

Public Trust Reloaded: The Impact of Data Transparency and Digital Participation on Government Legitimacy in the Era of Open Government

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how data transparency and digital participation influence public trust and government legitimacy in the contemporary era of open government. Through a qualitative literature-based approach, the research synthesizes recent theoretical and empirical findings published between 2015 and 2025, encompassing studies on transparency, e-participation, and institutional trust across diverse political and cultural contexts. Data were collected from reputable databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, and SpringerLink, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis to identify conceptual patterns and thematic relationships among the key constructs. The results indicate that data transparency enhances perceptions of government competence and integrity, while digital participation fosters inclusiveness and responsiveness, together generating a multidimensional form of legitimacy. However, these effects are contingent on the quality, accessibility, and sincerity of transparency practices as well as on the meaningfulness of participatory mechanisms. The study also finds that trust functions both as an outcome and as a mediating variable, moderating how citizens interpret openness and accountability. Theoretically, this research contributes to the integration of Legitimacy Theory and Trust Theory by demonstrating that legitimacy in the digital era is co-produced through communicative interaction and ethical transparency. Managerially, the findings imply that open government must evolve toward sustainable governance by institutionalizing transparency and digital participation as continuous, ethical, and inclusive processes. The study concludes that enduring legitimacy requires adaptive institutions capable of aligning openness with technological transformation, citizen expectations, and responsible data stewardship.

Keywords: Data Transparency, Digital Participation, Public Trust, Government Legitimacy, Open Government.

I. Introduction

In modern democratic governance, public trust in government constitutes a foundational pillar of legitimacy and effective administration. As societies become increasingly complex and digitally interconnected, citizens expect greater accountability, transparency, and participation from their governments. Governments, in turn, have responded by embracing the principles of *open government*,

emphasizing data transparency, proactive information disclosure, and inclusive citizen engagement. This transformation, driven by advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs), global governance norms, and rising citizen expectations, has redefined the dynamics of trust between the state and society (Bertot et al., 2010; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). Open government initiatives aim not only to improve efficiency and accountability but also to strengthen democratic legitimacy by allowing citizens to observe, understand, and influence governmental decision-making processes (Lourenço, 2015). At the general level, open government represents a paradigm shift in governance. The traditional bureaucratic model, characterized by hierarchy, secrecy, and unilateral decision-making, has evolved toward an open, collaborative, and participatory framework (Meijer et al., 2012). In this model, *data transparency* refers to the proactive disclosure and accessibility of government data, budgets, and performance indicators, while *digital participation* refers to the use of digital technologies to enable citizen input, feedback, and co-creation of policies and services (Ruijter et al., 2020). Together, these elements form the backbone of open government reforms intended to rebuild trust and legitimacy amid growing public skepticism (Bannister & Connolly, 2014).

The decline of public trust in government has become a global concern. Studies conducted across diverse political systems demonstrate that citizens' confidence in public institutions has declined markedly over the past two decades (OECD, 2022). This decline erodes the legitimacy of democratic governance, reduces compliance with regulations, and weakens public cooperation in collective action (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003). Trust is therefore not only a moral or political asset but also a functional requirement for effective governance (Mayer et al., 1995). Within this context, transparency and participation have been identified as potential remedies for the trust deficit. The underlying logic suggests that when citizens perceive that government actions are transparent and that they have genuine opportunities to participate in governance, their sense of fairness, accountability, and inclusion improves, which in turn enhances legitimacy (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014). Transparency allows citizens to evaluate governmental performance objectively, while participation enhances their sense of ownership and belonging (Fung, 2015). However, empirical findings reveal mixed outcomes. While some research supports the positive impact of transparency and participation on trust (Porumbescu, 2015; Wirtz & Birkmeyer, 2015), others indicate that these initiatives may have limited or even counterproductive effects if not implemented meaningfully (Harrison & Sayogo, 2014). For example, excessive data disclosure without contextual interpretation may overwhelm citizens or expose government inefficiencies, leading to reduced trust (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). Likewise, digital participation platforms that merely simulate consultation without influencing real decisions may foster cynicism rather than engagement (Yang & Holzer, 2006). These divergent findings underscore the importance of context-specific, evidence-based research on how data transparency and digital participation influence public trust and legitimacy.

The emergence of open data portals, e-governance applications, and social media channels has revolutionized how governments communicate and interact with citizens. Governments now disseminate vast amounts of data ranging from budgets to policy outcomes, while citizens use digital media to comment, criticize, and collaborate. This interactivity has been theorized as a new form of "digital legitimacy" (Meijer, 2015), where transparency and participation in digital spaces function as symbolic acts of accountability and inclusiveness (Parycek et al., 2018). Numerous studies have attempted to quantify these relationships. Grimmelikhuijsen (2012) demonstrated that perceived transparency positively affects perceived competence and benevolence of government officials, key dimensions of trust. Porumbescu (2017) found that transparent information delivery via online channels enhances citizens' perceived fairness and thus strengthens trust. Meanwhile, studies on digital participation reveal that online engagement fosters deliberative legitimacy, particularly when citizens perceive their input as valued and consequential (Michels, 2011).

