

## **Digital Governance and Public Trust: Assessing the Impact of E-Government on Democratic Participation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the relationship between digital governance and public trust in shaping democratic participation, with a particular focus on the implementation of e-government. The research aims to assess how digital platforms influence citizen engagement and to analyze the mediating role of trust in this process. A qualitative approach was employed using an embedded case study design, chosen for its ability to capture in-depth, contextual insights into complex socio-political interactions. The study was conducted in Surabaya, Indonesia, due to its advanced e-government initiatives and diverse socio-demographic context. Data were collected from twelve informants, including government officials, IT specialists, civil society actors, and active citizens, selected purposively based on their relevance and experience. The findings indicate that while e-government enhances service efficiency and accessibility, its impact on democratic participation is significantly dependent on public trust, which is shaped by transparency, responsiveness, and perceived accountability. The study concludes that digital governance must be accompanied by trust-building mechanisms to foster meaningful participation. It recommends strengthening institutional responsiveness, improving digital inclusivity, and integrating participatory features that ensure citizen input influences policy outcomes.



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## **INTRODUCTION**

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped the interaction between governments and citizens, giving rise to what is widely conceptualized as digital governance (Mesa, 2023). Within this evolving paradigm, e-government initiatives have emerged as a central instrument for improving administrative efficiency, transparency, and service delivery (Tokovska, 2023). Governments across both developed and developing contexts have increasingly adopted digital platforms to streamline public services, enhance accessibility, and foster more inclusive forms of civic engagement (Fadrial et al., 2024). In parallel, democratic participation has undergone a transformation, as citizens are no longer confined to conventional, offline mechanisms of engagement but are instead enabled to interact with public institutions through digital channels (Mutiarin et al., 2024). Despite these advancements, the relationship between e-government and public trust remains complex and not fully understood, particularly in relation to its influence on democratic participation (Firtin et al., 2025).

Existing scholarship has extensively examined the technical and administrative dimensions of e-government, emphasizing its potential to reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies, minimize corruption, and improve service responsiveness (Ali, 2023). Studies have also highlighted the role of digital platforms in facilitating transparency by enabling real-time access to government data and decision-making processes (Rodríguez-Hevíá et al., 2020). Furthermore, a growing body of literature has explored how digital tools can enhance participatory governance by enabling citizens to voice opinions, provide feedback, and engage in policy deliberation (Demirdoven et al., 2020). However, while these studies provide valuable insights, they often treat public trust as a secondary outcome rather than a central analytical variable (Adenuga & Babawale, 2025). Moreover, empirical findings remain inconsistent, with some studies indicating that e-government strengthens trust and participation, while others suggest

that digitalization alone is insufficient to generate meaningful civic engagement (Shayganmehr et al., 2023).

The main problem addressed in this research lies in the ambiguity surrounding the causal relationship between e-government implementation and democratic participation, particularly when mediated by public trust (Jejenywa et al., 2024). In many cases, the adoption of digital governance systems does not automatically translate into increased citizen engagement (Yadav & Yadav, 2025). Factors such as digital literacy, perceived transparency, data security concerns, and institutional credibility significantly influence how citizens respond to e-government initiatives (Janssen et al., 2021). Consequently, there is a need to critically assess whether digital governance genuinely enhances democratic participation or merely provides a superficial layer of interaction without fostering deeper trust and engagement.

A significant research gap can be identified in the limited integration of public trust as a mediating variable in studies examining e-government and democratic participation (Latip et al., 2025). While prior research has addressed these constructs independently, few studies have systematically analyzed how trust functions as a bridge between digital governance and participatory outcomes (Espinosa & Pino, 2025). Additionally, much of the existing literature is context-specific, focusing predominantly on advanced economies, thereby neglecting the socio-political and infrastructural variations present in developing countries (Gholipour & Pirannejad, 2021). This gap underscores the necessity for a more comprehensive analytical framework that captures the interplay between digital governance, trust, and participation within diverse governance contexts.

