



DIGITAL POLITICS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

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Abstract

Digital technologies have reshaped political participation by expanding access to information, public expression, mobilization, and communication with democratic institutions. This study aimed to examine how digital politics transforms the forms, intensity, and consequences of citizen participation across democratic societies. A comparative mixed-method design combined a cross-national survey of 1,200 respondents from Indonesia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States with 48 interviews, digital observation, institutional document analysis, and comparative case studies. The findings showed that digital platforms increased political information consumption, online expression, petitioning, and short-term mobilization more strongly than sustained organizational or institutional engagement. Political interest, digital competence, internal efficacy, participation diversity, and institutional responsiveness were positively associated with broader democratic involvement. Misinformation exposure and online hostility stimulated interaction while reducing trust, discouraging visible participation, and increasing selective withdrawal. The study concludes that digital politics functions as a conditional democratic resource rather than an inherently empowering force. Meaningful participation depends on citizens' capabilities, transparent platform governance, diverse channels of engagement, and responsive institutions capable of converting digitally expressed demands into accountable political processes, sustained civic involvement, and legitimate public decisions across different democratic contexts and social groups, while protecting equality, deliberative quality, political safety, collective agency, and trust.

Keywords: Democratic Societies; Digital Politics; Institutional Responsiveness; Political Participation; Social Media.



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INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have transformed the institutional, communicative, and social environments in which democratic participation occurs (Obi, 2025). Political engagement is no longer confined to elections, party membership, campaign meetings, public demonstrations, or direct communication with state institutions (Rajasekaran et al., 2025). Citizens increasingly encounter political information, express opinions, organize collective action, monitor public officials, sign petitions, donate to campaigns, and participate in policy consultations through networked platforms (Al-Mhasnah et al., 2025). Digital politics therefore represents more than the migration of conventional political activities to online spaces. It involves a restructuring of the relationships among citizens, political organizations, governments, media institutions, and technology companies within democratic societies.

Social media platforms have become influential political arenas because they reduce the practical costs of publishing information, connecting with like-minded citizens, and responding publicly to political events (Singh et al., 2024). Digital participation may enable marginalized groups, young citizens, geographically dispersed communities, and individuals with limited access to conventional organizations to enter public discussions (Kılıç, 2024). International evidence generally associates digital media use with increased political and civic participation, ranging from low-cost activities such as sharing political content to more demanding forms such as campaigning and protesting (Ghising, 2025). Such benefits coexist with negative relationships involving polarization, misinformation, declining trust, and hostility, demonstrating that digital media produce neither uniformly democratic nor uniformly destructive consequences.

Government-led digital participation has also expanded through online consultations, participatory budgeting, civic-monitoring platforms, open-data systems, digital petitions, and other forms of civic technology (Berry, 2026). These instruments can widen the channels through which citizens contribute to policy processes and evaluate governmental performance (Mittelstaedt, 2026). Their democratic value depends on whether public contributions influence decisions, whether marginalized groups can participate meaningfully, and whether institutions explain how citizens' input is used (Swain, 2025). The OECD consequently frames civic technology as a means of informing citizens, enabling participation in decision-making, and improving governmental responsiveness and accountability rather than as a purely technical modernization project.

The central research problem concerns whether digital politics broadens meaningful political participation or merely increases the visibility and frequency of low-cost expressive activities (Wang et al., 2026). Liking, reposting, commenting, following political accounts, and using campaign hashtags can indicate political interest, but they do not necessarily influence institutional decisions or lead to sustained offline engagement (Lima Neto, 2025). A citizen may be highly active in online political discussions while remaining disconnected from elections, parties, civic associations, or policymaking processes (Zhang & Caretta, 2026). Research must therefore distinguish symbolic expression from consequential participation and examine the conditions under which digital engagement develops into voting, organizing, deliberation, civic oversight, or direct influence on public policy.

Platform power creates a second problem because political communication is increasingly organized through privately governed technological infrastructures (Villaplana, 2025). Recommendation systems, engagement metrics, content moderation, political advertising, data collection, and interface design influence which political actors and issues receive public attention (Elmatsani et al., 2024). Citizens do not encounter political information in neutral or transparent environments. Recent evidence concerning algorithmically recommended political content indicates that platform systems may produce partisan imbalances in exposure, while experimental evidence concerning political advertising shows that assumed digital effects are not always detectable in political knowledge, participation,

polarization, or turnout (Khan et al., 2026). These contrasting findings demonstrate the need to analyse platform influence empirically rather than presume either overwhelming manipulation or complete technological neutrality.

Political inequality presents a third problem because expanded digital opportunities do not guarantee equal democratic participation (Ølgaard & Hedling, 2026). Differences in internet access, digital literacy, education, income, language, disability, political knowledge, safety, and confidence can shape who participates and whose contributions become visible. Global research indicates that inequalities in online political information and engagement remain widespread and may grow over time (Hok, 2026). Digital platforms may consequently mobilize citizens who already possess political resources while leaving less connected groups underrepresented (Hackfort, 2025). Online hostility can impose additional participation costs, especially in economically unequal or less democratic environments, where political disagreement may become more aggressive and exclusionary.

The primary objective of this study is to analyse how digital politics transforms the forms, intensity, and consequences of political participation in democratic societies (Bekus, 2025). The research will examine electoral participation, online political expression, digital campaigning, petitioning, fundraising, civic monitoring, protest coordination, policy consultation, and participatory governance (Latorre, 2025). Particular attention will be directed toward the relationships between low-cost digital actions and more demanding forms of engagement (Macdonald et al., 2025). This objective will clarify whether online participation supplements conventional political involvement, mobilizes previously inactive citizens, substitutes for offline engagement, or creates parallel forms of political activity with limited institutional influence.