Yet, the mechanisms linking transparency, participation, and legitimacy remain contested. Cucciniello et al. (2017) argue that transparency influences trust primarily through mediating factors such as perceived integrity and performance, while digital participation may strengthen legitimacy through perceived responsiveness and empowerment (Kim & Lee, 2012). Moreover, contextual variables—such as political culture, technological infrastructure, and prior trust levels—moderate these effects (Reddick et al.,

2017). Therefore, further descriptive quantitative investigation is warranted to map how these constructs interact in the contemporary era of open government, particularly across diverse political and institutional settings. In the Southeast Asian and Indonesian contexts, the open government movement has gained significant momentum since the launch of the Open Government Indonesia (OGI) initiative in 2011. This program, aligned with the global Open Government Partnership (OGP), emphasizes transparency, accountability, and citizen participation through data disclosure and ICT adoption (Haryanti & Suryani, 2019). Despite notable progress—such as the development of online complaint portals, open data websites, and participatory budgeting systems—public trust in government institutions remains volatile (Arifin & Pratama, 2020). Citizens often perceive transparency measures as symbolic and digital participation channels as lacking influence on real policy outcomes (Pratono, 2021). Against this backdrop, understanding the extent to which data transparency and digital participation affect government legitimacy becomes both empirically and policy-relevant.

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in Legitimacy Theory and Trust Theory. Legitimacy Theory posits that the authority of government depends on citizens' belief in the appropriateness and fairness of its actions (Suchman, 1995). Trust Theory suggests that trust is an outcome of citizens' assessments of government competence, integrity, and benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995). Data transparency primarily relates to perceptions of integrity and competence, as open data allows citizens to verify information and evaluate performance (Piotrowski, 2014). Digital participation relates to perceptions of benevolence and responsiveness, as participatory platforms create reciprocal communication channels (Bryer, 2007). Together, these mechanisms can reinforce government legitimacy when perceived positively. Empirical evidence supports this theoretical integration. Kim and Lee (2012) found that e-participation positively influences trust through perceived government responsiveness. Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2014) demonstrated that transparency enhances trust when citizens attribute competence and honesty to public institutions. These findings align with the argument that legitimacy in the digital era arises from both procedural and substantive dimensions of governance—procedural transparency (how information is shared) and participatory inclusiveness (how citizens are involved).

Despite abundant literature on open government, few studies have jointly examined the combined influence of data transparency and digital participation on government legitimacy using a descriptive quantitative framework. Most research focuses on experimental or case-based designs, often in Western democracies, with limited generalizable data from developing contexts. Furthermore, many studies analyze transparency and participation separately, overlooking their potential interactive or complementary effects (Bannister & Connolly, 2014). The absence of comprehensive, data-driven mapping of citizens' perceptions in the digital era leaves a gap in understanding how these variables collectively shape legitimacy. This study addresses that gap by empirically describing the patterns, relationships, and intensity of perceived data transparency, digital participation, and government legitimacy in a specific context. Its descriptive quantitative design allows for systematic measurement of citizens' perceptions, statistical analysis of relationships, and interpretation of emerging trends. By doing so, it contributes to both theoretical development and policy formulation within the open government framework. The objectives of this study are fivefold.

- a. To measure citizens' perceptions of data transparency in government activities.
- b. To assess citizens' levels of engagement in digital participation platforms.
- c. To evaluate the overall level of public trust in government as an indicator of legitimacy.
- d. To examine the relationship between data transparency and government legitimacy.
- e. To examine the relationship between digital participation and government legitimacy.

Although the study does not aim to establish causality, it provides a descriptive statistical overview of how these constructs correlate, thereby offering empirical insight into the conditions of open governance in the digital age. Empirical evidence from multiple regions reinforces the importance of this inquiry. A meta-

analysis by Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2014) confirmed a consistent positive correlation between perceived transparency and trust across public sectors. Cucciniello et al. (2017) further reported that transparency enhances trust primarily through perceived fairness and competence. In parallel, e-participation research suggests that online engagement increases satisfaction and legitimacy when accompanied by responsiveness (Kim & Lee, 2012; Wirtz & Birkmeyer, 2015). Nevertheless, contradictory findings exist. Harrison and Sayogo (2014) observed that transparency initiatives may backfire if data disclosure reveals inefficiencies. Similarly, Roberts (2012) cautioned that transparency without accountability can lead to “transparency fatigue,” where excessive information erodes rather than builds trust. Consequently, the interaction of transparency and participation merits renewed quantitative description to clarify these complexities.