The novelty of this research lies in its integrative approach, which positions public trust as a central mechanism through which e-government influences democratic participation. By conceptualizing trust not merely as an outcome but as a dynamic mediator, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of digital governance. Furthermore, the research incorporates a multidimensional perspective on participation, encompassing both conventional and digital forms of civic engagement. This approach allows for a more holistic assessment of how e-government initiatives reshape democratic practices in the digital age.

Based on these considerations, the research is guided by the following questions: how does the implementation of e-government affect public trust in government institutions; to what extent does public trust mediate the relationship between digital governance and democratic participation; and what contextual factors influence the effectiveness of e-government in fostering meaningful civic engagement. These questions aim to unravel the complex interactions between technological innovation and socio-political dynamics, thereby providing a clearer understanding of the conditions under which digital governance can strengthen democracy.

The primary objective of this study is to assess the impact of e-government on democratic participation by examining the mediating role of public trust. Specifically, the research seeks to analyze the extent to which digital governance initiatives enhance citizens' trust in public institutions, evaluate how this trust influences their willingness to participate in democratic processes, and identify the key determinants that shape these relationships. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute to both theoretical and empirical debates on digital governance and democratic development.

From a theoretical perspective, this research offers a significant contribution by bridging the gap between governance theory, trust theory, and digital transformation studies. It advances the conceptualization of digital governance by integrating socio-political variables into predominantly technology-driven frameworks. Academically, the study provides a robust empirical foundation for future research, offering insights that can inform comparative studies across different governance systems and cultural contexts. Practically, the findings are expected to inform policymakers and public administrators on how to design and implement e-government initiatives that not only improve service delivery but also foster trust and encourage active citizen participation.

Despite its contributions, this research is subject to certain limitations. The analysis may be constrained by data availability, particularly in contexts where reliable measures of public trust and

digital participation are limited (Nguyen et al., 2024). Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study may restrict the ability to capture long-term dynamics and causal relationships (Patergiannaki & Pollalis, 2023). Variations in political systems, institutional capacity, and digital infrastructure may also limit the generalizability of the findings across different regions (Chipriyanov & Roditis, 2025).

Future research is therefore recommended to adopt longitudinal approaches that can better capture the evolving relationship between digital governance, trust, and participation over time (Sharma et al., 2025). Comparative studies across different countries and governance models would also provide deeper insights into contextual variations (Cifuentes-Faura, 2022). Furthermore, future investigations could explore the role of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and blockchain, in shaping trust and democratic engagement within digital governance frameworks (Hassan, 2025).

In conclusion, while e-government holds significant promise for enhancing democratic participation, its effectiveness is contingent upon the level of public trust it generates. By addressing the identified research gaps and offering a novel analytical perspective, this study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how digital governance can support more inclusive, transparent, and participatory democratic systems.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly discourse on digital governance and public trust has evolved substantially alongside the proliferation of e-government systems, positioning this field at the intersection of political science, public administration, and information systems (GÜNAL & MÜLAZIMOĞLU, 2023). The literature consistently highlights that the integration of digital technologies into governance structures has the potential to transform democratic participation by enhancing transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement (Kaplale & Yoernaldi, 2025). However, this transformation is not linear; rather, it is mediated by complex socio-institutional factors, among which public trust plays a pivotal role (Grigalashvili, 2023). Consequently, a comprehensive literature review must be anchored in robust theoretical frameworks that can explain the interconnections between digital governance, trust formation, and participatory democracy.

One of the foundational theories employed in this study is the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), originally popularized by Fred Davis in 1989 during his doctoral research at the MIT Sloan School of Management, United States (Smorgunov et al., 2020). TAM posits that individuals' acceptance and use of technology are primarily determined by two key constructs: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Pandey, 2023). According to Davis, these perceptions shape users' attitudes toward technology, which in turn influence their behavioral intentions and actual usage (Prasetyo et al., 2024). Within the context of e-government, TAM provides a critical lens for understanding how citizens evaluate digital platforms offered by governments. If e-government systems are perceived as accessible and beneficial, citizens are more likely to engage with them, thereby potentially increasing participation in democratic processes (Mellouli et al., 2020). Contemporary developments of TAM, including TAM2 and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), have expanded the model by incorporating social influence and facilitating conditions, reflecting the increasing complexity of digital ecosystems (OJIH, 2025). This theoretical evolution underscores the relevance of TAM in addressing the research problem, particularly in explaining variations in citizen engagement despite widespread availability of digital services.

