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Submitted: 29 September 2025, Revised: 25 December 2025, Accepted: 30 December 2025

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Policy & Governance Review
ISSN 2580-4820
Vol. 10, Issue 1, pp. 68-84
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30589/pgr.v10i1.1357>

Citizen Participation in the Digital Era: A Comparative Perspective between Thailand and South Korea

Abstract

Citizen participation is a vital component of public administration in the 21st century. This study compares Thailand and South Korea to examine how digital governance frameworks influence civic engagement, focusing on policy design, administrative structures, and political culture. The findings reveal that South Korea has effectively utilized digital platforms, such as e-participation systems and Open Government Data, to strengthen transparency and enable citizens to engage substantively in auditing, administrative appeals, and policymaking. In contrast, although Thailand has developed platforms such as the 1111 Complaint System and Damrongtham Online Center, citizen participation remains limited because of structural, legal, and trust barriers. This contrast illustrates that South Korea has reached an advanced stage of digital governance, whereas Thailand is still in its formative phase. Therefore, this study proposes policy recommendations for Thailand, including sustained investment in digital infrastructure, development of integrated platforms, and enhancement of transparency to foster public trust. These measures would expand opportunities for citizen engagement and serve as a pathway to advance public administration toward greater democracy and sustainability.

Keywords:

citizen participation; public administration; digital government; Thailand; South Korea

Introduction

Modern public administration highlights the concept of citizen participation, where people help shape policies in the digital age. This makes the government more democratic, transparent, and accountable while ensuring that decisions reflect real public needs. Participation further promotes inclusive decision-making and empowers citizens to be directly involved in state administration. Moreover, citizen participation allows for the evaluation of government actions and ensures that governance aligns with

the genuine needs of the people (Yadav, 2024). From a normative perspective, citizen engagement is closely linked to democratic legitimacy: when citizens can meaningfully influence public decisions, they are more likely to perceive public institutions as fair, responsive and trustworthy (Afiyah, 2024; Fung, 2006).

Public administration is also undergoing rapid transformation, driven by globalization and technological change. Governments are shifting from traditional bureaucratic systems to digital governance, using technology to expand citizen participation, improve access to public services, and ensure inclusiveness, even in remote areas. These developments enhance transparency and accountability, which are essential for strengthening public trust in the government (Afiyah, 2024; Bano et al., 2025; OECD, 2024). Simultaneously, digital tools reconfigure the classic roles of the state, market, and civil society by enabling new forms of collaborative problem-solving, co-production of services, and networked oversight.

The Republic of Korea has successfully integrated digital technology into its governance. Citizens now have greater access to government information through online platforms and can benefit from services available on mobile devices, such as Mobile Government (m-Government). With a strong digital infrastructure and long-standing political commitment, South Korea provides fast, inclusive, and citizen-centered public services that are accessible across age groups (Amailef & Lu, 2013; Cheong & Cho, 2024). South Korea's position among the top performers in global e-government rankings is not merely a technological achievement; it reflects the alignment of institutional reforms, legal frameworks, and participatory mechanisms that collectively support digital governance (United Nations, 2022; OECD, 2024).

In contrast, Thailand has initiated several online platforms and established a Digital Government Development Agency (DGA) to support its transition toward digital governance. Despite these efforts, Thailand still faces challenges: government data are difficult to access, bureaucratic procedures remain slow, and genuine citizen participation is limited. Public input rarely informs policy decisions, and

gaps in digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas, continue to hinder progress toward a fully functional digital government (Digital Government Development Agency, 2023). Although Thailand has improved service delivery and basic transparency, the participatory dimension of digital governance remains underdeveloped.

These patterns reflect the wider disparities between the Global North and Global South. Countries in the Global North, such as Eastern Europe, North America, and parts of East Asia, generally possess robust digital infrastructure, coherent policy frameworks, and strong data governance systems, enabling high-quality digital participation (Bertot et al., 2012). Conversely, many countries in the Global South, including Southeast Asia, continue to face structural constraints, such as inequality, institutional fragmentation, and political instability, which weaken digital governance capacity (Bano et al., 2020; Bano et al., 2025). Digital divides are multidimensional; they encompass not only access to connectivity (first-level divide) and skills (second-level divide), but also differences in the ability to translate digital use into tangible political and social benefits (third-level divide) (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2015).

From the perspective of contemporary public administration, the shift toward a digital government is not merely a technological upgrade but an institutional transformation.

This requires restructuring administrative systems, fostering a culture of transparency, and designing participation channels consistent with participatory democracy. Therefore, citizen participation becomes a central indicator of digital-era governance quality, linking efficiency and accountability with broader notions of justice, inclusion, and rights (Fung, 2006; Gardenier et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, this study compares the experiences of South Korea, a highly developed digital government, with those of Thailand, a developing country navigating an early stage digital transformation. This comparison aims to identify the institutional, technological, and sociopolitical factors that contribute to successful citizen participation in the digital era and explore how Thailand can adapt these insights to strengthen its digital governance.

This study contributes to the literature by combining classical participation theory with contemporary frameworks on digital governance, technological citizenship, and institutional capacity, while drawing practical lessons for public administration reform in emerging democracies.

Research Question

How have South Korea and Thailand adopted digital technologies to enhance citizen participation in public-administration?

Research Objective

To study and compare citizen participation in the context of digital-era public administration in Thailand and the Republic of Korea.