A second objective is to investigate how platform structures mediate political participation. The analysis will examine the influence of recommendation systems, content-ranking mechanisms, political advertisements, engagement metrics, moderation policies, data-driven targeting, and generative artificial intelligence on political information and citizen action (Gangopadhyay & Rajan, 2026). Such an objective recognizes that participation is shaped not only by citizens' motivations but also by technological arrangements that determine visibility, interaction, and access (Eray, 2026). Artificial intelligence may assist governments in analysing public contributions and reducing linguistic or administrative barriers, yet it can also introduce risks involving opacity, bias, privacy, manipulation, and unequal institutional capacity.

The study further aims to identify the institutional and social conditions under which digital participation strengthens democratic inclusion, responsiveness, and public trust (Luca, 2024). Comparative attention will be given to age, socioeconomic position, education, political interest, digital competence, minority status, and national context (Herrera, 2025). The analysis will also examine whether participation platforms provide feedback, influence public decisions, and maintain accessible alternatives for citizens who cannot participate digitally (Radil, 2026). The expected outcome is an explanatory framework connecting citizen resources, platform design, participatory behaviour, institutional responsiveness, and democratic consequences rather than treating online activity as an independent measure of democratic vitality.

Existing scholarship has established that digital media can facilitate political information, mobilization, expression, and participation (Gaw & Soriano, 2025). Research also documents relationships with affective polarization, misinformation, hate speech, populist communication, and declining political trust. Much of this literature examines beneficial and harmful outcomes as separate research problems. Such separation limits understanding of how the same technological environment can simultaneously expand participation and weaken deliberative quality. A social-media campaign may mobilize previously inactive citizens while intensifying hostility, spreading misleading information, or excluding participants who fear harassment. A

more integrated analytical framework is required to evaluate these democratic gains and costs together.

A second gap concerns the weak connection between online participation and observable institutional outcomes (Tauchnitz & Ahmed, 2024). Many studies measure political engagement through self-reported posting, sharing, commenting, or exposure to political content. Fewer investigations establish whether these activities influence policy agendas, governmental responsiveness, electoral participation, organizational membership, or long-term civic engagement (Degré & Sæther, 2025). Digital participation platforms may collect substantial citizen input without creating meaningful involvement when officials do not respond or participants cannot observe how their contributions affect decisions (Barseguyan et al., 2024). Research on digital governance increasingly emphasizes that participation technology does not automatically generate trust or substantive citizen influence.

A third gap arises from limited integration among individual, technological, institutional, and societal explanations (Tshiyoyo, 2025). Individual-level research commonly examines political interest, efficacy, education, and media use. Platform studies focus on algorithms, interface features, networks, and content circulation. Institutional studies investigate government consultation, party communication, regulation, and civic technology, while comparative research considers political systems and social inequality (Sistyawan et al., 2024). These levels often remain analytically separated even though digital participation develops through their interaction (Piñeiro Otero et al., 2024). Global patterns of political inequality cannot be understood solely through access to devices because technological design, institutional openness, socioeconomic resources, and political conditions jointly determine participation opportunities and consequences.

The principal novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing digital political participation as a multistage democratic process rather than a collection of isolated online behaviours. The proposed framework will trace participation from political exposure and expression to mobilization, collective organization, institutional reception, and policy consequences (Tian & Pérez-Durán, 2026). Such an approach distinguishes the visibility of citizen activity from its actual democratic influence. A large volume of comments, shares, or digital submissions cannot be treated automatically as evidence of effective participation (Ahmed et al., 2024). Democratic value depends on who participates, how interactions occur, whether institutions respond, and whether public contributions produce accountable decisions or sustained civic capacity.

A second element of novelty involves integrating four analytical dimensions within a single model: citizen capability, platform mediation, institutional responsiveness, and democratic quality (Chen, 2024). Citizen capability includes access, literacy, motivation, safety, and political efficacy. Platform mediation covers algorithms, interfaces, moderation, data practices, and visibility. Institutional responsiveness concerns feedback, transparency, policy influence, and governmental accountability (Kikasu & Dorasamy, 2025). Democratic quality includes inclusion, equality, deliberation, trust, and resistance to manipulation. This integrated framework can explain why the same digital technology may strengthen participation in one context while reproducing inequality, symbolic consultation, or polarization in another.

The justification for this research rests on the increasing dependence of democratic communication and participation on digital infrastructures. Citizens, political parties, governments, civic organizations, and social movements now use networked technologies for information, mobilization, consultation, oversight, and public debate (Riádigos-Couso et al., 2025). Democratic societies require evidence that distinguishes genuinely empowering practices from participation that is merely visible, commercially optimized, or procedurally symbolic. The study can contribute to political science, digital communication, public administration, democratic theory, and platform-governance research while offering practical

guidance for designing participation systems that are inclusive, transparent, institutionally consequential, and resistant to misinformation, harassment, algorithmic distortion, and unequal access.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a comparative mixed-method research design combining a cross-national survey, semi-structured interviews, digital-platform observation, and institutional document analysis (Hosoda, 2024). The design was selected to examine how digital politics transforms political participation at individual, technological, and institutional levels. Quantitative analysis identified patterns linking digital-media use with political expression, electoral participation, civic monitoring, collective action, political efficacy, and institutional trust (Bolleyer, 2024). Qualitative inquiry provided deeper explanations of how citizens interpreted their online activities, managed political disagreement, responded to misinformation, and assessed the influence of digital participation on public decisions.

The research adopted an explanatory sequential structure. Survey data were collected and analysed during the first phase to identify significant relationships, participation profiles, and cross-national differences. Interview participants and digital cases were subsequently selected according to the quantitative findings, allowing the second phase to explain patterns that could not be understood through numerical data alone. Integration occurred during interpretation by comparing statistical relationships with participants' experiences, platform practices, and evidence of governmental responsiveness.