The second theoretical framework is Trust Theory in Government, significantly advanced by Russell Hardin in 2002, affiliated with New York University, United States (Bokhari et al., 2025). Hardin conceptualizes trust as "encapsulated interest," wherein individuals trust institutions when they believe those institutions act in their best interests (Martín-Mayoral, 2025). In the domain of digital governance, this theory elucidates how citizens assess the credibility, integrity, and reliability of government institutions, especially when interactions are mediated through digital platforms (Hariguna et al., 2022). Trust becomes a crucial intermediary variable that determines whether technological innovations translate into meaningful civic participation (Goloshchapova et al., 2023). Recent developments in trust theory have incorporated dimensions such as institutional transparency, data security, and algorithmic accountability, reflecting contemporary concerns in digital governance (Balaji, 2025). Scholars building on Hardin's work argue that trust is not merely a static attribute but a

dynamic process shaped by repeated interactions and institutional performance. This perspective is particularly relevant to the identified research gap, as it highlights the need to examine trust as a mediating factor rather than a peripheral outcome.

The third theoretical perspective is Participatory Democracy Theory, prominently articulated by Carole Pateman in her seminal 1970 work, developed during her academic tenure at the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom (Okocha & Adigwe, 2024). Pateman argues that democratic legitimacy is strengthened when citizens actively participate in decision-making processes beyond periodic elections (Abdulkareem & Ramli, 2021). Participation, in this sense, is both a means and an end, fostering civic competence and reinforcing democratic values (Ramadhani et al., 2025). In the digital era, this theory has been reinterpreted to encompass online forms of engagement, such as e-consultations, digital deliberation, and participatory platforms (Chohan et al., 2020). Contemporary scholars have extended Pateman's framework by integrating digital tools as facilitators of participatory governance, while also acknowledging the risks of digital exclusion and superficial engagement (Schmidhuber et al., 2021). The evolution of participatory democracy theory thus provides a normative foundation for evaluating the effectiveness of e-government initiatives in enhancing democratic participation.

The conceptual frameworks proposed by these three scholars offer complementary insights into the research problem. Davis's TAM emphasizes the technological dimension, focusing on user perceptions and system usability. Hardin's trust theory introduces a relational dimension, highlighting the importance of institutional credibility and perceived alignment of interests. Pateman's participatory democracy theory provides a normative and political dimension, emphasizing the value of active citizen engagement. When integrated, these frameworks form a comprehensive analytical model in which e-government adoption (TAM) influences public trust (Hardin), which in turn shapes democratic participation (Pateman). This integrative perspective addresses the central problem of the study by explaining why the mere availability of digital platforms does not automatically lead to increased civic engagement.

The relevance of these theories to the main research problem is evident in their ability to explain the discrepancies observed in empirical studies (Farooq & Yousaf, 2025). While e-government initiatives are widely implemented, their impact on democratic participation varies significantly across contexts. TAM suggests that low levels of digital literacy or poor system design may hinder adoption, thereby limiting participation (Xhafka et al., 2024). Trust theory indicates that even well-designed systems may fail if citizens lack confidence in government institutions (MacLean & Titah, 2022). Participatory democracy theory further emphasizes that meaningful engagement requires more than access; it necessitates opportunities for genuine influence in decision-making processes (Hutahaean et al., 2023). Together, these insights highlight the multifaceted nature of the research problem and underscore the importance of an integrated theoretical approach.