Literature Review

Citizen Participation

Arnstein's (1969) classical framework provides an essential foundation for analyzing the quality and depth of citizen involvement. She identifies eight rungs of participation, ranging from non-participation to full citizen control. At the lowest levels, manipulation and therapy, citizens are merely persuaded or managed, representing non-participation. Mid-level informing, consultation, and placation allow citizens to receive information, voice opinions, or participate in advisory roles; however, they hold no substantive power. These forms of involvement are categorized as tokenism, where engagement is symbolic rather than influential or substantive. True participation appears at the top of the ladder: partnership, where citizens work jointly with the government; delegated power, where citizens hold authority in specific decisions, such as budgeting; and citizen control, where citizens have full managerial power within governance processes.

Building on Arnstein, Fung (2006) proposed the Democracy Cube to conceptualize participation across three dimensions: who participates (e.g., randomly selected citizens, stakeholders, the general public), how they communicate (e.g., listening as spectators, expressing preferences, deliberation), and how much authority they have (e.g., personal benefit, advisory input, co-governance). This framework

helps distinguish between participation that merely gathers public opinion and that which redistributes power and responsibility. For digital governance, the Democracy Cube is particularly useful for assessing whether online platforms actually move participation toward more empowered forms, such as co-creation and shared decision-making.

Digital government is increasingly conceptualized as a governance model that employs digital technologies to enhance efficiency, strengthen oversight, and respond effectively to societal needs. A core component is the provision of citizen-centric services designed around user needs and accessible through multiple channels, such as websites and mobile applications (European Commission, 2020; OECD, 2020). Another key element involves data and system integration, which enables information sharing across agencies, reduces duplication, and improves administrative efficiency for citizens (Office of the National Digital Economy and Society Commission, 2020). Dawes (2008) emphasized that effective e-governance requires strong legal and policy frameworks to mitigate risks, protect citizen rights, and cultivate public trust. These frameworks are increasingly critical for addressing cybersecurity threats, safeguarding personal data, and ensuring the ethical use of emerging technologies. Recent studies have further highlighted that digital government reforms succeed when they are embedded in broader institutional strategies, including civil service reform, performance management, and anti-corruption measures (Wang et al., 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2024).

Despite significant progress, persistent challenges remain, particularly in organizational risk management, data protection, and the integration of citizen feedback into policymaking processes (Wang et al., 2023). In many contexts, digital government efforts risk devolving into technocratic projects that prioritize efficiency over accountability and fail to harness the participatory potential of digital tools (Bannister & Connolly, 2020).

Citizen Participation in the Digital Era

Citizen participation in the digital era refers to the use of digital platforms that enable interactions

among citizens, governments, and civil society. These platforms support information exchange, public deliberation, decision-making, and greater influence on policy formulation and public service delivery (Zhang, 2024). The spread of social media, online petitions, civic technology platforms, and open data portals has broadened the repertoire of tools available to citizens and public officials. Digital tools expand opportunities for inclusion, but they also introduce challenges, especially in developing countries, where limited infrastructure and weak institutional capacity hinder effective participation (Peixoto & Steinberg, 2019). Beyond infrastructure, psychological and attitudinal factors shape the digital engagement. Lai and Beh (2025) show that political efficacy the belief that one's actions can influence politics strongly predicts citizens' willingness to participate in e-government initiatives. Without trust in institutions and confidence in their own agency, citizens may refrain from using digital platforms, even when access is available (Afiyah, 2024; Bano et al., 2025). Digital participation increasingly entails active engagement in shaping digital technologies, a concept reflected in technological citizenship. This framework highlights the need to ensure privacy protection, promote inclusiveness, and enable citizens to meaningfully contribute to governance amid rapid digital transformation (Gardenier et al., 2024). Technological citizenship emphasizes that citizens are not passive users of digital systems but co-producers of governance whose rights and responsibilities evolve alongside new technological arrangements.

Modern Concepts Related to Digital Government and Participation

To understand the digital participation landscape in Thailand and South Korea more deeply, it is essential to consider contemporary governance theories that extend beyond the classical participation models. These frameworks explain how institutional, technological, and structural factors shape participation outcomes in different national contexts.

Digital Era Governance (DEG) and Digital Governance.

Contemporary scholars argue that modern digital government requires a rethinking of public

administration architecture. Digital-Era Governance highlights three core principles:

1. **Reintegration:** rebuilding government systems to reduce fragmentation and integrate data and services.
2. **Holism:** Designing services around citizen needs and policy problems rather than bureaucratic structures.
3. **Digitization of Processes** – transforming internal workflows into seamless digital operations rather than layering technology onto existing procedures (Dawes, 2008; OECD, 2020; Zhang, 2024).

Countries that successfully adopt these principles tend to develop more robust and continuous mechanisms for citizen participation, as integrated systems and holistic services create clearer channels for feedback, co-production, and joint problem-solving.

Designing Citizen Participation Processes

Modern participation frameworks emphasize who participates, how communication occurs, and the level of influence that citizens hold. Digital participation can therefore range from informing to consultation and, at higher levels, to partnership and delegated power, aligning with Arnstein's (1969) typology and Fung's (2006) Democracy Cube. Digital technologies can support these processes by lowering transaction costs, expanding the reach of consultations, and enabling new deliberation forms. However, the effectiveness of participation depends on institutional design, political culture, and organizational openness (Peixoto & Steinberg, 2019; Yadav, 2024).

Institutional Theory and Digital Participation

Institutional theory highlights that meaningful participation can only occur when governance structures provide supportive, legal, administrative, and cultural conditions. High-quality participation requires coherent laws and procedures, a unified bureaucratic system, long-term policy consistency, and organizational cultures that welcome citizen monitoring and oversight (Bannister & Connolly, 2020; Bano et al., 2025). South Korea's digital governance success is strongly linked to its stable institutional framework,

integrated systems, and consistent policy direction. In contrast, Thailand faces institutional constraints, including bureaucratic fragmentation, overlapping mandates, and inconsistent policy implementation, which limit the depth and effectiveness of digital participation.

