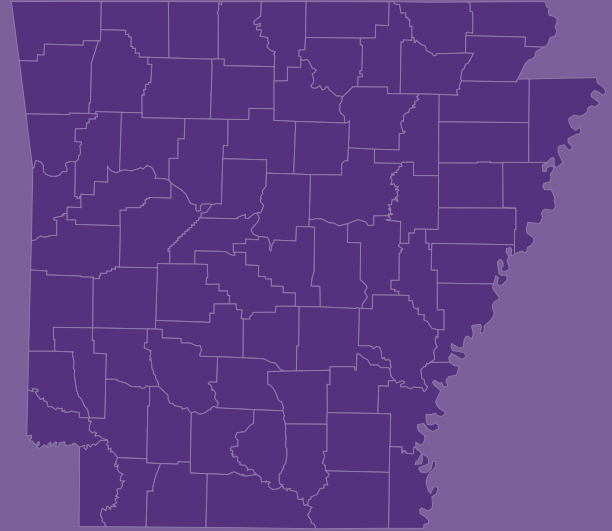


ACCESS ARKANSAS

COUNTY WEB TRANSPARENCY

ARKANSAS CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN ECONOMICS
UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Transparency is key to good governance.¹ A survey of transparency research reveals that transparency enhances accountability, instills fiscal discipline, improves economic performance, promotes trust between governments and citizens, and reduces corruption.²

To further these ends, the Arkansas Center for Research in Economics (ACRE) started the Arkansas Projects in Transparency to improve transparency at Arkansas's local government level. A key component of this project is the creation and maintenance of a transparency index for Arkansas counties, which serves two purposes. First, it informs citizens about the level of government transparency in their counties and the improvements their county governments are making and need to make. Second, it provides researchers and policy makers with the data needed to analyze the relationship between transparency and economic and socioeconomic factors in Arkansas. This publication is the second edition of our index, which was first published in 2018.

We calculate our transparency index by assessing the information that county governments publish on their websites and on the Arkansas.gov platform. We identify the counties that are best and worst in web transparency overall, and we also quantify their strengths in three overarching kinds of transparency: fiscal, administrative, and political.

We focus on county-level governments because they are just as important as state governments. For example, Arkansas counties provide key services like law enforcement, firefighting, ambulances, trash pickup, sewers, and water for their residents among other things.³ However, despite the impact of county governments' decisions on citizens' lives, information on their decision-making processes and the policy outcomes is not always readily available and accessible to voters.

TRANSPARENCY
ENHANCES
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INSTILLS FISCAL
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AND CITIZENS,
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There is a greater need for increased transparency at the county government level: a 2013 Sunshine Review⁴ of web transparency in the United States revealed that state governments are more transparent than local governments.⁵ In Arkansas, the state government earned a B, while its county governments earned an F. In fact, Arkansas counties were the worst in the nation: no other state's counties earned such a low grade. Thus, our goals are to raise awareness of web transparency in Arkansas counties and to encourage counties to improve their web transparency.

This edition also highlights the counties that have improved the most since last year. Our assessment shows some improvement in overall transparency. For Arkansas counties as a whole, we find that, as in 2018, political transparency is the best, followed by fiscal then administrative transparency. Fiscal transparency improved the most, followed by political then administrative transparency.

The current index shows that, on average, Arkansas counties are publishing about 21 percent of the important information included in our index compared to about 15 percent in 2018. We acknowledge that part of the reason for the improvement could be that we had more researchers searching for information on the county websites this year than we did in 2018. This increase in our research resources may have increased our chances of finding the information. It is also possible that the publication of our 2018 index has encouraged counties to step up their transparency efforts since then. Regardless of the reason, we are pleased to report that several counties have made tremendous improvements in their web transparency.

BACKGROUND

A 2013 Sunshine Review report revealed that Arkansas counties are the worst in the nation in publishing public information on their websites.⁶ Considering the benefits of transparency, which include instilling fiscal discipline and reducing corruption, the Arkansas Center for Research in Economics (ACRE) embarked on a project designed to measure and improve web transparency at the county government level in Arkansas. Our project systematically reviews and assesses the types of information Arkansas's 75 county governments publish online.

We released our inaugural report, "Access Arkansas: County-Level Web Transparency," in 2018. It revealed a deficiency in Arkansas counties' online publishing of public information, especially information pertaining to fiscal transparency (financial information such as budgets and financial statements) and administrative transparency (information about local officials' activities and processes).

As of October 2019, 41 counties (up from 40 in 2018) have stand-alone websites; the rest have some or minimal web presence through the state's Arkansas.gov platform. We consider Arkansas.gov an important platform for counties without stand-alone websites to publish information. At a minimum, residents can find contact information for their county assessor and collector at <https://portal.arkansas.gov/counties>. Many counties' pages also contain links to their assessor's or collector's website. For some counties one can find more information at "countyname"county.arkansas.gov. For example, for Johnson County, there is more information at johnsoncounty.arkansas.gov. However, we noticed that it is difficult to get to these counties' pages going through the home page of arkansas.gov rather than just using a search engine, such as Google.

Previous studies assessing Arkansas counties' websites include only those counties with stand-alone websites. The first study, published in 2013, assessed

just 35 counties,⁷ while the second one, published in 2015, assessed 31 counties.⁸ Building on these two earlier studies, we include all 75 counties to create our transparency index.

Both earlier studies are based on web assessments conducted no later than 2012. However, circumstances have changed and will keep evolving in Arkansas, generating the need for ACRE's inaugural transparency index in 2018 and regular updates to it. One such evolving circumstance is the improvement in web access in rural areas. As of year-end 2018, 55.9 percent of Arkansas's rural population had access to fixed terrestrial 25 Mbps/3 Mbps internet,⁹ up from 16.0 percent in 2013 (but down from 57.6 percent in 2017).¹⁰

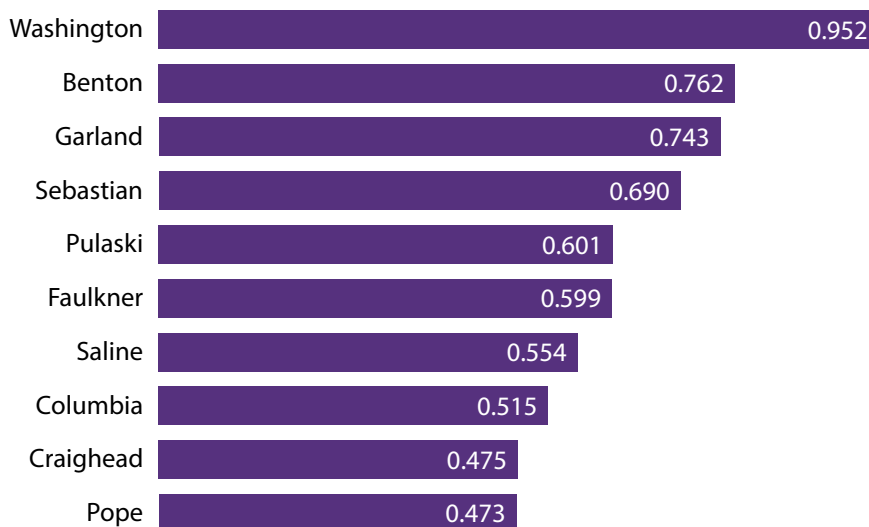
In addition to being the most current assessment, our study has four more noteworthy features:

- 1. Benefits categorized.** Because our study categorizes fiscal, administrative, and political information separately, researchers and policymakers can easily assess the relative benefits of increasing accessibility for each information type.¹¹
- 2. Focus on the fiscal.** Our study breaks out fiscal information from other types of information. Isolating the transparency of fiscal information allows us to examine more deeply items that have the biggest deterrence and detection effects on public corruption.
- 3. Recent information prioritized.** Our study assigns more weight to current information when analyzing sources that include past information, such as budgets. Recent information is a more accurate indicator of county web transparency, especially when evaluating the success or failure of current officials or programs.
- 4. Ongoing.** Regular updates allow citizens and researchers to make comparisons over time with a consistent and reliable data set.

OVERALL TRANSPARENCY

The overall score, which ranges from 0.000 to 1.000, combines the three types of transparency: fiscal, administrative, and political. Fiscal transparency is the disclosure of how governments spend tax dollars. Administrative transparency relates to the openness of government activities and processes, while political transparency relates to the disclosure of information about elected officials and openness of elected bodies such as quorum courts—the legislative body of county governments.¹² Scoring highest on all three types of transparency, Washington County (0.952) stands out as the most web-transparent county in Arkansas, as figure 1 shows. Between Washington County and second-place Benton County (0.762) is a noticeable gap (0.190), and 10th-place Pope County (0.473) publishes less than half the information that Washington County does.

FIGURE 1: Top 10 Performers in Overall Transparency



Compared to 2018, Washington County has improved by 0.117 points, which means that it publishes 11.7 percent more information online than it did last year. The gap between Washington County and the other Arkansas counties has also decreased—an indication that they, too, have improved in publishing public information online. Last year, only four counties—Washington, Benton, Pulaski, and Garland—had an overall score greater than 0.500. The current index shows that four more counties that scored below 0.500 last year—Sebastian, Faulkner, Saline, and Columbia—now have a score greater than 0.500 as well.

Less encouraging is that 89 percent of Arkansas counties (67 out of 75) still score less than 0.500, which means these counties are publishing less than 50 percent of the important public information included in our index. Thus, despite the improvements some counties have made, most counties, including some of the top 10 performers, still have a long way to go in improving their web transparency. Possible reasons for not publishing information may include lack of resources and personnel with knowledge of how to do so. However, a 2018 United States Public Interest Research Group (U.S. PIRG) report notes that as technology improves governments may be able to lower the costs of creating and maintaining the websites. Despite these possible barriers, counties should consider the benefits that come with a transparent government such as improved relationships between government officials and residents.

Overall, Arkansas counties performed better in political transparency this year than in the other two types of transparency, and their scores show improvement from our inaugural assessment in 2018. Table 1 shows how the state averages for the three transparency categories compare:

TABLE 1: 2019 and 2018 Comparison of the Average Percentage of Published information by Transparency in Arkansas

	2019	2018	IMPROVEMENT
Fiscal	16.4	7.2	9.2
Administrative	12.2	6.2	6.0
Political	36.6	28	8.6

Figure 2, below, shows the distribution of overall scores for all 75 Arkansas counties. Figure 2 also shows the number of counties that score in each range. The distribution skews to the left, where transparency scores are lower, implying that most counties in Arkansas are still not publishing enough information on their websites. Fifty-four counties score between 0.000 and 0.290, a clear indication that Arkansas counties as a whole are still deficient in web transparency. Last year’s assessment revealed that 65 counties scored between 0.000 and 0.290.

