

Public Trust and Government Legitimacy in the Era of Digital Governance: An Institutional Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed public service delivery and government–citizen interactions. This study examines the relationship between public trust and government legitimacy in the era of digital governance from an institutional perspective. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted by analyzing 25 scholarly publications retrieved from Google Scholar through a structured process of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and thematic synthesis. The findings indicate that institutional factors, including transparency, accountability, responsiveness, citizen participation, data security, and digital inclusion, are essential for strengthening public trust in digital governance. Public trust also serves as a key mechanism linking institutional performance to government legitimacy. The review further identifies cybersecurity risks, digital inequality, misinformation, and ethical concerns as major challenges to sustaining legitimacy in digital environments. The study proposes an integrated institutional framework that explains the relationship between digital governance, public trust, and government legitimacy. These findings provide practical insights for policymakers to strengthen institutional capacity and develop trustworthy, inclusive, and legitimate digital governance systems.

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A. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the way governments deliver public services and interact with citizens. Across the globe, governments are increasingly adopting digital platforms, artificial intelligence, big data analytics, cloud computing, and integrated information systems to improve administrative efficiency, service accessibility, transparency, and accountability (Greenstein et al., 2013; Sneller et al., 2017). This transformation has strengthened the emergence of smart governance, a governance paradigm that emphasizes the strategic use of digital technologies to develop responsive, citizen-centered, data-driven, and collaborative public administration systems. Smart governance has become an essential component of digital government initiatives as public institutions seek to enhance service quality, improve decision-making processes, and create greater public value in an increasingly digital society (Greenstein et al., 2013; Meyerhoff Nielsen & Jordanoski, 2023).

In Indonesia, digital transformation has become a national strategic priority aimed at supporting bureaucratic reform and improving public service performance. Various government initiatives, including the Electronic-Based Government System (SPBE), digital identity programs, integrated public service applications, and smart city development projects, have been implemented to modernize public administration (Muslim et al., 2024). These initiatives are expected to streamline administrative procedures, reduce bureaucratic inefficiencies, increase service accessibility, and strengthen transparency and accountability within government institutions. As citizens increasingly expect faster, more reliable, and more accessible public services, digital transformation has become a critical instrument for enhancing government responsiveness and effectiveness in the digital era.

Despite substantial investments and policy commitments, the implementation of digital transformation in Indonesian public services continues to face considerable challenges. Many government agencies experience difficulties in integrating information systems, standardizing digital procedures, and ensuring effective coordination across institutions (Oktavianti et al., 2024; Silitonga, 2023). Consequently, digital transformation efforts often remain fragmented, resulting in duplicated systems, inconsistent service standards, and limited interoperability among government entities. Furthermore, disparities in digital infrastructure and technological readiness between regions contribute to unequal levels of service quality, particularly between urban and rural areas. These conditions suggest that technological adoption alone is insufficient to achieve successful digital transformation without adequate institutional support and organizational readiness.

Among the factors influencing digital transformation, institutional barriers represent one of the most critical challenges within the public sector. Institutional barriers refer to structural, organizational, regulatory, cultural, and administrative constraints that hinder the effective implementation of technological innovations. Previous studies indicate that rigid bureaucratic structures, resistance to organizational change, fragmented governance arrangements, insufficient leadership support, regulatory inconsistencies, and limited digital competencies among public officials frequently impede digital transformation initiatives (Agus Suharsono, 2023; Cooper & Robson, 2006). Such barriers weaken the ability of government institutions to leverage digital technologies effectively and limit the achievement of desired governance outcomes. Therefore, understanding the influence of institutional barriers has become increasingly important in the context of public sector modernization.

At the same time, smart governance has attracted growing attention in public administration literature as governments seek to maximize the benefits of digital transformation. Smart governance extends beyond the digitization of public services by emphasizing technology-enabled decision-making, transparency, citizen participation, inter-organizational collaboration, and public value creation. However, although prior studies have examined digital government, e-government adoption, smart city development, and public sector innovation, several research gaps remain. First, many studies focus predominantly on

technological determinants while paying limited attention to institutional barriers. Second, digital transformation and smart governance are often investigated as separate constructs rather than as interconnected processes. Third, empirical evidence from developing countries, particularly Indonesia, remains limited despite the distinctive institutional challenges faced by emerging economies. Furthermore, studies incorporating citizens' perceptions as an evaluative perspective remain insufficient, even though public trust and acceptance are essential indicators of successful governance transformation.