Methods

This section outlines the research design, methods, and procedures employed in this qualitative study, which examines the mechanisms of citizen participation in the digital era through a comparative analysis of Thailand and the Republic of Korea. The methodological framework ensures rigor, credibility, and systematic alignment with the research questions.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design and utilizes comparative methods to analyze the structures, mechanisms, and degrees of digital citizen participation in both countries. The comparative approach allows for the identification of both context-specific features and cross-cutting patterns that illuminate how similar technologies can lead to different governance results. The analysis is guided by several theoretical frameworks: Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, Fung's (2006) Democracy Cube, contemporary models of digital participation design (Peixoto & Steinberg, 2019; Yadav, 2024), and conceptual frameworks of digital government proposed by international organizations (United Nations, 2022; OECD, 2020). South Korea and Thailand were selected as comparative cases because they share certain similarities, such as being middle- to high-income countries in Asia with significant digital government ambitions, yet exhibit markedly different levels of digital governance maturity. This logic of a similar system helps isolate how institutional capacity, political culture, and policy choices shape the effectiveness of digital participation mechanisms.

Data Sources

This study relies exclusively on secondary data, including government reports, policy documents, academic literature, and publications from inter-

national organizations. Key sources include official reports from public agencies, such as the Digital Government Development Agency (DGA, 2023) in Thailand and relevant ministries and agencies in South Korea (e.g., the Ministry of the Interior and Safety). International assessments, such as the United Nations E-Government Survey (2022), OECD Digital Government Policy Framework (2020), and OECD Digital Government Index (OECD, 2024). Peer-reviewed journal articles and research relevant to digital government and citizen participation (e.g., Arnstein, 1969; Dawes, 2008; Peixoto Steinberg, 2019; Afiyah al., 2024; Lai & Beh, 2025; Peixoto & Steinberg, 2024). These sources collectively provide comprehensive insights into the policy environment, digital infrastructure, and participatory frameworks of each country. The use of established high-impact sources also enhances the external validity of the study's interpretations.

Data Collection and Tools

Data were collected through a systematic documentary analysis. Documents were identified using keyword searches related to "digital government," "e-participation," "citizen engagement," and "South Korea/Thailand" in academic databases, government portals, and international organization repositories. The materials were then organized according to central themes, including digital government strategies, legal and institutional frameworks, and mechanisms of e-participation; levels of public trust; organizational structures; and political and administrative culture. Only documents from credible sources, such as peer-reviewed journals, government publications, and reports from international organizations, were included in the analysis. Where possible, triangulation between multiple reports was used to validate the statistical indicators or qualitative claims.

Data Analysis

This study applies both content and comparative analyses. The analytical process is guided by several conceptual frameworks, including Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, Fung's (2006) Democracy Cube, the OECD Digital Government Framework (OECD, 2020), and the concepts

of e-participation and technological citizenship developed by Gardenier et al. (2024), as follows: The analysis was conducted in three stages: Categorization: Relevant information from documents was coded into categories such as service digitization, transparency mechanisms, formal participation channels, informal participation (e.g., social media), and institutional capacity. Comparison: The mechanisms and levels of citizen participation in Thailand and South Korea were compared across these categories, with particular attention to how similar tools (e.g., complaint systems and open data portals) function differently in practice. Synthesis: Key patterns and divergences were synthesized to generate explanatory insights and policy recommendations for digital governance and citizen participation. This analytical strategy allowed the study to move beyond descriptive comparison toward a theoretically informed interpretation.

Reliability of Data

To enhance the credibility and reliability of the findings, this study employed triangulation to validate information across multiple independent sources. Preference was given to authoritative and internationally recognized datasets, including UN and OECD reports and peer-reviewed academic literature (Bertot et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2023).

This approach strengthens the trustworthiness of the interpretations and ensures robustness in comparative insights.

Results and Discussion

Digital Governance and Citizen Participation in South Korea and Thailand

Evolution toward Digital Government

In the 1960s, South Korea faced poverty and depended heavily on foreign aid to address it. Significant transformation began in the 1980s with the introduction of information technology to enhance public administration's efficiency (Cheong & Cho, 2024). Despite limited resources, the government invested in computerization projects, which laid the foundation for the country's leadership in e-government and digital governance. Over the decades, South Korea has transitioned

comprehensively toward a digital government, adopting advanced technologies such as IoT, Big Data, cloud computing, and AI to improve service delivery and strengthen citizen participation (Cheong & Cho, 2024; United Nations, 2022). Viewed through the lens of Digital-Era Governance, South Korea has reached a stage where digital technologies form the core infrastructure of state administration, enabling integrated data systems, connected services, and real-time information for public decision-making.

At the municipal level, Seoul's smart city initiatives integrate transport, energy, safety, and citizen communication systems into a unified digital ecosystem, enabling real-time monitoring and responsive interventions in urban management (Seoul Metropolitan Government 2020). These initiatives complement national digital strategies and reinforce holistic, citizen-centered service design associated with the DEG.

Thailand began systematically developing a digital government in the early 2000s with the establishment of the Digital Government Development Agency (DGA). The Thailand Digital Government Development Plan 2020–2022 sought to enhance efficiency, reduce redundancy, and improve transparency (Office of the National Digital Economy and Society Commission 2020). However, institutional fragmentation, the digital divide, and limited public trust continue to constrain Thailand's progress.

Empirical benchmarks confirm these structural gaps in the literature. According to the UN E Government Development Index (EGDI) 2022, South Korea ranks among the global top ten (EGDI: 0.9594), while Thailand ranks 55th (0.7690). Similarly, open data assessments consistently place South Korea in the High/Very High maturity category, whereas Thailand remains in the emerging stage.