FIGURE 2: Distribution of Overall Transparency Scores in Arkansas

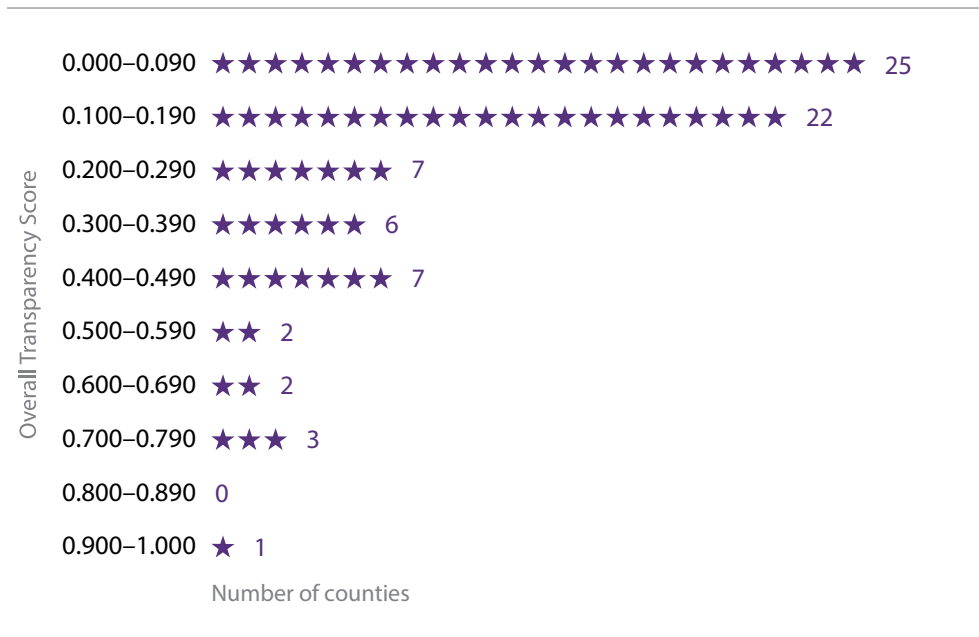


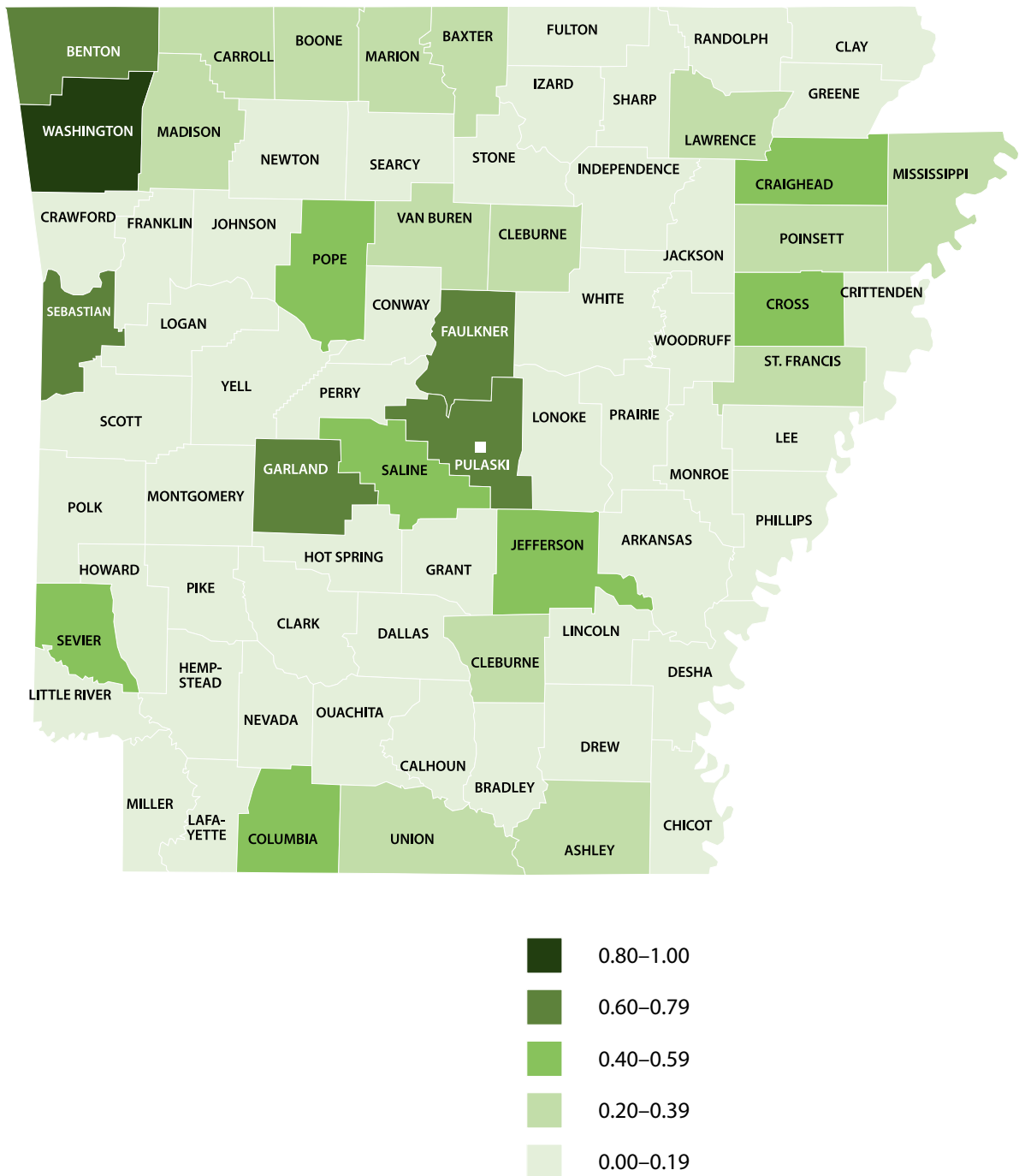
Table 2 gives the rank and overall score for each of Arkansas’s 75 counties. Just like in 2018, the last 15 counties in the table do not have stand-alone websites and only supply information on the contacts of their two elected offices, the assessor and collector, through the Arkansas.gov platform. Of the remainder, 41 counties have stand-alone websites and the other 19 use the Arkansas.gov platform and include more information than the bottom 15.

TABLE 2: Overall Transparency Score and Ranking

RANK	COUNTY	SCORE	RANK	COUNTY	SCORE	RANK	COUNTY	SCORE
1	Washington	0.952	26	Union	0.220	51	Phillips	0.083
2	Benton	0.762	27	St. Francis	0.218	52	Desha	0.076
3	Garland	0.743	28	White	0.195	52	Lincoln	0.076
4	Sebastian	0.690	29	Izard	0.188	52	Crittenden	0.076
5	Pulaski	0.601	30	Crawford	0.183	52	Woodruff	0.076
6	Faulkner	0.599	31	Greene	0.180	56	Clay	0.074
7	Saline	0.554	32	Miller	0.165	56	Cleveland	0.074
8	Columbia	0.515	33	Hempstead	0.156	58	Conway	0.068
9	Craighead	0.475	34	Chicot	0.146	59	Perry	0.067
10	Pope	0.473	35	Stone	0.142	60	Arkansas	0.060
11	Cross	0.452	36	Bradley	0.133	61	Ouachita	0.055
12	Jefferson	0.424	37	Prairie	0.127	62	Little River	0.052
13	Sevier	0.405	37	Calhoun	0.127	63	Polk	0.047
14	Carroll	0.395	39	Lafayette	0.123	64	Pike	0.038
15	Boone	0.390	40	Monroe	0.119	65	Howard	0.036
16	Baxter	0.389	39	Johnson	0.117	66	Lonoke	0.033
17	Marion	0.388	42	Sharp	0.108	66	Randolph	0.033
18	Ashley	0.387	43	Clark	0.106	66	Newton	0.033
19	Van Buren	0.332	44	Scott	0.101	69	Dallas	0.031
20	Mississippi	0.313	45	Hot Spring	0.095	69	Logan	0.031
21	Cleburne	0.298	46	Drew	0.093	71	Independence	0.029
22	Poinsett	0.279	47	Nevada	0.092	71	Franklin	0.029
22	Grant	0.279	48	Lee	0.090	71	Jackson	0.029
24	Madison	0.256	48	Montgomery	0.090	71	Fulton	0.029
25	Lawrence	0.236	48	Yell	0.090	75	Searcy	0.013

Figure 3 presents a transparency heat map of counties. Even though we found some improvements, it is evident from the map that most Arkansas counties are still not web transparent.

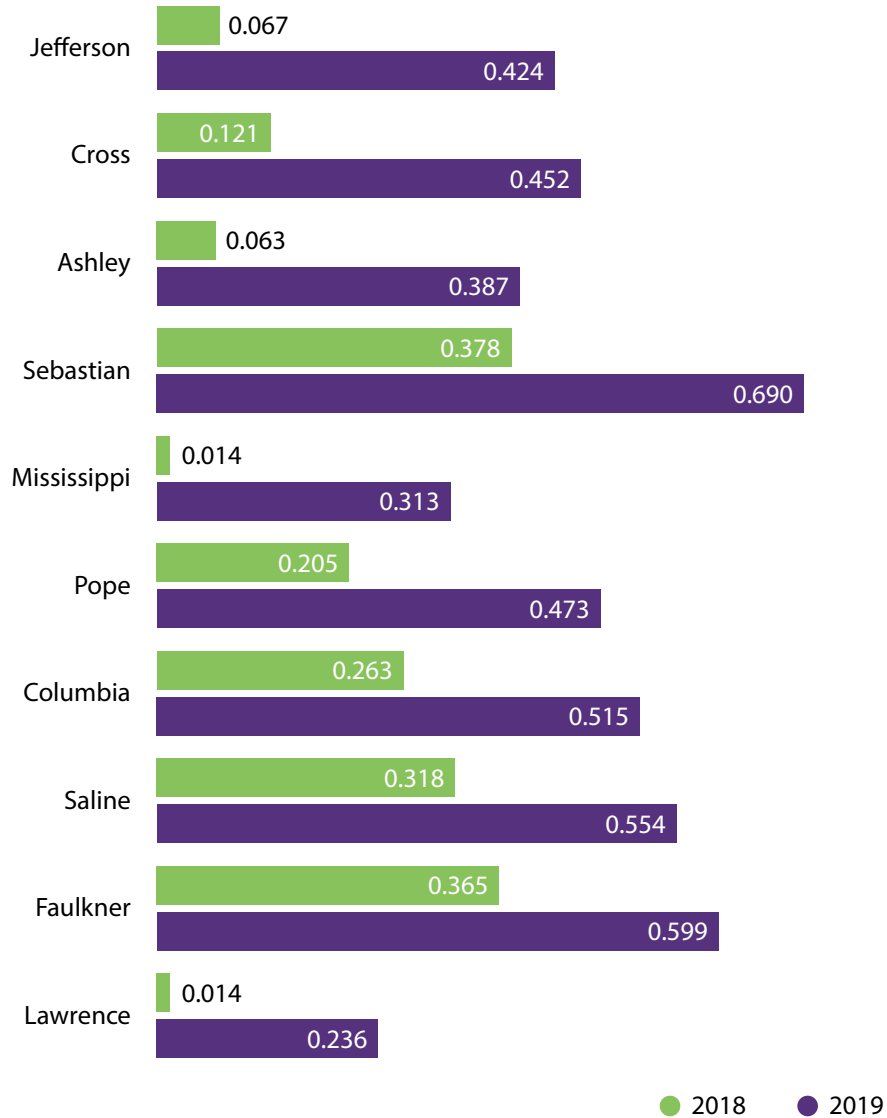
FIGURE 3: Heat Map



TOP 10 MOST-IMPROVED COUNTIES

One reason for creating the index and updating it regularly is for county officials and county residents to see for themselves the progress their county is making regarding web transparency. Figure 4 shows the top 10 most-improved counties in Arkansas.

FIGURE 4: Top 10 Most Improved Counties, Overall Transparency Score



Jefferson County improved the most, by 0.357, which is equivalent to adding close to 36 percent of the important public information included in the index. In terms of ranking, Jefferson County moved from ranking 50th in the state in 2018 to 12th in 2019. One reason for this improvement is that Jefferson County now has its own stand-alone website. Previously, it published only a few pieces of information on the Arkansas.gov platform. Other counties worthy of mention are Cross and Ashley, which improved by 0.330 and 0.323 points, respectively. This improvement made Cross County jump from 28th in 2018 to 11th in 2019; Ashley leaped from 52nd to 18th. Three counties (Sebastian, Saline, and Faulkner) that were in the top 10 in 2018 are among the top 10 most-improved counties in overall transparency, showing that even when counties have relatively high rankings, they can make important improvements.

OVERALL TRANSPARENCY BY COUNTY CLASSIFICATION

The Association of Arkansas Counties organizes counties into different classes based on population size:¹³

Class 1 (0–9,999 people): Calhoun, Cleveland, Dallas, Lafayette, Monroe, Montgomery, Nevada, Newton, Prairie, Searcy, and Woodruff.

Class 2 (10,000–19,999 people): Arkansas, Bradley, Chicot, Clay, Cross, Desha, Drew, Franklin, Fulton, Grant, Howard, Iazard, Jackson, Lawrence, Lee, Lincoln, Little River, Madison, Marion, Perry, Pike, Randolph, Scott, Sevier, Sharp, Stone, and Van Buren.

Class 3 (20,000–29,999 people): Ashley, Carroll, Clark, Cleburne, Columbia, Conway, Hempstead, Johnson, Logan, Ouachita, Phillips, Poinsett, Polk, St. Francis, and Yell.

Class 4 (30,000–49,999 people): Baxter, Boone, Greene, Hot Spring, Independence, Miller, Mississippi, and Union.

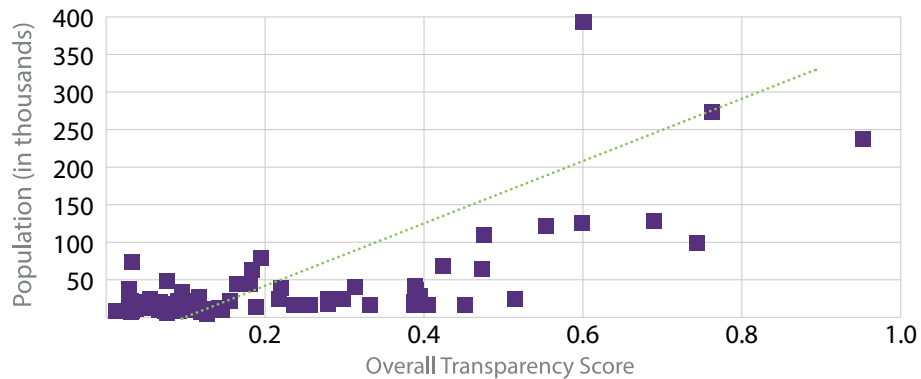
Class 5 (50,000–69,999 people): Crawford, Crittenden, and Pope.

Class 6 (70,000–199,999 people): Craighead, Faulkner, Garland, Jefferson, Saline, Sebastian, and White.

Class 7 (200,000 and above): Benton, Pulaski, and Washington.

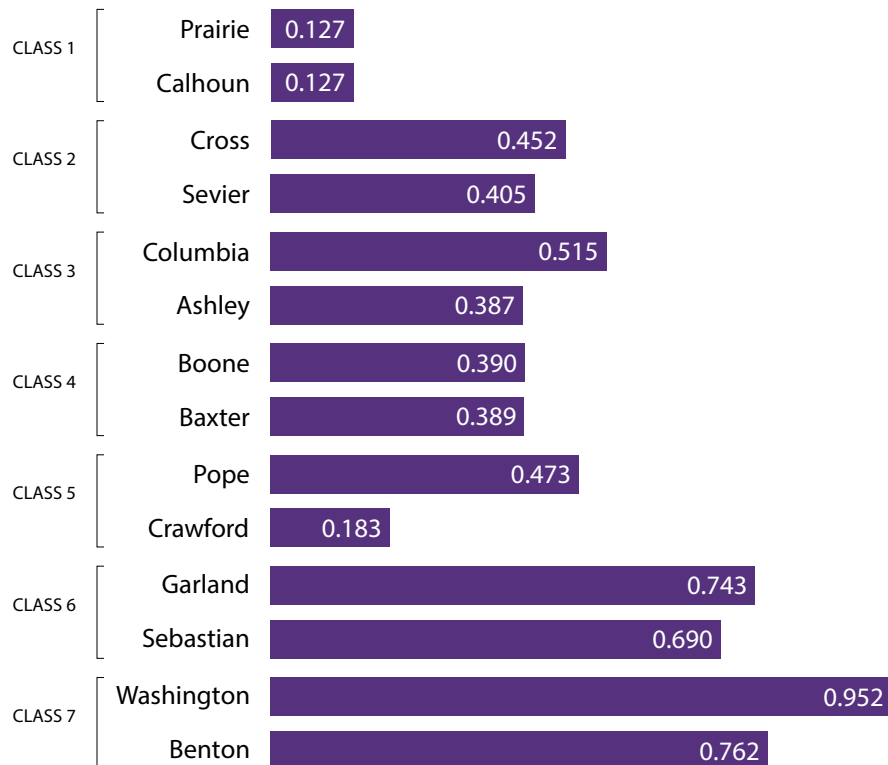
Eight of the top 10 most populous counties in Arkansas (Pulaski, Benton, Washington, Sebastian, Faulkner, Saline, Craighead, and Garland) are in the top 10 performers in web transparency. A simple scatter plot of population and our transparency index in figure 5 indicates that more populous counties tend to be more web transparent than less populous ones.

