FROM INFRASTRUCTURE TO INCLUSION: RETHINKING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN VIETNAM'S DIGITAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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Abstract

This study explores the role of citizen participation in the digital transformation of Vietnam's public administration. As the country advances e-government platforms such as the National Public Service Portal, VNForm, and VNeID, effective governance increasingly depends on active civic engagement. To analyze this phenomenon, the study applies multiple theoretical lenses including deliberative democracy, participatory governance, and platform theory to examine how digital tools mediate state citizen interactions. These

frameworks help conceptualize participation not only as informational access but also as collaborative policymaking, shaped by legal foundations such as the current Constitution promulgated in 2013 of Vietnam and laws on information access and grassroots democracy. A mixed-method approach was employed, including document analysis and a survey of 400 citizens across seven provinces. Findings reveal that while Vietnam has built robust digital infrastructures, actual participation remains limited. Many citizens are unaware of available channels or lack confidence in data security and government responsiveness. Platforms often omit critical consultation documents or fail to provide transparent feedback loops. Moreover, platform theory reveals that the architecture of these systems tends to prioritize administrative efficiency over deliberative engagement. Social media channels such as Zalo OA and Facebook, despite their potential to foster public dialogue, remain underutilized. These insights underscore the need to reimagine digital governance not just as a technical upgrade but as a democratic opportunity.

1. Introduction

In the context of Vietnam's ongoing digital transformation across all sectors, the application of digital technology in public administration has become a pivotal strategy for enhancing transparency, efficiency, and citizen-centric governance (Government of Vietnam, 2024). The country's efforts to develop a digital government, evidenced by platforms such as the National Public Service Portal and mobile applications, underscore a strong commitment to administrative modernization. However, the success of these technologies relies not solely on digital infrastructure but critically on meaningful citizen participation.

Citizen involvement includes more than the passive use of online services; it entails active engagement in providing feedback, monitoring public operations, and co-developing solutions to governance challenges (Webler et al., 1995). Yet, in practice, the gap between policy ambitions and actual public uptake persists, driven by barriers such as limited digital literacy and skepticism surrounding data privacy (Doyle, 2015; Nguyen, 2015). This research aims to investigate the current status of citizen participation through digital technology applications in Vietnam's state management, identify enabling and inhibiting factors, and propose strategic solutions to promote inclusive, smart governance in which technology and citizen agency evolve synergistically.

Although Vietnam has invested heavily in digital platforms, citizen engagement remains low. Existing literature rarely examines the behavioral and institutional barriers to participation. This study fills that gap by analyzing usage patterns and proposing inclusive design solutions. While digital infrastructure has expanded, theoretical clarity on citizen participation remains limited. This study addresses that gap by applying frameworks from IAPP (2000), Webler et al. (1995), and Margetts (2022).

2. Theoretical Framework on Citizen Participation

Citizen participation has evolved into a fundamental concept within public administration and policy-making discourse, drawing insights from diverse theoretical perspectives. Since the 1990s, "participation" has gained scholarly attention not only as a democratic principle but also as a mechanism for improving the quality and legitimacy of governance (Webler et al., 1995; Doyle, 2015). The International Association for Public Participation (IAPP, 2000) characterizes participation as a process whereby individuals affected by a decision are engaged in its formulation. The IAPP framework identifies five progressive levels of involvement: information, consultation, involvement, collaboration, and empowerment. This highlights the need for transparency and mutual understanding between citizens and state actors.

Grabow et al. (2002) contribute a decision-oriented view, emphasizing participation as a route through which stakeholders can influence the content of decisions. This reinforces the importance of inclusivity and representation in policy-making, especially for those directly impacted by government actions.

Doyle (2015) expands on the concept by positioning participation along a continuum from simple information-sharing to collaborative decision-making partnerships. This gradient reflects the varying degrees of public influence depending on institutional will, policy urgency, and citizens' capacity to engage.

In the context of European deliberative governance, public participation is increasingly viewed as a process grounded in reasoned dialogue among affected citizens, civil society organizations, and government actors prior to the finalization of policies. Such deliberative interaction transforms participation into a structured arena for collective problem-solving, where diverse perspectives contribute to more legitimate and socially grounded decisions. Building on broader public governance scholarship, citizen participation is also understood as a continuum of engagement that extends beyond deliberation to include the identification of community needs, contributions to policy development, and collaboration in the design and improvement of public services (Brandsen, Steen, & Verschuere, 2018).