These disparities reflect not only differences in digital capacity but also deeper institutional and governance dynamics that shape opportunities for citizen participation in the digital world.

Concepts and Characteristics of Digital Governance. To understand why participation outcomes differ, it is necessary to examine how each country conceptualizes and operationalizes digital governance.

Digital governance has a broader scope than e-government, which focuses mainly on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to achieve administrative goals. E-government emphasizes the use of computers and networks to digitize procedures, documents, and services to improve governance through information exchange among agencies (Cheong & Cho, 2024). In contrast, digital governance is distinctive in promoting transparency, openness, and citizen-oriented services and embedding participation and accountability into the core of administrative practices.

The essential characteristics of digital governance in South Korea can be identified in three, interrelated dimensions. First, the provision of public services through online platforms and mobile applications enables citizens to access government services more rapidly, efficiently, and conveniently, thereby enhancing overall administrative performance. Second, the adoption of advanced digital technologies strengthens transparency and accountability by reducing the concentration of power and facilitating more effective mechanisms for the detection and prevention of corruption (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). Third, the establishment of digital platforms has expanded opportunities for citizen participation, allowing the public to engage directly in governance processes and contribute to more inclusive, equitable, and democratic decision-making (Bae et al., 2019). Together, these dimensions illustrate how digital governance in South Korea improves administrative efficiency and reinforces democratic values and trust between the state and its citizens.

In Thailand, the essential characteristics of digital governance emphasize convenience and accessibility in public services through websites and mobile applications, such as online complaint systems and centralized government information platforms. In addition, the government has promoted open government data policies to allow citizens access to more public information (Digital Government Development Agency, 2023). However, these systems remain largely one-way communication mechanisms, limiting genuine citizen participation in the policymaking process. While they signify important steps toward transparency, they often fall

short of enabling the kind of empowered participation envisioned by Arnstein (1969) and Fung (2006).

Case Studies of Citizen Participation through ICT Platforms

South Korea provides a compelling example of how ICT platforms can be leveraged to enhance citizen participation in the governance. A prominent initiative is the Participatory Audit, through which the Board of Audit and Inspection (BAI) has institutionalized mechanisms that allow citizens to contribute by providing information and engaging in consultations and, in certain cases, by participating directly in decision-making. This participatory approach significantly narrows the gap between the government and the public, reinforcing accountability and inclusiveness in state oversight processes (Bae et al., 2019).

The second case is the Audit Information Management System, which was launched in 2015 to handle audit requests and citizen complaints more effectively. It improved complaint processing, made oversight more accessible, and reduced the number of complaints passed to other agencies from approximately 40% to under 20%. This also strengthens transparency. However, challenges remain in effectively using audit results and encouraging citizens to focus on the public good rather than only personal issues. (Bae et al., 2019).

Another significant mechanism is the Online Administrative Appeals Hub System, which was established to protect citizens' rights against administrative decisions. Managed by the Central Administrative Appeals Commission (CAAC), this system represents a major development in modern public administration. Initially launched online in 2003 and further centralized in 2013, it has greatly facilitated the submission of appeals, particularly benefiting socially disadvantaged groups in China. The growing reliance on the platform is evidenced by the increase in online submissions from 15.9 percent in 2013 to 35.3 percent in 2017. Moreover, the system incorporates a robust knowledge management function by systematically classifying past cases, thereby ensuring consistency and transparency in decision making (Bae et al., 2019).

Beyond these institutionalized platforms, South Korea has advanced innovative tools to foster direct civic engagement in policymaking and social problem-solving. For instance, Gwanghwamoon 1st Street, introduced in 2017 under President Moon Jae-in's administration, serves as an online channel for citizens to directly propose policy ideas. Within its first 49 days, the platform received 180,705 policy suggestions, many of which were incorporated into national policy agendas, underscoring the role of digital platforms as mediators between the state and civil society and reinforcing mutual trust (Baek, 2022).

Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the city of Icheon organized a public contest in August 2020 to solicit citizen proposals for responding to the pandemic. This bottom-up initiative not only generated creative solutions but also heightened public awareness and strengthened civic participation in crisis management (Baek 2022). Furthermore, in the context of nuclear energy policy, particularly concerning the construction of Shin-Kori Nuclear Reactor Units 5 and 6, the Moon administration conducted non-binding public consultations to gather citizen input on the project. Digital tools, such as e-learning modules and online expert forums, were utilized to ensure that citizens were adequately informed and able to engage meaningfully in debates over highly technical issues. This case illustrates the potential of ICT platforms to broaden deliberative participation, even in complex policy domains (Baek, 2022).

In Thailand, the government has implemented the 1111 Complaint System, which allows citizens to submit complaints or suggestions directly to the government through online channels and mobile apps. This system aims to reduce bureaucratic procedures and enhance convenience; however, it still provides limited opportunities for policy-level participation (Digital Government Development Agency 2023). In addition, the Online Damrongtham Center, operated by the Ministry of Interior, serves as a platform for citizens to file complaints about local administrative issues. Although this system has improved local citizen accessibility, it lacks mechanisms that effectively link citizen input to policymaking processes (Yadav, 2024). Finally, the Open Government Data initiative represents another government effort to promote transparency and enhance public oversight.

Nevertheless, the data released are often outdated or difficult to utilize in practice, thereby restricting meaningful citizen participation (Digital Government Development Agency 2023).

Overall, although Thailand has introduced multiple digital platforms, citizen roles largely remain confined to consultation and complaint submission rather than extending to partnerships or co-decision-making in public policy. In terms of Arnstein's (1969) ladder and Fung's (2006) Democracy Cube, Thailand's platforms cluster around the lower rungs of informing and consultation, whereas several Korean initiatives move toward partnership and, in some cases, the delegation of power.