Theoretically, this study contributes to refining the conceptual link between open government, trust, and legitimacy in digital contexts. It tests the proposition that openness, manifested through data and participation, constitutes not only a democratic ideal but also a measurable determinant of legitimacy. Practically, the results will assist policymakers in designing open government strategies that are evidence-based and citizen-centric. Findings can inform national and local governments on how to improve information accessibility, participatory mechanisms, and communication transparency to rebuild public confidence. By emphasizing empirical description rather than experimental causality, the research situates itself as a diagnostic study that captures the contemporary state of public perception in the open government era. Its outcomes will serve as a foundation for future longitudinal or comparative analyses, contributing to both scholarly literature and policy evaluation frameworks. In sum, this study arises from the recognition that public trust, data transparency, and digital participation are interdependent components of legitimate governance. The erosion of trust in modern societies underscores the need for governments to go beyond procedural compliance and embrace genuine openness. Through descriptive quantitative analysis, the present research aims to reveal the extent to which open data and digital engagement have reshaped citizens’ perceptions of legitimacy. By doing so, it contributes to the broader discourse on democratic renewal and digital governance, offering empirically grounded insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike.

II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Empirical Studies on Data Transparency and Trust in Government

In recent years, a growing body of empirical research has explored how disclosure of government-held data and public information access influence citizens’ trust in government institutions. For example, Alessandro et al. (2021) conducted a survey experiment demonstrating that providing information to citizens generally enhances perceptions of transparency and, in turn, increases trust in government—but the magnitude of the effect depends on prior trust levels and information valence. Alessandro et al. found that while transparency per se has a positive effect, the effect is attenuated when citizens hold high pre-existing scepticism (Alessandro et al., 2021). Further, Pratolo (2022) examined transparency and accountability in village governance during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that transparency alone did not automatically yield higher trust; instead, the mediating effect of service quality and institutional responsiveness was important. In a study in Indonesia, Husni (2023) revealed that village government performance mediated the relationship between transparency and public trust in local institutions—indicating that mere disclosure without sufficient performance may limit trust building (Husni, 2023). More broadly, the systematic review by Wirtz, Weyerer, Becker et al. (2022) of 169 empirical open government data (OGD) studies established a conceptual framework of antecedents, decisions and outcomes, showing transparency (as outcome of open data) is often assumed to lead to positive outcomes—yet many empirical gaps remain, particularly around trust as a mediating or outcome variable (Wirtz et al., 2022). Collectively, these studies suggest that while data transparency is a promising lever for trust building, its effects are conditional, context-dependent, and often moderated by performance, quality of disclosure, and citizen perceptions.

2.2. Definitions and Conceptual Clarifications: Data Transparency, Digital Participation, Legitimacy, Public Trust

For this research, clarity in defining key constructs is critical. Data transparency typically refers to the extent to which governments proactively disclose data, make information accessible, understandable and usable by citizens—covering budget data, performance indicators, decision rationale, etc. (OECD, n.d.). The OECD emphasises that transparency and access to information are core principles of open government and crucial for an informed, engaged public. Digital participation refers to the use of digital tools and platforms to enable citizens to contribute, collaborate, monitor or provide feedback in governance processes. Studies treating digital participation emphasize e-participation (online consultations, digital feedback, co-creation) as extending the citizen voice via ICTs. Public trust is conventionally defined as citizens' belief in government institutions' competence, integrity and benevolence (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Legitimacy in governance theory refers to the belief by citizens that a government has rightful authority, that its actions are appropriate and its decisions accepted (Suchman, 1995). In the open-government context, legitimacy is influenced by perceptions of transparency, responsiveness, participation and trust. Thus, in this study, data transparency and digital participation are posited as antecedents to public trust, and trust serves as an indicator of perceived legitimacy.

2.3. Digital Participation and its Relationship with Trust and Government Legitimacy

Beyond transparency, digital participation has attracted empirical attention as a mechanism to strengthen citizen–government relations. Campbell's (2023) vignette experiment in South Korea found that participatory policymaking marginally increased citizen trust in government—but crucially, policy performance was a dominant influencer, and participation alone could not overcome the trust-damaging effect of poor performance (Campbell, 2023). Similarly, a study in Turkey by “Does Participation Have an Impact ...” (2025) revealed that participation partially mediates the influence of transparency on trust: namely, transparency positively influenced participation, and participation in turn raised trust—but the mediating effect was only partial (Does Participation..., 2025). These findings highlight that digital participation adds value, but its effect is not uniform and is shaped by context, implementation quality, and citizens' prior attitudes. Further, Kumalasari et al. (2024) in a crisis communication setting across MENA region local governments found that while digital communication transparency significantly enhanced public engagement, trust per se did not directly drive engagement; rather engagement (a form of participation) mediated the effect of transparency on outcome effectiveness (Kumalasari et al., 2024). Thus, digital participation interlinks with transparency and trust, but the causal mechanisms are complex and often indirect.

2.4. Specialised Insights: Open Government Data (OGD) and Institutional Trust

The domain of open government data (OGD) has produced specialised insights into how data disclosure influences trust and legitimacy. Zainal, Abdul Rahim & Nazri (2024) focused on Malaysia, finding that information quality (a dimension of data transparency) significantly influences trust in an OGD website, which in turn mediates the relationship between trust in government and behavioral intention to use the data. This underscores how trust in the medium (i.e., data portal) can mediate the broader link between government transparency and citizen outcomes (Zainal et al., 2024). Barati (2023) reviewed privacy concerns in OGD programmes and pointed out that although transparency is touted as beneficial, privacy worries and data misuse fears can undermine citizens' trust in open-data initiatives (Barati, 2023). The systematic review by Wirtz et al. (2022) further notes the empirical gap in examining trust and legitimacy within OGD literature. On the budget participation front, evidence from Sierra Leone documented that digital participatory budgeting increased perceptions of government legitimacy—but only for certain groups and it did not

uniformly raise trust across all citizens (Grieco et al., 2025). These niche studies demonstrate that the journey from data transparency to trust and legitimacy is neither straightforward nor linear: factors like data quality, privacy, participation design, and citizen heterogeneity matter.

