

Master Thesis
POLITICAL SCIENCE

“The Power of Transparency in a Post-democracy”



“Let’s never forget that the public’s desire for transparency has to be balanced by our need for concealment.”

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Introduction

In April of 2016, the biggest data leak in history happened in the form of the publication of the Panama Papers, containing compromising information about world leaders. There have been previous high-profile data leaks, such as those by the whistleblowing organization WikiLeaks, that have exposed morally ambiguous activities by the political elites around the world (Evans, 2015). This phenomenon has resulted in a growing narrative about the need for more transparency in Western democracies. Due to the scale of the leaks and the nature of the information exposed, its relevance to political science cannot be denied. The Panama Papers reported on the financial dealings by political leaders, who used their privileged position to increase their personal wealth and in doing so, neglected the public interest. This thesis will follow the theory by Colin Crouch on *post-democracy*, which proposes that politics is increasingly shaped in private interactions of political and economic elites and citizens have become "...manipulated, passive, rare participants" in democracies (2004, p. 21). The research question will be: "*Can information about the activities of political elites exposed as a result of data leaks, challenge the level of control the political elites have over a democratic political system?*" The main argument is that more transparency as a result of data leaks *can* challenge the high level of control political elites have over the political system in Western democracies.

This research will be a qualitative research focusing on a single case study of Iceland with a *most likely case design*. This means that the contextual conditions for the expected relationship between transparency as a result of data leaks and level of control by the political elite, are optimal in this case. The analysis will be focus on the political elite in Iceland between 2001 and 2016. Firstly, I will present the theoretical framework around the research question, followed by the operationalization of the core concepts and methodology for the analysis. The second part will consist of the empirical analysis of post-democratic patterns in Iceland and the information on activities by the Icelandic political elite, exposed by WikiLeaks and in the Panama Papers. Concluding with a critical reflection about the research question and the main argument about transparency in a post-democratic society.

Theoretical framework

Many scholars have looked at the role of elites in democracies and how they either benefit or hinder democratic practice (Bealey, 1996; Engelstad, 2009; Etzioni-Halevy, 1993; Michels, 1915). Classic elite theorists such as Robert Michels, Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto have argued that in every societal system, there will be small elites that hold the largest share of power. Michels calls this the ‘iron law of oligarchy’ (1915). Egalitarian scholar Colin Crouch gives a new perspective on the dominant position of ruling elites in modern societies in his theory about ‘post-democracy’ The theoretical approach will be central to this thesis. Crouch describes a historical timeline of democracy in modern nation-states, in which he categorizes a pre-democratic, democratic and post-democratic period. He refers to a *post-democracy* as a society which has functioning democratic institutions, yet the control of the political system lies with political and economic elites, rather than with the people (Crouch, 2014). To assess how well a democracy is doing in a society, Crouch measures the success of democratic practice by comparing it to an ideal of democracy. Besides the occurrence of elections, there should be major opportunities for the people in that society to actively participate in politics. Citizens are then able to shape the agenda of public life, by actively using these opportunities given to them (Crouch, 2004, pp. 2-3). Egalitarian causes such as redistribution of wealth and power and restraint of powerful interests is what Crouch finds important to strive for, to ensure the wellbeing of citizens (2000, p. 2). Crouch stresses the fact that the democratic ideal might not be fully attainable, but he finds that the consideration of egalitarian causes can function as markers of ‘health’ of democratic practices in society (2004, p. 3).

Crouch finds empirical evidence pointing towards the growing inequality between the powerful elites and the masses. He finds that citizens have become “... manipulated, passive, rare participants” and politics is shaped in private interactions between members of these elites (Crouch, 2004, p. 21). His argument is that the current position of the political and economic elites has negatively impacted egalitarian causes that serve the public interest (Crouch, 2004, p. 10). In order to substantiate his argument, Crouch lists three empirical processes that, he claims have led to the concentration of control with political and economic elites. The timeline on the societal developments he describes is based around a ‘democratic moment’, which he describes as the closest approximation of the ideal for democracy modern democracies have experienced (2000, pp. 2-3). He argues that this moment occurs after a great regime change, when the enthusiasm about shaping the political agenda is widespread

among members of a society (Crouch, 2004, p. 7). In most Western democracies, this moment occurred during the mid-point of the 20th century, following the Second World War (Crouch, 2004, p. 9). The four main processes used by Crouch to illustrate the shift towards post-democracy are

- 1) economic globalization,
- 2) the weakening of political identities based on social class,
- 3) the changing relationship between the electorate and party politics and
- 4) the commercialization of public services (2004, pp. 31-103).

The economic globalization and the rise of a transnational capitalism has led to the existence of a 'Global Firm', according to Crouch (2004, pp. 31-33). This has resulted in interactions that are beyond the reach of the nation-state. Corporate interests have penetrated political decision-making, which means that the corporate elite can bargain more easily for power and influence in political life (Crouch, 2004, p. 52).

The second process, according to Crouch, is the decrease of social class as a significant politicized identity in party politics in Western democracies (2004, pp. 55-57). The de-industrialisation of advanced democratic societies has contributed to this process, because trade unions have lost importance and specific class interests have become harder to define (Crouch, 2004, pp. 53-57). The development of Western states into post-industrial societies that are now more focused on the service industry, has resulted in powerful and privileged elite, but a general levelling of the socio-economic position of the people in the working and middle class (Crouch, 2004, p. 10; Mendieta, 2015, p. 204). Due to these societal changes, the political party system has become removed from representing ideological values and class interests. This forced political parties to adopt new strategies in order to appeal to their electorate (Dommett, 2016, p. 86). Over time, politicians and political parties as organizations have taken on more advertisement strategies to sell themselves and their policies as products to the masses (Crouch, 2014).