Lessons Learned and Remaining Challenges

The South Korean experience with digital governance offers three key lessons for developing countries. First, the integration of online and offline channels is crucial, as digital platforms should complement traditional modes of engagement to ensure inclusivity and enhance the overall effectiveness. For instance, public hearings, citizen juries, and neighborhood meetings continue to play a role alongside online consultations, reducing the exclusion of groups with limited digital access (Baek, 2022). Second, systematic knowledge management through the classification and transformation of participatory data enables governments to translate citizen input into actionable knowledge that can improve services and inform policy development (Bae et al. 2019). Rather than treating citizen input as isolated complaints, Korean institutions increasingly organize, analyze, and feed this information into planning and decision-making processes. Third, building trust between the government and citizens remains the most decisive factor for the success of digital governance, as trust underpins both the legitimacy of participatory processes and the sustainability of citizen engagement (Afiyah, 2024; Baek, 2022). Transparency about how citizen input is used, clear communication of the rationales for decisions, and visible policy changes resulting from participation all contribute to strengthening this trust.

Despite these achievements, South Korea continues to face significant challenges. Chief among

them are the persistence of the digital divide, which restricts equitable access to participatory platforms for certain groups, and the difficulty in ensuring that citizen proposals submitted through digital systems are of sufficient quality and practicality to contribute meaningfully to policymaking (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2015). These challenges highlight that while digital platforms can significantly expand the scope of citizen participation, their effectiveness ultimately depends on complementary strategies that promote equity, capacity building, and institutional responsiveness.

Thailand faces several critical challenges in advancing digital governance. First, the digital infrastructure remains uneven, particularly in rural areas, creating disparities in access to public services and limiting the extent to which citizens can fully benefit from government platforms (Bannister & Connolly, 2020; Digital Government Development Agency, 2023). Second, citizen participation remains largely at the level of consultation rather than joint decision-making, which hinders the genuine reflection of public voices in governance processes (Arnstein, 1969). Finally, persistent distrust in the government and the lack of transparency in responding to citizen input have contributed to the perception that digital platforms function more as symbolic tools than as effective mechanisms for policymaking and practical implementation (Afiyah, 2024).

Institutionally, overlapping mandates among agencies, limited interoperability of information systems, and frequent policy changes further weaken the continuity needed for sustained digital participation. These issues reinforce each other: weak institutional capacity reduces responsiveness, which erodes trust and discourages citizens from engaging, creating a vicious cycle that digital technologies alone cannot break.

Comparative Analysis in Three Key Dimensions

A comparative assessment of South Korea and Thailand reveals structural differences along three main dimensions:

1. **Efficiency:** South Korea's integrated digital systems and use of real-time data enable the efficient

management of complaints, appeals, and audits. Processes are streamlined and supported by interoperable platforms, allowing agencies to respond quickly and consistently. In contrast, Thailand still relies on procedures that involve multiple administrative steps and fragmented information systems, resulting in slower responses and higher administrative burdens for citizens and officials.

2. **Transparency:** South Korea has robust open data mechanisms and regularly publishes performance and oversight reports that are accessible to the public, thereby reinforcing transparency and scrutiny. Thailand has also launched open data initiatives; however, many datasets are not updated regularly or are provided in formats that limit their practical use. Consequently, open data have not yet become a fully effective tool for citizens to monitor and evaluate government decisions.

3. **Decision-making Participation:** Several South Korean platforms, such as Gwanghwamoon 1st Street and the nuclear energy deliberation process, approach the levels of partnership and delegated power in Arnstein's ladder of participation, enabling citizens to influence policy choices in meaningful ways. In Thailand, most digital platforms remain at the levels of informing and consultation, with few institutional pathways for citizens to share authority in policy-making (Arnstein, 1969). This difference underscores the contrast between symbolic and substantive participation in the digital governance.

Underlying Drivers of Divergent Outcomes

The three dimensions of efficiency, transparency, and decision-making participation are not merely descriptive categories but reflect deeper causal mechanisms that shape citizen participation in the digital era in the two countries (Bannister & Connolly, 2020; OECD, 2020). In South Korea, a relatively high level of state capacity, coherent legal frameworks, and a professionalized bureaucracy create favorable conditions for institutionalizing digital platforms (Cheong & Cho, 2024; United Nations, 2022). Long-term investment in ICT infrastructure has been

accompanied by reforms in public management, performance monitoring, and anti-corruption systems, allowing digital tools to be embedded into core administrative routines rather than operating as stand-alone projects (United Nations Development Programme 2024). This institutional coherence explains why platforms such as the Audit Information Management System and Gwanghwamoon 1st Street can channel citizen input into concrete policy adjustments and oversight outcomes (Bae et al., 2019; Baek, 2022).

In contrast, Thailand's digital government agenda has evolved in a context characterized by fragmented mandates, overlapping authorities, and frequent policy discontinuities (Digital Government Development Agency, 2023; Office of the National Digital Economy and Society Commission, 2020). Many digital initiatives have been introduced as projects tied to specific administrations or donor-driven programs rather than as components of a stable, whole-of-government strategy (Bannister & Connolly, 2020). As a result, complaint platforms and open data portals often lack clear follow-up mechanisms, standardized workflows, or dedicated units responsible for turning citizen input into actionable policy knowledge (Peixoto and Steinberg, 2019). This divergence can be explained by differences in institutional path dependence: South Korea's gradual consolidation of administrative reforms since the late 20th century has created a platform for digital integration, whereas Thailand's reforms remain partial, producing islands of innovation in an otherwise traditional bureaucratic landscape (Cheong & Cho, 2024; United Nations, 2022).

