

Democracy's Limit. A Realist Response to the Quest for Transparency

Rahul Sagar

New York University Abu Dhabi

The defining characteristic of a democratic people, Alexis De Tocqueville observes in *Democracy in America*, is “an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion” for equality (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 482.) Contemporary history validates this observation: some of the most important debates and events in our time revolve around redressing social, economic, and political inequalities associated with race, gender, income, opportunity, and access to information. I do not intend to evaluate here equality’s moral worth or status. Instead, I want to evaluate its prospects in one particular domain, focusing on the norm of transparency or the quest for equal access to information. I will explain why calls for transparency have greatly increased in recent decades, and why efforts to meet these calls are continually frustrated. The argument rests on a simple observation: because democracies must have recourse to secrecy, someone in a position of authority will need to have a final, unreviewable say on what is done in secret. This fact implies that our evaluation and understanding of many important government decisions will invariably have to rely on something other than public scrutiny and deliberation. The claim, in short, is that the contemporary quest for transparency is bound to flounder, and that a failure to face up to this reality renders democratic theory a poor guide to confronting political problems, especially potential abuses of power under the cover of secrecy. The more realistic way forward, I propose, is to investigate and cultivate mechanisms and institutions for good governance that are *not* predicated on transparency. The search must be for answers that give reason to hope that we will be ruled well in the many moments when we can neither rule ourselves nor watch over those who rule in our name.