The analytical model examined five interrelated dimensions: digital access and competence, political motivation, platform mediation, institutional responsiveness, and democratic outcomes. Digital access and competence included internet availability, digital literacy, privacy awareness, and the ability to evaluate political information. Platform mediation covered algorithmic exposure, political advertising, content moderation, engagement metrics, and experiences of online hostility. Democratic outcomes included political knowledge, participation diversity, political efficacy, institutional trust, deliberative engagement, and involvement in offline political activities.

Research Target/Subject

The target population and subjects for this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study were structured across both quantitative and qualitative phases to examine how digital politics transforms political participation. For the quantitative component, the target population encompassed general citizens across selected national contexts with varying levels of internet access, digital literacy, and political involvement. For the qualitative phase, the research subjects consisted of selected survey respondents, civic activists, campaign organizers, digital community managers, and institutional representatives involved in the eight observed digital participation cases.

The sampling methodology combined probability and non-probability techniques aligned with the sequential design. In the quantitative phase, a multi-stage stratified sampling approach was utilized across participating countries to ensure representation across age cohorts, educational backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and geographic regions. In the qualitative phase, respondents were selected through a purposive sampling strategy based on preliminary quantitative participation profiles targeting both highly active digital participants and politically disengaged or silent citizens alongside intensity sampling to select key informants directly leading the observed digital campaigns.

The sample size for the quantitative phase was determined using power analysis to achieve adequate statistical power for structural equation modeling and multigroup cross-national comparisons. For the qualitative phase, the number of interview subjects and observed digital cases was governed by the principle of theoretical data saturation, concluding when additional interviews and platform observations yielded no new themes regarding online expression, platform mediation, or institutional responsiveness. This combined sampling framework guaranteed both broad empirical generalizability and contextual depth across micro (individual), meso (technological), and macro (institutional) levels.

Research Procedure

Data collection began after ethical approval had been obtained from the responsible research institution. Survey and interview participants received information concerning the research objectives, voluntary participation, confidentiality, data protection, and their right to withdraw. Informed consent was secured before participation. Survey instruments were translated and back-translated where necessary to preserve conceptual equivalence across national contexts. Local political terminology was adapted carefully without changing the underlying constructs.

The survey was administered through a secure online platform over a three-month period. Screening questions verified participant eligibility before access to the complete questionnaire was granted. Data-quality procedures identified incomplete responses, implausibly short completion times, repetitive answer patterns, and inconsistent demographic information. Invalid responses were removed before analysis. Missing data were assessed according to their frequency and pattern, while appropriate imputation procedures were applied only when the assumptions for such treatment were satisfied.

Quantitative analysis began with descriptive statistics, reliability testing, and exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis. Political-participation profiles were constructed according to the frequency, diversity, and institutional orientation of digital activities. Multiple regression and structural equation modelling were used to examine relationships among digital competence, political interest, platform exposure, political efficacy, trust, and participation. Multigroup analysis compared structural relationships across countries, age groups, educational levels, and socioeconomic categories. Mediation analysis examined whether political efficacy connected digital-media use with participation, while moderation analysis assessed whether misinformation, hostility, or institutional responsiveness altered these relationships.

Interview participants were selected after the preliminary survey findings had been reviewed. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or through encrypted video-conferencing platforms and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim with participants' permission. Field notes documented contextual information, emotional responses, contradictions, and emerging interpretations. Transcripts were returned to selected participants for factual clarification when statements required contextual verification.

Digital observation was conducted over six months. Researchers monitored the selected participation cases from their initial mobilization or active campaign stage through identifiable institutional responses or periods of declining activity. Public content was archived systematically, while private groups and direct messages were excluded unless explicit permission had been obtained. Researchers did not intervene in political discussions or collect information unrelated to the research objectives.

Qualitative data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis and comparative case analysis. Initial coding focused on political motivation, low-cost participation, sustained engagement, institutional influence, algorithmic exposure, misinformation, polarization, online hostility, strategic silence, and transitions between digital and offline action. Focused coding organized these categories into broader themes concerning mobilization, exclusion, platform power, democratic efficacy, and institutional responsiveness. Cross-national comparison

identified contextual similarities and differences without treating citizens within each country as politically homogeneous.

Mixed-method integration was conducted through joint displays and interpretive comparison. Quantitative participation profiles were connected with qualitative narratives and institutional evidence to determine whether frequent digital engagement produced meaningful democratic influence. Cases showing high online activity but limited institutional response were compared with cases in which digital mobilization contributed to policy discussion, governmental feedback, or sustained civic organization. Contradictory findings were retained and examined rather than removed to create an artificially consistent interpretation.

Research quality was strengthened through internal-consistency testing, measurement-invariance analysis, source triangulation, member reflection, peer debriefing, and a documented audit trail. Ethical safeguards included anonymization, encrypted data storage, restricted access, and the removal of identifiable political affiliations from reported quotations. Public digital content was paraphrased when direct quotation could expose individual users. The study treated automated metrics, platform engagement, and self-reported participation cautiously because visibility and frequency do not necessarily demonstrate meaningful democratic influence.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

A structured questionnaire served as the principal quantitative instrument. The questionnaire contained sections measuring demographic characteristics, digital access, platform-use frequency, political-information exposure, online expression, campaign participation, petitioning, civic monitoring, protest involvement, voting behaviour, political efficacy, institutional trust, misinformation exposure, algorithmic awareness, and experiences of online hostility. Most attitudinal variables were measured using five-point Likert scales ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. Participation variables recorded both frequency and diversity of political activities to distinguish repeated low-cost actions from broader forms of democratic involvement.

