

Public Participation in Policy Formulation in the Era of Digitalization of Government

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Abstract

Digital transformation in government has opened up new opportunities to strengthen public participation in the policy formulation process. Through various digital platforms such as e-government and social media, interactions between the state and citizens have become more open, fast, and participatory. However, digitalization is not without challenges. Infrastructure gaps, digital literacy, and the tendency towards participatory symbolism (tokenism) have the potential to create new exclusions in the practice of digital democracy. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature study method to evaluate the extent to which digital governance is able to encourage substantive public participation. The results of the study show that the success of digital democracy is not enough just by providing technology, but requires institutional reform and ethical-political commitment to create a fair and inclusive deliberative space. Within the framework of deliberative democracy, citizen participation must be positioned as an integral element that influences the substance of policy, not just a procedural formality. These findings emphasize the need for policy strategies that are not only technocratic, but also sensitive to socio-political dimensions, including the redistribution of power, increasing digital-political literacy, and ensuring the involvement of marginalized communities. Thus, digitalization in government will only be meaningful if it is able to bridge the participation gap and encourage democratic practices that are more inclusive, deliberative, and have a real impact on the public.

Keywords: Digitalization of Government; Public Participation; Policy Formulation.

1. Introduction

Digital transformation in government has triggered a paradigm shift from a conventional closed and hierarchical bureaucratic model to a more open, participatory, and responsive model of government. According to Irfan & Anirwan (2023), digital governance is not only related to the adoption of information technology, but also concerns systemic changes in governance that enable two-way interaction between the government and citizens. Digital technologies, such as e-participation platforms, online forums, and social media, have changed the landscape of policy communication to be more horizontal and inclusive. In this context, digitalization becomes an important instrument to expand public access to information and open up space for the community to be involved in every stage of the policy cycle, from formulation to evaluation.

However, digital adoption in government is not without challenges. On the one hand, the presence of technology can accelerate decision-making and expand citizen participation. On the other hand, the unequal distribution of digital literacy and limited internet access in various regions, especially underdeveloped areas, creates gaps in participation. As stated by Hidayat (2024), digitalization in



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government must be accompanied by an inclusive approach so as not to create a digital divide that actually widens the gap in participation. Therefore, although digital transformation has great potential to revolutionize the public policy process, the government needs to design technology policies that are not only efficient, but also fair and socially democratic.

The demand for transparency and accountability in governance has escalated significantly along with increasing public awareness of their rights as citizens. Good governance is no longer sufficient to simply guarantee efficiency and effectiveness in policy implementation, but must also be able to account for every policy step to the public openly. In this context, public participation becomes not only a means of collecting aspirations, but also a mechanism for social control over policies that have the potential to be unrepresentative or deviate from the public interest. According to Dedeng et al (2023), citizen participation in the decision-making process can increase policy legitimacy and strengthen the government's capacity to respond to problems more adaptively and contextually. Therefore, transparency and accountability are not only the end products of a digital democracy system, but also an integral part of a deliberative process that actively involves non-state actors.

Unfortunately, in practice, many digital governments only implement openness symbolically, without providing space for substantive public participation. This phenomenon is known as tokenism, a form of pseudo-participation that places the public only as spectators in the policy-making process, not as deliberative partners. As criticized by Nelly (2024), information technology can be used to strengthen state control instead of expanding democracy, if not accompanied by a political commitment to the principles of transparency and accountability. Therefore, a regulatory framework and institutional design are needed that ensure that public participation is not only procedural, but also has a real impact on the substance of the policy. The government must open access to public data and information in real time, build interactive platforms that can accommodate public input inclusively, and ensure that the entire policy process can be traced and evaluated openly by the public.

The low level of public participation in policy formulation in the digital era is often influenced by structural inequalities that are still inherent in the digital democracy ecosystem. Although various online platforms have been provided by the government such as e-musrenbang, public aspiration portals, or social media of state institutions, this does not necessarily guarantee broad participation, let alone meaningful participation. One of the roots of the problem is the digital divide which is still significant, both in terms of infrastructure and user skills. In many areas, limited and uneven internet access limits citizen involvement in online policy discussions. Furthermore, high literacy rates are not always directly proportional to digital literacy and political literacy. This is in line with findings from the World Bank (2021), which noted that developing countries face major obstacles in activating digital participation due to the low capacity of users to utilize technology for political or policy purposes (Herwanto et al., 2024).