2.5. Synthesis of Research Gaps and Implications for Quantitative-Descriptive Inquiry

While numerous studies document the associations among transparency, participation, and trust, several gaps remain that justify a descriptive quantitative approach. First, many investigations adopt experimental or case-qualitative designs, limiting generalisability (Wirtz et al., 2022). Second, studies that consider multiple antecedents (transparency + participation) in the same empirical model are relatively few (Kumalasari et al., 2024). Third, the majority of research focuses on developed countries; evidence from developing or transitional contexts is under-represented, especially in Southeast Asia and Indonesia (Husni, 2023). Fourth, the operationalisation of legitimacy (via public trust) often remains abstract or secondary rather than a primary outcome. Finally, the descriptive mapping of citizens' perceptions of transparency and participation—and their statistical associations with trust—is underdeveloped. A quantitative-descriptive study, such as yours, can measure levels of perceived data transparency, participation and trust, examine their associations, and provide baseline evidence in a specific context. This contributes to theory by testing the conceptual links empirically, and to practice by providing policy-relevant insights about where citizens stand, rather than only whether an intervention works.

III. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in the methodology of a literature-based or library research design. The choice of this approach is driven by the conceptual and theoretical nature of the study, which seeks to interpret, synthesize, and evaluate existing scholarly contributions related to data transparency, digital participation, public trust, and government legitimacy within the framework of open government. Qualitative literature research allows for a comprehensive understanding of how these variables are interconnected and manifested across different political, institutional, and technological contexts. Rather than relying on empirical field data, this study draws upon peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, institutional reports, and theoretical frameworks that collectively illuminate the evolution of scholarly thought on open government and its implications for public trust. In qualitative inquiry, the purpose is not to quantify relationships among variables but to interpret meanings, patterns, and relationships within textual data. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe qualitative research as a process of exploring and understanding meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Applied to this study, the aim is to understand how the literature conceptualizes transparency and participation as determinants of legitimacy and how scholarly debates have framed their significance in governance studies. The literature review process, therefore, is not a mere summary of previous findings but a methodical interpretation and critical synthesis of theoretical and empirical discourses on open government practices.

The research design aligns with what Snyder (2019) defines as a qualitative systematic literature study, which involves collecting, evaluating, and synthesizing existing research to build an integrated conceptual understanding of a phenomenon. This design is particularly suitable for topics that are multidimensional—such as the interplay between transparency, participation, and trust—where the goal is to identify conceptual linkages, research gaps, and emergent patterns across diverse studies. Through qualitative synthesis, the study aims to reveal the underlying logic and theoretical progression that informs how open government practices influence perceptions of legitimacy. The data source in this research consists entirely of secondary data. The corpus includes journal articles published primarily within the last ten years (2015–2025) from international peer-reviewed journals, government white papers, and institutional frameworks, including those from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Open Government Partnership (OGP). Sources were accessed from digital databases such as Scopus,

ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected due to their extensive coverage of social science research and their inclusion of credible, peer-reviewed materials relevant to governance and public administration studies.

The search process employed a combination of keywords such as “open government,” “data transparency,” “digital participation,” “e-government,” “public trust,” and “government legitimacy.” Boolean operators were applied to refine the results, for example: (“open government” AND “trust”) OR (“digital participation” AND “legitimacy”) OR (“transparency” AND “citizen engagement”). Inclusion criteria were established to ensure that all selected works are directly relevant to the conceptual variables of the study and written in English. Only peer-reviewed journal articles and institutional publications were included, while editorials, commentaries, and non-academic essays were excluded to maintain analytical rigor. Data analysis in this research follows a qualitative content analysis procedure. According to Krippendorff (2019), qualitative content analysis involves interpreting textual material through systematic coding and identifying themes, categories, and patterns that represent the meanings embedded in the data. This method allows the researcher to organize large volumes of literature into coherent analytical themes that correspond to the study’s focus areas. The analysis proceeded through three major stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, as proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). In the data reduction stage, the researcher read and reread selected studies to identify key constructs, definitions, theoretical propositions, and empirical findings related to transparency, participation, trust, and legitimacy. This phase involved highlighting recurrent keywords and phrases, extracting definitions, and summarizing the methodological orientations of the reviewed studies.

