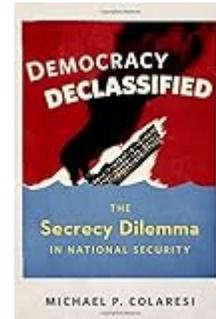**Michael P. Colaresi.** *Democracy Declassified: Oversight and the Secrecy Dilemma in Liberal States.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 400 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-938977-3.

Reviewed by D.M. (Deirdre) Curtin (University of Amsterdam)

A Red Queens Race

Democracy Declassified by Michael P. Colaresi is an important book about a very salient subject, written at a time when issues of secrecy and national security in democracies worldwide continue to leak out to the public often in a dramatic fashion. Writing this review from Berlin in the week that German newspapers revealed that the German intelligence agency (BND) has allowed the American National Security Agency (NSA) for many years to access the digital data of private companies as well as German citizens, âthe secrecy dilemmaâ in international relations is as urgent as it ever was. That dilemma relates to the fact that although secrecy in foreign policy matters is useful and sometimes necessary, executive discretion over the capacity to classify information creates the possibility of abuse that cannot be controlled by the citizens. Despite well-established oversight systems in many democracies worldwide, the independence of the intelligence agencies in particular and the secrecy that surrounds their information gathering and sharing techniques makes it very difficult to know how much they are being informed on an ongoing ba-

sis. The public often only finds out when information is leaked in one fashion or another.

From the main title, *Democracy Declassified*, one might think this is a book about the use of classified information within democracies to hide and eventually reveal secrets upon declassification. It is not. The topic of (de)classification does not figure in any great depth or technical detail. It is rather a book on quite a specific interpretation of *The Secrecy Dilemma in National Security* (subtitle) and this indeed neatly delimits its scope. The secrecy dilemma is what the author describes as the need to balance the necessity of secrets for national security in general against public accountability and consent in a democracy. That dilemma relates to the fact that although secrecy in foreign policy matters, executive discretion over the capacity to classify information creates the possibility of abuse that cannot be controlled by the citizens. Basically the age-old dilemma lies in the fact that the one undermines the other since the capacity to keep secrets can and sometimes is used for non-security ends and to cover up mistakes or incompetence. In Co-

laresiâs own words: âHow can citizens be assured by the executive that a given policy proposal will increase public security, relative to other alternatives, instead of being a product of incompetence or corruption? This is the secrecy dilemma in democraciesâ (p. 233).

The aim of the book is to highlight the tensions and interconnections between the realities and the needs of national security and to find potential solutions to the secrecy dilemma. Colaresi, a US political science scholar, succeeds in the former remarkably well. The latter, more forward looking part of lessons learned and potential solutions is, perhaps almost inevitably, less successful although the more general âimplicationsâ of his findings are interesting and thought provoking. I will return to this below.

In terms of scholarly audience and focus of theorizing the secrecy dilemma, the book is of primary interest to international relations scholars although the actual audience is likely to be considerably wider. A large part of the authorâs argument has to do with what he terms âtransparency cost deflationââthe fact that over time secrets lose their urgency and value in a way that can make (retrospective) oversight possible. In his view, national security oversight institutions either have or need to be supplied with tools to investigate secret national security issues and to reveal executive abuses. In general terms this is fine. The devil is in the detail and in the practice. From a different disciplinary perspective I would have liked to have more discussion and detail on both.

Leaks into the public domain can cut across this in terms of timing and in terms of highlighting just how ineffective existing institutional arrangements are. The fundamental problem is that an autonomous secretkeeper that functions in a highly secretive (international) environment can simply hold back on core information in a manner that it is impossible for an oversight institution to discover independently. Also the nature of secrets are changing and consist more and more of what is known as meta-data that is accessed via private companies and servers that go way beyond the traditional domain of national security. There is little about these issues in the book, which can be considered a missed opportunity in terms of taking thinking further in a way that is highly relevant in our deeply networked world.

The main focus of the book is, I think itâs fair to say, the growth of oversight institutions over the national security executive worldwide. Colaresi has gathered a unique data collection set (and provides considerable detail on the formal models, data, and statistical results in an appendix for those interested in the details of the methodology followed) of national security accountability institutions in democracies worldwide over the past thirty years and draws the existing heterogeneity to provide insights (and ambitiously âsolutionsâ). He uses this wide data set to elaborate throughout the book on three sets of observable implications that he bolsters with historical evidence and case studies.

Colaresi makes the central argument that security oversight institutions must themselves be monitored in terms of foreign policy successes. He focuses his argument around three basic questions: First, do retrospective oversight institutions lead to greater public support during international crises? Second, do oversight institutions have a mobilizing and constraining effect on military spending? Third, does investing in oversight institutions increase the probability of a democracy winning a dispute with a non-democracy? For all three questions he provides empirical (and historical) evidence on why they can all be answered affirmatively. For all these reasons, he concludes that more attention needs to be given to the role of national security institutions in analyses of democratic foreign policy. The secrecy dilemma is solved by democracies that keep secrets if they also have national security oversight institutions that can (retroactively) deter abuse and reassure the public.