On the other hand, low public participation is also influenced by the government's minimal proactive efforts in conducting policy socialization and participatory education. The government often assumes that the public will voluntarily participate once a digital platform is opened, whereas public involvement requires intensive, educational, and sustainable communication prerequisites. As explained by Natika (2024), a healthy digital democracy is not only built by the availability of technology, but also by the quality of interaction between the state and its citizens, including in forming citizen trust and capacity. Without systematic efforts to build a participatory political culture through political education, digital literacy training, and facilitation of citizen forums, public participation will continue to be exclusive, dominated by certain groups that have socio-economic privileges and access to technology. Therefore, digitalization in policy formulation, if not accompanied by an inclusive strategy, actually risks widening the participatory gap and weakening democratic legitimacy in the public policy-making process.

The urgency of integrating technology with the principles of deliberative democracy cannot be seen as a mere technical aspect, but rather as a political and ethical agenda that determines the quality of digital governance in the future. Deliberative democracy demands the existence of a public space that allows for rational dialogue, exchange of arguments, and a deliberation process based on equality between citizens and the state. In the digital context, these spaces can only be created if technology is

designed not only to convey one-way information, but to facilitate inclusive two-way conversations. As emphasized by Wiranti & Frinaldi (2023), digital deliberation must avoid the dominance of the majority voice or the digital elite group, and instead pay special attention to the inclusion of vulnerable groups who are often marginalized in policy discourse. Thus, technology integration is not only about administrative efficiency, but also about the formation of a deliberative space that prioritizes the principles of social justice and the distribution of power democratically.

For this reason, the policy strategy taken by the government is not enough to only build a technically participatory digital platform, but must also guarantee the existence of institutional safeguards that ensure public participation is authentic, documented, and has an impact on the substance of the policy (Nazaruddin & Kamil, 2025). This includes transparent reporting mechanisms, operational feedback systems, and assurances that public voices are truly considered in decision-making. For example, the government can establish regulations that require state institutions to follow up on the results of open public consultations, as proposed in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) framework. Without this kind of approach, digitalization will only be the "skin of democracy" without the flesh of deliberation. Therefore, true digital democracy requires not only technological readiness, but also institutional commitment and political ethics to realize a government that is not only digital in form, but also democratic in substance.

2. Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature review method to examine the dynamics of public participation in policy formulation in the era of government digitalization. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore in depth complex socio-political phenomena, especially related to the relationship between the state, society, and technology in the context of digital democracy. The literature review method is used to trace and analyze various relevant scientific references, both from academic journals, books, policy reports, and official government documents.

The literature sources used in this study were selected based on certain criteria: (1) published in the last five years (2019–2025), (2) focused on the themes of public participation, digital governance, and deliberative democracy, and (3) came from credible and accredited sources, such as internationally reputable journals (Scopus, SINTA), global institution reports (World Bank, UNDP, Open Government Partnership), and academic articles from higher education institutions. The analysis process was carried out using content analysis techniques by examining key concepts, comparing theories, and identifying relevant findings to answer research questions.

The research steps include: (1) formulating research questions about how public participation in policy formulation develops amidst the digitalization of government, (2) searching and selecting relevant literature, (3) thematic classification based on issues such as the digital divide, participatory inclusion, and the effectiveness of digital platforms, and (4) synthesizing the study results to formulate critical and reflective conclusions. With this method, the research is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and potential of technology integration in strengthening democratic and substantive public participation.

3. Results

Digital Transformation in Government and Its Implications for Public Participation

Digital transformation in government is a manifestation of the paradigm shift in public administration from a conventional bureaucratic model to a digital-based government (digital governance). This process marks a shift from a closed, hierarchical, and slow system to a more open, decentralized, and responsive system to the aspirations of the community. Digitalization is not merely about the automation of bureaucratic processes, but is also an arena for reconfiguring the power relations between the state and citizens. Along with the development of information and communication

technology, especially the internet and mobile devices, the government has the opportunity to design a more deliberative, efficient, and inclusive participation system.