The data display stage involved categorizing and synthesizing the reduced data into thematic clusters. For example, studies that examined transparency’s relationship to trust were grouped together, while those exploring participation and legitimacy were categorized separately. Within each cluster, patterns of agreement, divergence, and methodological differences were identified. These patterns were visualized conceptually using thematic mapping to illustrate how different studies have approached the relationships among the core variables. The final stage, conclusion drawing and verification, entailed interpreting the thematic patterns to develop a coherent narrative that connects existing knowledge to the objectives of this research. The process of verification was iterative, ensuring that conclusions drawn were consistently aligned with the data and substantiated by evidence from the literature. In qualitative literature research, the researcher serves as the main instrument of analysis. This requires reflexivity and intellectual rigor throughout the process. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasize, reflexivity is vital to ensure that interpretations are grounded in the data rather than researcher bias. In this study, reflexivity was maintained by adopting a systematic approach to source selection and analysis, using clear inclusion criteria, and continuously comparing interpretations with original author intentions. The validity of findings in qualitative literature studies is often addressed through criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability rather than through statistical measures. Credibility was established by cross-verifying information across multiple sources and ensuring consistency in interpretations. Dependability was achieved through transparent documentation of the search process and analytical procedures, while confirmability was maintained by anchoring all conclusions in verifiable literature rather than personal assumptions.

The rationale for choosing a literature-based qualitative method is both epistemological and practical. Epistemologically, the study of open government, trust, and legitimacy is inherently interpretive; it involves understanding how meaning is constructed through discourse, policy, and institutional practices. Such phenomena cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative means without first clarifying their conceptual underpinnings. Practically, the rapid expansion of literature on open government over the past decade provides a rich data set that can be systematically synthesized to identify conceptual evolution and empirical tendencies. This makes a qualitative literature study particularly suited for establishing an integrated theoretical foundation for future empirical work. The analytical framework guiding this study draws on thematic synthesis as proposed by Thomas and Harden (2008). Thematic synthesis combines elements of narrative review and grounded theory by coding data line-by-line, developing descriptive themes, and

generating analytical themes that extend beyond the content of individual studies. Through this approach, the researcher interprets how transparency and participation are operationalized in the literature, how trust and legitimacy are measured or conceptualized, and how relationships among these constructs are theorized. This iterative process allows the researcher to move from surface-level summaries to higher-order conceptual insights that reveal the cumulative state of knowledge in the field.

Ethical considerations were also acknowledged throughout the research process, even though no human participants were directly involved. All sources were properly cited using the American Psychological Association (APA) 7th edition format, ensuring intellectual integrity and respect for authorship. Additionally, because this research relies on publicly available data, there were no issues of confidentiality or informed consent. However, ethical responsibility in literature research also includes accurate representation of authors' arguments and avoidance of plagiarism or misinterpretation. Every effort was made to preserve the original intent of the authors cited, while synthesizing their contributions into a new interpretive framework. To enhance the trustworthiness of findings, triangulation of sources was applied. Denzin (2012) notes that triangulation in qualitative research does not necessarily refer to combining different data collection techniques but rather to comparing and cross-validating multiple perspectives. In this study, triangulation was achieved by consulting literature from various disciplinary perspectives—including public administration, political science, communication studies, and information systems. This multidimensional view ensures that the conceptualization of transparency, participation, trust, and legitimacy is not confined to a single paradigm but reflects the interdisciplinary reality of open government research. Furthermore, methodological triangulation was applied by incorporating findings from both qualitative and quantitative studies within the reviewed literature to enrich interpretation.

The interpretive phase of the analysis was conducted by integrating theoretical perspectives from legitimacy theory, trust theory, and governance theory. Legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995) explains how institutional actions gain acceptance through conformity with social values, while trust theory (Mayer et al., 1995) elucidates the psychological basis for confidence in institutional actors. By weaving these theories into the literature synthesis, the study identifies how transparency and participation serve as institutional mechanisms to signal integrity, responsiveness, and fairness—factors that underpin legitimacy. This theoretical triangulation adds depth to the interpretation and ensures that findings are not merely descriptive but theoretically informed. The outcome of this methodological process is a narrative synthesis that not only categorizes existing studies but also critically evaluates their contributions, limitations, and interrelationships. The synthesis reveals that while data transparency is frequently associated with procedural legitimacy and perceived competence, digital participation contributes more strongly to relational legitimacy and perceived benevolence. However, both are necessary and mutually reinforcing dimensions of trust-building in open government. By analyzing literature across contexts, the research identifies emerging trends, such as the growing role of digital platforms in mediating transparency, and the shifting definition of legitimacy from procedural compliance toward experiential trust.