FIGURE 5: Scatter Plot of Population and County Transparency in Arkansas



In addition to ranking the top 10 overall performers (figure 1), we recognize the top two performers in each of the seven population-size classes, as figure 6 shows. This analysis allows us to compare each county not only with all other counties in the state, but also with counties similar in population. Competition among peers can bring about much-needed improvement as counties realize that counties like theirs are able to do better.

FIGURE 6: Top Two Performers in Overall Transparency by County Population Classification



Even though we observe a positive relationship between population size and web transparency in our scatter plot, low population is not an excuse for not publishing public information online. Columbia, which is in class 3, outperforms more populous counties in class 4 and class 5. Similarly, Crawford County, which is in class 5, is outperformed by the top two performers in less-populous counties in classes 2, 3, and 4.

Each of the top two performers by population class, except for Columbia, Garland, Sebastian, Washington, and Benton, have scores less than 0.500. Their scores indicate that even the top performers publish less than 50 percent of important public information online. Take Prairie and Calhoun counties, for example: neither has published its budgets and financial statements online. Doing so would improve their low scores.

OVERALL TRANSPARENCY BY COUNTY WEALTH CLASSIFICATION

One concern regarding web transparency is that it imposes new and on-going cost for counties to create and maintain the websites. The implication is that wealthier counties are more likely to be more web transparent than poorer counties. We have added this section, which was not in the previous report to provide a comparison of counties that are in the same wealth bracket. Using the median household income as a measure of counties' wealth, we have grouped counties into 6 income groups to show the top performers for five different wealth levels.¹⁴

Group 1 (\$26,000 - \$30,999): Desha, Lee, Phillips, Woodruff

Group 2 (\$31,000 - \$35,999): Chicot, Clay, Dallas, Howard, Jackson, Johnson, Lafayette, Monroe, Montgomery, Ouachita, Polk, Randolph, Sharp, St. Francis, Stone, Van Buren

Group 3 (\$36,000 - \$40,999): Arkansas, Ashley, Baxter, Boone, Bradley, Calhoun, Carroll, Clark, Columbia, Conway, Crittenden, Drew, Franklin, Fulton, Hempstead, Hot Spring, Independence, Izard, Jefferson, Lawrence, Lincoln, Little River, Logan, Marion, Mississippi, Nevada, Newton, Pike, Poinsett, Pope, Scott, Searcy, Sebastian, Yell

Group 4 (\$41,000 - \$45,999): Faulkner, Grant, Pulaski, Washington, Perry, Craighead, Greene, Cleveland, White, Sevier, Crawford, Madison, Cleburne, Miller, Garland, Prairie, Union, Cross

Group 5 (\$46,000 - \$50,999): Benton, Lonoke, Saline

Six of the top 10 wealthiest counties in Arkansas (Benton, Saline, Faulkner, Pulaski, Washington, and Craighead) are in the top 10 performers in web transparency. Similar to population, a scatter plot of median household income

and our transparency index in Figure 7 indicates that wealthier counties tend to be more web transparent than poorer ones.

FIGURE 7: Scatter Plot of Median Household Income and County Transparency in Arkansas

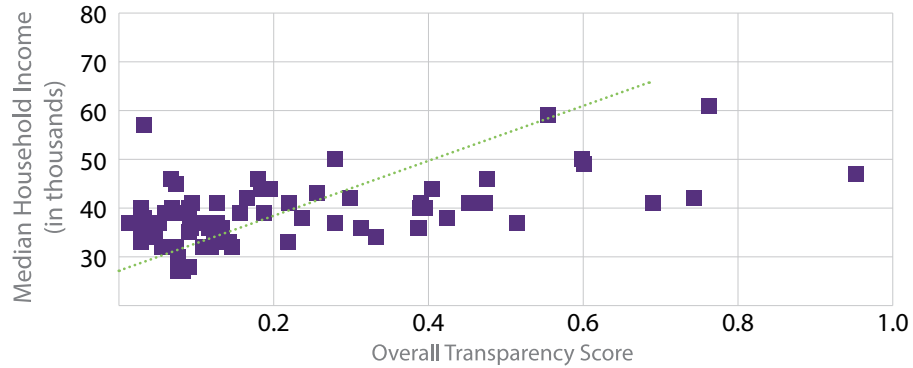


Figure 8 shows the top two performers in each group.

FIGURE 8: Top Two Performers in Overall Transparency by County Wealth Classification

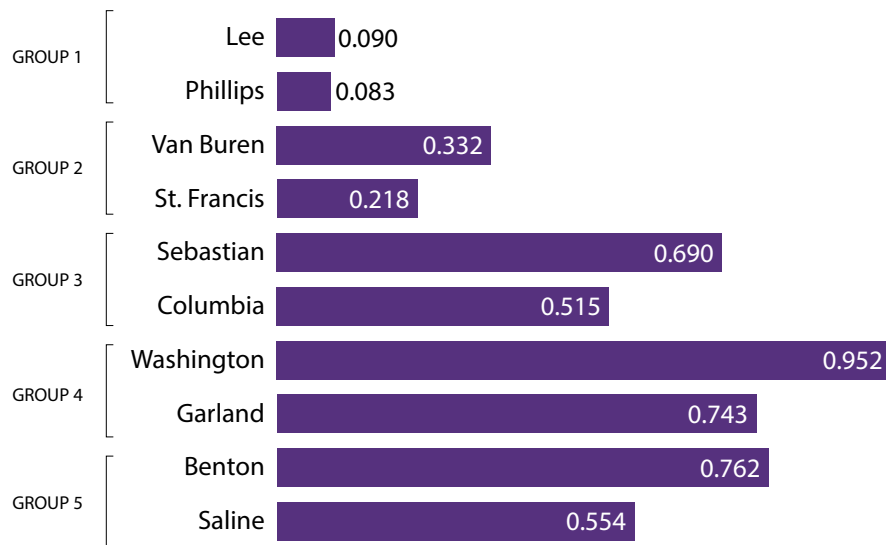
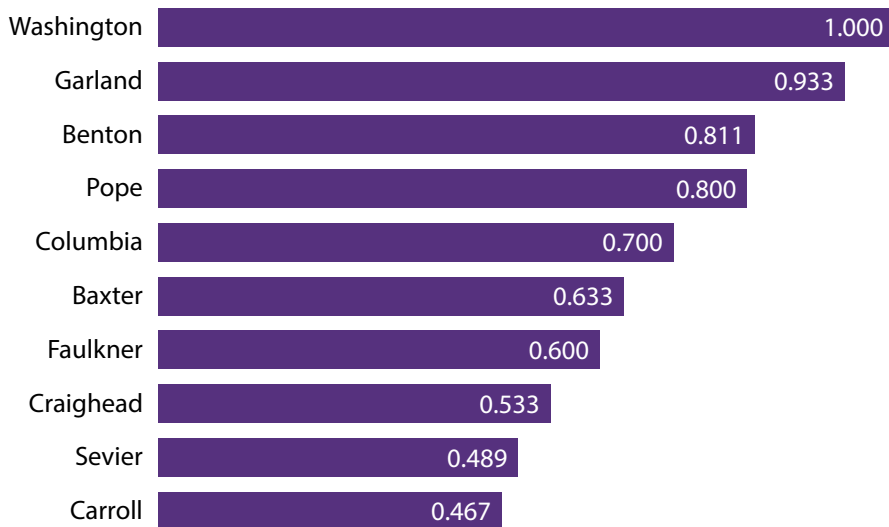


Figure 8 shows that wealth seems to be correlated with the level of web transparency for the first four groups. The relationship seems not to hold when you compare groups 4 and 5. Washington County, which is in the fourth group, outperforms all counties in Arkansas, including those in wealthier group 5 (Benton and Saline). The second-best performer in group 4 (Garland) also outperforms the second-best performer (Saline) in the wealthier group 5.

FISCAL TRANSPARENCY

FIGURE 9: Top 10 Performers in Fiscal Transparency



Recall that fiscal transparency is the disclosure of how governments spend tax dollars. Our fiscal transparency score combines three components: budgets, audits, and taxes and fees. Figure 9 shows that Washington County with a score of 1.000 out of a maximum possible score of 1.000, posts 100 percent of the important fiscal information included in our index. Washington County outperforms all the other counties in Arkansas.

Compared to 2018, we observe some improvement in fiscal transparency across counties. The best score in 2018 was Washington's 0.767, which was heads and shoulders above every other county in Arkansas. The 2019 index shows that three other counties, Garland, Benton and Pope, have exceeded Washington's

2018 score. Pope and Columbia, two counties that were not in the top 10 in 2018, have broken through this year, replacing Pulaski and Van Buren counties. The 10th-ranked county in 2018, Sevier, scored 0.200. In contrast, 2019's 10th-ranked county, Carroll, scored 0.467.

Table 3 provides the number of counties that reported each of the index's subcomponents in 2018 and 2019. It demonstrates both the improvement that Arkansas counties have made as whole and the deficiency that still exists in publishing certain types of financial information.

TABLE 3: Number and Percentage of Counties Publishing Each Subcomponent of Fiscal Transparency Online in 2019 and 2018

SUBCOMPONENT	2019		2018	
	COUNT	%	COUNT	%
Current budget	18	24	8	11
Previous year's budget	15	20	9	12
Two years prior's budget	10	13	7	9
Three years prior's budget	9	12	6	8
Current Audit	6	8	0	0
Previous year's audit	6	8	1	1
Two years prior's audit	7	9	2	3
Three years prior's audit	6	8	2	3
County fees	36	48	22	29
Property tax rates	27	36	11	15
General Sales Tax Rates	8	11	4	5
Special Sales Tax Rates	8	11	2	3
All on a single webpage	1	1	0	0

Five things especially stand out in table 3:

- The number of counties publishing each subcomponent of fiscal transparency online has increased in every category.
- For each subcomponent of fiscal transparency, over half of the counties do not publish each subcomponent of fiscal transparency online.
- For all but two subcomponents of fiscal transparency, less than a quarter of counties publish each subcomponent of fiscal transparency online.
- 18 of 75 counties (24 percent) publish current budgets on their websites compared to 8 counties (11 percent) in 2018.
- 6 of 75 counties (8 percent) now publish their most current audited financial statements online compared to 0 in 2018.¹⁵

- Only 9 of 75 Arkansas counties (12 percent) have published their current budgets and budgets for the past three years.

Table 4 shows fiscal transparency scores for each of Arkansas’s 75 counties. Thirty-three Arkansas counties have a score of zero, indicating that they currently do not publish any financial information. Thirty-three is an improvement compared to 2018, when 49 counties did not publish any financial information. Additionally, 13 counties have a score of 0.067 this year. The only financial information these thirteen counties publish is their county fees.¹⁶

TABLE 4: Fiscal Transparency

RANK	COUNTY	SCORE	RANK	COUNTY	SCORE	RANK	COUNTY	SCORE
1	Washington	1.000	21	Saline	0.133	43	Montgomery	0.000
2	Garland	0.933	21	Clark	0.133	43	Nevada	0.000
3	Benton	0.811	21	Ashley	0.133	43	Phillips	0.000
4	Pope	0.800	21	Hempstead	0.133	43	Sharp	0.000
5	Columbia	0.700	30	Chicot	0.067	43	Woodruff	0.000
6	Baxter	0.633	30	Johnson	0.067	43	Arkansas	0.000
7	Faulkner	0.600	30	Lee	0.067	43	Conway	0.000
8	Craighead	0.533	30	Prairie	0.067	43	Dallas	0.000
9	Sevier	0.489	30	Marion	0.067	43	Franklin	0.000
10	Carroll	0.467	30	White	0.067	43	Fulton	0.000
11	Cross	0.422	30	Cleburne	0.067	43	Howard	0.000
11	Grant	0.422	30	Izard	0.067	43	Independence	0.000
13	Sebastian	0.400	30	Jefferson	0.067	43	Jackson	0.000
13	Van Buren	0.400	30	Little River	0.067	43	Lafayette	0.000
15	Pulaski	0.300	30	Ouachita	0.067	43	Lawrence	0.000
16	Union	0.289	30	Polk	0.067	43	Logan	0.000
16	Madison	0.289	30	Scott	0.067	43	Lonoke	0.000
16	Mississippi	0.289	43	Calhoun	0.000	43	Newton	0.000
19	Greene	0.233	43	Clay	0.000	43	Perry	0.000
20	Boone	0.200	43	Cleveland	0.000	43	Pike	0.000
21	Monroe	0.133	43	Crittenden	0.000	43	Poinsett	0.000
21	Crawford	0.133	43	Desha	0.000	43	Randolph	0.000
21	Bradley	0.133	43	Drew	0.000	43	Searcy	0.000
21	St. Francis	0.133	43	Hot Spring	0.000	43	Stone	0.000
21	Miller	0.133	43	Lincoln	0.000	43	Yell	0.000