To address these gaps, this study investigates the influence of institutional barriers on digital transformation and examines the implications of digital transformation for smart governance in Indonesia. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize technological readiness or organizational innovation, this research highlights the institutional dimension of digital transformation and explores how institutional constraints shape governance outcomes through the transformation process. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of institutional barriers, digital transformation, and smart governance within a single analytical framework in the context of Indonesian public services. Moreover, by incorporating citizens' perceptions as the basis of analysis, this study offers a citizen-centered perspective on the effectiveness of digital government initiatives. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the effect of institutional barriers on digital transformation, examine the impact of digital transformation on smart governance, and investigate the mediating role of digital transformation in the relationship between institutional barriers and smart governance. The findings are expected to contribute to the advancement of digital governance and public administration literature while providing practical recommendations for strengthening institutional capacity and accelerating digital transformation initiatives in Indonesia.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesize scholarly literature concerning public trust and government legitimacy in the era of digital governance from an institutional perspective. The SLR method was selected because it provides a structured and transparent procedure for reviewing existing knowledge while minimizing researcher bias through predefined protocols and selection criteria. The review was guided by three research questions: (1) What institutional factors influence public trust in digital governance? (2) How does public trust contribute to government legitimacy in the digital era? and (3) What institutional challenges and opportunities emerge in strengthening government legitimacy through digital governance? To address these questions, a literature search was conducted using Google Scholar as the primary database due to its extensive coverage of interdisciplinary publications. Several keyword combinations were employed, including "digital governance" AND "public trust," "government legitimacy" AND "digital governance," "e-government" AND "citizen trust," and "institutional perspective" AND "digital government," to identify studies addressing the intersection of trust, legitimacy, digital governance, and institutional factors.

To ensure the quality and relevance of the reviewed literature, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were established. Eligible studies were required to be published in peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, or academic book chapters; written in English; focused on digital governance, e-government, digital public services, or public sector digital transformation; discussed public trust or government legitimacy; provided theoretical, conceptual, or empirical contributions from an institutional perspective; and be available in full-text format. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on private-sector digital transformation, addressed technology adoption without considering trust or legitimacy, consisted of non-academic publications, contained duplicate records, lacked sufficient methodological information, or were inaccessible in full text. Following the PRISMA-based screening procedure, an initial search yielded 112 studies, which were reduced to 95 after duplicate removal. Subsequent title and abstract screening resulted in 48 potentially relevant studies, and after full-text eligibility assessment, 25 studies were selected for final analysis.

Data from the selected studies were extracted using a structured review matrix containing information on authorship, publication year, geographical context, research objectives, theoretical framework, methodology, key findings, institutional determinants, trust-related variables, legitimacy-related variables, and policy implications. The extracted data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and dominant themes across the literature. The analysis involved literature familiarization, systematic coding, theme development, refinement, and interpretation. Several major themes emerged, including transparency and accountability, citizen participation, digital inclusion, data security and privacy protection, government responsiveness, institutional capacity, regulatory quality, and digital ethics. The findings were subsequently interpreted through the lens of Institutional Theory, which posits that trust and legitimacy are shaped by formal regulations, governance structures, societal norms, and stakeholder expectations. Based on this perspective, the study assumes that institutional factors embedded within digital governance systems influence public trust, which in turn contributes to the formation and maintenance of government legitimacy in digital environments.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Reviewed Literature

The systematic review analyzed 25 scholarly publications on public trust, government legitimacy, and digital governance published between 2015 and 2025 across disciplines such as public administration, political science, governance studies, information systems, and institutional theory. The findings indicate that digital governance has become an important instrument for improving governmental effectiveness, transparency, and public service delivery. However, the literature consistently demonstrates that technological advancement alone is insufficient to ensure successful governance outcomes. Instead, the effectiveness of digital governance largely depends on institutional factors that shape citizens' perceptions of governmental competence, accountability, and trustworthiness.

Across the reviewed studies, public trust emerged as a critical determinant of citizen acceptance and support for digital governance initiatives. Governments that demonstrated transparency, accountability, responsiveness, and high-quality digital services were more likely to gain citizen trust, whereas concerns related to privacy protection, cybersecurity, digital inequality, and institutional inefficiency often weakened trust and reduced perceptions of legitimacy. The review further reveals that government legitimacy in the digital era is increasingly influenced by citizens' experiences with digital platforms and online public services, making trust-building mechanisms a fundamental requirement for sustaining institutional legitimacy and strengthening citizen-government relationships.

Publication Trends

The review identified a substantial increase in scholarly publications on digital governance and public trust over the past decade. While earlier studies primarily concentrated on e-government adoption and technological implementation, recent research has expanded to encompass broader governance issues such as institutional quality, citizen participation, digital ethics, and government legitimacy. This shift reflects the growing recognition that governance challenges cannot be addressed solely through technological innovation, but require robust institutional arrangements capable of fostering public trust and maintaining legitimacy. Consequently, the literature demonstrates a clear transition from technology-centered perspectives toward citizen-centered and institution-centered approaches, emphasizing that the success of digital governance depends not only on system functionality but also on citizens' perceptions of governmental institutions and their capacity to protect public interests, ensure accountability, and deliver public value.