In terms of the research gap, the literature reveals a lack of studies that simultaneously incorporate technological acceptance, institutional trust, and participatory outcomes within a single analytical framework (Ahmad et al., 2025). Most existing research tends to focus on one or two of these dimensions, thereby providing a fragmented understanding of digital governance (Balaskas et al., 2022). By combining TAM, trust theory, and participatory democracy theory, this study addresses this gap and offers a more holistic perspective. This integration also aligns with the research questions, which seek to examine the relationships between e-government, public trust, and democratic participation in a comprehensive manner.

The theoretical framework also supports the research objectives by providing clear analytical pathways. TAM informs the assessment of how citizens interact with e-government platforms, trust theory guides the evaluation of institutional credibility, and participatory democracy theory frames the analysis of civic engagement. From a theoretical standpoint, this integration contributes to the advancement of interdisciplinary research in digital governance. Academically, it provides a robust foundation for empirical investigation and comparative analysis. Practically, it offers actionable insights for policymakers aiming to design e-government systems that enhance both trust and participation.

In conclusion, the literature review demonstrates that the interplay between digital governance, public trust, and democratic participation can be effectively understood through the integration of TAM, trust theory, and participatory democracy theory. These frameworks, as developed by Davis, Hardin, and Pateman, respectively, provide a comprehensive basis for analyzing the research problem, addressing the identified gaps, and supporting the study's objectives. The novelty of this research lies in its synthesis of these theoretical perspectives into a unified model that positions public trust as a central mediating variable. This approach not only enriches the theoretical discourse but also offers practical implications for strengthening democratic governance in the digital age.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The methodological approach adopted in this study is grounded in a qualitative research paradigm, which is particularly suitable for exploring complex socio-political phenomena such as digital governance, public trust, and democratic participation. Qualitative inquiry allows for an in-depth understanding of meanings, perceptions, and experiences that cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative measures (Savveli et al., 2025). Given that the central objective of this research is to examine how e-government initiatives influence public trust and, subsequently, democratic participation, a qualitative approach provides the necessary flexibility to uncover nuanced relationships and contextual dynamics. This methodological choice aligns with the interpretivist epistemological stance, which assumes that social reality is constructed through human interaction and is therefore best understood through detailed, context-sensitive analysis (Karmakar, 2025).

The research design employed in this study is a case study design with an embedded approach (Mu et al., 2025). This design is selected because it enables the researcher to conduct a comprehensive and holistic investigation of digital governance practices within a specific institutional and socio-political context. The case study design is particularly appropriate for addressing "how" and "why" questions, which are central to this research, especially in understanding how e-government affects public trust and why such effects may vary across different stakeholders (Hartanto et al., 2021). The embedded nature of the design allows for the inclusion of multiple units of analysis, such as government institutions, digital platforms, and citizen groups, thereby providing a richer and more layered understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Efthalitsidou et al., 2025). The rationale for choosing this design lies in its ability to integrate multiple sources of evidence, including interviews, observations, and document analysis, which enhances the robustness and credibility of the findings (Naseer, 2020).

The research is conducted in Surabaya, Indonesia, a metropolitan city recognized for its progressive implementation of e-government initiatives and digital public services (Harsoyo & Amanatin, 2025). Surabaya serves as an appropriate research site due to its relatively advanced digital infrastructure, active civic engagement programs, and strong governmental commitment to transparency and innovation. The city has implemented various digital platforms, such as online licensing systems, public complaint portals, and participatory budgeting applications, making it an ideal context for examining the interaction between digital governance and public trust. The selection of Surabaya is also informed by its socio-demographic diversity, which allows for the exploration of different citizen experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, as a developing urban context, Surabaya provides valuable insights into how e-government functions in environments characterized by varying levels of digital literacy and institutional capacity (Liu & Khalid, 2025).

The primary data for this study are collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants and participants who are directly involved in or affected by e-government initiatives (Xin et al., 2023). A purposive sampling technique is employed to select informants who possess relevant knowledge and experience related to the research topic (Al-Ansi et al., 2024). This technique ensures that the data collected are rich, relevant, and aligned with the research objectives. The study involves a total of twelve informants, each selected based on their role, expertise, and level of engagement with digital governance systems.