NOTEWORTHY CHANGES TO FISCAL TRANSPARENCY IN ARKANSAS

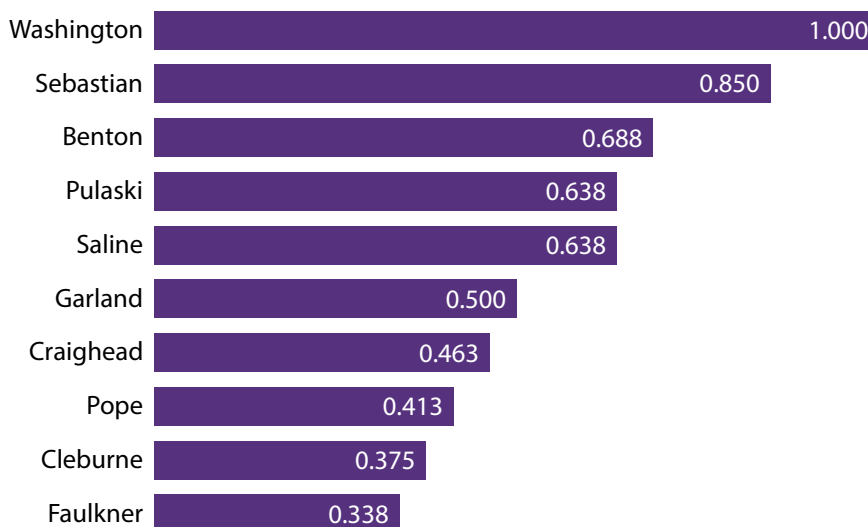
In our inaugural report on county transparency in Arkansas, we recommended an amendment to AR Code § 14-21-102 (2017) to include the publication of financial information online. Previously, the law required the county clerk to publish the county's annual financial report one time in one local newspaper (or a newspaper with the largest circulation in the county if the county has no local newspaper). The Arkansas Legislature followed our recommendation and enacted Act 564 requiring counties to publish annual budgets and annual financial reports on a website owned or maintained by the county, the state, or the Association of Arkansas Counties. Effective January 2020, annual budgets and other annual financial reports will be available online on different platforms. With this change, we expect an upswing in financial transparency.

If counties publish their budgets on other platforms, we recommend that they provide a link to that financial information on their websites to make it easy for residents to access the financial information.¹⁷ Publishing the information is meaningless if residents cannot find it.

ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSPARENCY

Administrative transparency relates to the openness of local officials' activities and processes, specifically public records requests, building permits and zoning, government contracts, and jobs. With a score of 1.000, Washington County outperforms all other counties, followed by Sebastian County at 0.850, as figure 10 shows. Rounding out the top 10 performers in this category are Cleburne and Faulkner, with scores of 0.375 and 0.338, respectively. Compared to the other categories of transparency, administrative transparency is still the weakest, with an average score of 0.114 (up from 0.063 in 2018), compared to 0.157 and 0.366 for fiscal and political transparency, respectively.

FIGURE 10: Top 10 Performers in Administrative Transparency



Take Faulkner County, for example, which publishes about 34 percent of the administrative information included in the index. On its own, 34 percent is low, but in relation to other Arkansas counties, it puts Faulkner in the top 10. Craighead, with a score of 0.463, is the only county that did not make the top 10 in 2018 but made it this year. Previously, it had a score of zero in administrative transparency.

Table 5 shows the different subcomponents of our administrative transparency score and the number and percentage of counties that published each subcomponent online in 2019. The table also provides 2018 figures to show the progress in publishing each subcomponent.

TABLE 5: Number and Percentage of Counties Publishing Each Subcomponent of Administrative Transparency Online in 2019 and 2018

SUBCOMPONENT	2019		2018	
	COUNT	%	COUNT	%
Court records	18	24	10	13
FOIA request forms	6	8	3	4
FOIA request contact person	3	4	5	7
FOIA contact information	4	5	6	8
Permit applications	4	5	3	4
Permit holders	2	3	0	0
Planning board meeting announcements	28	37	4	5
Planning board agenda	9	12	3	4
Planning board minutes	8	11	2	3
Current RFPs	7	9	5	7
Archived RFPs	4	5	2	3
Current year bids and bid winners	2	3	1	1
Archived bids and bid winners	3	4	1	1
(Hiring) Job Titles	16	21	9	12
(Hiring) Position descriptions	13	17	7	9

Four things especially stand out in table 5.

- The biggest improvements occurred in the publishing of
 - court records: In 2019, 18 of the 75 counties provide links to CourtConnect for court records compared to 10 of 75 in 2018.
 - planning board meeting announcements: In 2019, 28 of the 75 counties publish these online compared to 4 of 75 in 2018.
- Two Arkansas counties publish a list of building permit holders online to ensure that the public can see if certain politically connected individuals are receiving favorable treatment.

- The process of obtaining information through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is still inadequate. Only six counties provide a way of requesting information on their websites. Only four counties list their FOIA contact information, and only three list their FOIA contact person.
- Reporting on the bidding process and bid outcomes needs improvement. Only two counties (Washington County and Sebastian County) publish all of the following: current RFPs, archived RFPs, current year bids and bid winners, and archived bids and bid winners. This information is important because contracts involve large public expenditures being transferred to the private sector. Therefore, they merit extra transparency.¹⁸

Table 6 displays a complete ranking of all 75 counties. Only 17 counties have a score greater than 0.100. Twenty-nine counties publish no information pertaining to administrative transparency compared to 58 in 2018: a considerable but not satisfactory improvement.

TABLE 6: Administrative Transparency

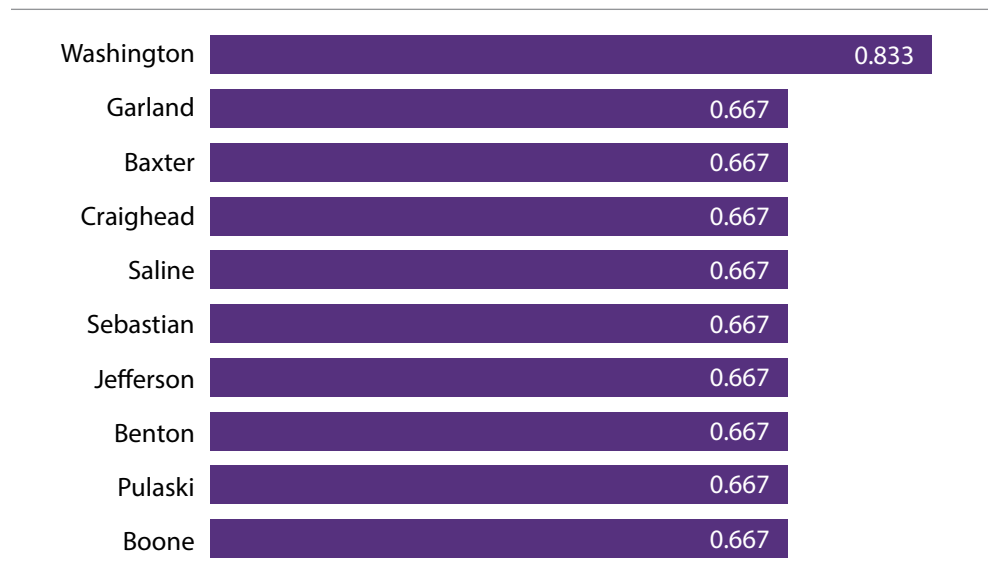
RANK	COUNTY	SCORE	RANK	COUNTY	SCORE	RANK	COUNTY	SCORE
1	Washington	1.000	18	Greene	0.063	47	Clay	0.000
2	Sebastian	0.850	27	Arkansas	0.050	47	Cleveland	0.000
3	Benton	0.688	27	Conway	0.050	47	Crittenden	0.000
4	Pulaski	0.638	27	Dallas	0.050	47	Cross	0.000
4	Saline	0.638	27	Franklin	0.050	47	Desha	0.000
6	Garland	0.500	27	Fulton	0.050	47	Drew	0.000
7	Craighead	0.463	27	Howard	0.050	47	Grant	0.000
8	Pope	0.413	27	Independence	0.050	47	Hempstead	0.000
9	Cleburne	0.375	27	Jackson	0.050	47	Hot Spring	0.000
10	Faulkner	0.338	27	Little River	0.050	47	Lafayette	0.000
11	Ashley	0.300	27	Logan	0.050	47	Lawrence	0.000
11	Marion	0.300	27	Lonoke	0.050	47	Lee	0.000
13	Jefferson	0.250	27	Madison	0.050	47	Lincoln	0.000
13	Carroll	0.250	27	Newton	0.050	47	Miller	0.000
15	Van Buren	0.188	27	Ouachita	0.050	47	Monroe	0.000
15	White	0.188	27	Pike	0.050	47	Montgomery	0.000
17	Mississippi	0.175	27	Poinsett	0.050	47	Perry	0.000
18	Columbia	0.063	27	Polk	0.050	47	Phillips	0.000
18	Baxter	0.063	27	Randolph	0.050	47	Prairie	0.000
18	Crawford	0.063	27	St. Francis	0.050	47	Scott	0.000
18	Izard	0.063	27	Stone	0.050	47	Searcy	0.000
18	Union	0.063	47	Calhoun	0.000	47	Sevier	0.000
18	Clark	0.063	47	Chicot	0.000	47	Sharp	0.000
18	Johnson	0.063	47	Boone	0.000	47	Woodruff	0.000
18	Nevada	0.063	47	Bradley	0.000	47	Yell	0.000

POLITICAL TRANSPARENCY

Political transparency relates to the openness of elected officials and the quorum courts. It has three components: quorum courts information, elected officials' contact information, and elected officials' financial disclosures, conflict of interest statements, and salaries. The quorum courts and elected officials categories have subcomponents (shown in table 7).

As figure 11 shows, Washington County, with a score of 0.833 out of a maximum possible score of 1.000, again outperforms all other counties in Arkansas. Three new counties (Baxter, Saline, and Jefferson) have made it into the top 10 in this year's index, displacing Faulkner, Carroll, Marion, Chicot, and Calhoun.¹⁹

FIGURE 11: Top 10 Performers in Political Transparency



Compared to fiscal and administrative transparency, Arkansas counties perform relatively well in political transparency. All top 10 performers scored at least a 0.667, meaning that they post at least 67 percent of the political information included in our index. Table 7 gives the number and percentage of counties for each subcomponent of political transparency for the years 2019 and 2018 to show the progress on this type of transparency.

TABLE 7: Number and Percentage of Counties Publishing Each Subcomponent of Political Transparency Online

SUBCOMPONENT	2019		2018	
	COUNT	%	COUNT	%
Quorum courts: meeting time and place	36	48	18	24
Quorum courts: meeting agendas	23	31	12	16
Quorum courts: meeting minutes	21	28	11	15
Quorum courts: archived meeting videos	7	9	4	5
Elected officials: names	61	82	61	81
Elected officials: office phone numbers	61	82	60	80
Elected officials: email addresses	51	68	42	55
Elected officials: office locations	48	64	52	69
Elected officials: job descriptions	52	70	33	44
Financial disclosure and conflict of interest statements	0	0	0	0
Salaries	1	1	1	1

Three things especially stand out in table 7.

- Counties have made noticeable improvements in quorum courts openness. Room for improvement remains, as less than 50 percent of the counties publish each of the following: meeting time and place, agenda, and minutes. Citizens need access to their elected officials, quorum courts meetings, and deliberations to encourage more participation and to add an extra level of scrutiny to the policy making process.
- No county in Arkansas publishes financial disclosure and conflict of interest statements.
- Only one county, Washington, publishes salaries by grade.²⁰

Table 8 shows the political transparency scores for each of Arkansas’s 75 counties. Notice that all counties have a score greater than zero, unlike the other categories of transparency. Twenty-one counties scored at least 0.500 compared to only eight in 2018.

TABLE 8: Political Transparency

RANK	COUNTY	SCORE	RANK	COUNTY	SCORE	RANK	COUNTY	SCORE
1	Washington	0.833	24	Chicot	0.444	49	Crittenden	0.267
2	Garland	0.667	24	Calhoun	0.444	49	Woodruff	0.267
2	Baxter	0.667	24	Pope	0.444	53	Nevada	0.258
2	Craighead	0.667	29	Lafayette	0.432	53	Clay	0.258
2	Saline	0.667	30	Sevier	0.428	53	Cleveland	0.258
2	Sebastian	0.667	30	Poinsett	0.428	56	Lee	0.250
2	Jefferson	0.667	30	White	0.428	57	Perry	0.235
2	Benton	0.667	33	Ashley	0.419	58	Conway	0.187
2	Pulaski	0.667	33	Union	0.419	59	Clark	0.174
2	Boone	0.667	35	Hempstead	0.411	60	Arkansas	0.161
2	Carroll	0.667	36	Prairie	0.379	61	Pike	0.083
12	Faulkner	0.658	36	Sharp	0.379	62	Ouachita	0.076
12	Cross	0.658	38	Bradley	0.333	63	Howard	0.075
14	Cleburne	0.600	38	Greene	0.333	64	Lonoke	0.067
15	St. Francis	0.579	38	Hot Spring	0.333	65	Little River	0.065
16	Van Buren	0.575	41	Lawrence	0.325	65	Randolph	0.065
17	Mississippi	0.633	41	Drew	0.325	67	Newton	0.064
18	Madison	0.556	43	Montgomery	0.317	68	Dallas	0.058
18	Grant	0.556	43	Yell	0.317	69	Logan	0.057
20	Columbia	0.539	45	Phillips	0.292	70	Independence	0.050
21	Izard	0.531	46	Scott	0.288	70	Franklin	0.050
22	Marion	0.492	47	Monroe	0.283	70	Jackson	0.050
23	Stone	0.446	48	Johnson	0.281	70	Fulton	0.050
24	Miller	0.444	49	Desha	0.267	74	Polk	0.048
24	Crawford	0.444	49	Lincoln	0.267	75	Searcy	0.045

RECOMMENDATIONS: A GOOD PLACE TO START

Forty-one counties have stand-alone websites. To improve transparency, these counties should post public information on their websites or provide links to web pages where certain kinds of information (such as audited financial statements) are posted. The other 34 counties have some web presence on the Arkansas.gov platform. These counties tend to publish less information than those that have stand-alone websites.