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore the meanings and consequences of digital political participation. Interview questions examined participants' motivations for engaging or remaining silent, transitions between online and offline action, experiences of political disagreement, perceptions of platform fairness, responses to targeted political content, and expectations of governmental feedback. Particular attention was directed toward whether participants believed their digital activities influenced policies, elected representatives, political organizations, or community decisions.

A digital-observation protocol was used to document communication patterns within the eight selected cases. The protocol recorded campaign objectives, participant interaction, hashtag use, emotional framing, misinformation correction, moderation practices, counter-mobilization, platform affordances, and evidence of movement from online expression to offline action. Publicly accessible posts, official campaign materials, discussion threads, participation statistics, and governmental responses were documented without collecting unnecessary personal identifiers.

An institutional-responsiveness matrix guided the analysis of government documents, consultation reports, platform policies, official replies, meeting records, policy statements, and public decisions connected to the selected participation cases. The matrix assessed whether institutions acknowledged citizen input, explained decision-making processes, incorporated public recommendations, provided feedback, and disclosed reasons for accepting or rejecting proposals. Instrument validity was examined by experts in political science, digital communication, public administration, and quantitative methodology. Pilot testing with 60 respondents was conducted to improve item clarity, cultural relevance, response consistency, and completion time.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis was executed sequentially and integrated across three main stages to address the research objectives. In the first phase, quantitative data from the online survey were processed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis, and confirmatory factor analysis established construct validity and reliability. Structural equation modeling (SEM) and multiple regression were applied to evaluate relationships between digital competence, platform exposure, political efficacy, institutional trust, and participation diversity. Multigroup SEM was conducted to test structural invariance across cross-national contexts, while mediation and moderation analyses tested whether political efficacy mediated participation and whether misinformation or online hostility moderated these dynamics.

In the second phase, qualitative data comprising interview transcripts, digital observation archives, and institutional documents were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis and comparative case analysis. Audio transcripts were coded iteratively to identify themes surrounding digital motivation, low-cost participation versus sustained action, algorithmic exposure, and strategic silence. Simultaneously, the institutional-responsiveness matrix was applied to analyze government documents, policy statements, and consultation reports, systematically measuring how public authorities acknowledged, processed, or rejected citizen input from the eight selected digital mobilization cases.

In the final phase, mixed-method integration was achieved through joint display matrices and interpretive cross-case synthesis. Quantitative participation profiles were directly merged with qualitative narratives and institutional responsiveness outcomes. This integrated approach allowed the study to evaluate whether high-frequency digital engagement translated into actual policy influence, specifically examining cases of high digital mobilization with low institutional response alongside successful offline transitions. Methodological rigor was maintained through measurement-invariance testing, Cronbach's alpha reliability scores, source triangulation, member reflection, and a detailed audit trail.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The final survey dataset consisted of 1,200 respondents distributed equally across Indonesia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Each national sample contained 300 participants. Respondents ranged from 18 to 68 years of age, with a mean age of 36.84 years and a standard deviation of 12.17. Women represented 50.3% of the sample, men represented 48.8%, and 0.9% identified with another gender category or preferred not to provide this information. Participants aged 18–29 accounted for 31.8% of the sample, while 28.7% were aged 30–39, 22.5% were aged 40–49, and 17.0% were aged 50 years or older. University graduates constituted 56.2% of respondents, while 43.8% reported secondary, vocational, or other educational backgrounds.

Digital political participation was widespread but varied considerably in intensity and form. Political information consumption was reported by 89.1% of respondents, while 67.8% had liked, shared, or commented on political content during the previous six months. Online petition participation was reported by 42.6%, direct digital communication with public officials by 24.8%, campaign volunteering or donation by 18.5%, and digitally coordinated offline action by 21.9%. Voting remained the most common conventional activity, reported by 78.4% of eligible respondents. Only 16.7% participated in political parties, formal civic organizations, or regular public consultations, indicating that expressive digital activity was substantially more common than sustained organizational involvement.

The distribution of participation shows that digital politics lowered the threshold for political expression more effectively than it increased formal organizational involvement. Political information consumption, commenting, reposting, and petitioning required relatively

limited time, institutional commitment, or personal exposure. Direct communication with officials, campaign work, organizational membership, and offline mobilization required greater effort and carried more visible political consequences. Digital platforms consequently expanded the number of citizens performing political actions without producing an equivalent expansion in sustained participation within parties, associations, or formal deliberative institutions.

Cross-national patterns revealed differences in dominant participation forms. Indonesian respondents reported the highest rates of hashtag campaigning and digitally coordinated community mobilization. German respondents displayed stronger participation in official consultation portals and civic associations. British respondents reported relatively high use of online petitions and direct communication with representatives. American respondents demonstrated the highest frequency of political fundraising, partisan content sharing, and campaign volunteering. These differences indicate that digital participation was shaped by national political institutions, media systems, campaign cultures, and available civic infrastructures rather than by platform use alone.

Four political-participation profiles were identified through cluster analysis. Expressive participants constituted 35.4% of the sample and were characterized by frequent commenting, sharing, and public opinion expression but limited institutional contact. Informational observers represented 27.8% and regularly consumed political information without participating visibly. Hybrid participants accounted for 23.6% and combined online expression with voting, petitioning, community action, or direct communication with institutions. Institutionally connected participants represented only 13.2% and showed sustained engagement with political parties, civic organizations, consultation processes, or public officials.