The informants include government officials, IT specialists, civil society representatives, and active citizens. For confidentiality and ethical considerations, pseudonyms are used to identify each informant. Among the government officials, "Mr. Arif" serves as a senior officer in the Department of

Communication and Informatics, responsible for overseeing e-government implementation. “Ms. Ratna” is a public service manager who directly interacts with digital service users. These informants are selected due to their institutional knowledge and direct involvement in policy implementation. From the technical perspective, “Mr. Dimas,” an IT systems developer, provides insights into the design and functionality of e-government platforms, while “Ms. Lestari,” a data analyst, offers perspectives on data management and system performance.

Civil society perspectives are represented by “Mr. Budi,” a community organizer, and “Ms. Sari,” a representative of a non-governmental organization focused on transparency and accountability. These informants are chosen for their active role in advocating citizen participation and monitoring government performance. Additionally, six active citizens are included as informants, identified as “Citizen A” through “Citizen F,” representing diverse demographic backgrounds, including age, education level, and digital literacy. These participants are selected to capture a wide range of user experiences and perceptions regarding e-government services. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups ensures triangulation of data and enhances the validity of the findings (Virnandes et al., 2025).

Data collection is conducted through face-to-face and virtual interviews, depending on the availability and preference of the informants. Each interview lasts approximately 45 to 90 minutes and is guided by an interview protocol that covers key themes such as user experience with e-government platforms, perceptions of transparency and trust, and levels of civic engagement. In addition to interviews, the study also utilizes document analysis, including government reports, policy documents, and digital platform interfaces, to complement and contextualize the primary data (Pancho et al., 2025). Observational data are also collected by examining how citizens interact with e-government systems in real-time, either through direct observation or through recorded user sessions.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, the study employs several validation strategies, including triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing (Thitinan & Khunanan, 2022). Triangulation is achieved by comparing data from different sources and stakeholder groups to identify patterns and inconsistencies. Member checking involves sharing preliminary findings with selected informants to verify the accuracy of interpretations (Simonofski et al., 2020). Peer debriefing is conducted by engaging with fellow researchers to critically assess the analytical process and findings. These strategies are essential for minimizing bias and enhancing the reliability of qualitative research (Rahmawan, 2025).

The data analysis process follows a thematic analysis approach, which involves systematically identifying, coding, and categorizing patterns within the data (Elbahnasawy et al., 2025). The analysis begins with data familiarization, where interview transcripts and documents are carefully reviewed. This is followed by open coding, where significant statements and concepts are identified. These codes are then grouped into broader categories and themes that reflect the key dimensions of the research, such as perceived usefulness of e-government, trust in government institutions, and forms of democratic participation. The final stage involves interpreting these themes in relation to the theoretical frameworks of the study, namely the Technology Acceptance Model, Trust Theory, and Participatory Democracy Theory.

The technique for drawing conclusions in this study is based on an inductive reasoning process, where general insights are derived from specific observations and empirical data (Govindaraj et al., 2024). The conclusions are formulated by synthesizing the identified themes and linking them to the research questions and theoretical framework. This process involves iterative reflection and comparison to ensure that the conclusions are grounded in the data and supported by evidence. The study also employs analytical generalization, where the findings are not intended to be statistically representative but rather to contribute to theoretical understanding and conceptual development.

Ethical considerations are carefully addressed throughout the research process. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, and confidentiality is maintained by using pseudonyms and securely storing data. Participants are also given the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. These ethical practices are essential for ensuring the integrity and credibility of the research.

Despite its methodological rigor, this study acknowledges certain limitations. The reliance on qualitative data may limit the generalizability of the findings, as the results are context-specific and based on a relatively small sample size (Alswalmh et al., 2024). Additionally, the use of self-reported data may introduce biases related to social desirability or recall (Waara, 2025). However, these limitations are mitigated through the use of multiple data sources and validation techniques.