A pathway exists for local officials who want to improve their counties' websites or create new ones. Since 1997, the Arkansas Information Consortium (AIC) has been the state's contracted provider of digital government services. The state hired AIC to increase the number of governmental processes completed online. AIC works with local governments to develop specific forms for web programs or design entire website platforms.

AIC charges a transactional "citizen fee" on all of its online services. For example, AIC is set up in 58 of Arkansas's 75 counties to accept property tax payments online. In 2017, AIC collected \$12 million in transaction fees from providing nearly 500 online services. Two percent of all fees paid to the AIC each year go into the Board Revenue Share Fund, which is controlled by the Information Network of Arkansas. Counties that lack the funds to improve their web transparency can apply for Board Revenue Share funding and work with the Information Network of Arkansas to ensure that important public information (or links to it) gets posted on their websites.²¹

CONCLUSION

In 2015 a Sheriff's office bookkeeper, Chris House, stole about \$3,000 from the Drug Buy and Petty Cash Funds.²² A legislative audit was able to detect corruption in this case, but audits—which can only detect corruption after it happens—are not sufficient. For example, during the period 2010 to 2016, then fleet records clerk for Pulaski County, Wanda Wyatt, stole nearly \$250,000 from the county's insurance provider.²³ Ensuring that information is always available to the public can deter bad behavior. More people watching means public officials have more opportunities to get caught if they break the rules. With more transparency, perhaps such cases and others like it would be discovered earlier, or perhaps the fear of getting caught would deter the crime. ACRE's County Web Transparency project aims to ensure honesty, accountability, and an efficient use of tax dollars.

Our project may already be spurring positive change. Compared to 2018, we observed minor improvements in all three types of transparency in 2019. However, we used three assistants to collect the information this year instead of one in 2018, which may have increased our chances of finding the information we use to calculate each county's web transparency score.

Regardless, Arkansas's web transparency is still seriously deficient. The average score for overall transparency among Arkansas county websites is 0.210 on a scale of 0.000 to 1.000. This score means that, on average, Arkansas counties are publishing only 21 percent of the important public information included in our index. Of the three types of transparency we have evaluated, Arkansas counties remain weakest in both fiscal and administrative transparency, the kinds of transparency most clearly related to preventing and detecting county government corruption.

Thirty-three counties do not publish any fiscal transparency information online. Thirty-four counties publish less than 50 percent of the important fiscal transparency information included in our index. Only eight publish more than 50 percent. This deficiency is a problem because the fewer the people who can easily scrutinize a state's financial information, the lower the likelihood of detecting corruption, and the lower the likelihood that county officials will be deterred from misusing tax dollars. Cross-country empirical studies show that fiscal transparency is a necessary tool to fix corruption.²⁴ We infer this argument should be applicable to counties too and hope that more research on the tightness of these connections to counties will be done.

Administrative transparency also fares poorly, with 29 counties not publishing any of this information online. Only six counties publish at least 50 percent of the important administrative transparency information included in our index. A key area of deficiency is the publishing of bids and bid winners for government contracts. Only two counties (Washington County and Sebastian County) publish all the information pertaining to contracts: current and archived RFPs, and current and archived bids and bid winners. Five others publish partial

administrative transparency information. Why does this deficiency matter? Public procurement is considered one of the most corruption-vulnerable areas in the public sector because of the money involved as well as the opportunities for bribery.²⁵ Requiring that counties publish such information promotes residents' trust that county officials are not favoring certain vendors. Publishing bids and bid winners also allows taxpayers to scrutinize them and encourages elected officials to be accountable to their constituents and allocate the contracts prudently.

Along with citizens and elected officials, the state government should also play a role in promoting transparency in Arkansas counties. The legislature took an encouraging step forward in promoting fiscal transparency for county-level governments by amending AR Code § 14-21-102 (2017) to require that counties publish financial information such as budgets and financial statements online beginning in January 2020. The rationale for expanding online access to financial information is that the internet now plays a major role in the way people access information.²⁶ For the same reason, the state should also play a role in improving residents' participation in quorum court deliberations by amending AR Code § 25-19-106(b)(2) to require counties to publicize online through a consistent platform notification about quorum court meetings including regular, special, and emergency meetings. The current law requires that for emergency or special meetings, "the person calling the meetings shall notify the representatives of newspapers, radio stations, and television stations, if any, located in the county in which the meeting is to be held and any news media located elsewhere that cover regular meetings of the governing body and that have so requested to be notified of the time, place and date of the meeting." The law further stipulates that the notification "be made at least (2) hours before the meeting takes place in order that the public shall have representatives at the meeting." This, however, does not guarantee that the public will have representation, hence the need to expand.

Not only does publishing public information provide on-demand access, it also reduces the costs that arise when people request information through FOIA. For example, in Mississippi, every information request fulfilled by its transparency website rather than a state employee saves the state between \$750 and \$1,000 in staff time.²⁷

Much work remains to be done to improve web transparency in Arkansas. We have offered a tool that can be used as a benchmark for assessing the progress Arkansas counties make in the short, medium, and long term. Our goal is to annually reassess the county websites and point out areas that are still lagging. The information already exists, and it should be made public. It makes officials more accountable. It makes citizens more powerful. Corruption should not happen. But if it does, it should be easily discovered and quickly stopped. This index is a tool, a measuring tape for good governance, and we hope Arkansans will use it to build better and more transparent county governments.

COUNTIES WITH NO STANDALONE WEBSITES

There are 34 Arkansas counties without a standalone website. The average overall score for these counties is 0.069, and the highest-ranking among them is #37. These counties are generally weak in all the three types of transparency, but especially in fiscal and administrative transparency. To improve transparency, they should work with the Information Network of Arkansas to find ways of posting fiscal and administrative transparency information online.

Highest Ranked County:

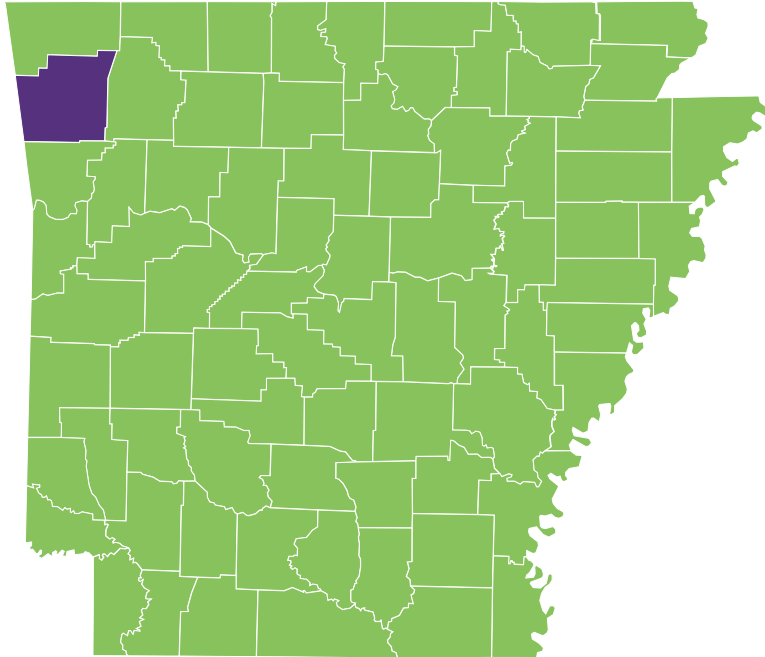
- Overall Rank: Chicot, 37th, Score: 0.069
- Administrative Rank: Monroe, 18th, Score: 0.063
- Fiscal Rank: Johnson & Nevada, 21st, Score: 0.133
- Political Rank: Chicot & Calhoun, 24th, Score: 0.444

COUNTY SUCCESS SNAPSHOTS

The following snapshots are intended to highlight counties that are excelling either through their exemplary transparency or through their attempts to improve. We include results for the top 10 counties with the highest transparency scores in the state first: Washington, Benton, Garland, Sebastian, Pulaski, Faulkner, Saline, Columbia, Craighead, and Pope.

The second group are counties that did not make the top 10 but showed notable improvements in their efforts for more transparency: Lawrence, Mississippi, Ashley, Cross, and Jefferson.

WASHINGTON COUNTY



Washington County is the most transparent county in Arkansas with an overall score of **0.952** on a scale of 0.000 to 1.000. It has maintained its #1 rank not only in overall transparency but in all three types of transparency. Washington County's weakest area is political transparency: the county does not publish financial disclosure and conflict of interest statements online.

OVERALL RANK: #1

#1

ADMINISTRATIVE



#1

FISCAL



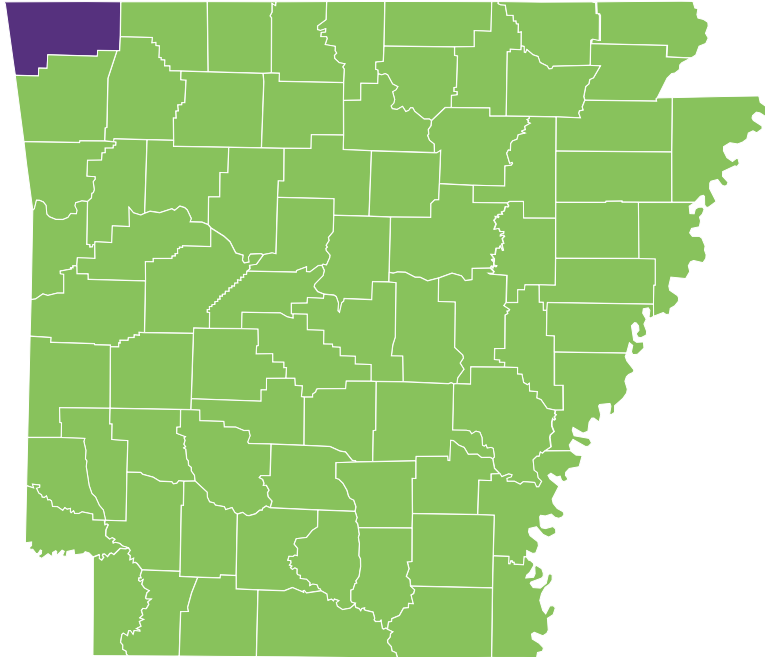
#1

POLITICAL



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BENTON COUNTY



Benton County ranks #2 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.762**. It ranked #3 in 2018. It is weakest in fiscal transparency. To improve transparency, officials should publish previous years' budgets online.

OVERALL RANK: #2

#3

ADMINISTRATIVE



#3

FISCAL



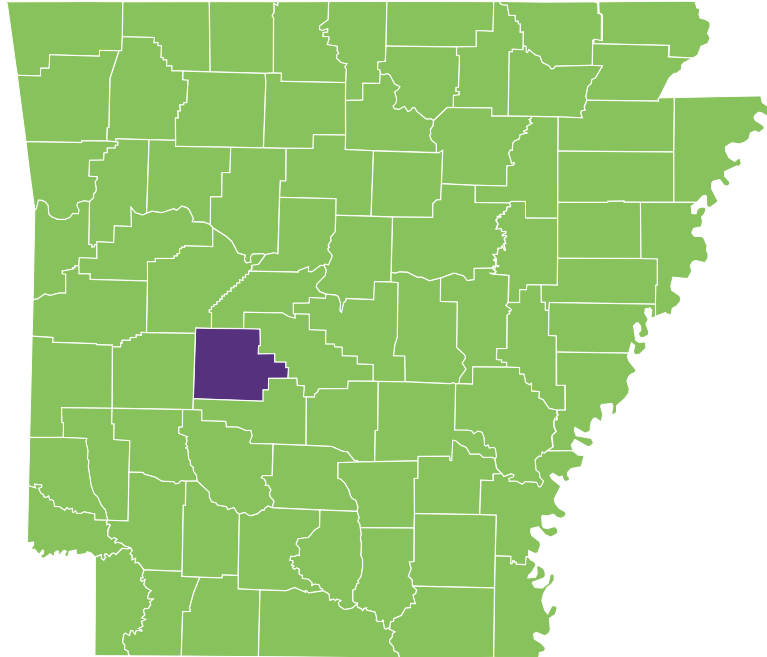
#2

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GARLAND COUNTY



Garland County ranks #3 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall transparency score of **0.743**. It ranked #4 in 2018. The biggest improvement for Garland is in fiscal transparency. It is weakest in administrative transparency. To improve transparency, officials should make public records easily accessible by providing online tools and information on FOIA requests.