Digital political efficacy received a mean score of 3.47 on a five-point scale, while perceived institutional responsiveness produced a lower mean of 2.81. Respondents generally believed that digital platforms increased their ability to obtain information, express political opinions, and connect with others. Confidence that governments or elected officials would seriously consider online contributions remained weaker. Exposure to misinformation achieved a mean score of 3.74, while online hostility produced a mean of 3.21. Younger respondents reported higher levels of digital expression and algorithmic awareness, although they also reported more frequent exposure to political hostility and misleading content.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Main Research Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Scale reliability
Digital political participation	3.42	0.76	0.88
Participation diversity	3.08	0.81	0.84
Digital competence	3.76	0.69	0.86
Political interest	3.58	0.83	0.89
Internal political efficacy	3.47	0.77	0.87
Institutional responsiveness	2.81	0.82	0.90
Institutional trust	2.93	0.85	0.91
Misinformation exposure	3.74	0.73	0.85
Online political hostility	3.21	0.88	0.88
Algorithmic awareness	3.19	0.79	0.83

Structural equation modelling demonstrated an acceptable fit to the observed data, with ($\chi^2/df=2.71$), comparative fit index ($=.953$), Tucker–Lewis index ($=.946$), root mean square error of approximation ($=.041$), and standardized root mean square residual ($=.038$). Political interest showed the strongest direct relationship with digital political participation, ($\beta=.41$), ($p<.001$), followed by digital competence, ($\beta=.27$), ($p<.001$), and internal political efficacy, ($\beta=.23$), ($p<.001$). Institutional responsiveness was positively associated with participation

diversity, ($\beta=.19$), ($p<.001$), indicating that citizens who perceived meaningful governmental feedback were more likely to combine online activities with institutionally oriented forms of engagement.

Mediation analysis showed that internal political efficacy partially mediated the relationship between digital competence and political participation. The indirect effect was statistically significant, ($\beta=.11$), 95% confidence interval [.08, .15], ($p<.001$). Online hostility weakened the relationship between political interest and visible participation, with a significant interaction coefficient of ($\beta=-.14$), ($p=.002$). Misinformation exposure was positively associated with political-content sharing, ($\beta=.16$), ($p<.001$), but negatively associated with institutional trust, ($\beta=-.29$), ($p<.001$). Frequent exposure to political information therefore encouraged activity while simultaneously weakening confidence in democratic institutions.

Table 2. Structural Relationships Among Digital and Democratic Variables

Hypothesized relationship	Standardized coefficient	Significance	Interpretation
Political interest → digital participation	($\beta=.41$)	($p<.001$)	Strong positive relationship
Digital competence → digital participation	($\beta=.27$)	($p<.001$)	Moderate positive relationship
Internal efficacy → digital participation	($\beta=.23$)	($p<.001$)	Moderate positive relationship
Institutional responsiveness → participation diversity	($\beta=.19$)	($p<.001$)	Positive relationship
Misinformation exposure → political sharing	($\beta=.16$)	($p<.001$)	Positive relationship
Misinformation exposure → institutional trust	($\beta=-.29$)	($p<.001$)	Moderate negative relationship
Online hostility × political interest → visible participation	($\beta=-.14$)	($p=.002$)	Significant weakening effect
Digital competence → efficacy → participation	Indirect ($\beta=.11$)	($p<.001$)	Significant partial mediation

Participation diversity was positively related to offline political engagement, ($r=.58$), ($p<.001$), while the frequency of low-cost expressive activity showed a weaker relationship with offline involvement, ($r=.24$), ($p<.001$). Citizens who participated through several channels, including petitions, civic monitoring, direct institutional contact, and community organization, were more likely to vote, attend meetings, volunteer, or join public actions. Repeated commenting or reposting alone was less strongly associated with these behaviours. The result demonstrates that the breadth and institutional orientation of digital participation were more informative than the volume of online activity.

Institutional responsiveness was positively associated with political efficacy, ($r=.46$), ($p<.001$), institutional trust, ($r=.53$), ($p<.001$), and willingness to participate again, ($r=.61$), ($p<.001$). Online hostility was negatively associated with public expression, ($r=-.31$), ($p<.001$), particularly among women, younger participants, and members of minority groups. Algorithmic awareness was positively related to verification behaviour, ($r=.39$), ($p<.001$), but showed only a weak relationship with reduced misinformation exposure, ($r=-.12$), ($p=.021$). Awareness of platform influence encouraged caution without fully protecting users from misleading political information.

Case A concerned a digitally organized environmental campaign in Indonesia that opposed a proposed development project affecting a local watershed. Activists used social media posts, short videos, online petitions, geospatial evidence, and messaging groups to

connect local communities with journalists, environmental organizations, and public officials. The campaign collected more than 85,000 digital signatures and contributed to a formal parliamentary hearing. Government representatives acknowledged the campaign and requested an additional environmental review. Participants nevertheless reported that algorithmic visibility favoured emotionally dramatic content over technical evidence, encouraging the campaign to simplify complex ecological arguments.

Case B examined a municipal participatory-budgeting platform in Germany, while Case C concerned a racial-justice hashtag campaign in the United States. The German platform received 4,860 proposals and comments, provided public status updates, and explained which recommendations were accepted, modified, or rejected. Participants reported comparatively high satisfaction because institutional feedback remained visible throughout the process. The American campaign generated extensive online attention and several offline demonstrations, but participation declined after harassment, partisan conflict, and disagreement about campaign objectives increased. Public visibility mobilized new participants while also creating fragmentation and emotional exhaustion.

The Indonesian case demonstrates how digital participation can move from public expression to institutional engagement when online visibility is connected with organized advocacy, credible evidence, media attention, and formal political channels. The number of signatures alone did not explain the campaign's influence. Coalition building, local testimony, environmental documentation, and direct contact with legislators converted digital support into a recognizable policy claim. Platform incentives created pressure toward emotional simplification, showing that mobilization and deliberative quality did not always develop together.

The comparison between the German and American cases illustrates the importance of institutional design. The participatory-budgeting platform created a structured pathway from citizen input to governmental response, making the consequences of participation visible. The hashtag campaign provided broader expressive freedom and rapid mobilization but lacked a single institutional mechanism capable of processing diverse demands. High digital activity therefore produced different democratic outcomes according to whether participation was connected to transparent procedures, identifiable decision-makers, and continuing organizational structures.

