

Analysis on the Development of Digital Governance and Collaborative Citizen Participation in the Field of Public Administration

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ABSTRACT

Digital technology is continuously changing the operating logic of public administration, and citizen participation in building and running digital governments has been used to measure the effectiveness of government digitalisation. The current development situation of citizen collaborative participation in the field of public administration will be examined through three lenses in this paper: institutional supply, platform support and practical operation. The national integrated government service platform has more than 1.08 billion registered users, and there are a total of 13,440 government websites and 82,151 government new media accounts at all levels in the country. Promptly respond to the public's complaints and enhance other modes of government-citizen communication. The State Council's "Guiding Opinions on Strengthening Digital Government Construction" has listed "prompt response to public complaints" as one of the key new forms of Digital Government Construction. Digital Infrastructure and institutional frameworks have provided the initial support for citizen participation. Obstacles to online participation still exist, data security risks are present, and the efficiency of some platform interactions is relatively low; thus, the scale and depth of collaboration have not been maximized. In the interest of promoting high-quality development of digital governance and citizen participation, efforts should be made to coordinate technological empowerment and institutional innovation, focus on the simultaneous progress of expanding participation channels and improving the effectiveness of participation, manage the relationship between data openness and the limits of privacy protection, and build a governance pattern where technology and institutions work together.

KEYWORDS

Digital Governance; Citizen Collaborative Participation; Public Administration; Government-citizen Interaction; Value Co-creation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital technology has entered public administration and is now operating in a new way. Technological iteration has extended the scope of governance, but digital governance will not end here. Its main purpose should also be to adjust the relationship between the government and the people. Citizens and the government are now connected online, working together, and this participation is becoming an essential indicator of the level of digital government.

This proposal has a feasible basis. The national integrated government service platform has connected 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the central government, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps and 46 State Council departments, and has more than 1.08 billion registered users [1]. A report by Tsinghua University in 2025 shows that as of October 2025, there were a total of 13,440 government websites at all levels and 82,151 government new

media accounts, including 54,878 WeChat official accounts and 9,721 Weibo accounts [2]. The System is also developing at the same time. The 2022 Guiding Opinions of the State Council on Strengthening Digital Government Construction set out the "people-centred approach" and the guarantee of "digital inclusivity and elimination of the digital divide" as basic principles. In 2025, the Regulations on Government Data Sharing have created an institutional basis for data openness and use. The reform of "efficiently completing one thing" has switched the focus of government services from departmental organization to user demands. Digital platforms have transformed institutional advantages into actual governance results, and the government service platform is now a primary channel for the government to communicate with the public.

The technical conditions have been met, but the participation effect has not followed automatically. Barriers to participation, information isolation and security problems have still not been solved; thus, joint efforts cannot proceed smoothly. How to use the digital governance system to encourage citizens to participate more actively in their lives and shift from a one-way approach of government supply to a two-way process of co-creation with the public is an issue that needs to be addressed by scholars of public administration. This paper examines the development situation, practical exploration and real dilemmas of digital governance and citizen participation in China, then puts forward optimisation directions and provides references for public governance.

2. THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND INSTITUTIONAL EVOLUTION OF DIGITAL GOVERNANCE AND CITIZEN COLLABORATIVE PARTICIPATION

Theoretically, the two are connected in the course of development of public administration theory. Traditional public administration is based on a bureaucratic system and generally has the features of division of labour and hierarchical control. The people are generally not involved in the government's work. In the late 20th century, the theory of governance also developed to some extent. Based on the theory, negotiations and cooperation are used to coordinate the interactions among administrative organisations and other parties. The good governance theory believes that the efficiency of governance can be promoted by the participation of citizens, and thus advocates for joint administration of public affairs by the government and the people [3]. The above assumptions have been supported by technology in recent years. Digital platforms have reduced the constraints of time and place, lowered participation costs, and enabled a large number of people to take part in public affairs in an accessible manner, providing a feasible basis. Digital Government and e-Government are not the same. E-government refers to the extension of traditional public services over the Internet, and digital government is a change in how the government interacts with the public is carried out by technology.