In addition to analytical rigor, the study adheres to criteria of transferability, allowing its insights to be applied in diverse governance settings. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability in qualitative research refers to the degree to which findings can be relevant in other contexts. To achieve this, thick descriptions of theoretical constructs, conceptual frameworks, and contextual variations were provided to allow readers to assess applicability. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through the maintenance of an audit trail, documenting each step of data collection, inclusion, coding, and synthesis. This transparency in method parallels the very principle under investigation—demonstrating how openness enhances legitimacy and trust, even within the research process itself. The qualitative literature approach adopted here also acknowledges limitations inherent to non-empirical research. The absence of primary data means the analysis relies on the accuracy and representativeness of published studies. Consequently, generalizations drawn from the synthesis should be understood as conceptual rather than statistical. Nevertheless, such limitations do not diminish the study's contribution; instead, they situate it as a foundational inquiry upon which future empirical investigations can build. By identifying theoretical inconsistencies, methodological

patterns, and empirical gaps, this research provides a roadmap for subsequent quantitative or mixed-method studies that could test hypotheses emerging from this synthesis. In summary, the research method employed in this study combines qualitative interpretive analysis with systematic literature review techniques to explore how transparency and participation shape trust and legitimacy in open government. The methodology is characterized by comprehensive data collection, rigorous content analysis, reflexive interpretation, and theoretical integration. Through this process, the study achieves depth, coherence, and analytical clarity, ensuring that its conclusions are grounded in the collective wisdom of prior scholarship while offering new interpretive insights. The qualitative literature approach not only illuminates what is already known about open government dynamics but also articulates what remains to be explored, reinforcing the relevance of trust and legitimacy as enduring pillars of democratic governance in the digital age.

IV. Result and Discussion

The synthesis of existing studies reveals that the relationship between data transparency, digital participation, and government legitimacy is complex, multidimensional, and contextually dependent. Across the literature reviewed, there emerges a consistent recognition that open government practices—specifically the disclosure of public data and the facilitation of online citizen participation—constitute fundamental mechanisms through which governments attempt to rebuild and sustain public trust. However, the evidence also demonstrates that transparency and participation alone are insufficient without institutional capacity, ethical leadership, and citizen literacy to interpret and act upon the information provided. These findings situate the discourse of open government not as a static reform initiative but as a dynamic, ongoing process of renegotiating legitimacy in the digital age.

At the most general level, the reviewed studies converge on the idea that data transparency functions as a necessary but not sufficient condition for cultivating trust. Governments that proactively disclose data related to budgeting, performance indicators, and decision-making processes are perceived as more accountable and competent, which in turn enhances public trust (Alessandro et al., 2021; Wirtz et al., 2022). However, the mere availability of data does not guarantee positive outcomes; instead, the quality, accessibility, and interpretability of data are decisive factors. Studies conducted by Zainal, Abdul Rahim, and Nazri (2024) and Pratolo (2022) demonstrate that when data is provided in user-friendly formats accompanied by contextual explanations, citizens tend to perceive the government as more transparent and fair. Conversely, when data is fragmented, overly technical, or selectively disclosed, transparency can paradoxically decrease trust by exposing inconsistencies or revealing inefficiencies. Thus, transparency's impact on legitimacy depends largely on the perceived sincerity and completeness of disclosure practices.

A second key pattern observed across the literature concerns the role of digital participation as a trust multiplier. Digital participation—expressed through e-consultations, online feedback mechanisms, and participatory policy platforms—enhances the relational dimension of legitimacy by strengthening communication and responsiveness between citizens and the state. Studies by Campbell (2023) and Kumalasari et al. (2024) illustrate that citizens who experience direct, interactive participation in policy processes report higher levels of trust and identification with government institutions. Nevertheless, the effect of digital participation is contingent upon the degree to which participation leads to tangible outcomes. Symbolic or performative forms of online engagement where citizen input is solicited but not acted upon often produce disillusionment and distrust, a phenomenon that Yang and Holzer (2006) describe as the “participation paradox.” Therefore, digital participation contributes to legitimacy only when it is embedded within institutional processes that ensure responsiveness and accountability.

The results also highlight that the intersection of transparency and participation produces synergistic effects when both dimensions reinforce each other. Transparency facilitates participation by providing the information base necessary for informed engagement, while participation legitimizes transparency by transforming data disclosure from a top-down gesture into a co-creative dialogue (Cucciniello et al., 2017). This synergy is evident in cases such as participatory budgeting systems, open data hackathons, and civic

innovation labs, where citizens collaboratively analyze public data to propose solutions or monitor outcomes. These participatory innovations convert data into deliberative capital, allowing legitimacy to emerge not from compliance or tradition, but from shared understanding and co-production of value. The reviewed studies suggest that such co-production mechanisms redefine legitimacy in the digital age as a participatory achievement rather than a static attribute of government authority.

However, the literature also cautions against assuming universal success. The implementation of open government initiatives varies widely across political and cultural contexts. In consolidated democracies, open data and digital participation are often integrated into institutionalized systems of checks and balances. In contrast, in emerging democracies or hybrid regimes, openness may be constrained by bureaucratic inertia, limited digital infrastructure, or political resistance (Husni, 2023). These contextual limitations imply that transparency and participation can also become instruments of symbolic legitimacy, where governments perform openness without substantive accountability—a phenomenon referred to as “transparency theatre” (Bannister & Connolly, 2014). Such practices may yield temporary legitimacy gains but risk long-term erosion of trust once citizens perceive the gap between rhetoric and reality. Therefore, sustainable legitimacy requires not only procedural transparency but also genuine institutional reform that aligns openness with ethical governance.