Recent contributions have expanded the understanding of digital inclusion and platform governance. For instance, platform-based governance dynamics are explored by Margetts (2022), while comparative studies by Kim & Choi (2023) offer regional benchmarks from Singapore and South Korea, highlighting best practices in citizen-centric digital administration.

Synthesizing these viewpoints, citizen participation in state management can be seen as both an ethical obligation and a strategic approach to improving governance outcomes. In the context of digital transformation, technology-enabled platforms offer new opportunities for citizens to engage meaningfully, whether through information access, feedback submission, or policy co-creation. However, the effectiveness of such participation depends on inclusivity, trust, and the government's willingness to facilitate genuine two-way communication (Justice, 2001; IAPP, 2000).

Research findings indicate that citizen participation in state management occurs through various channels and at different levels, either directly or indirectly. To operationalize "inclusive participation," we define it as the meaningful and equitable involvement of citizens in digital governance processes, beyond mere access to platforms. This includes the ability to understand, influence, and co-create public services. We adopt a four-level (Figure 1) framework adapted from IAPP and Webler et al. (1995):

+ Level 1 - Information: Citizens receive relevant public information through digital platforms.
+ Level 2 - Consultation: Citizens provide feedback or opinions on draft policies or services.
+ Level 3 - Collaboration: Citizens co-design or co-deliver public services with government agencies.
+ Level 4 - Empowerment: Citizens monitor, evaluate, and hold agencies accountable through digital tools.

These levels reflect increasing depth of engagement, from passive receipt of information to active governance roles. Survey items were mapped to these levels to assess the depth and quality of engagement.
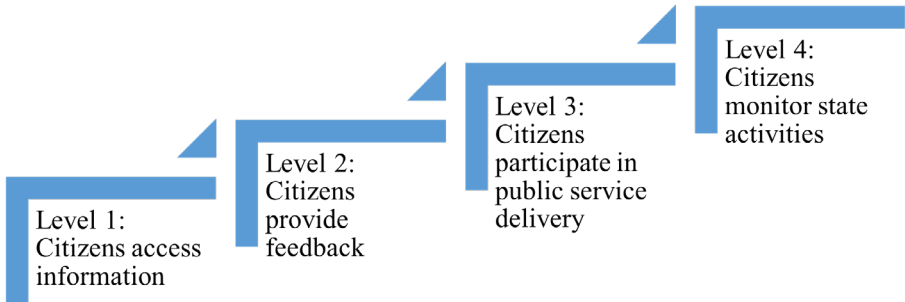

Figure 1. Forms of Citizen Participation in State Management

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method research design, integrating both secondary and primary data sources to examine the current state of citizen participation in digital technology applications for public administration in Vietnam. The secondary data collection was conducted through a comprehensive desk review of official documents, digital platforms, and statistical reports published by government agencies (Government of Vietnam, 2024). These sources provided insights into the policy environment, legal frameworks, and technological initiatives relevant to citizen engagement. Particular emphasis was placed on analyzing the structure and functionality of platforms such as the National Public Service

Portal and various ministry-level and provincial websites.

Primary data were obtained through a structured survey administered across seven provinces and cities, representing the northern, central, and southern regions of Vietnam. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed, with participant selection based on population size, concentration of government agencies, and socioeconomic diversity (Nguyen, 2015). Specifically, 140 responses (35%) were collected in Hanoi, followed by Quảng Ninh (40 responses), Yên Bái (30), Thừ Thiên Huế (30), Dak Lak (30), Ho Chi Minh City (100), and Binh Phuoc (30). Participants were selected from various age groups (18–65 years old) and different demographic groups to ensure representative sampling. The age distribution of the surveyed participants is illustrated in Figure 2, with the highest proportion (39.8%) belonging to the 25–40 age group.

The analysis included factors such as age distribution, educational background, and prior experience with digital platforms. Quantitative data from the surveys were processed using SPSS Statistics 20.0 software, allowing for descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and comparative analysis to identify patterns in citizen engagement (Doyle, 2015). This dual approach facilitated a multidimensional understanding of the motivations, challenges, and behaviors associated with digital participation in public administration. By triangulating insights from both document analysis and field data, the study aims to generate robust and actionable recommendations for improving citizen involvement through technology-driven governance.
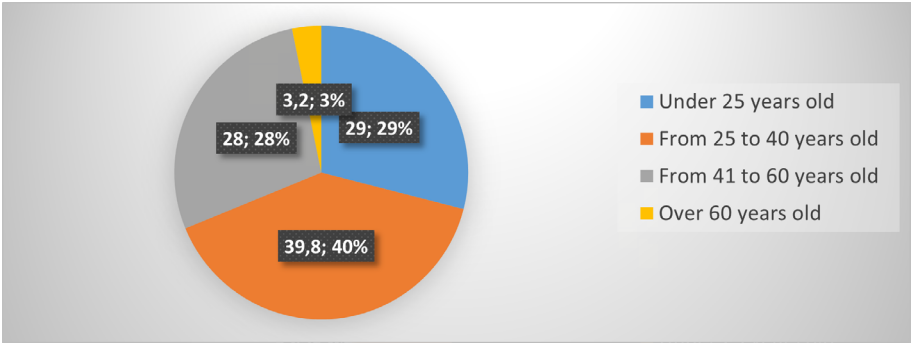