There have been some changes at the institutional level. The "Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Digital Government" (Guo Fa [2022] No. 14) issued by the State Council in 2022 laid out some general directions, highlighted the position of the people and the value of data, and offered a path for citizen participation. According to the regulations on the sharing of government data (State Council Order No. 809, effective 2025), a general system for opening and using government data has been built. The General Office of the State Council has also established a regular promotion mechanism for "Efficiently Handling One Thing" (Guo Bu Fa [2025] No. 24) and required improvements in government services according to the actual needs of enterprises and the public. The institutions have established a regular system for involving the public and constructed an all-weather policy channel.

Theories of value co-creation can be used to support the analysis above. Based on the above theory, the value of public services is not only generated by government departments but also gradually formed through interaction with service users. Xiang Yuqiong and Jiang Yaqin's research on the

Zhejiang Government Service Network shows that cooperative production behaviour occurs at all times in the process of digital government services [4]. They explain that the government has simultaneously strengthened both the system construction and the technical platform, thereby increasing the behaviour-changing motivation and ability to participate among the public. At its core, citizens' cooperative participation refers to the joint empowerment of the government and the people in the digital age.

3. PLATFORM SUPPORT: CONSTRUCTION OF DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND PARTICIPATION CHANNELS

A Digital Platform will be introduced to support the above model. The national integrated government service platform serves as the foundation for building an extensive and well-organised digital infrastructure across China, and at the same time, more and more channels for public participation are developing.

At the most basic level, the government website and the new media for the government are for spreading information and collecting demands. According to the online government assessment report published by Tsinghua University in 2025, as of October 2025, all government websites at all levels across the country have accumulated a total of 33.994 million pieces of information, 192,000 pieces of explanatory materials, and 4.172 million letters. There are a total of 82,151 government new media accounts, including 54,878 WeChat official accounts and 9,721 Weibo accounts. The range of the information is relatively large, and the public can access official information to some extent. Some leading local government websites have ceased to be mere disseminators and have started to organise information by fields and circumstances for a wider range of public services. Some places have integrated the policy content from various departments to enable enterprises and the public to query, match and use them directly; that is to say, it has changed from "people looking for policies" to "policies finding people". A lower threshold for accessing information will help the public engage in the process of government management.

The data are now open. It has allowed the public to participate in the construction of government. Open data is in fact a type of participation resource. It can be used to identify problems and raise issues for the public [5]. At present, the Shanghai Public Data Open Platform has released 5,515 sets of data from 51 departments across all corners of the city, such as transport, education, and environment [6]. Individuals and social organisations can use the above data for analysis, find shortcomings, offer suggestions and even start public discussions. Open data can also help the public monitor whether the implementation of policies is reasonable and whether the decision-making process has been reasonable through data. Thus, the four rights to be informed of, participate in, express and inspect public affairs have gradually been realised in specific cases.

Artificial Intelligence technology is improving the interactive experience of the platform. Many local government websites have added intelligent question-and-answer systems based on large models to provide specific answers to all kinds of questions. The function to summarise the document will automatically extract the main content of a policy document for convenience. Although there have been technological advances to lower both the hurdle and the cost for the public to participate, these technologies have only created opportunities. The actual participation in this system will depend on the quality of the support system.

4. PRACTICAL EXPLORATION: TYPICAL MODELS AND OPERATING MECHANISMS OF CITIZEN COLLABORATIVE PARTICIPATION

With the gradual formation of institutional systems, various regions have been employing digital platforms for different types of experiments in practice, and diverse forms of citizen participation

have gradually appeared. Different forms of participation have been developed at various levels by all kinds of digital platforms, such as demand response, grassroots governance and democratic consultation.

Beijing's "prompt response to public complaints" is a typical case of government-citizen communication in the area of administration. It is a hub for government service departments that collects previously dispersed public complaint hotlines and suggestions from all levels of the public across the region to integrate them into a digital and intelligent platform for receiving citizens' demands at any time. Channels for citizens' demands and responses have become more explicit. In preparing the "Beijing Response Upon Receipt Work Regulations", more than ten thousand delegates of the People's Congress went to the "homes" and "stations" of the community to hear people's opinions, and thus brought the legislation closer to the people. Participation in the formulation of this law will help to promote both the scientific character of the law and the democratic consciousness of the people.