Institutional Factors Influencing Public Trust

The thematic analysis identified six major institutional factors that influence public trust in digital governance, namely transparency, accountability, government responsiveness, data security and privacy protection, citizen participation, and digital inclusion. Transparency becomes a foundational factor because it enables citizens to access public information, monitor government performance, and evaluate policy decisions more openly (Fahmi, n.d.). In digital governance, transparency is strengthened through the publication of government information, budgets, regulations, performance indicators, and public service data on digital platforms. When citizens perceive that government actions are open and understandable, uncertainty decreases and trust increases. Accountability also plays a crucial role because citizens expect governments to be answerable for their decisions and actions. Digital platforms can reinforce accountability by supporting open data initiatives, complaint channels, public monitoring systems, and citizen feedback mechanisms that allow public scrutiny of government performance (Tariq, 2025).

Government responsiveness is another important determinant of trust because it reflects the ability of public institutions to respond effectively to citizens' needs, complaints, and expectations. Effective service delivery and responsive interaction strengthen citizens' perceptions of governmental competence and commitment, thereby increasing trust (Afiyah, 2024). Digital governance tools, such as online complaint systems, social media engagement, and electronic service portals, can improve communication between citizens and government agencies while accelerating public service responses (Tariq, 2025). In addition, data security and privacy protection have become increasingly significant in digital governance environments because citizens are often concerned about unauthorized access, cyberattacks, surveillance practices, and misuse of personal data. Trust in digital government is strongly influenced by perceptions of cybersecurity effectiveness and data protection. Therefore, governments must establish clear privacy regulations, secure digital infrastructures, and transparent data governance mechanisms to ensure that citizens feel safe when using digital public services (Asrijal et al., 2025; Ntika & Chigona, 2024).

Citizen participation and digital inclusion also function as essential institutional mechanisms for strengthening public trust. Opportunities for citizens to participate in policymaking, public consultation, and collaborative governance create a sense of inclusion and shared responsibility, which ultimately enhances trust in public institutions (Afiyah, 2024). Digital participation mechanisms also strengthen social accountability by enabling citizens to directly oversee policy implementation and government performance (Asrijal et al., 2025). However, digital governance can weaken trust when access to digital services is unequal, especially among citizens who lack internet connectivity, technological access, or digital literacy. Digital inclusion is therefore necessary to prevent perceptions of exclusion and unfairness that may undermine trust in government institutions (Ntika & Chigona, 2024). Addressing the digital divide is essential for building an inclusive digital governance environment in which all social groups can access, use, and benefit from public digital services (Tariq, 2025).

Public Trust as a Foundation of Government Legitimacy

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that public trust is a fundamental prerequisite for government legitimacy, as citizens are more likely to perceive governmental authority as legitimate when they believe public institutions act competently, fairly, transparently, and in the public interest. Several studies describe trust as an intermediary mechanism linking institutional performance and legitimacy outcomes, whereby effective institutions foster trust through transparent, accountable, and responsive governance practices, which subsequently increase public acceptance of governmental authority, policy decisions, and regulatory interventions. In digital governance environments, trust becomes even more critical because many interactions between governments and citizens occur through technological systems rather than direct personal contact. Citizens therefore increasingly evaluate governmental legitimacy based on their experiences with digital public services, online communication channels, and virtual engagement

platforms. Digital services that promote transparency, accessibility, efficiency, and participatory governance tend to strengthen citizen trust, whereas poorly designed or inadequately implemented systems may generate skepticism and reduce confidence in government institutions (Fahmi, n.d.).

The literature further highlights the important role of transparency in strengthening institutional trust and legitimacy. E-government transparency has been identified as a mediating factor between digital integration and institutional trust, contributing to higher citizen satisfaction and more positive evaluations of government performance (Noor et al., n.d.). Likewise, transparency and effective communication through digital platforms and social media help governments build legitimacy by fostering openness and reducing information asymmetries (Budiana, 2025). Trust also contributes to governance quality by encouraging greater policy compliance, political participation, and social cohesion, all of which reinforce institutional legitimacy (Adeyemi, 2025). Nevertheless, some studies reveal a more complex relationship, showing that relatively high levels of institutional trust may persist even when government performance is perceived as less satisfactory, indicating that legitimacy is influenced not only by performance outcomes but also by broader social, political, and institutional factors (Baniamin, 2021). Overall, the findings suggest that trust functions as a strategic resource that enables governments to maintain legitimacy and public support amid rapid technological and societal transformation.