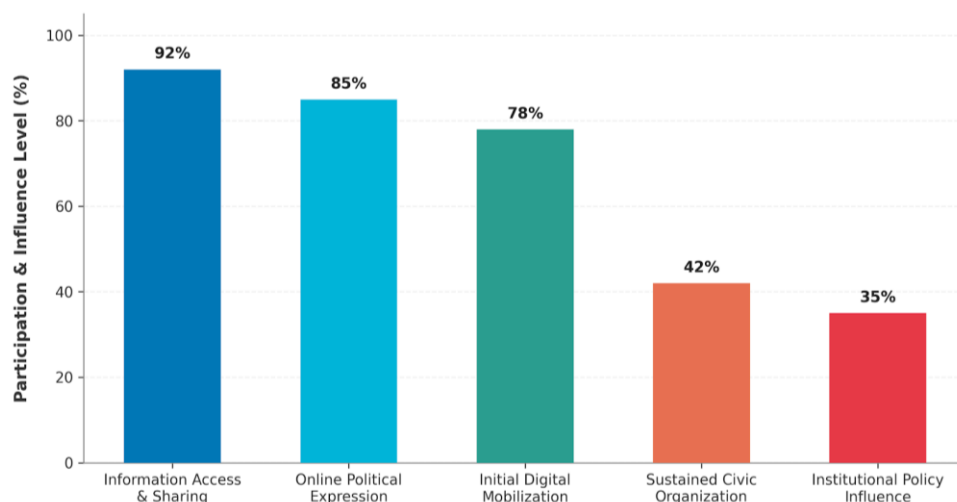


Figure 1. Levels of Digital Political Participation vs. Institutional Influence

The combined findings indicate that digital politics has expanded political participation more clearly at the levels of information, expression, and mobilization than at the levels of sustained organization and institutional influence. Citizens were able to enter political discussion with fewer practical barriers, yet meaningful democratic outcomes depended on political efficacy, digital competence, participation diversity, and institutional responsiveness.

High levels of engagement did not automatically produce democratic influence, particularly when activities remained limited to repeated sharing, commenting, or symbolic endorsement.

Digital participation should consequently be understood as a conditional democratic resource. Platform access can mobilize citizens, connect dispersed communities, and increase public scrutiny, while misinformation, harassment, algorithmic distortion, and weak governmental feedback can undermine trust and participation quality. Stronger democratic outcomes emerged when digital activity was linked to diverse forms of engagement, transparent institutional procedures, credible evidence, and visible responses from decision-makers. The transformation of political participation therefore concerns not only how citizens communicate online but also whether democratic institutions are capable of receiving, evaluating, and responding to digitally expressed public demands.

The findings show that digital politics expanded political participation most visibly through information consumption, public expression, content sharing, petitioning, and campaign-oriented communication. These activities involved lower practical and organizational costs than party membership, sustained civic association, direct engagement with officials, or participation in formal policy consultations. Digital platforms consequently widened opportunities for citizens to perform political actions, although the expansion of visible activity did not produce an equivalent increase in durable organizational participation. The transformation identified in this study concerns a diversification of political repertoires rather than a complete replacement of conventional democratic engagement.

Participation profiles revealed important differences between informational observation, expressive activity, hybrid engagement, and institutionally connected participation. Expressive participants frequently commented on or circulated political content but maintained limited contact with formal institutions. Hybrid participants combined online expression with voting, petitioning, community mobilization, or direct communication with decision-makers. Participation diversity showed a considerably stronger relationship with offline engagement than repeated low-cost expression. This distinction suggests that the democratic importance of digital participation depends more on the range and institutional orientation of citizens' activities than on the numerical volume of posts, comments, or reactions.

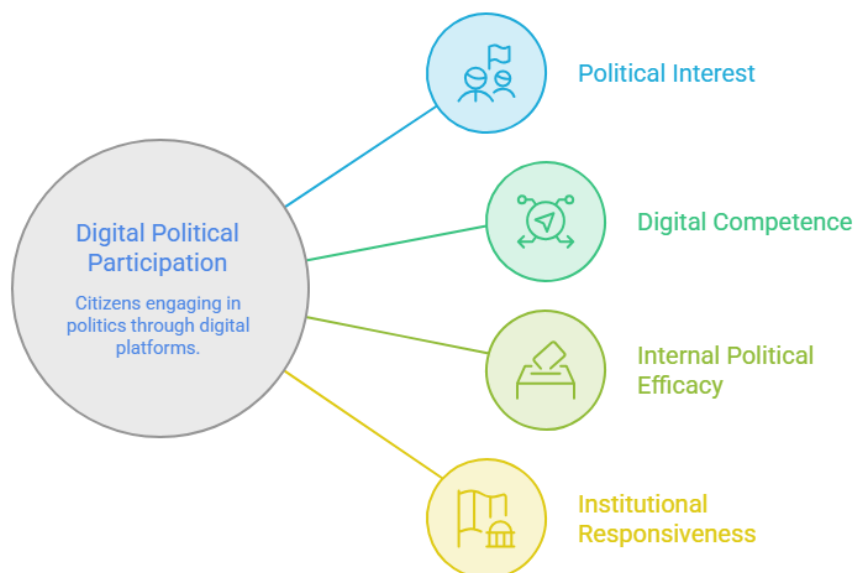


Figure 2. Unveiling the Dimensions of Digital Political Participation

Structural analysis identified political interest as the strongest predictor of digital political participation, followed by digital competence and internal political efficacy. Digital skills supported participation partly because they increased citizens' confidence in locating information, evaluating content, and communicating political positions. Institutional

responsiveness was associated with more diverse participation, stronger efficacy, greater trust, and a higher willingness to participate again. These relationships indicate that citizens' motivation and technological capability initiate participation, while visible institutional recognition helps transform temporary activity into repeated democratic involvement.