Many explorations have also been conducted in the area of grassroots governance. The "Smart Village" platform in Funan County, Anhui Province, has built a "one village, one code" system based on administrative villages. Scan the code to display the village information and join the management of the village. By April 2022, the number of registered users on the platform had reached 874,000 and the total number of visits had reached 6.32 million. At the time of the incident, 219,000 suggestions and comments had been published, and about 206,000 of them had been handled in terms of environmental sanitation, infrastructure, social security, public services, etc. [7] The "Group Governance" platform in Cixi City, Zhejiang Province, is based on an incentive design of "points + credit points", integrates the efforts of the public, the government and enterprises, and has explored solutions to common problems such as low participation and insufficient initiative at the grassroots level. Grassroots experience shows that when digital platforms are connected to the people's immediate interests, citizen participation can be effectively realised.

Digitalisation Construction at the national level is also moving forward. Since the introduction of the "Digital People's Congress System" in Shah River City, Hebei Province, representatives have uploaded a total of 45,312 issues via the mobile application for duty performance. More than 95 per cent of the representative group took part in solving problems during the break, and the solution rate was 95 per cent. The system has built an integrated interaction mechanism between the People's Congress and the 49 departments of the "One Government, One Commission, Two Courts" [8], and an "Online Public Opinion Expressway" has been constructed in Zhenjiang City, Jiangsu Province. Online public sentiment collection, gathering public opinion, addressing public concerns and harnessing the public mind were all conducted. The discussions of the Standing Committee were also extended to the online platform. Technology can improve the efficiency of government and reduce the entry barriers for the public to participate in public affairs. The Scope of discussion and supervision has thus expanded.

5. REALISTIC CHALLENGES: STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO CITIZEN COLLABORATIVE PARTICIPATION

Digital technology has increased efficiency; however, this higher efficiency has not improved the system. Citizen participation in governance still faces some institutional deficiencies at the fundamental level. According to the analytical system of "capacity to participate - willingness to participate - effectiveness of participation", these obstacles can be divided into three categories.

First, there is a participation limit. The Digital Divide includes lack of access, skills, and knowledge. Older people, rural residents and those with lower levels of education have relatively weak digital operating abilities and are thus unable to participate in public affairs. Even in areas with better facilities, a digital literacy gap still exists and is thus unequal. Zhou Zezhong and Ding Mengqian

indicated in their study of the public participation mechanism that the digital technology gap restricts equal opportunities for public participation [9]. Although digital governance has enabled some people to participate in it, it has also excluded others; those who cannot use the new technology well are no longer able to join, and traditional means of expression are gradually disappearing. If there are still inequalities in the starting conditions, this will undermine the democratic spirit of digital government.

The third is a desire to participate. Data Security and Privacy Concerns. The sharing of government data leaves a large amount of data traces in the process of citizen participation. If they are used improperly or leaked, people will lose faith in the platform. The "Regulations on Government Data Sharing" (Order No. 809) issued by the State Council in 2025 provides a system foundation, but problems such as the scope of data collection, permission for use and security liability at the operating level still need to be solved. The risk of privacy violation among citizens will reduce their willingness to participate voluntarily. Trust is the psychological basis for cooperative participation, and institutions provide guarantees for this trust.

Next is the mode of operation for participation. Some platforms are more oriented towards construction than to operation. Some government Apps or WeChat official accounts have been released but lack regular updates and effective interaction. If the people's demands are not met in time and their opinions are ignored, they will lose the will to participate. The underlying reason is that the design of participation by some platforms is still at a superficial level, limited to opinion collection and satisfaction assessment; thus, citizens are unable to engage in decision-making and supervision of policy implementation. For the three mechanisms of public opinion aggregation, democratic consultation and public wisdom-assisted governance to operate effectively, strong institutional design is needed; otherwise, they will not be effective [10]. Data barriers and information islands at different departments and levels are also responsible for the low efficiency in the circulation of demand and weaken the actual effect of collaborative participation.