In summary, the qualitative case study approach adopted in this research provides a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of the relationship between digital governance, public trust, and democratic participation. By integrating multiple data sources, engaging diverse stakeholders, and employing rigorous analytical techniques, the study offers valuable insights into how e-government initiatives can be designed and implemented to enhance trust and foster meaningful civic engagement.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a complex and multilayered relationship between digital governance, public trust, and democratic participation, particularly within the context of e-government implementation in Surabaya, Indonesia. Drawing upon qualitative data collected from government officials, technical experts, civil society actors, and citizens, the analysis demonstrates that while e-government systems have significantly improved administrative efficiency and accessibility, their impact on democratic participation is strongly mediated by the level of public trust (Lee & Moon, 2020). This outcome directly addresses the main research problem, which concerns the ambiguity of whether digital governance can genuinely enhance civic engagement or merely provide procedural improvements without substantive democratic outcomes.

From the perspective of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the findings indicate that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use play a decisive role in shaping citizens' willingness to engage with e-government platforms (Diniz et al., 2025). Most informants acknowledged that digital services such as online licensing, complaint systems, and participatory applications have reduced bureaucratic delays and improved service delivery. For instance, "Citizen B" noted that accessing government services through mobile applications significantly reduced time and effort compared to traditional methods. Similarly, "Ms. Ratna," a public service manager, emphasized that digital platforms have streamlined workflows and minimized administrative burdens. These findings confirm the core assumptions of Davis (1989) that technological acceptance is driven by user perceptions of efficiency and usability (Omweri, 2024). However, the study also identifies limitations in this regard, as older citizens and individuals with lower digital literacy reported difficulties in navigating these systems, thereby highlighting an implementation gap that constrains broader participation (Ogunleye, 2024).

From the standpoint of Trust Theory as articulated by Russell Hardin (2002), the findings underscore that trust is not automatically generated by the presence of digital systems (Bisogno et al., 2022). Instead, trust emerges from consistent institutional performance, transparency, and perceived accountability (Sadat, 2025). Several informants expressed concerns regarding data privacy, system reliability, and responsiveness of government agencies. "Ms. Sari," a civil society representative, pointed out that while digital platforms provide access to information, they do not always guarantee meaningful responses or follow-up actions from authorities. This perception weakens institutional trust and discourages sustained participation (Hutahaean et al., 2024). Conversely, instances where government agencies responded promptly and transparently to citizen complaints were found to enhance trust and encourage further engagement (Matveieva et al., 2022). These findings reinforce Hardin's concept of "encapsulated interest," suggesting that citizens are more likely to trust institutions when they perceive alignment between institutional actions and public interests.

In relation to Participatory Democracy Theory, as developed by Carole Pateman (1970), the study finds that e-government platforms have created new opportunities for citizen engagement but have not fully realized the ideals of participatory democracy (Suranto & Mutiarin, 2025). While tools such as online consultations and feedback mechanisms enable citizens to express their views, the extent to which these inputs influence policy decisions remains limited. "Mr. Budi," a community organizer, observed that many digital participation initiatives are consultative rather than deliberative, meaning

that citizens can provide input but have little influence over final decisions. This suggests that while digital governance facilitates access to participation, it does not necessarily empower citizens in a substantive sense. The findings thus highlight a gap between formal participation and meaningful democratic engagement, which is central to Pateman’s theoretical framework (Saputro, 2025).