OVERALL RANK: #3

#6

ADMINISTRATIVE



#2

FISCAL



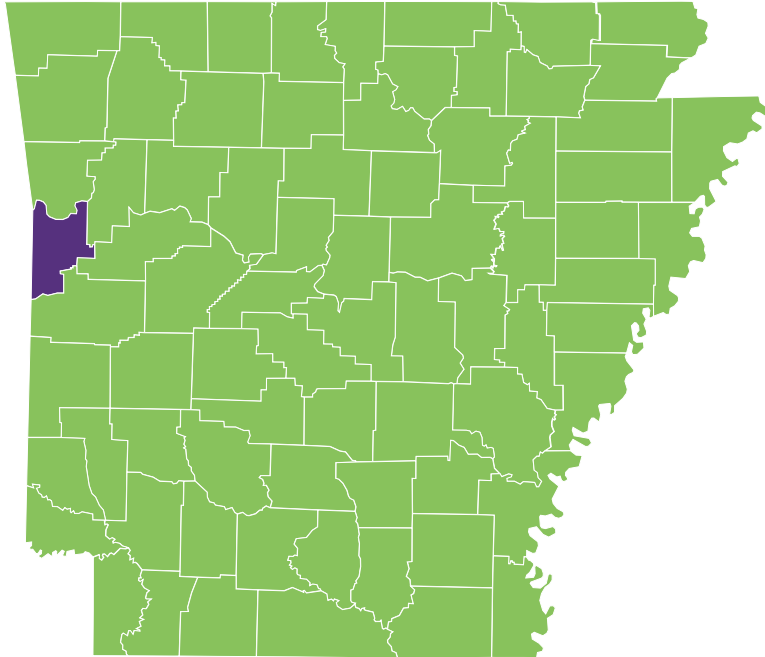
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SEBASTIAN COUNTY



Sebastian County ranks #4 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.690**. It ranked #7 in 2018. The biggest improvement for Sebastian is in administrative transparency. It is weakest in fiscal transparency. To improve transparency, officials should publish audited financial statements or provide a link to the financial statements posted on the Arkansas Legislative Audit website.

OVERALL RANK: #4

#2

ADMINISTRATIVE



#13

FISCAL



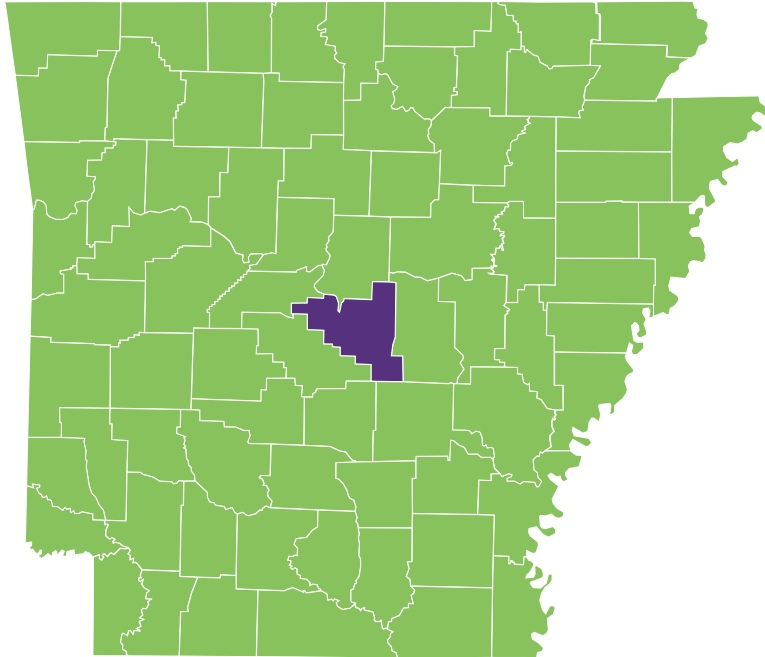
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PULASKI COUNTY



Pulaski County ranks #5 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.601**. It ranked #2 in 2018. It is weakest in fiscal transparency. To improve transparency, officials should publish audited financial statements or provide a link to the financial statements posted on the Arkansas Legislative Audit website.

OVERALL RANK: #5

#4

ADMINISTRATIVE



#15

FISCAL



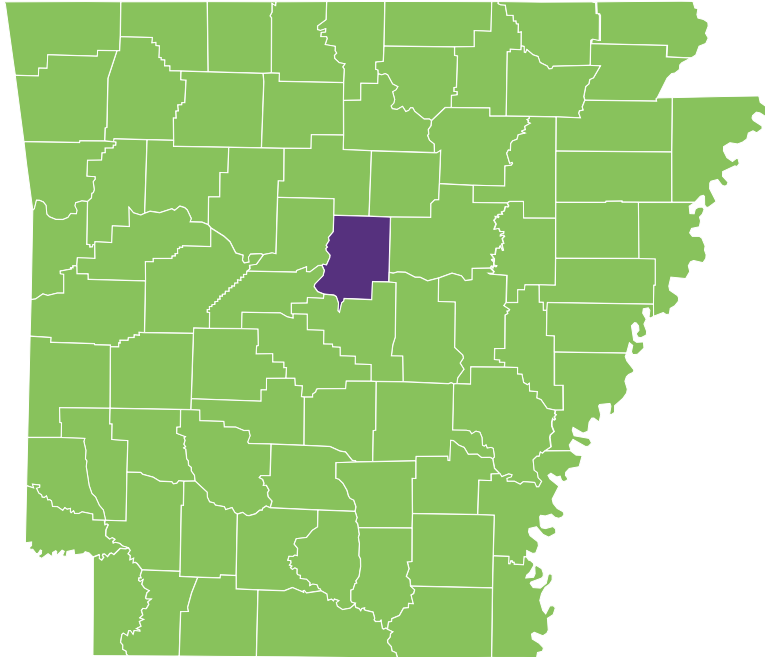
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FAULKNER COUNTY



Faulkner County ranks #6 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.599**. It ranked #8 in 2018. Even though the biggest improvement for Faulkner is in administrative transparency, it is also weakest in administrative transparency. To improve transparency, officials should publish contract information, including current and archived bids and bid winners. Ordinance 19-22 enacted in July 2019 will improve Faulkner's administrative transparency.

OVERALL RANK: #6

#10

ADMINISTRATIVE



#7

FISCAL



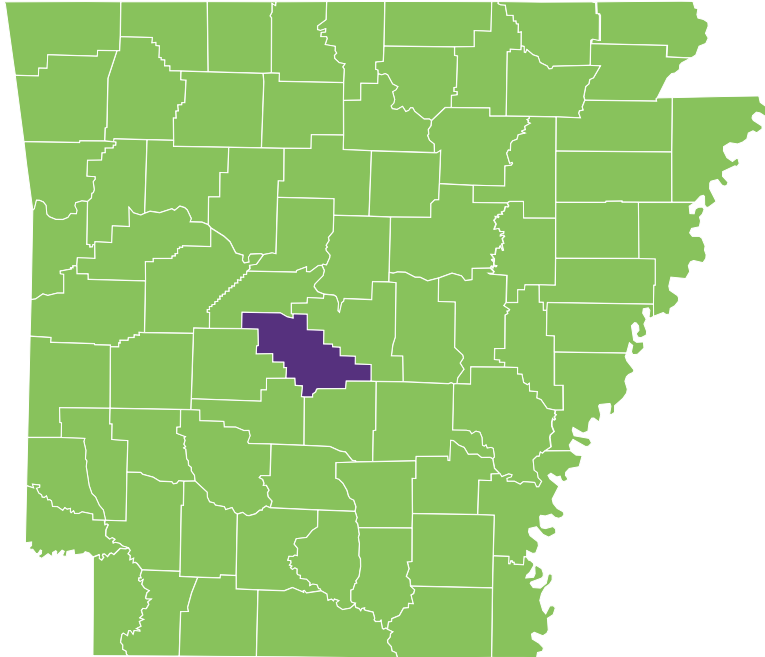
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SALINE COUNTY



Saline County ranks #7 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.554**. It ranked #9 in 2018. The biggest improvement for Saline is in political transparency. It is weakest in fiscal transparency. To improve transparency, officials should publish budgets and financial statements or provide a link to the financial statements posted on the Arkansas Legislative Audit website.

OVERALL RANK: #7

#4

ADMINISTRATIVE



#21

FISCAL



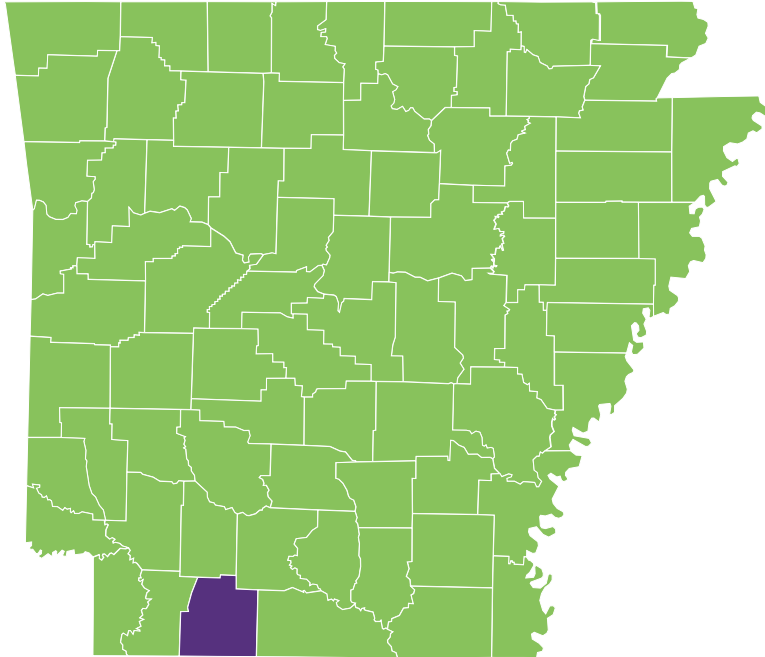
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COLUMBIA COUNTY



Columbia County ranks #8 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.515**. It ranked #13 in 2018. The biggest improvement for Columbia is in fiscal transparency. It is weakest in administrative transparency. To improve transparency, officials should make public records easily accessible by providing online tools and information on FOIA requests. Officials should also publish information on building permits and on zoning and contracts including current and archived bids and bid winners.

OVERALL RANK: #8

#18

ADMINISTRATIVE



#5

FISCAL



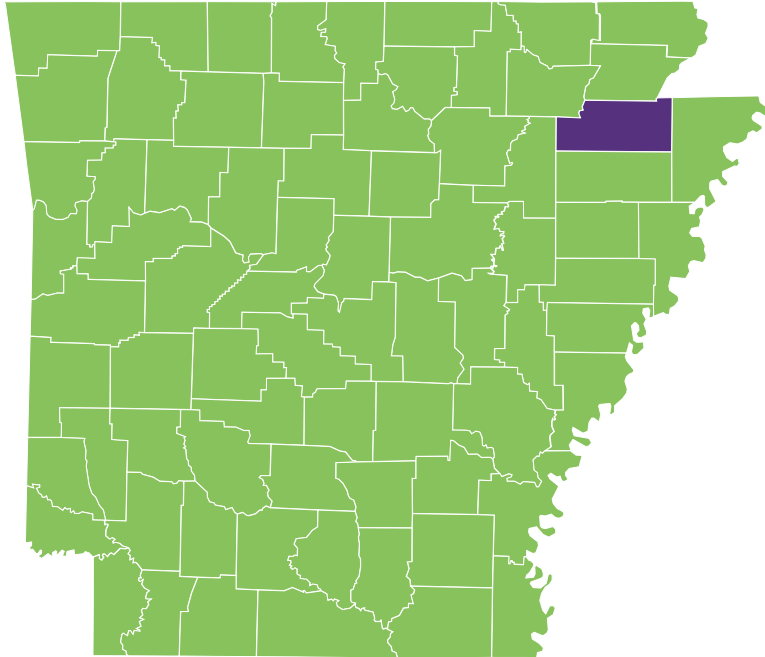
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CRAIGHEAD COUNTY



Craighead County ranks #9 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.475**. It ranked #14 in 2018. Even though Craighead made the biggest improvement in administrative transparency compared to the other two types of transparency, it is also weakest in administrative transparency. To improve transparency, officials should make public records easily accessible by providing online tools and information on FOIA requests. Officials should also publish information on building permits and on zoning and contracts, including current and archived bids and bid winners.

OVERALL RANK: #9

#7

ADMINISTRATIVE



#8

FISCAL



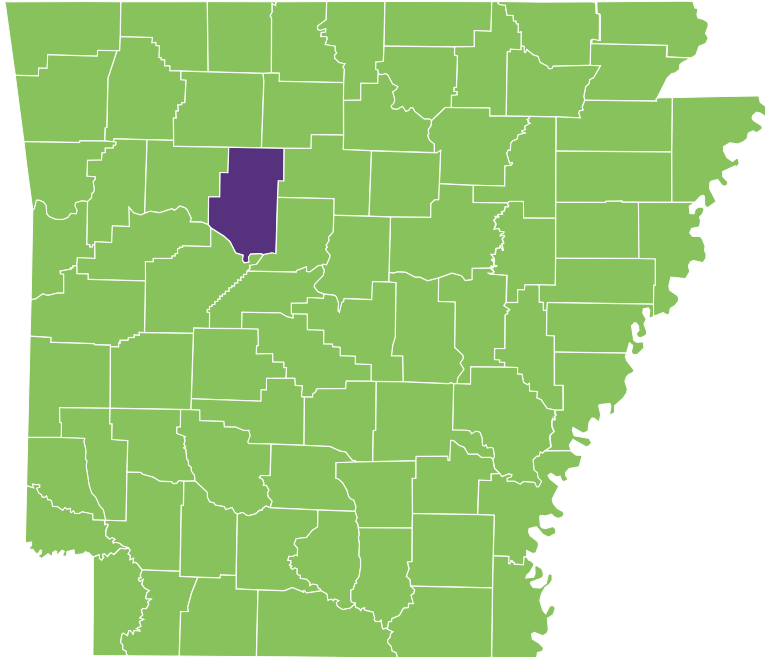
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POPE COUNTY



Pope County ranks #10 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.473**. It ranked #20 in 2018. The most improvement for Pope is in fiscal transparency. It is weakest in administrative transparency. To improve transparency, officials should make public records easily accessible by providing online tools and information on FOIA requests. Officials should also publish information on building permits, and zoning and contracts including current and archived bids and bid winners.