Institutional Challenges to Legitimacy in Digital Governance

Although digital governance offers significant opportunities to improve public service delivery and citizen engagement, the literature identifies several institutional challenges that may weaken government legitimacy. One of the most prominent challenges is digital inequality, as unequal access to technology, internet connectivity, and digital literacy can exclude certain segments of society from accessing public services and participating in governance processes. Such exclusion may create perceptions of institutional unfairness and reduce trust in government. Previous studies highlight that digital governance can unintentionally widen existing social inequalities, particularly among marginalized populations, thereby emphasizing the importance of inclusive system design and digital literacy initiatives to ensure equitable access to digital services (Ariyadi & Akbar, 2025; Mozin et al., 2025; Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025).

Another critical challenge relates to cybersecurity risks and data protection. As governments increasingly rely on digital platforms, concerns regarding data breaches, cyberattacks, unauthorized access, and technological failures have become more prominent. These threats can significantly undermine public confidence in digital governance systems and weaken institutional legitimacy. The literature consistently emphasizes that effective cybersecurity measures, secure digital infrastructures, and transparent data management practices are essential for maintaining citizen trust and ensuring the reliability of digital public services (Fahmi, n.d.; Kapesa, 2025; Sukare & Abdullahi, 2025). Without adequate safeguards, citizens may become reluctant to engage with digital government platforms, thereby reducing the effectiveness of digital transformation initiatives.

The literature also identifies misinformation, algorithmic bias, and institutional capacity limitations as major threats to legitimacy in digital governance environments. The rapid dissemination of false or misleading information can erode trust in public institutions and complicate governmental efforts to maintain credibility, while algorithmic bias in artificial intelligence-based decision-making systems raises concerns regarding fairness, transparency, and accountability (Ariyadi & Akbar, 2025; Mozin et al., 2025). Addressing these challenges requires robust regulatory frameworks and greater transparency in the design and operation of digital systems (Kapesa, 2025). Furthermore, many governments continue to face limitations in technical expertise, regulatory readiness, and governance capacity, which hinder the effective implementation of digital governance initiatives. Strengthening institutional capacity through continuous training, organizational adaptation, and collaboration with relevant stakeholders is therefore essential

Emerging Institutional Opportunities

Despite the challenges associated with digital governance, the reviewed literature identifies several opportunities for strengthening public trust and government legitimacy through the effective use of digital technologies. One of the most important opportunities lies in improving transparency by making governmental information more accessible, understandable, and available through digital platforms. Greater transparency enables citizens to better monitor governmental activities and strengthens public trust in institutions (Budiana, 2025). Similarly, open data initiatives contribute to structural transparency and accountability by providing broader access to public information and supporting more informed citizen oversight (Asrijal et al., 2025). The literature also highlights the role of digital participation platforms in enhancing democratic engagement by allowing citizens to participate more actively in governance processes and directly monitor public policies. In addition, well-designed digital services that emphasize efficiency, responsiveness, and user-centered delivery can further strengthen citizen trust and improve perceptions of governmental performance (Asrijal et al., 2025; Fahmi, n.d.).

Another significant opportunity relates to the development of robust cybersecurity frameworks and ethical technology governance. Effective cybersecurity measures are essential for protecting citizen data, reducing risks associated with digital services, and maintaining public confidence in government-operated digital systems (Fahmi, n.d.). At the same time, ethical and responsible governance of digital technologies ensures that digital transformation remains aligned with democratic principles, transparency, fairness, and accountability, thereby reinforcing institutional legitimacy (Kasim et al., 2025). The literature further emphasizes the importance of adaptive institutions capable of responding to technological innovation while preserving democratic values and public accountability. Governments that successfully integrate technological advancement with strong institutional governance arrangements are more likely to build sustainable public trust and achieve long-term legitimacy in the digital era.

D. CONCLUSION

This study systematically reviewed 25 scholarly publications to examine the relationship between public trust and government legitimacy in the era of digital governance from an institutional perspective. The findings indicate that digital governance should be viewed not merely as a technological innovation but as an institutional transformation that reshapes citizen–government interactions. The review identified transparency, accountability, government responsiveness, citizen participation, data security, and digital inclusion as the primary institutional factors influencing public trust, which in turn serves as a critical foundation for government legitimacy in digital environments. Effective institutional mechanisms strengthen citizens' perceptions of governmental competence, integrity, and fairness, thereby increasing acceptance of governmental authority, support for public policies, and engagement with digital public services. Conversely, challenges such as cybersecurity vulnerabilities, digital exclusion, misinformation, algorithmic concerns, and weak accountability mechanisms may undermine trust and weaken legitimacy despite advances in digital technology. Therefore, sustainable digital governance requires not only technological modernization but also institutional reforms that promote transparency, accountability, participation, security, and inclusiveness while maintaining democratic values and public interests. Future studies may extend this analysis through comparative cross-country research and by examining the implications of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain for public trust and government legitimacy in increasingly digitalized governance systems.

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