While the contribution of OGD to the objective of citizen participation appears to depend both on the government-centric supply side and the citizen-centric demand side, the contribution of *Bjorn Kleizen* and *Wouter van Dooren* offers a more critical understanding of the relationship between open government data and citizen participation. OGD is usually considered as non-privacy-restricted and non-confidential data, produced with public money and made available without any restrictions on their usage or distribution (Janssen et al., 2012). Kleizen and Van Dooren explore the opposite perspective by experimenting with giving citizens control over the exchange of personal data, hoping to reinforce trust in and support for data-driven governance. In fact, this experiment deals with citizen participation *without* OGD. However, the ultimate consequence of citizens consenting explicitly with the use of personal data may result in these data being opened up to everyone. What is more, citizen participation here precedes transparency instead of vice versa (which is usually the approach taken with OGD), while the contribution also sheds light on the complex relationship between transparency and trust.

Gijs van Maanen, finally, questions the idea that an increase of knowledge by disseminating OGD will result in an increase of one's capacity to control and check governments. Building on other scholars, he argues that citizens are better understood as vigilant smoke-alarms that go off when problems become public, than as actors proactively involved in decision-making procedures. When problems occur, citizens will respond, but only on a case-by-case basis and as involved actors in the issues themselves. Thus, he concludes that communicating information proactively is a nice gesture, but does not necessarily have to do with the types of democracy and citizenship we are situated in.

4. Final remarks

While the challenges and opportunities associated with open government data are high on the public sector agenda, driven by the datafication of society and revised legal frameworks regarding the (re)use of this data (e.g. the EU Open Data Directive), our academic understanding of the drivers and barriers to participation-oriented OGD is still limited. Overall, the rich contributions to this special issue add various perspectives to this debate and call for a nuanced understanding of citizen participation in its relationship with open government data. We therefore conclude that the relationship between OGD and citizen participation is not as straightforward as is often claimed. More 'OGD' will not necessarily lead to 'more participation', nor is this necessarily desirable. Instead of focusing exclusively on the active participation of citizens in decision-making procedures, other, more passive levels of citizen participation

should also be acknowledged. Moreover, it is important to recognize that OGD itself is on the move, entangled in a web of legal frameworks, which makes the relationship with citizen participation even more elusive. Researchers should therefore pay more attention to further refining and defining what exactly ‘open’ ‘government’ ‘data’ means.

Based on the different contributions to this special issue, we identify several research directions for the next decade of open government research. First, given that over the last decade regulation has been increasingly incorporating OGD in the applicable legal framework (see the contributions of Broomfield and Wolswinkel), the impact of modern ‘open government legislation’ on fostering or impeding citizen participation deserves further attention (Kempeneer et al., 2023). Where OGD used to be characterized as a non-legal phenomenon, its gradual transformation into a legal concept requires to scrutinize which legal emphasis is put on citizen participation. Moreover, the modern legal trend encouraging machine-readable data for re-use purposes also warrants further examining. On the one hand, the machine-readable format might exclude certain citizens who do not have the skills to access, process, or interpret this kind of data. On the other, this might render data more usable for ‘intermediates’, like journalist or researchers, who can translate insights to citizens – shifting the ‘burden’ of processing OGD away from citizens. To be sure, this too might entail risks (Balvert & van Maanen, 2019).

Second, when considering this complex relationship between citizen participation and OGD in further research, it is necessary to go beyond the well-known distinction between vision and voice that has proven value in the last decade. Instead of equating citizen participation with voice, a more differentiated understanding of citizen participation is necessary, as Van Maanen shows that the often proclaimed success of OGD to foster citizen participation can be debated. Perhaps data should not be opened merely for the sake of opening it. Rather, more scholarly attention should be directed towards which data should be opened when in which format; rather than assuming citizens want to participate all the time using all the OGD that can be made public in a variety of formats. This is also relevant when considering the cost of publishing OGD, which is rarely discussed in literature, though considered by Ingrams et al. and Mettler & Mescioni in this issue. For instance, during crises citizens might be more inclined to participate in co-creating public services using OGD (as McBride et al. show for the Covid pandemic), and perhaps opening up government data should be prioritized in such instances. Additionally, Hanbal et al. show that citizens might not want to use OGD to participate in political life, but to empower them in their everyday life, carrying implications for which kind of data should be opened up. This might mean looking for a balance between opening up the data that governments find relevant to share, and the data that citizens are interested in. This rich understanding of citizen participation will also enable scholars to study other forms of citizen participation than informing or collaborating in relation to OGD, such as disinformation by OGD (manipulation) or citizen control.

Third, since the citizen-oriented perspective of OGD has been less developed in the last decade of OGD research, there are still many insights to unfold here, as pointed out by several papers in this special issue (McBride et al., Ingrams et al., Hanbal et al.). Future research should not only pick up this gauntlet, but should also connect this citizen-oriented perspective with a more government-oriented perspective, questioning how insights on citizens’ behavior can impact open government policies and practices as it takes two to tango. In addition, OGD research in the next decade should also confront OGD with alternative paths for increasing citizen participation with government information, as exemplified in this special issue by Kleizen and Van Dooren. This broader orientation of OGD research, taking ‘open’ of OGD not for granted anymore, is also necessitated by the recent evolution of legal frameworks on re-use of government information, such as the Data Governance Act with a separate legal regime of re-use of *non-open* government data (European Parliament and Council, 2022).

With this research agenda, there is no doubt that the question of how to foster meaningful citizen participation with open government data will spur engaging and important research in many years to come. This special issue is a first step in that direction.

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