The third process described by Crouch is the commercialization of citizenship, illustrated by the example of the privatization of public services, such as healthcare and education (Crouch, 2004, pp. 84-85). As a result, privatized public service providers have become an authority outside the political centre and therefore the mechanism of democratic control, by citizens, can no longer be applied to these services (Crouch, 2004, pp. 99-103).

Crouch links these processes to the success of neoliberal ideology in modern societies at the beginning of the 21st century (2015, p. 71). Crouch's argument that we have entered a time period where the people in democracies find themselves in a weaker and the political and

economic elites a stronger position to determine the political outcome, is compelling, but has also been criticized. The main critique provided by Eduardo Mendieta is that the observed processes do not imply the failure of democracy as a system, but rather illustrate the fact that there is still the need for democratic societies to further develop (2015, p. 203). Crouch does indirectly address this critique by stating that there have been significant trends in modern societies that counter the effects of the post-democratic structure, he describes (2014; 2015, p. 74). An important example of such a trend is the public's quest for more transparency and freedom of information concerning the activities of political and economic elites (Crouch, 2015, p. 74).

This thesis is about how more transparency about the activities of the political elites, can influence the ability of these elites to control the political system, and thus how more transparency can challenge the structure of a post-democratic society.

Crouch does not operationalize how political and economic elites exercise their control over the political system. He describes the relationship between the public and the political elites as the paradox of contemporary politics, because both the techniques for manipulating the public opinion and the mechanisms for scrutinizing politicians by the public, are becoming more sophisticated in modern democracies (Crouch, 2004, p. 21). The core assumption of Crouch is that behind the spectacle of electoral politics presented to the public, politics is shaped in private interactions between political and business elite (2000, p. 1; 2014). The idea of transparency about the actions of the elites as a means to monitor elites, is considered by elitist theorists as the power of the public in a democracy (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, p. 107). This is supposed to ensure that the existence of powerful ruling elites does not undermine the democratic principle of 'rule by the people' (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, p. 107). The democratic ideal therefore consists of a balance between a relatively autonomous political elite and an informed public that can check the behaviour and actions of this elite.

Crouch finds that, as illustrated by the empirical processes described previously, the people in Western democracies have become increasingly apathetic towards politics (2014). This means the citizens do not actively check whether the political elite actually serves the public interest (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, pp. 104-105). The political elite can be defined as the group actually governing or exercising power in a state, and consisting of "...members of the government and of the high administration, military leaders, and in some cases politically influential people of the royal family and aristocracy and heads of powerful economic enterprises" (Bottomore, 1964, p. 7). Elite theorists argue that in a functioning democracy the political elite requires a certain level of autonomy from the public, in order to rule the state

effectively (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, p. 109). However, the precondition for this given autonomy, is that the actions of this elite serve the interests of the people they are representing (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, p. 108). To prevent the isolation of the powerful elites from the public interest, the public needs to be well informed and able to closely monitor the elite's actions (Barceló, 2016, p. 2; Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, p. 107). When the interaction and circulation between members of the public and the political elite is low, the elite can perpetuate their power because they do not fear replacement and become more removed from understanding the interests of the people (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, p. 107). This theoretical argument aligns with Crouch's argument that an informed public could make the political elite vulnerable and so more inclined to act in the public's interest in a democracy.

In the past fifteen years, there have been a number of prominent data leaks containing large amounts of information about the political elites' activities in Western democracies (Beyer, *The Emergence of a Freedom of Information Movement: Anonymous, WikiLeaks, the Pirate Party, and Iceland*, 2013, p. 141; Obermayer & Obermaier, *The Panama Papers*, 2016, pp. vii-x). The best-known incidences are the data leaks by the whistle-blowing organization WikiLeaks, active since 2006, and the data exposed in the Panama Papers in 2016 by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (Beyer, 2013, pp. 141-142; Obermayer & Obermaier, *The Panama Papers*, 2016, p. 7). The occurrence of these data leaks coincides with the time period Crouch uses in his theory to show the increasingly post-democratic structure found in Western democracies. Both these data leaks presented the public with classified information about the financial dealings and private arrangements made by the members of the political elites (Brevini, Hintz, & McCurdy, 2013, p. xi; Obermayer & Obermaier, *The Panama Papers*, 2016, p. 10). The information showed members of the political elite on occasion acting in self-interest, rather than in the public interest. This has had significant implications for the people and organizations mentioned in these data leaks, because the information caused public outrage and even led to the resignation of prominent figures, such as the prime minister of Iceland (Henley, 2016). This suggests that these activities would not have been likely to occur, if the public was informed about it earlier on, because it could jeopardize the positions of the members of the political elite.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse whether post-democratic structure and level of control of political elites can be challenged when there is more transparency about the activities of these elites, as a result of data leaks. If this is the case, this thesis suggests that more transparency and freedom of information in Western democracies can justifiably be considered a counter-trend to Crouch's post-democratic processes.