OVERALL RANK: #10

#8

ADMINISTRATIVE



#4

FISCAL



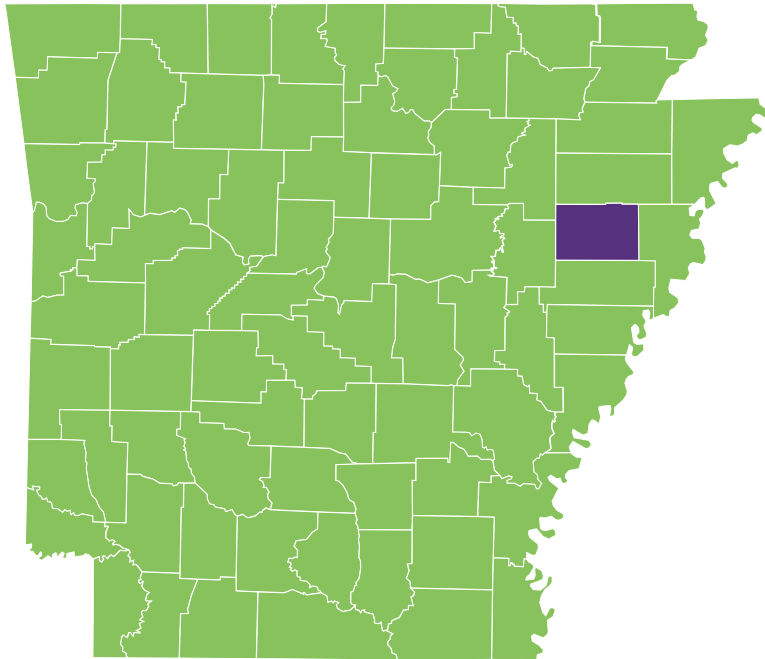
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CROSS COUNTY



Cross County ranks #11 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.452**. It ranked #28 in 2018. The biggest improvement for Cross is in political transparency. It is weakest in administrative transparency. To improve transparency, officials should make public records easily accessible by providing online tools and information on FOIA requests. Officials should also publish information on building permits and on zoning and contracts, including current and archived bids and bid winners.

OVERALL RANK: #11

#47

ADMINISTRATIVE



#11

FISCAL



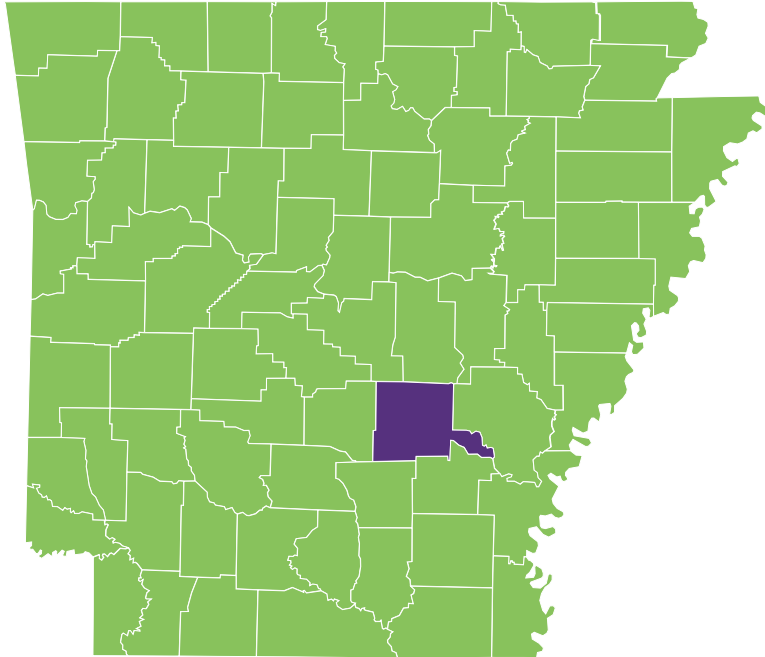
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JEFFERSON COUNTY



Jefferson County ranks #12 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.424**. It ranked #50 in 2018. The biggest improvement for Jefferson is in political transparency. It is weakest in fiscal transparency. To improve transparency, officials should make public records easily accessible by providing online tools and information on FOIA requests. Officials should also publish information on building permits and on zoning and contracts, including current and archived bids and bid winners.

OVERALL RANK: #12

#13

ADMINISTRATIVE



#30

FISCAL



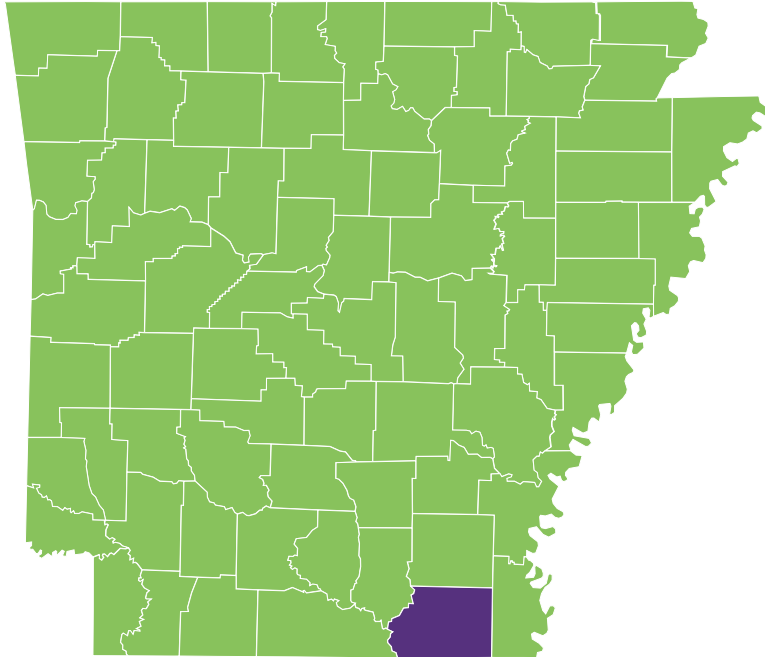
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ASHLEY COUNTY



Ashley County ranks #18 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.387**. It ranked #52 in 2018. The most improvement for Ashley is in administrative transparency. It is weakest in fiscal transparency. To improve transparency, officials should publish budgets and audited financial statements or provide a link to the financial statements posted on the Arkansas Legislative Audit website.

OVERALL RANK: #18

#11

ADMINISTRATIVE



#21

FISCAL



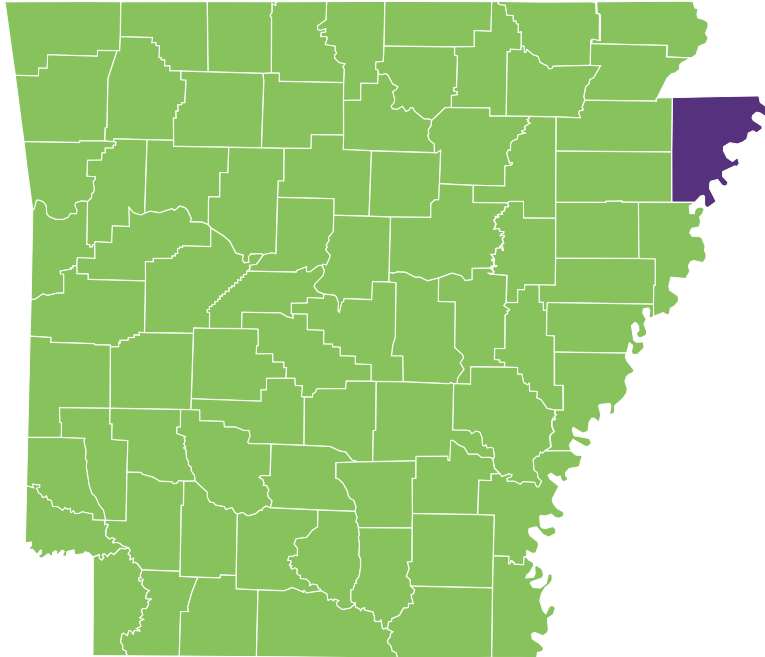
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MISSISSIPPI COUNTY



Mississippi County ranks #20 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.313**. It ranked #19 in 2018. The biggest improvement for Mississippi is in political transparency. It's weakest on administrative transparency. To improve transparency, officials should make public records easily accessible by providing online tools and information on FOIA requests. Officials should also publish information on building permits, and zoning and contracts including current and archived bids and bid winners.

OVERALL RANK: #20

#17

ADMINISTRATIVE



#16

FISCAL



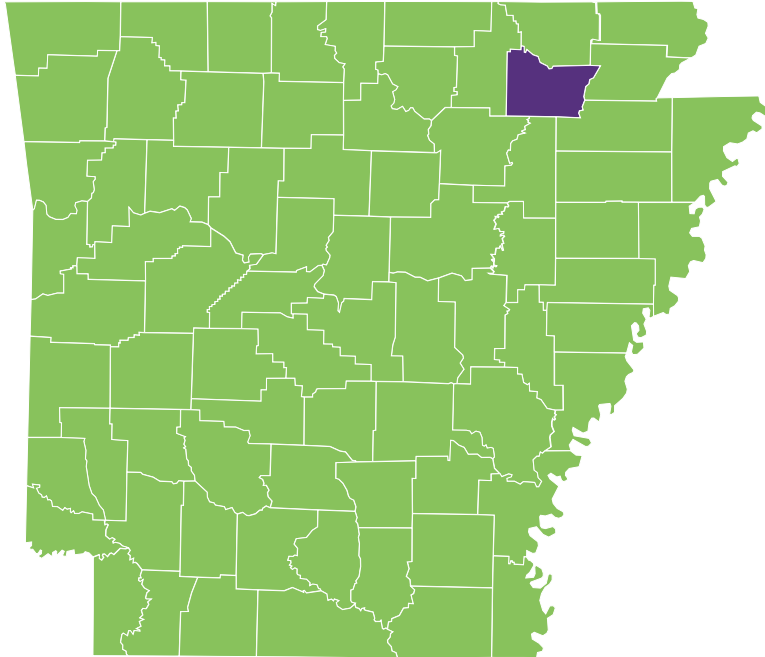
#14

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LAWRENCE COUNTY



Lawrence County ranks #25 in Arkansas web transparency with an overall score of **0.236**. It ranked #61 in 2018. The biggest improvement for Lawrence is in political transparency. It is weakest in both fiscal transparency and administrative transparency. To improve transparency, officials should publish budgets and audited financial statements or provide a link to the financial statements posted on the Arkansas Legislative Audit website. Officials should also make public records easily accessible by providing online tools and information on FOIA requests. Officials should additionally publish information on building permits and on zoning and contracts, including current and archived bids and bid winners.

OVERALL RANK: #25

#47

ADMINISTRATIVE



#43

FISCAL



#41

POLITICAL



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METHODOLOGY

In the inaugural edition of this index, we reviewed existing transparency analyses to determine what indicators they use to measure transparency. The best practices emphasize aspects of transparency such as the display of budgets and tax information.²⁸ Some studies also examined the display of information about elected officials, public meetings, government contracts, criminal records, and public records.²⁹ Darrell West includes foreign language access and search functions.³⁰ Sunshine Review adds lobbying, audits, and permits.³¹ We draw most frequently from Carolyn Harder and Meagan Jordan's work, since it incorporates all the information from earlier studies and also assesses Arkansas counties.³²

Our goal, however, is to emphasize the transparency of information that can assist in detecting and deterring corruption. We omit from our index measures that require a value judgment, such as readability and presentation. Although counties should ensure that information is readable and presentable, assessing these factors is beyond the scope of our project. We do encourage other researchers to look at these characteristics in their own studies.

Table 9 provides the components and subcomponents included in our assessment.

TABLE 9: Components of Transparency

COMPONENT	SUBCOMPONENT	DEFINITION
Fiscal Transparency		
Budget	Current	2018 plan that reveals county government's priorities
	Previous Year	2017 plan that reveals county government's priorities
	Two Years Prior	2016 plan that reveals county government's priorities
	Three Years Prior	2016 plan that reveals county government's priorities
Audit	Current	2018 plan that reveals county government's priorities
	Previous year	2017 plan that reveals county government's priorities
	Two years prior	2016 plan that reveals county government's priorities
	Three years prior	2016 plan that reveals county government's priorities
Fees & taxes	County fees	Payments for use of services
	Property tax rates	Tax assessed on real estate
	General sales tax rates	Tax levied on the sale of goods and services
	Special sales tax rates	Tax levied for a specific purpose
	County fees and taxes on the same web page	All the fees and taxes that the county levies, provided in one place
Administrative Transparency		
Public records	FOIA request contact person	Whom to contact for information under FOIA
	FOIA request contact information	Email, phone, and address
	FOIA request forms	Downloadable forms
	Court records	Link to CourtConnect
Building permits and zoning	Permit applications	Downloadable forms
	Permit holders	List of permit holders
	Planning board meeting announcements	Date and time of meeting
	Planning board agenda	What to discuss
Government contracts	Planning board minutes	Meeting resolutions
	Current RFP	Open RFPs
	Archived RFPs	Closed RFPs
	Current year bids and bid winners	List or searchable current bids and winners
Jobs	Archived bids and bid winners	Previous years' bids and bid winners
	(Hiring) Job titles	Position being advertised
	(Hiring) Position descriptions	Duties and required credentials

COMPONENT	SUBCOMPONENT	DEFINITION
Political Transparency		
Quorum court	Meeting notice	Time and place where the meetings occur
	Meeting agendas	List of issues to be discussed at meetings
	Meeting minutes	Deliberations and resolutions of the meeting
	Archived videos	Recorded videos from previous meetings
Elected officials' contact information and duties	Names	Names of the eight elected office holders
	Phone numbers	Office phone numbers for each of the eight elected office holders
	Email addresses	Official email addresses for each of the eight elected office holders
	Location addresses	Location addresses for each of the eight elected office holders
Financial disclosure, conflict of interest statements, and salaries	Job description	Duties of the elected officials
	Financial disclosure	A signed document showing whether an elected official is involved in multiple interests related to their work
	Salaries	Actual amounts received by elected officials

FISCAL TRANSPARENCY

BUDGET: Budgets inform citizens about government resources and how it intends to spend those resources. Budget scrutiny by the citizenry can deter elected officials from directing resources toward unproductive projects.