Political culture and state–society relations also contribute to these divergent trajectories. In South Korea, the legacies of pro-democracy movements and social mobilization have generated strong expectations that citizens should be able to monitor and contest government decisions (Cheong & Cho, 2024). Digital participation platforms resonate with the existing culture of public scrutiny and civic activism. In Thailand, by contrast, hierarchical bureaucratic norms and limited traditions of deliberative engagement mean that citizens may hesitate to confront authorities directly, and officials may perceive citizen monitoring

as a threat rather than a resource (Bannister & Connolly, 2020; Yadav, 2024). These cultural factors help explain why similar digital tools (e.g., complaint systems) function primarily as one-way communication channels in Thailand but evolve into shared problem-solving spaces in South Korea.

Trust is another central causal variable in this study. Empirical studies consistently confirm that citizens are more willing to participate when they believe that authorities will listen and respond in good faith (Afiyah, 2024; Lai and Beh, 2025). South Korea's relatively high levels of institutional trust, supported by visible anti-corruption efforts and consistent communication, reinforce virtuous cycles of engagement: citizens participate, see results, and therefore remain engaged (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). In Thailand, low trust in political and administrative institutions often discourages citizens from investing time and effort in participation processes they perceive as symbolic (Afiyah, 2024; Peixoto & Steinberg, 2019). The outcome is a vicious cycle in which limited responsiveness undermines trust, and weak trust further suppresses participation, even when digital channels are technically available (Bano et al., 2025; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2015).

Positioning within Public Administration Paradigms

The comparison between South Korea and Thailand can also be interpreted through the evolution of public administration paradigms, including New Public Management (NPM), New Public Governance (NPG), and Digital-Era Governance (DEG) (Hood 1991; Osborne 2006; Dunleavy et al. 2006). South Korea exhibits the characteristics of a hybrid model that has moved beyond NPM's narrow focus on efficiency toward a more networked, citizen-oriented governance structure. While performance measurement and managerial tools remain important, DEG principles such as reintegration, holism, and process digitization are visible in integrated data systems and cross-agency platforms (Cheong & Cho, 2024; OECD, 2020). Simultaneously, NPG elements emerge in collaborative arrangements where citizens, civil society organizations, and experts contribute to

policy deliberation via digital channels (Fung, 2006; Peixoto & Steinberg, 2019).

In contrast, Thailand's digital government reforms remain closer to a service-delivery variant of NPM, emphasizing convenience, speed, and cost reduction rather than deeper transformations of accountability and participation (Bannister & Connolly, 2020). Many initiatives focus on "front-office" improvements such as online forms, tracking applications, and information portals without comprehensive redesign of "back-office" processes or horizontal coordination (Digital Government Development Agency, 2023; Office of the National Digital Economy and Society Commission, 2020). From an NPG perspective, the absence of strong institutionalized partnerships with civil society organizations and citizen groups limits the development of collaborative governance networks (Osborne, 2006). DEG principles are only partially implemented: while some processes are digitized, reintegration and holism are weakened by persistent silo structures and fragmented ICT architectures (Dunleavy et al., 2006; OECD 2020).

This paradigmatic positioning has important implications for citizen participation in public health. Where DEG and NPG logics are more fully developed, as in South Korea, digital tools are more likely to be embedded in multi-actor governance arrangements and used to distribute authority across state and non-state actors (Fung, 2006; Cheong & Cho, 2024). Where NPM remains dominant, as in Thailand, digital participation risks being instrumentalized as a means of collecting feedback or improving service satisfaction without altering the underlying power relations (Bannister & Connolly, 2020; Peixoto & Steinberg, 2019). Understanding these paradigmatic differences helps clarify why technology adoption alone does not automatically lead to democratic deepening and why reforms must simultaneously address institutional design, administrative culture, and accountability mechanisms (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Gardenier et al., 2024).

Results

The findings presented in Chapter 4 demonstrate that South Korea has achieved substantial pro-

gress in digital governance, marked by enhanced transparency, efficiency, and inclusive mechanisms for citizen participation (United Nations, 2022; OECD, 2024). Through integrated digital platforms, open data initiatives, and participatory systems such as the Audit Information Management System and Gwanghwamoon 1st Street, South Korea, have successfully narrowed the gap between the government and citizens (Bae et al., 2019; Baek, 2022). These advancements illustrate how well-designed digital infrastructure and coherent institutional arrangements can foster public trust and strengthen democratic accountability (Afiyah, 2024; United Nations Development Programme, 2024). Despite these achievements, challenges such as the digital divide and disparities in digital literacy persist, indicating the need for continuous investment in equitable access and participatory capacity (Bano et al., 2025; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2015).

Thailand, on the other hand, has made notable improvements in service delivery and administrative transparency through digital tools such as the 1111 Complaint System, the Online Damrongtham Center, and Open Government Data initiatives (Digital Government Development Agency, 2023). However, citizen participation remains limited. Most platforms operate at the stages of informing and consultation rather than enabling deliberation, co-creation, or shared decision-making (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006). Structural constraints, including fragmented institutional arrangements, insufficient integration of digital systems, and limited responsiveness to public input, continue to impede the evolution of meaningful engagement (Bannister & Connolly, 2020; Peixoto & Steinberg, 2019).

A comparative assessment reveals that South Korea represents a more advanced and institutionalized model of digital governance, whereas Thailand remains in a developmental stage (United Nations, 2022; OECD, 2024). The analysis of efficiency, transparency, and participatory depth highlights the significant gaps between the two countries. South Korea's model demonstrates how institutional coherence, long-term policy continuity, and citizen-centered design can increase the quality of participation and improve policy outcomes (Bae et al., 2024; Bae et al., 2019). In contrast, Thailand must address systemic barriers

to expand opportunities for citizens to contribute substantively to government decision-making (Digital Government Development Agency, 2023; Yadav, 2024).