6. OPTIMIZING THE PATH: TOWARDS HIGH-QUALITY CITIZEN COLLABORATIVE PARTICIPATION

In light of the problems of the participation threshold, participation intention and participation effectiveness, digital governance and citizen collaborative participation need to find their key breakthroughs. The following will expand on the above problems in terms of capacity building, institutional guarantees and mechanism optimisation.

Close the digital divide first to extend the coverage area of people involved. The "Guiding Opinions on Strengthening Digital Government Construction" calls for "promoting digital inclusivity and eliminating the 'digital divide'". On the one hand, the government can maintain some offline service windows to enable people without digital literacy to still use them. At the same time, digital skills training for some elderly and rural residents has been arranged to help them improve these skills. Wang Xinliang and Xing Yudan's research shows that the function of supporting government digital platforms is declining gradually. The first is to improve the digital literacy of the people, [11]. Therefore, the focus of work will shift from platform construction to capacity building, and from technology popularisation to literacy popularisation.

Improve the Data Governance System to restore public trust. Although the "Regulations on Government Data Sharing" have established an initial system, more detailed provisions on the scope of data collection, the distribution of use rights, and the establishment of security measures are still to be formulated. Although the government's department has promoted the opening and sharing of data, an all-weather safe network still needs to be built to prevent its abuse or leakage. In 2025, Nankai University released the "Evaluation Index of Digitalisation Empowering Government Governance" and placed "Digitalisation Security Support" at the top of its first-level indicators, indicating that all

parties are concerned about this problem. Only when the public is assured of the safety of their data will they feel safe participating and be able to do so actively and consistently.

Improve the Operating Mode of the Platform to Increase its Efficiency. The Integration Reform of government services has a clear direction. The State Council's "Guiding Opinions on Further Optimising Government Services, Improving Administrative Efficiency and Promoting 'Efficiently Handling One Thing' (Document No. 3 of 2024)" has laid out the direction for this integration reform. It is not necessary to make the process of handling affairs more convenient; instead, we should promote citizens' participation at a deeper level by actively engaging in serious matters such as decision-making discussions, process monitoring and effect assessment, etc., to make participation a real part of governance [12]. Once the people know that their suggestions will change the direction of policy, they will be more willing to participate in their own affairs and make public contributions. In addition, the data barrier between departments and levels needs to be reduced so that there will be an open channel for appeals at all times, or the actual effect of participation will be diminished due to information isolation.

7. CONCLUSION

At present, many governments are promoting the construction of digital governments and citizen-participatory governments in various ways. From the above content, we can see that this problem occurs at three levels: Governance theory, Value co-creation theory and Cooperative production theory provide theoretical support; "Responding to Complaints Immediately", "Smart Villages", "Digital People's Congress", and other practices offer real-life cases; and issues such as participation barriers, data security, and platform effectiveness need to be addressed. Technology is changing at present, and good governance has not kept pace. It has been validated in all the above areas.

Technology and institutions are related in the above way, and this will be the focus of our discussion. Digital technology has lowered the cost of participation and expanded the channels; however, ultimately, institutions have decided how this technology should be used, to what extent, and who will benefit from it. Money is being spent to build platforms in some places, but there is no effort to involve the people in the design process. Therefore, technology will not automatically align with the public interest. The State Council's documents have proposed "adhering to reform as the guiding principle" and "adhering to overall coordination", and have pointed out this exact issue. Technology can be bought, but the institutions will have to be built independently.

Looking ahead, there are three directions that need to be continuously promoted: expand the scope of participation and improve its quality simultaneously; citizens' participation should not only have a channel for submission but also a right to voice opinions; data openness and privacy protection must be guaranteed; if openness is lacking, the data will not be published; if protection is weak, public trust will be eroded; thus, both need to reach an optimal balance point. Finally, the subject of the cooperative participation is the citizens' personal experience. The actual effect of digital governance is not high-tech systems and intelligent platforms; rather, it is whether people feel that their voices have been heard and they are included in the participation process. In practice, the value co-creation of the government and the people will not be merely words.

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