To provide a structured overview of the findings, the following table summarizes key themes, empirical evidence, and theoretical linkages identified in the study:

Key Theme	Empirical Findings	Theoretical Linkage	Implications for Participation
Perceived Usefulness	E-government improves efficiency and accessibility	TAM (Davis, 1989)	Increases initial adoption and usage
Ease of Use	Digital literacy gaps affect usability	TAM (Davis, 1989)	Limits inclusivity in participation
Institutional Trust	Trust depends on transparency and responsiveness	Trust Theory (Hardin, 2002)	Mediates sustained engagement
Data Security Concerns	Privacy issues reduce confidence in systems	Trust Theory (Hardin, 2002)	Weakens long-term participation
Access to Participation	Digital platforms enable broader civic input	Participatory Democracy (Pateman, 1970)	Expands formal participation opportunities
Depth of Participation	Limited influence on decision-making	Participatory Democracy (Pateman, 1970)	Creates gap between engagement and empowerment

These findings directly address the identified research gap, which lies in the limited integration of technological, institutional, and participatory dimensions in previous studies (Grigalashvili, 2022). By combining TAM, Trust Theory, and Participatory Democracy Theory, this research demonstrates that the effectiveness of e-government in enhancing democratic participation depends on the interaction between these three dimensions (Chabok et al., 2025). The gap is particularly evident in the discrepancy between high levels of platform usage and relatively low levels of meaningful civic engagement. While citizens may use digital services frequently, their participation in decision-making processes remains constrained by issues of trust and institutional responsiveness (Linhartova, 2022).

In relation to the research questions, the findings provide clear and nuanced answers. First, e-government positively affects public trust when it is implemented in a transparent, reliable, and responsive manner (Rahmadany & Mansyur, 2021). Second, public trust acts as a critical mediating variable that determines whether digital engagement translates into democratic participation (Rahmatullah et al., 2025). Third, contextual factors such as digital literacy, institutional capacity, and socio-political culture significantly influence the effectiveness of e-government initiatives (Kassen, 2025). These insights demonstrate that technological solutions alone are insufficient; they must be accompanied by institutional reforms and capacity-building efforts.

The findings also align closely with the research objectives. The study successfully evaluates the impact of e-government on public trust, identifies the mechanisms through which trust influences participation, and highlights key determinants that shape these relationships. From a theoretical perspective, the integration of the three frameworks provides a more comprehensive understanding of digital governance. Practically, the findings offer valuable guidance for policymakers seeking to design

e-government systems that foster both trust and participation. Academically, the study contributes to the growing body of interdisciplinary research on digital governance by bridging gaps between technology, politics, and public administration.

The theoretical implications of this study are significant. By demonstrating the interdependence of technological acceptance, institutional trust, and participatory engagement, the research advances existing theories and highlights the need for integrated analytical models (KURTI, 2025). From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that governments should prioritize user-centered design, enhance transparency, and ensure accountability in order to build trust and encourage participation (Manoharan et al., 2023). Academically, the study provides a foundation for future research that can explore these relationships in different contexts and with different methodological approaches.

In the discussion of findings, it is important to relate the results to previous studies. Consistent with earlier research, this study confirms that e-government can improve efficiency and access to services (Botrić & Božić, 2021). However, it also supports studies that emphasize the importance of trust as a determinant of participation (Elayah, 2025). Unlike some prior research that assumes a direct relationship between digital governance and participation, this study highlights the mediating role of trust, thereby addressing a key gap in the literature. Furthermore, the findings align with recent studies that question the depth of digital participation, suggesting that access alone does not guarantee meaningful engagement.

The main problem identified in this study is thus reaffirmed: the implementation of e-government does not automatically lead to enhanced democratic participation (Galushi & Malatji, 2022). This problem is explained through the combined insights of the three theoretical frameworks, which reveal that technological, institutional, and participatory factors must be aligned in order to achieve desired outcomes (Abales et al., 2023). The research gap is addressed by demonstrating how these factors interact and by providing empirical evidence from a developing country context.

The benefits of this research are evident across multiple dimensions. Theoretically, it contributes to the development of integrated models of digital governance. Practically, it offers actionable recommendations for improving e-government systems. Academically, it enriches the literature and provides a basis for further research. These contributions are directly linked to the research objectives and are supported by empirical findings and theoretical analysis.

In conclusion, the findings of this study provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the relationship between digital governance, public trust, and democratic participation. By integrating multiple theoretical perspectives and drawing on rich qualitative data, the research offers valuable insights into the conditions under which e-government can enhance democratic processes. The study not only addresses the main research problem and gap but also provides a foundation for future research and policy development in the field of digital governance.