The concept of e-government as explained by Heeks (2006) in *Implementing and Managing eGovernment* is an important foundation in this discussion. He explains that e-government includes the transformation of internal government processes, interactions between government institutions, and interactions between the government and the community. In this context, applications such as e-Musrenbang (Electronic Development Planning Deliberation) and [Lapor.go.id](#) are real examples of how the government adopts a participatory approach through digital media. This is supported by research by Afrilia et al (2024), which emphasizes that bureaucratic digitization can accelerate policy response times and increase public accountability, as long as it is accompanied by a good monitoring system and adequate human resource capacity.

This transformation is also closely related to the concept of open government, namely transparent, participatory, and collaborative government. The Open Government Partnership (OGP) encourages its member countries to open public data and provide more space for citizens in decision-making. In Indonesia, various initiatives such as the One Data Indonesia Portal and official ministry social media have been utilized to convey policy information in real time and invite public participation. A study conducted by Mayyora et al (2025) shows that digital engagement through government social media contributes to building citizen trust and strengthening policy legitimacy, especially on strategic issues such as pandemic response or social assistance policies.

However, as highlighted by Suryosumunar & Noorzeha (2023), digital developments also bring new threats in the form of data-based power centralization. In the context of digital governance, the state is not only a regulator, but also a collector and manager of data on a large scale. This condition creates the risk of using citizen data for political or economic interests without adequate accountability mechanisms. This is where the critique of algocratic governance, namely governance driven by algorithmic logic, becomes relevant. As explained by Millard (2023), algorithmic power can shift the deliberative process to technocratic, eliminate human interaction in decision-making, and disguise structural bias behind seemingly neutral systems.

On the other hand, public participation imagined in the digital era is often pseudo-participation if it is not accompanied by a real redistribution of power. Hakim & Hayat (2024) divide the form of participation into eight levels, from manipulation to full citizen control. Many government digital initiatives are only at a symbolic level, such as consultation or information, but do not have a real impact on policy direction. This is exacerbated by the low digital-political literacy of the community, which makes them more vulnerable to opinion manipulation through social media and echo chambers.

Thus, digital transformation in government brings a paradox between opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, it can expand democratization, open up space for dialogue, and improve the quality of public policy. But on the other hand, if not regulated ethically and inclusively, digitalization actually strengthens the elitist power hidden behind the algorithm screen. For this, a policy design is needed that is not only oriented towards technological efficiency, but also guarantees fair access, personal data protection, and substantial deliberation mechanisms. The government needs to build participatory digital governance, not only procedurally, but also substantively and sustainably.

Structural Challenges in Realizing Inclusive Public Participation in the Digital Era

Several academic studies have highlighted that inequality in digital participation is not only caused by physical access to technology, but also by unequal social and cultural capital in society. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1986), social and cultural capital greatly determine who can access, understand, and utilize digital spaces optimally. In this context, those with higher levels of education, strong communication skills, and confidence in public forums both online and offline tend to be more



active participants in policy discourse. Conversely, marginalized groups not only experience a lack of access, but also lack the symbolic legitimacy to have an equal voice in digital spaces.

This is supported by research by Scupola & Mergel (2022) which shows that although the internet opens up new opportunities for participation, it still creates new layers of class-based exclusion. Norris calls this phenomenon a form of "second-level digital divide" not only about access to technology, but also about the ability and opportunity to use the technology productively and politically. Thus, digital participation does not automatically create a more substantive democracy, but can actually deepen democratic inequality if not accompanied by comprehensive structural intervention.

Furthermore, the concept of deliberative democracy developed by Habermas (1996) in *Between Facts and Norms* emphasizes the importance of a rational and inclusive public space as the foundation of democratic participation. In this framework, digitalization should be a means to expand dialogue and consensus based on rational and equal arguments. However, in reality, as criticized by Calloni (2025), digital space often turns into a space of exclusive narrative contestation, controlled by algorithms and the logic of platform capitalism, which encourages clicks and polarization rather than inclusive deliberation.

In Indonesia, a study by Kusuma et al (2024) in the *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* shows that the use of digital media by the government to collect public aspirations is still minimally interpreted as a forum for two-way dialogue. The e-participation programs developed, such as SP4N Lapori or e-Musrenbang, are often utilized only by segments of citizens who have adequate digital competence, while grassroots communities have difficulty participating due to technical language barriers, time constraints, and distrust of the effectiveness of government responses. This proves that without a planned social inclusion strategy, digital platforms actually replicate structural inequalities that have long existed in the conventional political system.