Research question, methodology and case selection

The research question of this qualitative research will be as follows: “*Can information about the activities of political elites exposed as a result of data leaks, challenge the level of control the political elites have over a democratic political system?*” The thesis will consist of the qualitative analysis of the case of Iceland, leading to a critical reflection on the proposition that more transparency can be considered a counter-trend to the post-democratic structure found in Western democracies. The hypothesis for this thesis is as follows: “*Information about the activities of political elites exposed in data leaks, can challenge the level of control political elites have over the democratic political system.*” I will limit myself to analysing the political elites in a Western democracy, since Crouch’s theory is based on the political elites and democratic institutions in Western societies. The focus of the thesis will be on the level of control the political elite has over the political system, through their ability to decide upon the allocation of different societal resources. The analysis will leave aside comparing the role of other elites, such as media, business and academic elites, because this would not be attainable in the time set for this research. Control is conceptualized in this thesis as the elite’s ability to decide upon the allocation of four resource types, without outside interference. This conceptualization of control by elites follows from elitist theory, in which the capacity to control a democratic political system is theoretically linked to the relative autonomy of elites. The relative autonomy of the elite is measured in the ability of the elite to control resources without interference by other elites and the public (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, pp. 98-99).

The categories of resources are the following:

<i>Resource type</i> (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, pp. 98-99)	<i>Relative autonomy</i> (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, pp. 98-99)	<i>Empirical indicators</i> <i>(Own elaboration)</i>
Resources for physical coercion	The elite is not subject to repression through coercive resources of others	e.g. civil disorder
Material resources	The elite is not dependent on the material resources of others The elite is in charge of material resources, which outsiders cannot control	e.g. control over budgeting and spending the financial resources of the state
Administrative/organizational resources	The elite is not controlled by administrative/organization resources of others	e.g. control over a bureaucratic apparatus, organizations aiding in executing policy

Symbolic resources	The elite's activities are not dependent on information and knowledge constructed or made available by others	e.g. knowledge about offshore activities, illegal activities, private negotiations /arrangements
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Table 1. The indicators of relative autonomy for different resource types

The analysis will be of the political elite's level of control over the empirical indicators that are part of table 1, before and after the occurrence of the data leaks. The data leaks used in this analysis consist of the information on the Icelandic political elite, leaked by WikiLeaks and by an anonymous source, who reached out to the journalists of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ). This data was later published in the so-called "Panama Papers". The public has had access to this information both via the Internet and via conventional media outlets (i.e. newspapers, television and radio) (Beyer, 2013, p. 141; Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016, pp. 257-259). The information consists of evidence about the activities conducted by members of the political elite. The members of the political elite in Iceland are the members of the government and of the high administration, and politically influential people, such as the heads of powerful economic enterprises (Bottomore, 1964, p. 7).

The analysis will be of a single case with a *most likely case design*. This means that the contextual conditions for the expected relationship between the leaked data about the political elite and the level of control of the elite, are optimal in this case. A number of scholars have described the strong position of the political elite in Iceland, as well as a shift in the political system after 2008 (Grímsson, 1976, pp. 14-25; Magnússon, 2010). Both WikiLeaks and the Panama Papers have led to exposure of private financial arrangements of Icelandic politicians and political decision-making that was in part responsible for the financial crisis of 2008 (Erimtan, 2016, pp. 1-3; Ingimundarson, Urfalino, & Erlingsdóttir, 2016, pp. 7-9). Important examples of the impact of the data leaked by WikiLeaks and the Panama Papers, were the resignation of the Icelandic Prime Minister in 2016, mass protests in the streets of Reykjavik and the new legislature initiatives about freedom of information (Beyer, 2013, pp. 147-148). The time period used in the analysis will be of the past 15 years, i.e. between 2001 and 2016, because of the growing relevance of Crouch's theory and the occurrence of data leaks in Western democracies. The indicators for the post-democratic structures and level of control of the Icelandic political elite will follow the theoretical work of Colin Crouch and of democratic elitist scholars, most notably that of Eva Etzioni-Havely. The empirical analysis is based on literature by academic scholars such as Beyer (2013), Brevini, Hintz and McCurdy (2013), Kristjánsson (2004) and Magnússon (2010). The

secondary sources consist of relevant documentation about WikiLeaks and the Panama Papers by the websites first publishing the respective data, and the coverage by news sites like The Guardian, BBC and journalists such as England (2015), Obermayer and Obermaier (2016) and Sigurgrimsdottir (2009).

Empirical analysis

Post-democratic patterns in Iceland

To establish whether a post-democratic structure can be found in Iceland, this section will contain an analysis of Crouch's empirical processes applied to society in Iceland, before the occurrence of data leaks. This will provide an understanding of the position of the political elite with regard to their ability to control societal resources, without outside interference. The political elite in Iceland comprises the Icelandic government. The members of parliament and the cabinet are made up of 63 people in total. The president as the head of state, who is elected every four years for an unlimited number of terms, is also part of the government (United Nations, 2006, p. 7). Other functions considered to be part of the elite are the heads of the prominent banks, the media and agricultural and fishing companies. The reason why they are included in Iceland's political elite is because of the close relationships that exist between the politicians and the corporate figures who have historically moved between the high-ranking positions in both the political and economic sphere (Grímsson, 1976, pp. 11-12; Magnússon, 2010, pp. 255-256). This section will start with an historical background of the political elite in Iceland, and will result in a conclusion on the level of control of the political elite prior to the data leaks by WikiLeaks and in the Panama Papers.