Overall, the findings suggest that Thailand can benefit from adopting several aspects of South Korea's approach, including sustained investment in digital infrastructure, strengthened cross-agency integration, development of participatory mechanisms beyond consultation, and enhancement of transparency to rebuild public trust (Bano et al., 2025; OECD, 2020). These measures would support Thailand's transition toward a more inclusive and participatory digital governance framework (United Nations, 2022; United Nations Development Program, 2024).

Limitations of the Study

Although this study offers a comprehensive comparative analysis of digital governance and citizen participation in South Korea and Thailand, it has several limitations. First, the research relies exclusively on secondary data, including government reports, academic literature, and documents from international organizations, which may limit the depth of contextual understanding available through primary qualitative data, such as interviews or field observations (Bertot et al., 2012; Peixoto & Steinberg, 2019). Future studies could enhance empirical richness by incorporating perspectives from government officials, civil society actors, and citizens who actively engage with digital platforms.

Second, the study is constrained by differences in data availability between countries. South Korea maintains extensive documentation on digital participation mechanisms, whereas Thailand's institutional reports are less detailed and sometimes inconsistent (Digital Government Development Agency, 2023; United Nations, 2022). This disparity may influence the comparative balance and interpretive depth of certain findings. Third, the rapid evolution of digital technologies means that the policies and systems discussed in this study may continue to change. Digital governance is dynamic; as new tools emerge, such as generative AI, algorithmic decision-making, and advanced data analytics, the mechanisms for citizen participation may shift in directions not

fully captured in the present analysis (Wang et al., 2023; Gardenier et al., 2024). Finally, cultural and political contextual factors were not examined in depth, although they significantly shape how citizens perceive participation and trust in the government (Afiyah, 2024; Lai and Beh, 2025). Further research integrating political culture, digital literacy levels, and socioeconomic factors would yield a more holistic understanding of the determinants of effective digital participation.

Implications of the Study

Theoretical Implications

The findings reinforce long-standing theories of citizen participation, such as Arnstein's Ladder (1969) and Fung's Democracy Cube (2006), by demonstrating how digital tools can either reinforce low-level participation (information and consultation) or enable higher-order participation (partnership and delegated power). South Korea's experience confirms that digital platforms alone do not guarantee empowered participation; rather, strong institutional frameworks and political commitment determine whether technology becomes a symbolic or substantive tool for democratic engagement (Cheong and Cho, 2024; Peixoto and Steinberg, 2019). Additionally, this study contributes to Digital-Era Governance (DEG) theory by illustrating how integration, holism, and data-driven systems can enhance participatory capacity (Dunleavy et al., 2006; OECD, 2020). Thailand's fragmentation and weak interoperability highlight the theoretical expectation that institutional coherence is a precondition for meaningful e-participation (Bano et al., 2020; Bano et al., 2025).

Policy Implications

The comparative findings suggest that digital governance reform in Thailand requires a shift from service-oriented digitization to systems that embed transparency, accountability, and participatory decision-making. Policymakers should prioritize: investments in infrastructure, particularly in rural regions, to reduce digital inequality; the creation of integrated participation platforms that connect complaints, audits, public consultation, and policy co-creation into a single ecosystem; institutional

reforms that clarify agency responsibilities, reduce duplication, and strengthen interoperability across government systems; and mechanisms for feedback loops, requiring agencies to formally respond to citizen input to rebuild trust (Digital Government Development Agency, 2023; OECD, 2020; United Nations, 2022). These implications align Thailand with international digital governance benchmarks, such as the OECD Digital Government Framework and the UN E-Government Survey (OECD, 2020; United Nations, 2022).

Practical Implications

For practitioners, the analysis highlights the need to strengthen digital literacy for both citizens and public officials, the capacity for data analysis to translate public input into actionable policy insights, communication strategies that demonstrate how public feedback influences decision-making, and user-centered design to ensure accessibility, usability, and inclusiveness of digital platforms (Bertot et al., 2012; Zhang, 2024). Thailand's agencies can use South Korea as a practical reference case for institutionalizing, scaling, and evaluating digital participation tools over time (Bae et al., 2019; Baek, 2022).

Implications for Comparative Public Administration

For comparative public administration, this study underscores the value of pairing macro-level indicators, such as the UNE-Government Development Index and OECD Digital Government Index, with qualitative assessments of institutional design and participation practices (United Nations, 2022; OECD, 2024). Focusing solely on rankings may obscure important differences in how citizens experience digital government in their daily interactions with the state (Bannister & Connolly, 2020). The South Korea–Thailand comparison demonstrates that countries with lower aggregate scores can still develop innovative pockets of participation, while high-ranking countries must continuously address issues of equity and inclusion (Bano et al., 2025; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2015).

The analysis also suggests that comparative research should pay closer attention to implementation

ecologies, that is, the constellation of laws, organizational routines, professional norms, and civic expectations that shape how digital participation tools are designed and used (Fung, 2006; Gardenier et al., 2024). Rather than treating digital platforms as neutral instruments, scholars and practitioners must examine how they are embedded in the broader trajectories of administrative reform, political contestation, and social change (Dawes, 2008; Peixoto & Steinberg, 2019). Future comparative studies could extend this framework to other regions in the Global South, exploring whether the causal mechanisms identified here, such as institutional coherence, trust, and political culture, operate in similar or distinct ways in different contexts.

Contribution and “So What?” Significance

This study offers three major contributions to the scholarship and practice.