AUDIT: Financial statements provide information about the results of the use of resources. Making such information easily accessible to voters can encourage elected officials to be prudent in their use of resources, knowing that voters can check up on them.

FEES AND TAXES: Aside from exposing overcharging by some officials, citizens need to be aware of the burden they bear in providing resources to their government. That awareness could make them more willing to hold elected officials accountable when they misappropriate funds.

ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSPARENCY

PUBLIC RECORDS: Making public information easy to access can reduce corruption by deterring government officials from engaging in dubious activity. It can also increase the chances of detection.

BUILDING PERMITS AND ZONING: Being open about the permit application process and adjustments reduces the likelihood of favoritism and bribery.

GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS: An open bidding process reduces the likelihood of favoritism and bribery. Ability to view the winning bids as well as the losing bids encourages awarders to follow the bidding rules.

JOBS: An open hiring process discourages nepotism.

POLITICAL TRANSPARENCY

QUORUM COURTS: Citizens' involvement in quorum court deliberations provides scrutiny to ordinances that affect their daily lives. Agendas, minutes, and videos allow citizens to go back and check what was discussed if there is any discrepancy in what was passed and what was executed, which may sometimes arise from misuse of resources. This transparency should also deter the quorum court from abusing their allocation of funds to benefit certain individuals or groups.

ELECTED OFFICIALS' CONTACT INFORMATION AND DUTIES: Citizens need access to their elected officials. Knowing how to contact elected officials makes it easier for citizens to participate in the policy making process and encourages citizens to question elected officials whenever citizens detect anomalies in the way resources are used.

FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE, CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENTS, AND SALARIES: Disclosure of this information is meant to reduce the possibility of corrupting the motivation of decision makers.

After identifying the components and subcomponents that comprise each type of transparency, we assessed the availability of information on each county's website.³³ First, we used a Google search of the county name to find each county's website. We then searched for information related to each type of transparency separately, moving from fiscal to political to administrative transparency and timing our search for each type. On average, we required seven minutes of searching to locate information on fiscal transparency, five minutes to locate information on political transparency, and five minutes to locate information on administrative transparency.³⁴ It is important to note that the researchers we used are college students and may be better equipped to find information than the average Arkansan. Thus, it may take longer for someone else to find the information. We spent more time locating information on stand-alone county websites than we did locating information on Arkansas.gov. There is little information on Arkansas.gov, and it is uniformly presented, which decreases search time. However, most of the information published on the Arkansas.gov platform pertains to political transparency.

We coded a value of 1 if the information was available on the website and 0 if the information was not available. The only exception was the information on elected officials. We entered fractions if some elected officials did not have their information available. There are 8 elected positions required by law and we differentiated between counties where only some of the elected officials had their information online from those that had all 8 of them.³⁵

To ensure accuracy of the information we collected, we sent out our initial findings to each of the 75 counties to verify if the information we found on their website was correct.³⁶ The cutoff date for our assessment was September 30, 2019. After collecting and verifying all the information, we calculated scores for each type of transparency before calculating overall transparency scores. To illustrate how we calculated the index, see the example for Washington County in each of the sections below. We chose Washington County because it performs better than the rest of the counties in all the three categories of transparency.

FISCAL TRANSPARENCY

Table 10 provides the subcomponent values we used to calculate our scores for each component of Washington County's fiscal transparency. For example, the component "fees and taxes" is made up of five subcomponents: county fees, property tax rates, general sales tax rates, special sales tax rates, and county fees and taxes, all of which must appear on the same web page. The table also shows the calculated values for each of the three components of fiscal transparency. The fiscal transparency score is calculated by taking the average of the three components: budget, audit, and fees and taxes.

The scores for each component of fiscal transparency are calculated as follows:

- budget score = (current budget + average of previous years) / 2 = 1.000
- audit score = (current audit + average of previous years) / 2 = 1.000
- fees and taxes score = average of 5 subcomponents = 1.000

TABLE 10: Washington County Fiscal Transparency Score

COMPONENT	SCORE
Budget	1.00
Current budget	1.00
Average of previous years	1.00
Previous year's budget	1.00
Two years prior budget	1.00
Three years prior budget	1.00
Audit	1.00
Current audit	1.00
Average of previous years	1.00
Previous year's audit	1.00
Two years prior audit	1.00
Three years prior audit	1.00
Fees and taxes	1.00
County fees	1.00
Property tax rates	1.00
General sales tax rates	1.00
Special sales tax rates	1.00
County fees and taxes on same web page	1.00
Fiscal Transparency Score	1.00

ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSPARENCY

Table 11 provides values for each subcomponent of Washington County's administrative transparency. For example, the component "government contracts" is made up of four subcomponents: current RFPs, archived RFPs, current year bids and bid winners, and archived bids and bid winners. The table also shows the calculated values for each of the four components. The administrative transparency score is calculated by taking the average of the four components, namely public records, building permits and zoning, government contracts, and jobs.

The scores for each component of administrative transparency are calculated as follows:

- public records score = (court records + FOIA request contact person + FOIA contact information + FOIA request forms) / 4 = 1.000

- building permit and zoning score = (permit applications + permit holders + planning board meeting announcements + planning board agenda + planning board minutes) / 5 = 1.000
- government contracts score = (current RFP + archived RFPs + current year bids and bid winners + archived bids and bid winners) / 4 = 1.000
- jobs score = (job titles + position description) / 2 = 1.000

TABLE 11: Washington County Administrative Transparency Score

COMPONENT	SCORE
Public records	1.00
Court records	1.00
FOIA request forms	1.00
FOI request contact person	1.00
FOI contact information of person	1.00
Building permits and zoning	1.00
Permit applications	1.00
Permit holders	1.00
Planning board meeting announcements	1.00
Planning board Agenda	1.00
Planning board minutes	1.00
Government contracts	1.00
Current RFP	1.00
Archived RFPs	1.00
Current year bids and bid winners	1.00
Archived bids and bid winners	1.00
Jobs	1.00
(Hiring) Job Titles	1.00
(Hiring) Position descriptions	1.00
Administrative Transparency Score	1.00

POLITICAL TRANSPARENCY

Table 12 provides values for each subcomponent that goes into the calculation of each political transparency component for Washington County. For example, the financial disclosure and salaries component is made up of two subcomponents: elected officials' salaries and their financial disclosure and conflict of interest statements. The table also shows the calculated values for each of the three components of political transparency. The political transparency score is calculated by taking the average of the three components: quorum courts meetings, elected officials' contacts and duties, and elected officials' financial disclosures and salaries.

The scores for each component of political transparency are calculated as follows:

- quorum courts score = (meeting notices + meeting agendas + meeting minutes) / 3 = 1.000
- elected officials score = (names + phone numbers + email addresses + office addresses + job descriptions) / 4 = 1.000
- financial disclosure and salaries = (disclosure and conflict of interest statements + salaries) / 2 = 0.500

TABLE 12: Washington County Political Transparency Score

COMPONENT	SCORE
Quorum Courts Meetings	1.00
Meeting notice	1.00
Meeting agendas	1.00
Meeting minutes	1.00
Archived meeting videos*	1.00
Elected Officials Contacts & Duties	1.00
Names	1.00
Phone numbers	1.00
Email Addresses	1.00
Location addresses	1.00
Job descriptions	1.00
Financial Disclosure and Salaries	0.50
Disclosure and conflict of interest statements	0.00
Salaries	1.00
Political Transparency Score	0.83

* Archived meeting videos can replace the three other subcomponents.

OVERALL TRANSPARENCY SCORE

In addition to the three types of transparency, we also include a fourth item: Does the website have a working search bar that actually yields the term you are searching for? A working search bar makes it easier to find information on the website, but only 16 counties had a working search bar. The rest either did not have one or the search returned no results. To avoid detracting from the importance of the three types of transparency, we assign a value of 0.5 if a website has a working search bar and a value of zero if not.

To calculate the final score, we sum the four items and divide by the total possible points (3.5). Thus, the overall score for Washington County is calculated as follows:

$(\text{fiscal transparency score} + \text{political transparency score} + \text{administrative transparency score} + \text{search bar score}) / \text{total possible} = (0.930 + 0.880 + 0.830 + 0.500) / 3.5 = 0.900$

ENDNOTES

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2. Maria Cucciniello, Gregory A. Porumbescu, and Stephan Grimmelikhuijsen. "25 Years of Transparency Research: Evidence and Future Directions." *Public Administration Review* 77, no. 1 [November 2017]: 32–44
3. Arkansas Code § 14-14-802 (2017)
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5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Carolyn T. Harder and Meagan M. Jordan. "The Transparency of County Websites: A Content Analysis." *Public Administration Quarterly* vol. 37, no. 1 [Spring 2013]: 103–128.
8. Barbara M. Warner. "A Study of Arkansas County Government Websites." *Midsouth Political Science Review* vol. 16 [2015]: 73–106.
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"Mbps" stands for "megabits per second," a measurement of data transfer speeds. The first number (25 in this case) refers to download speed, while the second refers to upload speed. The federal government considers 25 Mbps/3 Mbps sufficient to provide "advanced telecommunications capability."
10. U.S. Federal Communications Commission. Wireline Competition Bureau. *Inquiry Concerning Deployment of Advanced Telecommunications Capability to All Americans in a Reasonable and Timely Fashion*. 2018 Broadband Deployment Report, GN Docket No. 17-199, 33 FCC Rcd 1660 (2). February 2, 2018. and
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11. Categories were inspired by Maria Cucciniello and Greta Nasi. "Transparency for Trust in Government: How Effective is Formal Transparency?" *International Journal of Public Administration* vol. 37, no. 13 [November 2014]: 911-921.
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13. Association of Arkansas Counties, "Classification of Counties 2010 Final Census Figures" <https://www.arcounties.org/site/assets/files/3388/censuspopulationsclassificationscounties1.pdf>. [Accessed 10 Oct. 2019]. The AAC is a government sector lobbying association that lobbies on behalf of counties in Arkansas. It was founded in 1968 and all counties in Arkansas are members since 1988.
14. Median income data collected from US Census Bureau. "2013–2017 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates." *Table DP03: Selected economic characteristics* (2017).
15. There is a lag in the release of audited financial statements, so "current" here means the most recent conducted by the Arkansas Legislative Audit.
16. Fees are the amounts counties charge residents for providing certain services such as marriage licensing, court filing fees, waste disposal, and others.

17. The Association of Arkansas Counties has already started publishing budgets online, and the Arkansas Legislative Audit already publishes audited financial statements.
18. Congress of Local, and Regional Authorities, Council of Europe. *Making Public Procurement Transparent at Local and Regional Levels*. Council of Europe. 33rd Session Report CG33 (19 October 2017)
19. There were 13 counties in the top 10 in 2018 because four counties tied for 10th place.
20. Association of Arkansas Counties. "Publication Library, 2017." Arcounties.org. https://www.arcounties.org/site/assets/files/4355/2017_salary_survery_2017.pdf. [Accessed 10 Oct. 2019]. The Association of Arkansas Counties (AAC) publishes a county government salary survey that shows the salaries of elected officials. If counties cannot directly publish the salaries on their websites, they should provide a link to direct citizens to the AAC salary survey so that citizens can easily access the data.
21. Christy S. Williams. Information Network of Arkansas, personal communication, May 30 2018.
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26. Pew Research Center Journalism & Media "Digital News Fact Sheet". 2019. Pew Research Center's Journalism Project. <https://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/digital-news/> [Accessed 10 Oct. 2019].
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30. Darrell M. West "Global E-Government 2007. Inside Politics, Brown University." [August 2007].
31. *Ibid.*, 4.
32. *Ibid.*, 7.
33. We only considered official county websites and the Arkansas.gov platform, unless there was a link taking us to other sites that contain certain information.
34. Our measure for the average time is the median because the data distribution is skewed. Possibly, these times are on the lower side because of the obvious lack of certain information on the websites. For example, most counties do not publish administrative information which makes the search times on those websites shorter than if they had the information.
35. Arkansas Code § 14-14-502 (2017).
36. The response rate in 2019 was higher than the response rate in 2018. In 2018, 18 counties responded while in 2019, 38 counties responded.

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The Arkansas Center for Research in Economics (ACRE) is an Arkansas focused research center housed in the College of Business at the University of Central Arkansas. ACRE scholars and policy analysts use research and analysis to find solutions for Arkansas's problems. Our research focuses on barriers to employment, taxes and spending, targeted incentives, and government transparency. We educate and provide resources for students, teachers, voters, activists, legislators, and business leaders.

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