The time following Iceland's independence from the Danish Kingdom in June 1944, can be described as the 'democratic moment' in the history of Iceland. Rapid political modernisation and economic development created momentum for structural change in the Icelandic political and economic system (Magnússon, 2010, pp. 243-244). However, the widespread involvement of the citizens as part of the post-war reconstruction was not as strong in Iceland, as Crouch describes it in other Western democracies. The economic development was slower in Iceland, because its economy was still heavily reliant on a single industry: fishing (Magnússon, 2010, p. 244). Moreover the old elitist structure of the political system remained in place in the second half of the 20th century (Magnússon, 2010, p. 244). The party system was dominated by a small group of party leaders who, through political and

administrative appointments, had a strong hold on the executive and legislative institutions (Grímsson, 1976, p. 20). The political interests were also extended into economic and cultural institutions, because the leaders of institutions in these spheres of society were appointed by the political parties (Grímsson, 1976, pp. 20-21). The coalition system in the Icelandic government can be seen as an oligarchic structure, where the voters can only choose from a group of already present leaders, all of whom have worked together in the past and are required to work together in the future (Grímsson, 1976, pp. 22-24).

The third quarter of the 20th century is what Crouch pinpoints as the beginning of significant economic globalization and the growing influence of mass consumption and mass production in Western democracies (2000, p. 13). This manifested itself in Iceland during the 1980s and 1990s when the status of the traditional industries such as fishing and agriculture changed and the jobs in the service industry multiplied (Magnússon, 2010, p. 248). These jobs, as well as the technological advancements in all companies, required a higher level of skills and education from the labour force (Magnússon, 2010, p. 250). The educational revolution in the 1970s resulted in a better education of the labour force, thereby better equipping the Icelandic society to handle this rapid innovation (Magnússon, 2010, p. 250). The macro-economic development in Iceland into the 21st century was staggering. The exponentially growing influx of capital during the investment boom of the early 2000s resulted in a vast expansion of the banking system in Iceland (Ingimundarson, Urfalino, & Erlingsdóttir, 2016, pp. 22-23). An important development was the privatization of the banks around this time (Ingimundarson, Urfalino, & Erlingsdóttir, 2016, pp. 7-9). Besides the more interdependent structure of the global market, the preponderance of the financial sector in Iceland was mainly facilitated by its politics (Ingimundarson, Urfalino, & Erlingsdóttir, 2016, p. 3). The privatization of the banks was done under conditions favouring the political leaders in power at that time. These privatizations were kept away from regulatory institutions overseeing fair trade standards. They were purposefully kept from becoming owned by foreign investors or members of the general public (Magnússon, 2010, p. 256).

The financial crisis in Western democracies in 2008 laid bare the growing influence that business interests had gained in politics and policy-making (Crouch, 2015, p. 72). The expensive bailouts of the banks by governments, because they were considered 'too big to fail' emphasized this. The collapse of the banking system Iceland suffered in the financial crisis, was the biggest in the world, relative to the size of the country's economy (Ingimundarson, Urfalino, & Erlingsdóttir, 2016, p. 1). The three main banks, Kaupthing, Landsbanki and Glitnir, all failed and a number of their senior executives were prosecuted

and convicted for their role in the high risk financial strategies of the banks (Ingimundarson, Urfalino, & Erlingsdóttir, 2016, pp. 21-23). Although the government officials tried to define the financial calamity as being a result of the international financial crisis, economic researchers argue that it was a clear result of the privatization of the banks, extravagant behaviour of Icelandic entrepreneurs and the uncritical support of that behaviour by the political parties (Ingimundarson, Urfalino, & Erlingsdóttir, 2016, p. 8). The financial crisis seemingly marked the beginning of a change in Icelandic politics, but Magnússon emphasizes that the oligarchic structure present before the crisis, contributed to the extraordinary scale of the devastation the financial crisis in Iceland suffered in 2008 (2010, pp. 269-270).

Crouch states the disappearance of social class as a strong politicized identity in Western democracies is a relevant process (2004, p. 53). In Iceland, the political party system has seen few structural changes up to 2008 (Magnússon, 2010, p. 254). However, the decline of the working class did occur in Iceland, a process which Crouch states as part of the de-politicization of social class in politics (2004, p. 53). The development of new industries and the decline of the agricultural and fishing industries in Iceland have contributed to this development, as well as the increase of highly educated people, following the educational revolution of the 1970s (Magnússon, 2010, pp. 248-256). In Iceland social class was never a fundamental principle shaping party politics has never been as it was as in the case of the United Kingdom. Therefore, the decline of the working class has not had the same political implications as Crouch describes in the UK. The Icelandic population is small in size, and consists of a rather homogenous group of people (Tomasson, 1980, pp. 38-39). This meant that the politicization of societal cleavages such as class, religion and ethnicity was not strong in Iceland. However, the change on the labour market in Iceland has gone hand in hand with the development of more businesses and a growing private sector, lobbying for corporate interests in politics.

The political party system in Iceland has been dominated by a small elite that had a very strong influence across all spheres of society, which means that the main societal cleavage that has shaped politics in Iceland is between the citizens and the elite itself. The political participation and the development of political parties in Iceland has been influenced by this cleavage as well. The structure of government allowed the members of political parties to form a network, in which they all cooperated with one another in some capacity, either in government or in other high-ranking positions (Kristjánsson, 2004, p. 163). This explains this patronage-based cooperation found in the ruling elite in Iceland, where mutual benefits and favours were exchanged between members of opposing parties (Kristjánsson, 2004, pp. 153-

154). The capacity of citizens to influence political decision-making in Iceland is difficult because of a complex electoral system in which both president and parliament are elected (Kristjánsson, 2004, pp. 153-154). The status of “manipulated, passive participant”, Crouch uses under the post-democratic model, is certainly applicable to Icelandic citizens. For example, as a result of the way in which the financing of political parties is organized. The political parties can operate without active partisanship, because they receive a high level of public financial support and there are tax deductions for companies giving political contributions, without having to disclose this information to the public (Kristjánsson, 2004, p. 166). The parties are not reliant on financial contributions from citizens via political party membership. This is described by Crouch as the increasing influence of lobbying efforts by the private businesses to gain political influence (2000, p. 28). The multi-party system in Iceland has become a more fragmented and party competition has grown (Kristjánsson, 2004, p. 166). The growing importance of drawing in voters from a more volatile electorate has meant that the parties had to employ more persuasive techniques in the electoral debate, such as more elaborate media campaigns (Crouch, 2004, p. 73; Kristjánsson, 2004, p. 166).