Another significant finding from the literature synthesis concerns the mediating role of trust as both an outcome and a mechanism within the open government framework. Trust operates bidirectionally: transparency and participation foster trust, and existing trust influences how citizens interpret transparency and participation efforts. Alessandro et al. (2021) found that individuals with high prior trust are more likely to interpret new information positively, whereas those with low initial trust may perceive transparency as strategic manipulation. This asymmetric response underscores the psychological dimension of trust-building. Governments thus face the challenge of designing communication strategies that address distrust not merely through data provision but through narrative framing and dialogic communication that humanizes institutional actors. As noted by Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2014), trust is not built through information alone but through consistent demonstration of integrity and responsiveness.

The findings also indicate that digital literacy and inclusiveness significantly moderate the effectiveness of transparency and participation. Digital participation presupposes access to technology, skills to use it, and trust in digital infrastructures. Without equitable access and adequate literacy, open government initiatives may inadvertently exacerbate inequality, privileging the voices of the digitally fluent while marginalizing vulnerable groups (Wirtz & Birkmeyer, 2015). This calls for a broader conception of openness that integrates social inclusion and capacity-building as integral components. In the context of sustainable governance, digital inclusion must be recognized as both a prerequisite and an outcome of open government reforms. The sustainability of public trust, therefore, depends not only on institutional transparency but also on the social infrastructure that enables all citizens to engage meaningfully.

From a theoretical standpoint, the synthesis of findings affirms the interdependence between Legitimacy Theory and Trust Theory in explaining the mechanisms through which open government enhances or diminishes public confidence. Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995) posits that legitimacy arises when institutional actions align with social norms, expectations, and moral values. Transparency signals integrity and accountability, satisfying citizens’ normative expectations of fairness, while participation demonstrates inclusiveness and procedural justice. Trust Theory (Mayer et al., 1995) complements this by articulating that trust is grounded in perceived competence, integrity, and benevolence. Data transparency primarily enhances perceptions of competence and integrity, while digital participation contributes to perceived benevolence and responsiveness. When both dimensions are present, citizens perceive the government as capable, honest, and caring—a triadic foundation of sustainable legitimacy.

The discussion also brings to light the temporal dimension of trust-building. Trust, once established, is resilient but fragile; it accumulates slowly through consistent openness but can be lost abruptly through scandals or breaches of integrity. The longitudinal studies reviewed by Wirtz et al. (2022) show that sustained transparency and participation lead to cumulative legitimacy effects over time, while sporadic or reactive

disclosure yields transient gains. Thus, the path toward sustainable trust is evolutionary rather than revolutionary, requiring institutionalization of openness as an ongoing practice rather than an occasional initiative. This temporal insight is crucial for policymakers who often treat transparency reforms as discrete projects rather than as continuous governance philosophies. Another emerging theme from the literature concerns the digital ethics of transparency. While openness is celebrated as a democratic virtue, the proliferation of data and surveillance technologies raises questions about privacy, security, and consent (Barati, 2023). The literature suggests that unregulated data transparency may paradoxically undermine legitimacy if it violates ethical norms or erodes citizens' sense of control over personal information. Sustainable trust, therefore, demands a balanced approach—one that reconciles transparency with data protection and ethical stewardship. Governments must cultivate what scholars term "responsible transparency," where openness is guided by ethical frameworks that respect individual rights while promoting collective accountability.

Moving toward a sustainability-oriented interpretation, open government should be viewed as part of the broader agenda of sustainable governance—a governance model that seeks equilibrium among transparency, participation, social justice, and institutional resilience. Sustainable governance requires not only the openness of institutions but also their capacity to adapt, learn, and respond to evolving societal expectations. In this regard, data transparency and digital participation are not end goals but dynamic tools of adaptive legitimacy. They enable governments to continuously sense, interpret, and respond to public needs, thereby sustaining trust even amid uncertainty. As public administration increasingly operates in complex digital ecosystems, legitimacy will depend less on hierarchical authority and more on the government's ability to demonstrate ongoing accountability and co-responsiveness. The implications for sustainable development are profound. Open government practices directly contribute to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 16, which emphasizes peace, justice, and strong institutions. By embedding transparency and participation into governance systems, states can institutionalize inclusive decision-making, reduce corruption, and enhance social cohesion. Moreover, sustained trust in government fosters compliance with sustainability policies, such as climate action and social equity programs. Therefore, open government should be reimagined as a sustainability accelerator, where digital transparency and participation are leveraged not only for accountability but also for collaborative problem-solving and long-term societal resilience.