Therefore, to encourage truly inclusive public participation in the digital era, the state must not only build technological infrastructure, but also redistribute literacy, symbolic, and institutional capital. Political-digital literacy programs must be designed in a participatory manner with a community-based approach, and digital participation mechanisms must be periodically evaluated to ensure equal involvement between community groups. Without serious efforts to address these structural challenges, digitalization of participation will only be a cosmetic project of democracy that is far from the essence of the people.

Integrating Technology and Deliberative Democracy: Strategies Towards Substantive Public Participation

The integration of technology and deliberative democracy is a promising strategic approach to substantially deepen public participation in the digital era. This approach is based on the principles of deliberative democracy as put forward by Jürgen Habermas, who emphasizes the importance of communicative action as the foundation for collective decision-making. In this context, technology is not only a tool to mobilize the masses quickly, but must be a medium that facilitates rational, inclusive, and equal dialogue among citizens. Jannah's study (2025) shows that deliberative digital platforms are able to increase the capacity for political participation, as long as they are designed with the principles of accessibility, neutral facilitation, and institutional connectivity. In other words, the success of digital participation lies not only in the existence of the technology, but in how the technology is integrated deliberatively into the structure of government.

However, the main challenge of this integration is the non-adaptive institutional design. Without clear feedback and accountability mechanisms, public participation tends to become symbolic and results in consultation fatigue, as warned by Pribadi et al. (2024). The OECD (2020) report reinforces this by stating that digital deliberation that does not have a formal institutional channel to influence policy will lose its legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Therefore, institutional safeguards are needed

to ensure that public input is not only heard but also accommodated in the legislative or policy-making process. This has been implemented effectively in several countries such as Taiwan through the vTaiwan model, which according to Tang (2020), has succeeded in bridging various community interests using technologies such as Pol.is, which neutrally maps citizen opinions and enables data-based consensus.

On the other hand, Anggita & Nurhaeni's study (2021) distinguishes between three levels of digital participation: e-enabling, e-engaging, and e-empowering. Unfortunately, many digital initiatives in developing countries, including Indonesia, stop at the first stage of simply opening access without empowering citizens to influence policy. In the Southeast Asian context, data openness often only strengthens technocratic elite groups who already have digital access and literacy, while the general public remains marginalized in policy discourse (Hardinandar et al., 2023). This is why the strategy of strengthening public participation cannot be separated from efforts to educate digital citizenship and improve the institutional structure of the state. The Indonesian government must not only develop participatory digital platforms, but also ensure data transparency, develop systemic feedback mechanisms, and establish independent monitoring units to ensure the quality and representation of public input.

Thus, the integration of technology and deliberative democracy is not merely a technological project, but rather a profound cultural and institutional reform. The success of this effort is largely determined by the willingness of the state to design a digital system that not only opens access, but also provides quality and impactful deliberative space. Without institutional reform, digital participation will remain shallow and easily reduced to a new form of exclusion, simply moving from physical exclusion to a more subtle digital exclusion that still limits the people's voice in public decision-making.

4. Conclusion

Digital transformation in government marks a significant shift from conventional bureaucracy to a more responsive and participatory technology-based public administration system. Digitalization brings great opportunities to expand the space for dialogue between the state and citizens through e-government, e-participation, and open government that encourage transparency and collaboration. Various digital applications have increased the effectiveness of policies and the speed of public services, but still face structural obstacles in the form of inequality in literacy and access. Digital participation is often symbolic if not accompanied by a real redistribution of power and deliberative mechanisms. Another risk is the concentration of data-based power that can be exploited politically without public accountability. In this context, criticism of algorithmic logic and pseudo-participation becomes very relevant. Efforts to integrate technology and deliberative democracy require inclusive institutional design that is able to accommodate public input into real policies. Strategies such as the vTaiwan deliberation model demonstrate the importance of neutral and data-based opinion mapping. However, many developing countries are still stuck in the early stages of digital participation without empowering citizens substantively. Therefore, this transformation demands more than just technological development—it requires institutional reform, redistribution of social capital, and equitable digital-political literacy. Without all of these, digitalization will only be a cosmetic democracy that reinforces exclusion in a new form. The success of digital governance lies in its ability to guarantee equal and impactful access, justice, and participation in the public policy process

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