## CONCLUSION

The conclusions of this study synthesize the empirical findings and analytical discussion to provide a coherent understanding of how digital governance, mediated by public trust, shapes democratic participation within the context of e-government implementation. Drawing from qualitative evidence and theoretical integration, the study confirms that the relationship between e-government and democratic participation is neither direct nor automatic, but instead contingent upon multiple interrelated factors, particularly citizens' trust in public institutions.

First, the study concludes that e-government initiatives significantly enhance administrative efficiency, accessibility, and service delivery, thereby fulfilling their primary instrumental objectives. As demonstrated in the findings, digital platforms have simplified bureaucratic procedures, reduced processing time, and expanded access to public services. From the perspective of the Technology Acceptance Model, these improvements contribute to higher levels of perceived usefulness and ease of use, which in turn encourage citizens to adopt and utilize e-government systems. However, the conclusion also emphasizes that technological acceptance alone is insufficient to foster meaningful democratic participation. While citizens may engage with digital services for transactional purposes,

such engagement does not necessarily translate into active involvement in governance or decision-making processes.

Second, the study establishes that public trust functions as a critical mediating variable between e-government implementation and democratic participation. The findings reveal that trust is built through consistent institutional performance, transparency, responsiveness, and accountability. In line with Trust Theory, citizens are more likely to participate in governance processes when they perceive that government institutions act in their best interests and handle digital interactions with integrity and reliability. Conversely, concerns related to data security, limited responsiveness, and perceived lack of follow-through undermine trust and discourage sustained engagement. This conclusion underscores that the success of digital governance depends not only on technological infrastructure but also on the quality of governance practices that accompany it.

Third, the study concludes that while e-government platforms have expanded opportunities for participation, they have not fully achieved the ideals of participatory democracy. Digital tools such as online consultations and feedback systems enable citizens to express their opinions more easily; however, the depth and influence of such participation remain limited. As indicated in the findings, many forms of digital engagement are consultative rather than deliberative, meaning that citizens' inputs are not always reflected in policy outcomes. This reflects a gap between formal participation and substantive empowerment, as highlighted in Participatory Democracy Theory. Therefore, the study concludes that the mere provision of digital participation channels does not guarantee meaningful democratic engagement unless these channels are accompanied by mechanisms that ensure citizen input has tangible policy impact.

Furthermore, the study highlights the existence of a persistent gap between the potential and actual outcomes of digital governance. Although e-government systems are widely implemented and frequently used, their capacity to enhance democratic participation is constrained by factors such as digital literacy disparities, institutional limitations, and socio-political contexts. This gap is particularly evident among marginalized groups who face barriers in accessing or effectively using digital platforms. Consequently, the study concludes that inclusive and equitable digital governance requires targeted efforts to address these structural challenges.

In relation to the research objectives, the study successfully demonstrates that e-government has a positive but conditional impact on democratic participation, mediated by public trust and shaped by contextual factors. The integration of the Technology Acceptance Model, Trust Theory, and Participatory Democracy Theory provides a comprehensive explanatory framework that captures the complexity of this relationship. The conclusions drawn from the findings and discussion affirm that these theoretical perspectives are complementary and collectively enhance the analytical depth of the study.

From a broader perspective, the study concludes that the transformative potential of digital governance lies not merely in technological innovation but in its ability to strengthen the relationship between governments and citizens. Effective e-government systems must therefore go beyond efficiency and prioritize trust-building, transparency, and meaningful participation. This requires a holistic approach that integrates technological design, institutional reform, and civic engagement strategies.

In summary, the conclusions of this research reaffirm that digital governance can contribute to democratic development, but only under conditions where public trust is actively cultivated and participation mechanisms are genuinely empowering. By linking empirical findings with theoretical insights, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the dynamics between e-government, trust, and participation, offering valuable implications for both scholarship and practice in the field of digital governance.

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