How about the amount of control of the elite in Iceland? Historically, Iceland has had a political elite who firmly dominated the power structure in Iceland, extending into different sectors of society (Grímsson, 1976, p. 10). This shows when one compares the position of the political elite to the relative autonomy over the allocation of different resource types, as set out by Etzioni-Halevy (1993, pp. 98-99). The resource for physical coercion¹ in Iceland consists of the police force, because Iceland does not have a standing army and a very small military apparatus (United Nations, 2006, p. 5). The police force and the military people and equipment in Iceland fall under the Ministry of the Interior (Icelandic Government, 2016). Massive protests or civil disobedience have been rare in Icelandic history (Magnússon, 2010, pp. 264-265). This means control over coercive resources before 2008 can be considered latent, because the political elite was not forced to provide a visible manifestation of this control. The administrative and organizational resources² of the Icelandic political elite are also relatively limited, because of the actual size of the government institutions (United

¹ The elite is relative autonomous when it is not subject to repression through coercive resources of others, for example indicated by civil disorder (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, p. 98).

² The elite is relative autonomous when it is not dependent on the material resources of others. The elite is in charge of material resources, which outsiders cannot control, indicated by the control over budgeting and spending the financial resources of the state (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, pp. 98-99)

Nations, 2006, pp. 2-7). The government has control over independent institutions hired to perform organizational and administrative tasks. This showed when, during the privatization of the banks around 2000, the regulatory institutions such as the Financial Supervisory Authority and the Competition and Fair Trade Authority did not get to execute their regulatory tasks (Magnússon, 2010, p. 256). This was decided upon by the members of the political elite. This illustrates that when organizational and administrative tasks are not conducted by members of the political elite, the actual control over the political outcome still rests with the political elite.

The control over material resources³ at the disposal of the political elite in Iceland lies with the Ministry of Finance and Economic Affairs (Icelandic Government, 2016). Financial affairs of the state, such as the capital controls, fiscal budget, debt management and monetary policies are decided by this ministry, be it in cooperation with other institutions as among others, the Central Bank of Iceland. Prime Minister Davíð Oddsson and the high-ranking personnel in economic enterprises shaped the economic development between 1991 and 2004 with neo-liberal policies (Boyes, 2009, pp. 6-7). This led to the privatization of companies and of the banks, which was implemented under favourable terms for the political parties in power at the time (Magnússon, 2010, p. 256). The enormous economic growth and the potential for personal wealth for the people in power, determined the direction of policy on the state finances (Ingimundarson, Urfalino, & Erlingsdóttir, 2016, pp. 26-29). The close relationship between the economic and political elite bolstered their ability to control the material resources of the state in the first eight years of the 21st century.

The symbolic resources⁴ of the elite are defined by the extent to which knowledge about the activities by the political elite can limit the elite (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, pp. 98-99). The transparency about the activities of the political elite was very minimal (England, 2015). In a democracy, the media informs the public about things that may concern them and could potentially influence the citizens' voting behaviour (Bealey, 1996, p. 326). In Iceland, media companies are partly owned by people that were either part of the political elite or closely connected to members of the elite. The media were not considered to fulfil their task as

³ The elite is considered relatively autonomous when it is not controlled by administrative/organization resources of others, indicated by the control over a bureaucratic apparatus, organizations aiding in executing policy (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, pp. 98-99)

⁴ The elite is considered relatively autonomous when its activities are not dependent on information and knowledge constructed or made available by others, indicated by the public's knowledge about offshore activities, illegal activities, private negotiations /arrangements (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993, pp. 98-99)

watchdog, because of this conflict of interest for the owners of national media outlets (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016, p. 256). Therefore, Iceland's political elite had the ability to monitor what the public knew about the activities of the elite before 2008. This meant that they were relatively autonomous from others exposing sensitive information, that could jeopardize the position of members of the elite. This lack of transparency meant the elite was less vulnerable to public scrutiny and the people in power were less likely to be held accountable for behaviour that did not serve the public interest. The presence of similar processes as those outlined by Crouch, as well as the level of control of Iceland's political elite had with regard to the different resource types concludes that the elite was able to control the political system without much interference, before the occurrence of data leaks.

The data leaks

Iceland has experienced two incidences of leaked information regarding the activities by members of the political elite after 2008 (Beyer, 2013, p. 141; Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016, pp. 255-264). This section of the analysis will provide background information about the nature of the information that was leaked, and the events that transpired as a result of the leaks.

The information was published by WikiLeaks over the course of 2009 and in the Panama Papers in April 2016 (Beyer, 2013, pp. 143-144; Obermayer, Obermaier, Wormer, & Jaschensky, 2016). The data leaked consisted of millions of documents and e-mails stolen from different institutions, such as government agencies and the law-firm Mossack Fonseca (Obermayer, Obermaier, Wormer, & Jaschensky, 2016). The leaks made the headlines all over the world. This analysis does not cover all the information these leaks brought to light, but will be focussing on the information that particularly concerned the Icelandic public.

