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CONTEXTUALIZING DIGITAL GOVERNMENT TRANSFORMATION IN ETHNICALLY POLARIZED SOCIETIES: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

TREO Paper

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Abstract

In ethnically polarized societies characterized by pronounced identity-based politics and competition over resources, digital government transformation entails both significant opportunities and substantial challenges. Accordingly, it is essential to examine how digital transformation can strengthen governance effectiveness in such contexts, while also understanding how social diversity and patterns of inclusion or exclusion shape governance outcomes for both theory and public policy. The purpose of this short paper is to test the soundness of our research idea and approach for conducting an integrative review on digital government transformation in ethnically polarized societies.

Keywords: digital transformation, digital government, ethnic diversity, ethnic polarization.

1 Introduction

As super-diversity becomes a normalized sociodemographic fact in contemporary societies, the issue of managing its complex manifestations has become a salient feature of academic and policy debates around the world (Mansouri & Elias, 2025). Recent global conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine/Russia, the rise of populism, increasingly restrictive anti-immigration policies in the United States, and broader anti-immigration discourses have underscored the need for continued debate on which policy approaches to ethnic diversity are most suitable for contemporary societies. Given these developments with an increasing proportion of cultural, political, economic, and related human activities occurring online, digital spaces may exacerbate existing challenges of division, inequity, exclusion, fraud, insecurity, and unequal power relations (Janowski, 2015).

However, this is an exciting time to be a researcher interested in the impact of technology on business, management, and broader society, as we approach the large-scale adoption of artificial intelligence. As AI algorithms become increasingly embedded across public services, we still lack crucial knowledge

about how citizens assign responsibility to public organizations for algorithmic failures and discrimination, compared to human-based discrimination (Alon-Barkat et al., 2025). This gap is particularly important in ethnically polarized and sensitive societies, where citizens' perceptions of responsibility strongly influence public demands for accountability. In ethnically polarized societies, where ethnic politics are prominent and competition for resources is intense, digital government transformation offers opportunities to improve service delivery, increase transparency, and enhance citizen engagement. At the same time, such initiatives require caution, as unevenly distributed trust, resources, and governance capacity can lead digital projects to deepen existing divisions or create new forms of inequality. This dual potential both promising and challenging makes these societies a particularly valuable context for exploring the impacts and design of digital government initiatives. Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of contextualized theory development as an alternative to the traditional positivist approach, defining context as 'situational opportunities or constraints that may alter behaviour' (Venkatesh, 2025).

2 Governance in ethnically polarized societies: setting the scene for contextualization

The relationship between ethnic diversity, the quality of governance and economic development remains highly debated. Many political scientists contend that achieving democracy and effective governance is more challenging in societies marked by significant diversity, as differing group interests can complicate consensus and institutional stability (De Soysa, & Almås, 2019). In contrast, sociological perspectives emphasize that it is not diversity itself, but rather the exclusion or marginalization of certain groups, that undermines social cohesion and governance quality. Research further suggests that inclusive political and economic institutions those that actively involve diverse groups are fundamental to fostering socio-economic development and stable governance (De Soysa, & Almås, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to explore how digital transformation in government can enhance governance effectiveness in this context.

3 Literature Integration Approach

This paper adopts an integrative review approach to investigate digital government transformation within the specific context of ethnically polarized societies. An integrative literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of a field by generating new insights through the critical analysis and synthesis of existing studies (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020). It involves not only reviewing and critically evaluating relevant literature but doing so in an integrated manner that enables the development of new conceptual frameworks and perspectives (Callahan, 2014). By leveraging the strengths of conceptual integration and theory building, this approach values context-specific factors that provide a richer understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. We performed our literature search using two major academic databases, Web of Science (WOS) and Scopus, both widely regarded for their extensive and authoritative coverage. Relevant studies were identified through a search strategy combining keywords such as "digital government," "digital transformation," "digital inclusion," "ethnic diversity," "ethnic minorities," "ethnic polarization" and "marginalized groups," along with citation chaining and the inclusion of seminal works. The aim was not to exhaustively catalogue all literature, but to conceptually integrate and interpret findings, highlighting key opportunities, challenges, and governance mechanisms in digitally transforming public sectors. Tables 1 below summarize the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Studies should focus on digital government, e-government, digital governance, or public sector digital transformation, including aspects of digital inclusion or digital inequality.	Studies focused solely on technical implementation, lacking frameworks, models, or conceptual relevance for organizational, managerial, or strategic purposes.

Studies should include some aspects of ethnic diversity, ethnic minorities, ethnic polarization, marginalized groups, or social fragmentation as part of the empirical context or conceptual analysis.	Studies focused solely on algorithmic design, software engineering, or technical architecture without governance implications, legal or policy analyses lacking organizational or theoretical insights
Studies should examine issues related to governance mechanisms, policy implementation, public administration, institutional capacity, citizen trust, or service delivery.	Studies examining digital transformation exclusively in private companies, businesses, or industry settings (with no public sector relevance) are excluded.
Only peer-reviewed journal articles published in recognized scientific outlets are included.	Books, book chapters, dissertations, reports, conference abstracts, and non-peer-reviewed materials are excluded.
Should be written in English	Articles that use languages other than English

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

From the initial query, we retrieved 195 journal articles from Web of Science and 242 from Scopus, resulting in a total of 437 articles from both databases. Following an initial screening of titles, abstracts, and authors, 118 duplicate records were removed, resulting in 319 unique articles retained for further analysis. The purpose of this short paper is to test the soundness of our research idea and approach for conducting an integrative review on digital government transformation in ethnically polarized societies. This paper represents the first step of this endeavour and provides a basis for discussion and refinement as we move toward the final study. Ultimately, this preliminary work contributes to our broader goal of developing a deeper understanding of how digital government initiatives interact with ethnic dynamics and social inclusion in public administration. In this short paper, we present our idea to the broader Information Systems community to evaluate its soundness, obtain feedback, and advance its development toward a full study.

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