I have no disagreement with this conclusion nor indeed with the kind of (widely based) comparative research undertaken to bolster this conclusion. My main sense, however, is that the really interesting questions and issues arise where the book stops rather than where it starts. This may be a bit unfair. Having now established the centrality of oversight institutions in this context we need to dig even deeper from the perspective of more democratic accountability. Should the mechanisms and practices of secrecy not be more precisely related to the ability of oversight institutions, to hold notoriously independent executive actors to account in practice? And should the institutions be held responsible only retroactively or also more in real time? The latter may be both necessary and possible under certain conditions as we know from certain national systems, for example, in Germany and also in the context of the European Union.

One of the original features of this book is âthe evidenceâ presented. Thus, in chapter 8, Colaresi presents âa new catalogue of national security institutions in democracies from 1970 to 2006â (p. 18). This is extensive and includes a wide range of countries across the globe, highlighting great variation in the level of oversight in differ-

ent regions. When the range is from Mongolia to Jamaica and Luxembourg as well as the United States and Germany, this is not so surprising. In addition, Colaresi highlights âa sample of laws across democracies that punish the revelation of information that the executive deems to be national security secretsâ (p. 66). That sample includes countries across the globe from Armenia and Georgia to South Korea and Peru (table 3.1, pp. 67-68). This conclusion is that oversight institutions of one kind or another have spread worldwide and that the secrecy paradox is salient in that context. But it does not lead to any in-depth thematic discussions of specific issues. For instance, how can the secrecy dilemma be resolved in a more meaningful way in the contemporary world, given the shifts in the nature of data, its sharing, and the way that it escapes territorial control? These issues are as relevant in the United States as in Europe and in other parts of the world, especially in view of the challenge of modern-day âdemocracy declassified.â Does the actual classification of data make the difference? I am not so sure but would have liked more in-depth discussion on the relationship between general notions of democracy and (de)classification.

This is an impressive book in its own right, especially in terms of the theoretical contribution it makes in the field of international relations scholarship and political science more generally. It definitely deepens the existing theoretical debate considerably with its focus on the relationship between the need for secrecy and the response of oversight. It is a rich book also in terms of the data collection over a wide range of democracies containing material stretching back thirty years and is peppered with an impressive number of incidents and case studies that bolster the findings in a readable and historically informed manner. Finally, the quantitative data gathered and analyzed is well presented and plausible in terms of the requisite balance between secrecy and democratic oversight.

When it comes to the solutions offered, the author frames these in the final chapter as six âimportant implications.â These deserve some particular attention, as this is where the rest of the research leads us to in terms of lessons learned and a possible way forward. For space reasons I will not be comprehensive and focus only on three. First, his observation is: secrecy leaks out. Well yes. Historically and in the contemporary world in a different way and on a different scale, secrecy will always leak out. This has always been the case right from the remark by Benjamin Franklin that three can keep a secret if two are dead. It is inherent to the nature of secrecy that secrets can (and often will) be revealed. How much more

likely is that when the secret keepers are so numerous and especially in a context where overclassification may well be widespread? Moreover, secrecy leaks out for a wide variety of reasons, including strategic ones and manipulative efforts. Many questions remain. For example, how does this relate to whistle-blowers and their legal protection? And what are more concretely the implications for oversight institutions and the manner in which they evolve into having a more demanding role in the interests of democracy and more stringent forms of executive accountability?

Another âimplicationâ is that âoversight needs timeâ (p. 238). The point is that the importance of secrets (or at least their urgency) declines over time. That is why declassification or public access may be given at a certain point. It is precisely in that context, I would suggest, that consideration should be given not only to retroactive oversight (by parliamentary committees, etc.) but also to the necessity of thinking of (model) rules governing formal declassification over time and oversight over declassification by, for example, the equivalent of an Information Commissioner or other agency. In Colaresiâs view, âthe tools must be present to dig up previously secret information. Reasonable expectations of retrospective accountability on the part of the executive, as well as investigations of potentially embarrassing secrets, are far from automaticâ (p. 238). Exactly. But the âinstitutional keys available to imperfectly unlock public accountabilityâ are only described in the most general of terms as âthe reinforcing tools of national-security relevant legislative oversight powers, freedom of information acts and speech and press freedomsâ (p. 239). The problem is that those of us who work in practice with such tools in specific legal and political systems, also in Europe, know how ill-fitting they can be in a number of concrete respects. Here, too, more detailed consideration would have been welcomed also in terms of taking the understanding and debate one step further.

Finally, âoversight must run a red queens raceâ (p. 242). Just as oversight evolves in various institutional forums and across political systems so too does the âexecutive strategies and techniques for potentially avoiding detectionâ (p. 243). The Red Queens Race continues as the executive dodges and adapts. The authorâs conclusion that âexisting oversight mechanisms such as freedom of information laws and declassification policies are inadequate and should be strengthenedâ does not take us far down the road to solutions tailored to the nature of executive resistance (p. 246). Of course that may well be the subject of another book and provides food for a further

agenda for research but still one would have liked a little more concrete lines for development precisely on the basis of the empirical and broad review conducted in this book. After all, to get somewhere elseâa genuinely balanced secrecy and oversight equationâas the queen said to Alice, âyou must run at least twice as fast as that!â

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo

Citation: D.M. (Deirdre) Curtin. Review of Colaresi, Michael P., *Democracy Declassified: Oversight and the Secrecy Dilemma in Liberal States*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2015.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42445