The discussion also underscores the need for cross-sectoral collaboration in sustaining open government reforms. Trust and legitimacy are collective achievements that extend beyond government agencies to include civil society, academia, and the private sector. Multi-stakeholder partnerships can enhance transparency through data sharing, improve participation through co-creation, and foster innovation through shared governance models. The future of open government thus lies in networked legitimacy, where authority is distributed and sustained through continuous interaction among diverse actors. This reconfiguration of legitimacy resonates with the post-bureaucratic paradigm of governance characterized by openness, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Finally, the literature points toward several avenues for future research. There is a growing need for longitudinal and comparative qualitative studies that examine how transparency and participation evolve across time and political systems. Future research should also integrate cultural variables, as trust and legitimacy are mediated by national values, historical experiences, and social norms. The interaction between artificial intelligence, algorithmic governance, and open data presents another frontier of inquiry—raising questions about algorithmic transparency and its implications for democratic accountability. Moreover, researchers should investigate the resilience of public trust during crises, such as pandemics or political upheavals, to understand how open government mechanisms can buffer legitimacy shocks. In doing so, the study of open government must evolve from a descriptive analysis of policy tools to a normative exploration of sustainable legitimacy systems that adapt to the ethical, technological, and social transformations of the twenty-first century.

In conclusion, the synthesis of existing literature indicates that the impact of data transparency and digital participation on government legitimacy is profound yet contingent. Transparency informs citizens,

participation empowers them, and together they generate the communicative conditions necessary for legitimacy. Nevertheless, their success depends on institutional sincerity, inclusiveness, and ethical governance. Sustaining public trust in the digital era requires continuous commitment to openness, responsiveness, and equity—values that must be embedded not only in policy design but in the everyday culture of governance. As open government matures, its challenge will no longer be whether to share data or engage citizens, but how to sustain these practices in ways that continuously renew legitimacy, strengthen democratic resilience, and contribute to the sustainable evolution of governance systems worldwide.

V. Conclusion

The present study concludes that the dynamics of public trust and government legitimacy in the era of open government are deeply rooted in the interrelationship between data transparency and digital participation. The synthesis of the reviewed literature demonstrates that transparency and participation function not merely as administrative mechanisms but as communicative instruments of legitimacy that embody the moral, procedural, and relational dimensions of governance. Data transparency reflects institutional integrity and competence, while digital participation symbolizes inclusiveness and responsiveness—together constructing a multidimensional foundation of public trust. Theoretically, this finding reinforces the integration of Legitimacy Theory and Trust Theory, revealing that legitimacy in the digital era emerges from citizens' perceptions of ethical transparency and participatory fairness rather than from hierarchical authority or tradition. It also advances the understanding that transparency alone does not inherently generate trust; rather, the effect depends on the perceived sincerity, quality, and interpretability of information, as well as the inclusivity of participatory processes. Through this synthesis, the study expands the conceptualization of legitimacy as a continuously negotiated outcome of dialogic interaction between state and citizen, thereby enriching governance theory with a communicative and relational dimension aligned with contemporary democratic evolution.

From a theoretical standpoint, the implications of this study extend beyond the operational boundaries of open government to the broader domain of sustainable governance. The findings illuminate the necessity to view openness not as a static reform agenda but as an evolving ecosystem that requires continuous adaptation to technological, ethical, and societal transformations. In this light, the theoretical contribution lies in positioning open government as a framework of sustainable legitimacy, where data transparency and digital participation function as cyclical feedback mechanisms maintaining equilibrium between accountability and trust. This conceptualization advances prior scholarship by articulating the temporal and ethical dimensions of openness: transparency must be sustained across time and guided by responsible data ethics, while participation must be inclusive and oriented toward co-creation rather than consultation alone. The literature further suggests that legitimacy is now co-produced within a distributed network of actors—government institutions, civil society organizations, digital communities, and private platforms—transforming the classical Weberian notion of bureaucratic legitimacy into one of networked legitimacy based on shared responsibility and communicative rationality. Such a shift requires the refinement of public administration theory to accommodate the horizontal and participatory logics of digital governance. Consequently, this research provides an epistemological bridge between traditional governance models and emerging paradigms of digital-era public administration, emphasizing that sustainable trust is not achieved through institutional design alone but through iterative, transparent, and participatory practices that evolve alongside citizen expectations.

Managerially, the implications of this study are equally significant, calling for strategic and operational transformations within public institutions. For policymakers and administrators, the findings underscore that transparency and participation must be institutionalized not as symbolic commitments but as integral components of daily governance. This requires establishing robust data governance systems that ensure the accuracy, accessibility, and interpretability of public information while simultaneously safeguarding ethical boundaries such as privacy and security. Governments should adopt participatory design

frameworks that embed citizen feedback loops within policy cycles, ensuring that digital participation leads to visible policy outcomes and thereby reinforces citizens' belief in the efficacy of engagement. Managerial practices must also prioritize the development of digital literacy and inclusivity, recognizing that equitable participation is a precondition for meaningful legitimacy. Investments in digital infrastructure, open data portals, and user-centered communication interfaces should be aligned with programs that build citizens' capacity to access, understand, and utilize information. Moreover, institutional leaders must cultivate a culture of openness within bureaucracies one that values transparency as a continuous learning process and participation as a collaborative partnership rather than a procedural obligation. The managerial implication, therefore, is a call for transformative governance, where openness becomes both an operational norm and a strategic compass guiding public sector innovation. By embedding openness into the moral and managerial DNA of governance, institutions can move toward a sustainable model of legitimacy one that is resilient to crises, adaptive to technological disruption, and grounded in the enduring trust of its citizens.

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