Misinformation and online hostility complicated the participatory benefits of digital politics. Exposure to misleading content was associated with increased political sharing but lower institutional trust, suggesting that information abundance could stimulate activity without improving democratic confidence. Hostility weakened visible participation, particularly among groups exposed to greater social or professional risk. Case-study findings reinforced these patterns: digital campaigns achieved stronger outcomes when online mobilization was connected to credible evidence, organized coalitions, identifiable decision-makers, and transparent institutional procedures.

The expansion of political information consumption and expressive participation is consistent with a systematic review of 496 studies showing that digital-media use is frequently associated with greater political participation and information consumption. The same review found that digital media can also be associated with polarization, misinformation, populism, and declining trust, with patterns differing across political contexts. The present findings support this dual interpretation by demonstrating that digital participation can mobilize citizens while simultaneously exposing them to misleading content, hostility, and weakened institutional confidence.

The stronger relationship between participation diversity and offline engagement qualifies claims that online expression necessarily produces broader democratic action. Reposting, commenting, or endorsing political content may contribute to agenda visibility and identity expression, but these activities remain weak indicators of institutional influence when they are disconnected from voting, association, deliberation, or direct contact with decision-makers. Contemporary democratic theory similarly treats social media as possessing several competing democratic functions rather than one uniformly participatory effect. Digital platforms may support peripheral political actors while failing to connect their claims to the institutional centres where binding decisions are made.

The importance of institutional responsiveness corresponds with research and policy analysis emphasizing that meaningful participation requires feedback, accountability, and demonstrable influence on the policy process. OECD guidance argues that participation should lower barriers, develop citizens' and officials' capacities, and provide clear accountability for how public contributions are used. The German participatory-budgeting case reflected these conditions because citizens could follow the status of proposals and understand why recommendations were accepted, modified, or rejected. High participation without comparable feedback risked becoming symbolic consultation rather than shared democratic problem-solving.

The negative relationship between online hostility and public expression aligns with recent cross-national evidence from 30 countries showing that political hostility is experienced more frequently in less democratic and more economically unequal settings. Current experimental research also demonstrates that algorithmic ranking can alter political exposure and subsequent account-following behaviour, although platform effects should not be assumed to operate identically across users or political systems. The present findings add that harassment and algorithmic visibility influence not only what citizens encounter but also whether they consider public participation safe and worthwhile.

The results signal a reconfiguration of political participation rather than a linear movement from offline politics to online politics. Citizens shift between information consumption, public expression, private messaging, petitioning, community organization, voting, protest, and institutional communication. Digital and conventional participation operate as interconnected components of a broader political repertoire. The democratic question is no

longer whether online engagement is “real” participation, but which combinations of activities generate knowledge, collective capacity, institutional access, and accountable decisions.

The persistence of unequal participation signals that lower communication costs do not remove underlying differences in political resources. Education, income, digital literacy, time, social confidence, linguistic competence, and personal safety continue to influence who participates and which voices receive attention. Earlier research on participatory inequality warned that internet use could reproduce advantages held by politically resourceful citizens, while more recent work shows that citizens consider some forms of unequal participation relevant to democratic legitimacy. Digital access should therefore be evaluated together with differences in competence, visibility, influence, and protection from harm.

The prominence of algorithms, moderation, and engagement metrics signals a partial privatization of the democratic public sphere. Technology companies organize access to political visibility through systems that are commercially designed, technically opaque, and unevenly accountable to national democratic institutions. Citizens may express themselves freely in a formal sense while remaining dependent on platform systems that rank, recommend, restrict, or monetize their political communication. Political participation is consequently shaped by private infrastructural decisions as well as by constitutional rights and electoral institutions.

The gap between high digital activity and low perceived institutional responsiveness signals a democratic bottleneck. Citizens possess expanding capacities to articulate demands, document problems, and mobilize support, but public institutions may lack procedures for receiving and processing this increased participatory supply. Unanswered petitions, opaque consultations, and absent feedback can weaken efficacy even when participation rates appear high. Digital democracy becomes substantively meaningful only when communicative openness is matched by institutional capacity, procedural clarity, and accountable responses.

The theoretical implication is that digital political participation should be conceptualized as a multistage democratic process. Political exposure can lead to expression, expression can support mobilization, mobilization can produce collective organization, and organized demands may enter institutional decision-making. Movement from one stage to another is not automatic. Citizen resources, platform structures, political organizations, and institutional openness determine whether online attention develops into meaningful influence. Participation research should therefore distinguish communicative visibility from organizational capacity and institutional consequence.

The methodological implication concerns how political participation is measured. Counts of posts, shares, signatures, hashtags, or platform interactions cannot independently demonstrate democratic empowerment. Measurement should include participation diversity, continuity, representativeness, deliberative quality, transitions to offline activity, institutional acknowledgement, policy influence, and willingness to participate again. Research instruments should also distinguish passive exposure from intentional information seeking and separate repeated expressive behaviour from involvement in several democratic channels.

The policy implication is that governments should design digital participation around visible response mechanisms. Public platforms need clear mandates, accessible submission processes, published timelines, transparent criteria for evaluating contributions, and explanations of final decisions. Participation should be connected to specific points in the policy cycle rather than offered as an open-ended opportunity to comment without identifiable consequences. OECD evidence on deliberative and participatory practices supports institutional designs that complement representative democracy while ensuring inclusion, accountability, and meaningful consideration of public input.

The platform-governance implication concerns safety, transparency, and user agency. Political participants require understandable information about recommendation systems, political advertising, data use, moderation decisions, and appeal procedures. Tools for

controlling audiences, filtering coordinated abuse, documenting harassment, and correcting misinformation can reduce the unequal costs of public participation. Platform reforms should empower citizens and civil-society actors rather than merely optimize political engagement as a commercial metric.