WikiLeaks is an active non-profit, whistle-blower organization, which publishes data provided by anonymous sources on their website (Beyer, 2013, p. 143). The first encounter of people in Iceland had with WikiLeaks was at an event of the Icelandic Digital Freedom Society (Brevini, Hintz, & McCurdy, 2013, p. xi). The information published that had a direct connection to the activities of the political elite in Iceland, consisted of a loan book of Kaupthing Bank (Brevini, Hintz, & McCurdy, 2013, p. xi). Shortly after the devastating financial crisis hit the Icelandic economy, the loan book provided insight into the high-risk strategies used by one of the three largest banks (Brevini, Hintz, & McCurdy, 2013, pp. xi-xii; WikiLeaks, 2016). The loan book showed the bank issuing huge loans to a number of

companies, that made the bank vulnerable to the kind of financial collapse that actually occurred shortly afterwards (Sigurgrimsdottir, 2009). Moreover, in an attempt to keep the information away from the public, a temporary injunction was secured by Kaupthing Bank, against the coverage of this loan book by the state broadcaster Ríkisútvarpið (RUV), several minutes before the broadcast was going live (Brevini, Hintz, & McCurdy, 2013, p. 150). This emphasized how highly sensitive the matter was. In response, RUV referred their viewers directly to the WikiLeaks website. The injunction was subsequently lifted because of public outrage (Sigurgrimsdottir, 2009).

From 2006 onwards, the call for revision of the current intellectual property regimes took shape in an international network of “pirate parties” (Beyer, 2013, p. 144). The data exposed by WikiLeaks made this international network grow and increase their political traction in different states (Beyer, 2013, p. 144). Birgitta Jónsdóttir, a former member of WikiLeaks and an Icelandic activist, has led the freedom-of-information movement in Iceland, aimed at making Iceland a safe space for the whistleblowers and publishers who were responsible for providing this information to the public (Brevini, Hintz, & McCurdy, 2013, p. xii). WikiLeaks set in motion the legislative reform around freedom of information in Iceland (Beyer, 2013, pp. 147-148). The Icelandic Modern Media Initiative (IMMI) was the new legislative regime proposed to the government by Jónsdóttir and her supporters, which consisted of a compilation of international examples of legal protections for whistle-blowers, journalists and publishers with regard to freedom of speech (Beyer, 2013, p. 147). The resolution made in this initiative was adopted by the Icelandic parliament in 2010, and is still gradually being implemented into Icelandic law (International Modern Media Institute, 2016). An example of this new legislation can be found in the Information Act, adopted in 2013, which has as its main objective “[...] to guarantee transparency in government administration and the handling of public interests...”.⁵ In order to channel the support of the public for more transparency and to push the proposed reform that would ensure more transparency, the Icelandic Pirate Party was founded in 2012. Jónsdóttir was one of the founders of the Pirate Party, that was set up aiming for more transparency about the government and their policies.⁶

⁵ The Information Act No 140/2012 was adopted into Icelandic law in 2013.

⁶ The Icelandic Pirate Party states the following on transparency in their core policy (2016): Transparency gives the powerless the power to monitor the powerful. Pirates believe that transparency is an important part of making the public informed and thereby capable of making democratic decisions. Information should be accessible to the public. Information should be accessible in open data formats, in a form that is most convenient for the usability of the information. Pirates believe that everyone has an unlimited right to be involved in

The party participated for the first time in the 2013 parliamentary elections and gained 5% of the popular vote, which ensured the party three seats in parliament (BBC, 2013).

The quest for more transparency coincided with a historically low level of trust in politicians in Iceland, following the financial crisis in 2008 (Helgadóttir, 2011, p. 2). The discussion about the need for constitutional reform was reopened by a grassroots movement led by citizens, after the people took to the streets in protest to the decisions made by the political elite that led to the crisis (Landemore, 2015, pp. 168-169). The Icelandic constitution, drafted after the independence from Denmark in 1944, was considered out-dated and had allowed the political elite to manoeuvre the country into the devastating financial crisis of 2008 (Landemore, 2015, p. 169). The reform was aimed to increase the democratic involvement of the citizens and enhance their capacity to control the government's decision-making, for example, by increasing legislative control, parliamentary control of the executive and the possibility for citizens to call for a referendum, and to block legislation or to table bills (England, 2015; Helgadóttir, 2011, pp. 6-8). The Pirate Party set the adoption of a new constitution as one of the most important goals in their 2016 election (Icelandic Pirate Party (II), 2016).⁷

The second notable data leak was published in April 2016 in the Panama Papers. This data leak consisted of approximately 11,5 million documents leaked from the law firm Mossack Fonseca, based in Panama (Obermayer, Obermaier, Wormer, & Jaschensky, 2016). An unknown source started sending the documents to two journalists, Bastian Obermayer and Frederik Obermaier, at the German newspaper the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) in 2015. The documents were all internal documents, correspondence and databases from Mossack Fonseca, exposing attorney-client relations about more than 214,000 offshore entities (Obermayer, Obermaier, Wormer, & Jaschensky, 2016). The clients of this law firm ranged from political leaders, celebrities, fraudsters, criminals and powerful businessmen and exposed their hidden financial dealings (Obermayer, Obermaier, Wormer, & Jaschensky, 2016). The extensive amount of data forced the journalists at the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* to call in the help of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (ICIJ) (Obermayer &

decisions that relate to their own affairs, and a right to knowledge about how such decisions are made.