1. **Contribution to Knowledge:** This study advances the digital governance literature by providing a rare, systematic comparison between a highly mature digital government (South Korea) and an emerging digital reformer (Thailand). This highlights how institutional capacity, not technology, is the decisive factor in determining whether e-participation becomes substantive rather than symbolic (Bannister & Connolly, 2020; Bano et al., 2025).
2. **Contribution to Policy and Practice:** By identifying the structural and cultural barriers constraining meaningful participation in Thailand, this study provides actionable insights for policymakers seeking to transition to participatory digital governance. The lessons from South Korea demonstrate feasible pathways for elevating citizen influence on decision-making (Bae et al., 2019; Baek, 2022).
3. **Answering the “So What?” Question:** This research is important because it shows that digital governance cannot succeed without genuine citizen participation and that participation cannot succeed without trust, transparency, and institutional readiness (Afiyah, 2024; Lai & Beh, 2025). Understanding these dynamics is essential for countries like Thailand that aim to meet global

benchmarks (e.g., OECD, UN E-Government Index) and strengthen democratic governance (OECD, 2024; United Nations, 2022).

Therefore, the findings have relevance beyond Thailand and South Korea, offering conceptual and policy insights applicable to other developing countries navigating similar digital transformations (Peixoto & Steinberg, 2019; Zhang, 2024).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that South Korea has successfully developed a mature and coherent model of digital governance through the establishment of comprehensive and integrated platforms that promote transparency, accountability, and substantive citizen engagement. Initiatives such as the Audit Information Management System, Online Administrative Appeals Hub System, and Gwanghwamoon 1st Street provide clear evidence of how institutionalized digital mechanisms can empower citizens to access information and influence decision-making in meaningful ways (Baek, 2022). These platforms represent more than technological tools; they reflect a governance philosophy centered on openness, responsiveness, and participatory democracy.

South Korea's experience further illustrates that digital transformation is most effective when it is supported by long-term political commitment, robust administrative structures, and continuous investment in advanced digital infrastructure. Digital technologies have improved service delivery, enhanced government responsiveness, and strengthened public scrutiny. During national crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, these systems enabled rapid two-way communication and mobilized public participation in problem-solving processes. The Korean case highlights the strategic importance of embedding participation into the architecture of digital governance.

However, the country continues to face challenges. Persistent socioeconomic disparities and variations in digital literacy contribute to a digital divide that restricts equal participation among vulnerable groups (Cramer, 2025). This indicates that even highly advanced digital systems must be complemented by inclusive policies and capacity

building measures to ensure fairness and universal access.

In contrast, Thailand's journey toward digital governance has resulted in notable improvements in public service accessibility and administrative transparency through platforms such as the 1111 Complaint System, Damrongtham Online Center, and Open Government Data initiative. However, these systems have not evolved sufficiently to foster deeper participation. Most platforms operate within the lower rungs of Arnstein's participation ladder, informing and consulting without mechanisms that permit deliberation, shared authority, or policy co-creation. Structural constraints, such as fragmented institutional arrangements, inconsistent policy implementation, and limited public trust, further weaken the potential of digital tools to generate meaningful engagement. The contrast between South Korea and Thailand underscores the importance of institutional coherence, long-term digital investment, and transparent governance in achieving participatory transformations. South Korea's experience shows that when a digital government is designed not only to deliver services but also to redistribute decision-making power, citizen participation becomes more authentic, sustained, and impactful.

If Thailand is able to commit to structural reforms particularly by strengthening transparency, enabling participatory platforms, and expanding nationwide digital access.

It has the potential to transition toward a genuinely citizen-centered digital governance system. Such a transformation would not only enhance public trust but also ensure that democratic governance evolves in parallel with technological advancements.

Recommendations

1. Reduce the Digital Divide

Thailand must prioritize comprehensive investment in digital infrastructure, particularly in rural, remote, and low-income communities. Beyond expanding broadband access, policies should include subsidies for devices, low-cost connectivity programs and community learning hubs. Bridging the digital divide is foundational to ensuring that citizen participation platforms

do not reinforce inequality but instead expand democratic inclusion.

2. **Develop Integrated Digital Participation Platforms**
Thailand should consolidate fragmented digital systems into a single, interoperable, one-stop platform that integrates complaints, administrative appeals, policy consultations, and feedback. Such a platform should include standardized data workflows across agencies, real-time progress tracking for users, and analytical dashboards to help policymakers systematically interpret citizen input. This would reduce redundancy, improve service responsiveness, and create a unified participation ecosystem that elevates the visibility and influence of citizens' contributions.
3. **Strengthening Transparency and Trust**
To rebuild public confidence, the government must articulate and demonstrate how citizen feedback influences the actual decisions. This requires timely disclosure of the rationale behind administrative decisions, performance metrics for public services, and follow-up actions in response to citizen input. Using digital tools to publish audit trails, decision logs, and open datasets reinforces accountability and provides tangible evidence of government responsiveness.
4. **Promote Meaningful Citizen Participation**
Thailand should expand beyond basic consultations toward participatory practices that grant citizens shared decision-making roles. This can include public deliberation forums integrated with digital platforms, policy co-creation workshops using hybrid online–offline models, participatory budgeting systems at the municipal and national levels, and co-monitoring platforms that allow citizens to track policy implementation. Such mechanisms elevate participation from symbolic involvement to substantive influence.
5. **Enhance Digital Literacy and Institutional Capacity**
Effective participation requires skill development on both sides of the equation. For citizens: digital literacy programs, education on evaluating public information, and training for using

E-participation platforms for public officials: Skills in managing digital platforms, competency in data interpretation and public communication, and training in participatory governance and collaborative problem solving. Strengthening these capacities will ensure that digital participation is accessible, meaningful, and influential for a wider range of citizens in the future.

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