Low-cost digital activities became dominant because platform affordances reduce the time, geographical, financial, and organizational requirements of political expression. Citizens can react to public events immediately, circulate information to large networks, and participate without attending meetings or joining formal organizations. These advantages make digital expression accessible during moments of political urgency. Their low cost also permits episodic involvement that may end once public attention declines, explaining why frequent expression did not consistently correspond with sustained organizational participation.

Political interest, digital competence, and internal efficacy predicted participation because citizens need both motivation and practical capacity to act within information-rich environments. Political interest directs attention toward public affairs, while digital competence helps users locate sources, manage privacy, and evaluate online content. Internal efficacy gives citizens confidence that they can understand politics and communicate meaningful positions. Research on digital literacy similarly emphasizes that online political competence involves more than technical access and requires reliable ways to assess information and navigate digital environments.

Institutional responsiveness encouraged broader and repeated participation because feedback provides evidence that political effort has potential value. Citizens invest time, disclose preferences, and sometimes accept social risks when engaging publicly. Acknowledgement, procedural updates, reasoned responses, and visible policy effects confirm that these investments have not been ignored. Trust and efficacy weaken when institutions collect contributions without demonstrating how they affect decisions. The association found in this study is therefore consistent with the role of public trust in supporting democratic participation, cooperation, and governmental capacity.

Misinformation and hostility affected participation because political communication takes place in environments that reward attention, speed, novelty, emotional reaction, and conflict. Misleading content may circulate before verification occurs, while hostile responses can impose psychological, reputational, and professional costs on visible users. News exposure through social media can improve current-affairs knowledge and awareness, but it may also increase familiarity with false claims, making belief accuracy and verification behaviour essential outcomes to examine. Participation rises when political information becomes more available, yet its democratic quality depends on whether users can distinguish credible evidence from persuasive falsehoods.

Democratic institutions should construct integrated pathways connecting digital expression with formal participation. Online petitions, civic-monitoring reports, consultation platforms, and digitally coordinated campaigns need defined routes toward hearings, administrative review, legislative consideration, or public explanation. Institutions should avoid promising direct policy adoption for every contribution, but they must clarify the authority, scope, and likely consequence of each participatory mechanism. Feedback should remain available after a campaign's most visible stage so that participants can assess outcomes and maintain organizational continuity.

Public authorities and educational institutions should strengthen political digital literacy alongside general technical competence. Training should address source verification, algorithmic awareness, political-advertising transparency, data privacy, respectful disagreement, and recognition of manipulative content. Citizens also need practical knowledge about how to contact representatives, submit evidence, participate in consultations, and organize across online and offline settings. Literacy initiatives become democratically useful when they support political agency rather than merely warning users about online dangers.

Platform providers and governments should develop participation systems that actively reduce inequality. Accessible interfaces, multilingual options, disability accommodations, low-bandwidth formats, offline alternatives, targeted outreach, and protection against harassment are necessary to prevent digital systems from privileging highly educated and technologically confident citizens. Participation data should be examined for demographic and geographical imbalance, while corrective recruitment should be used when consultations systematically exclude affected groups. Emerging technologies may improve accessibility and analyse large volumes of citizen input, but their use requires safeguards concerning bias, privacy, explainability, and governmental accountability.

Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative designs capable of tracing participation from initial online activity to later institutional and political outcomes. Panel studies could determine whether expressive participation produces sustained engagement or short-lived mobilization. Field experiments could evaluate the effects of feedback, moderation, platform design, and verification interventions. Cross-national analysis should examine how democratic institutions, inequality, media systems, and platform regulation alter digital participation. Research partnerships with governments, civil society, and technology companies could provide stronger behavioural evidence while requiring strict safeguards for privacy, political freedom, and researcher independence.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that digital politics has expanded political participation more strongly at the levels of information access, public expression, petitioning, and short-term mobilization than at the levels of sustained organization and institutional influence. Meaningful democratic participation was associated not merely with the frequency of online activity but with the diversity of political actions, internal political efficacy, digital competence, and visible institutional responsiveness. Exposure to misinformation and online hostility produced a contradictory effect by stimulating political interaction while weakening trust, discouraging public expression, and increasing selective withdrawal. Digital platforms therefore function as conditional democratic resources whose effects depend on citizen capabilities, technological structures, and the capacity of institutions to respond transparently to public demands.

The principal contribution of this research lies in its conceptualization of digital political participation as a multistage process connecting political exposure, expression, mobilization, collective organization, institutional reception, and democratic consequences. This framework distinguishes highly visible online engagement from participation that produces sustained civic capacity or measurable institutional influence. The methodological contribution derives from integrating a cross-national survey, structural equation modelling, semi-structured interviews, digital observation, institutional document analysis, and comparative case studies. Such an approach enables the study to connect individual motivations, platform conditions, national political contexts, and governmental responses within a unified explanation of how digital politics transforms democratic participation.

The limitations of this study include its cross-sectional survey design, purposive qualitative sample, selected national contexts, dependence on self-reported behaviour, and restricted observation of digital platforms and political cases. Statistical associations cannot establish causal relationships, while differences in electoral systems, media environments, platform regulation, and political cultures limit broad generalization. Publicly visible digital activity may also overlook participation occurring through private groups, encrypted communication, or informal community networks. Future research should employ longitudinal panel studies, field experiments, behavioural platform data, and broader cross-national comparisons to trace how online engagement develops into lasting institutional outcomes.

Further investigation should examine generative artificial intelligence, algorithmic political targeting, coordinated misinformation, gendered and racialized harassment, digital surveillance, platform moderation, political inequality, and the long-term effects of institutional feedback on democratic trust and participation.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used Grammarly to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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