⁷ The Pirate Party states in the 2016 Elections Manifesto from October (2016): *“Icelandic Pirates believe that adopting the Constitutional Council’s new constitution is a basic precondition for improving Icelandic society.”*

Obermaier, 2016, pp. 47-49). The leaked documents and e-mails were not published directly to the public by the ICIJ, but reported on by the journalists for different media outlets. The Icelandic journalist Johannes Kr. Kristjansson was the investigative reporter from the ICIJ who reported on the Panama Papers in Iceland (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016, p. 256).

The data from Mossack Fonseca contained information about an offshore company the Icelandic Prime Minister, Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, had previously owned. Gunnlaugsson and his wife, Anna Sigurlaug Pálsdóttir, owned a shell company⁸ in the British Virgin Islands, called Wintris Incorporated (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016, pp. 257-263). The data showed that at the time Mr. Gunnlaugsson came into office, he was no longer the official owner of Wintris Inc., because he had sold 50% of his shares for a symbolic 1\$ to his wife in 2009 (Henley, 2016). This company held nearly 4 million dollars' worth of bonds in the three Icelandic banks that went bankrupt in the 2008 financial crisis; Glitnir, Landsbanki and Kaupthing (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016, pp. 258-261). Gunnlaugsson was also the chairman of the Progressive Party, and a spokesperson for the civil society group InDefence (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016, p. 261). This group had as its objective to represent the citizens of Iceland in the political clash on the Landsbanki's subsidiary Icesave credit default (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016, p. 260). Unknown to the public, Wintris Inc. was one of the creditors trying to get money back from Icesave (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016, p. 261). Therefore, Gunnlaugsson represented both sides in the negotiations being both a former creditor, married to a current creditor as well as representing the taxpaying citizens of Iceland.

In April 2016 Prime Minister Gunnlaugsson was confronted with the information in an interview by Jóhannes Kr. Kristjansson, for his independent news platform Reykjavik Media (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016, p. 263). Kristjansson confronted the Prime Minister with the information from the leak on Gunnlaugsson's involvement with Wintris Inc., which prompted the Prime Minister to walk out of the interview (Henley, 2016). The video resulted in public outrage, which led to 10,000 to 20,000 people demonstrating and calling for the resignation of the government (Henley, 2016). The Prime Minister tried to avoid having to resign, by trying to convince the public that he always served the public interest (Henley, 2016). He asked the President to dissolve the parliament and write out new elections, but the President Grímsson refused to do this (Henley, 2016). The Prime Minister was consequently forced to resign, but his government stayed on. Gunnlaugsson's successor, Gudni Johansson, did manage to hold

⁸ The definition of a shell company as given by Obermayer et al. (2016, pp350): a company that has no employees at its official registered office – which is normally at the address of the registered agent – but only a letterbox.

parliamentary elections six months before the scheduled date, on the 29th of October 2016 (The Guardian, 2016). In the run up to this election, the Pirate Party led the polls, because they had gained momentum after the Panama Papers (Leruth, 2016). They received 14,5% of the popular vote and became the third largest party represented in parliament, with ten seats in the parliament (Positive News, 2013). Gunnlaugsson's party, the Progressive Party, lost eleven seats compared to the previous parliamentary elections in 2013 (Leruth, 2016).

Increased transparency

Looking again at the research question: "*Can information about the activities of political elites exposed in data leaks, challenge the level of control the political elites have over a democratic political system?*", I contend that the analysis of Iceland indeed suggests that that the data leaks have led to several societal developments challenging the level of control of the political elite in the political system. The financial crisis of 2008 sparked large-scale protests in Iceland (England, 2015). The protests were attributed to the fact that people were angry about the decisions made and the information withheld from them in the wake of this crisis, that affected them severely (Ingimundarson, Urfalino, & Erlingsdóttir, 2016, pp. 21-233). The historical dominance of the political elite the Icelandic society has provided the institutional build-up to the financial collapse and the subsequent response by the public (Magnússon, 2010, p. 256). The financial crisis brought to light the damage the political elite had done with their, high-risk economic strategies and policies that benefited the private interests of politicians and wealthy business leaders (i.e. themselves), rather than the citizens. WikiLeaks became the platform to provide the people with hard evidence about these activities of the powerful elite. The revelations about Kaupthing bank by WikiLeaks substantiated the feeling of distrust towards the political elite. Iceland is one of the few nations that has seen sentencing of people in the banking sector, who were held accountable for their bad judgement resulting in the severity of the financial collapse (Ingimundarson, Urfalino, & Erlingsdóttir, 2016, p. 24).

The growing demand for more transparency, starting internationally around 2006, has been operationalized very clearly by activists such as Brigitta Jónsdóttir. The legislative reform in the shape of the Iceland Modern Media Initiative, grass-root organized constitutional reform and the political ambitions of the Pirate Party, all show concrete efforts for embedding more institutional mechanisms that guarantee more transparency. The occurrence of mass protests illustrates severe civil unrest, meaning civil order was being

interfered with by the public. These protests were a rare occurrence in Iceland, but there have been a number of these protests from 2008 onwards (Magnússon, 2010, p. 256). Also after the Panama Papers, the public took to the streets to demand the resignation of their government. The data leak incited the demonstrations, aimed at coercing the political elite to resign. This effectively diminishes the relative autonomy of the elite with regard to resources of physical coercion. The demand for a new constitution to reestablish a more direct control by the public over policy making, also challenges relative autonomy of the political elite over organizational and material resources. The proposed mechanisms of increasing the public control, such as the ability for citizens to table a bill and call a referendum, would make it more difficult for the political elite to control the policy on state finances and to avoid control by regulatory institutions. This is because there would be more options available to the public, to alter the decisions made by the political elite. This means that the political elite are more dependent on the citizens' approval, and thus more likely to pursue the public interest rather than private interests in policy. However, the constitutional reform bill has been shelved by the parliament, after the Supreme Court annulled the assembly of 25 elected delegates in 2011 (Landemore, 2015, pp. 169-170). This raises the question, whether the Icelandic political elite are reluctant to give up the relative autonomy they still possess. The information exposed in the data leaks have contributed to more intensified efforts to realize the constitutional reform (Positive News, 2013). But it cannot be stated that the leaks have exclusively caused this. The drive for constitutional reform could also have been the direct result of the exposure of the destructive financial policies leading to the financial crisis, without this information being leaked to the public.

However, the data leaks have illustrated how the political elite's activities can be influenced by information made available by actors outside the elite. The information in the loan book of one of the three defaulted banks would not have been published if the political elite would have been able to control the release of that information, because it implicated the political elite as negligent in their task to keep the country's economy prosperous. In the case of the Panama Papers the data pointed directly to the Prime Minister's involvement in financial dealings, which he chose not to disclose to the public (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2016, p. 257). This shows that members of the political elite are more vulnerable, because the exposure of information can lead to the public demanding their resignation. The growing support for the Pirate Party, who rallied behind legislative reform that would enable more transparency, has led to more votes and therefore has resulted in different people filling seats in parliament. The relative autonomy over symbolic resources, such as the knowledge people

outside the political elite have about the elite's activities, is challenged when individuals are taking it upon themselves to expose classified information to the public. This might not be legal, but it makes the political elite less capable to control what the people know about them and it can even jeopardize their own position as member of the political elite. Therefore, the increased transparency through the data leaked by WikiLeaks and in the Panama Papers, challenged the level of control the political elite had over the political system in Iceland.

Conclusion

The political system in Iceland has been ruled by a political elite that had a lot of freedom to control the societal resources, without outside interference. This elite was historically small and close-knit, which enabled it to keep high-ranking positions in all sectors of society. During the largest part of the twentieth century, politics was mostly shaped in private interactions, away from the public. Thus, my contention is that the empirical processes, Crouch uses in his theoretical model, are indeed found in the recent history of Iceland. However, the financial crisis of 2008 marked the dawn of a new era in Icelandic politics. The financial collapse presented the public with knowledge of the high risk strategies employed by their political elite, which woke the citizens up to the fact that their political elite was not serving their interests. The data leaks added fuel to fire and gave the public undeniable evidence of this fact, which led to a stronger mobilization in the form of a quest for constitutional and legislative reform, and the electoral shift to a new political party. The Panama Papers has as a direct consequence the resignation of the Prime Minister, one of the highest ranking officials in the political elite, because of his offshore financial dealings coming to light. This has shown what powerful impact these kind of information leaks can have on a , political elite that considered itself in control.

The manipulated, passive role of citizens in a democratic society is what Crouch describes as a symptom of post-democracy. The events that have transpired after the data leaks show a more active public that has rallied to enforce changes in their political system. The request for more direct ways to influence policy-making has followed from a grassroots civil society movement that formulated a new constitution. As said before, although these developments cannot in the context of this research exclusively be ascribed to the occurrence of the data leaks, the sudden transparency around the political elite has facilitated the formulation of what the public desires to change about the political system. It even resulted in

the implementation of institutional mechanisms, such as new legislature, to see this change through. This means that citizens are as a result more actively involved in shaping the political agenda for public life, which is what Crouch finds, is the desirable dynamic between the public and a government in a democracy. The excessive control the political elite has in a political system is then challenged by the increased transparency about the activities of the elite. This means that this increased transparency could be considered a counter-trend to the post-democratic structure found in Iceland.

The generalization of the findings of the Icelandic case study to other Western democracies, has to be qualified. Firstly, the size of the population of Iceland is significantly smaller than most Western democracies (i.e. approximately 300,000 people). This analysis does not take into account how the size of the population and consequently the size of the political elite, can influence the relative autonomy of the political elite in a country. Secondly, the financial crisis was, specifically in the case of Iceland, a very important factor in aggravating the public, before the leaked information was brought to light. The devastating economic collapse of 2008 had already mobilized the Icelandic citizens. The information exposed in the data leaks fuelled the already existing discontent of the citizens further, which might have led to a similar mobilization to without the data leaks. Other Western democracies have experienced a similar financial crisis around 2008. However, it would require more research to establish whether the level of control of their economic and political elites has been challenged as a result of the data leaks by WikiLeaks and the Panama Papers. This analysis does not allow for a generalization of this conclusion to apply to other Western democracies, because it does not account for the possibility of intervening factors that need to be measured in order to conclusively find a causal relationship between data leaks and the level of control political elites have in a democratic political system.

Having said that, it does seem to invite a revisiting of Crouch's theory on post-democracy, as he holds a very negative outlook on the prospects of democracy as a viable system for Western states. His scenario of a *post*-democracy suggests that the democratic institutions we currently have in our society are not worth having anymore if they do not operate in accordance with the theoretical ideal set out by him and other scholars. But, as Crouch mentions himself, Western democracies have never met the standards of this ideal and are unlikely to ever do so. The fact that there has been a notable response to the excessive control by the political elite over the political system in Iceland probably means that the passiveness of the public, he describes, should be understood as a dormant discontent that needs a sudden exposure of relevant information, to mobilize it into action. Data leaks can

then be seen as catalysts, facilitating this much needed ‘shock to the system’. This would mean that democratic systems may have the potential to be more resilient and that the public can wake up to reassert itself, thus avoiding the rather gloomy prospect of Crouch’s post-democracy.

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