Figure 2: Age Distribution of Surveyed Participants

In addition to the survey and document review, we acknowledge the limitations of self-reported data and propose future integration of behavioral trace data. This includes scraping public feedback posts from the National Public Service Portal for topic-sentiment modeling, extracting completion rates and dwell time from VNForm, and conducting conversation analysis on Zalo OA messages to quantify engagement quality.

4. Current Situation of Citizen Participation

In recent years, Vietnam has made significant strides in deploying digital technology to enhance public administration and citizen engagement. Several platforms have been introduced to facilitate access to public information, gather feedback, and promote collaborative governance. Among the most prominent is the Government Electronic Portal, established under Decision No. 83/2008/QĐ-TTg (Government of Vietnam, 2024). Designed as a single point of access, it links users to various governmental services and resources, including Q&A tools and feedback mechanisms. Despite its comprehensive structure, the portal's usage by the public remains modest due to limited awareness and digital capacity (Justice, 2001).

The "Policy Consultation" section within these portals is another initiative aimed at soliciting public input on draft regulations (Government of Vietnam, 2024). While technically equipped to publish full drafts and collect comments, the implementation varies across agencies and often falls short of procedural completeness. Many draft postings omit essential documents such as explanatory reports or structured feedback templates, thereby reducing clarity and engagement incentives for the public. Figure 3 illustrates citizens' experience with the "Policy Consultation" section on governmental platforms.
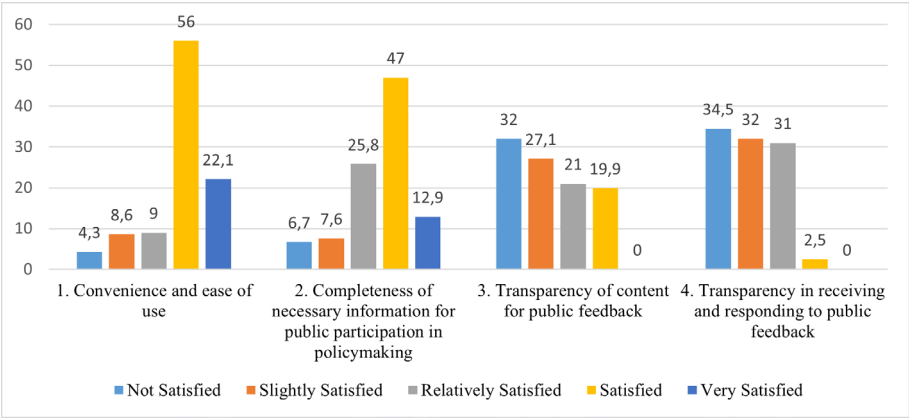

Figure 3. Citizens' Experience in Policy and Law-Making Participation Through the "Policy Consultation" Section

The National Public Service Portal (https://dichvucong.gov.vn) stands out as a critical component of Vietnam's digital government. Operational since 2019, it offers hundreds of administrative services online and integrates with local and sectoral portals (Government of Vietnam, 2024). Coupled with the VNeID application for digital identification, this system enables citizens to access services and update personal data efficiently. Nevertheless, barriers such as digital literacy, lack of trust in data protection, and uneven infrastructure

continue to impede widespread adoption (WHO, 2002).

Platforms such as VNForm (https://form.gov.vn) allow citizens to participate in surveys and satisfaction assessments of public services. However, survey results reveal extremely low user engagement, with 98% of respondents reporting never using VNForm (Government of Vietnam, 2024), suggesting a disconnect between technical availability and actual user adoption. Similarly, other specialized petition channels intended to facilitate public input also suffer from limited visibility and low participation rates. Figure 4 presents the percentage of citizens using digital technology applications to participate in policy-making and public service delivery.
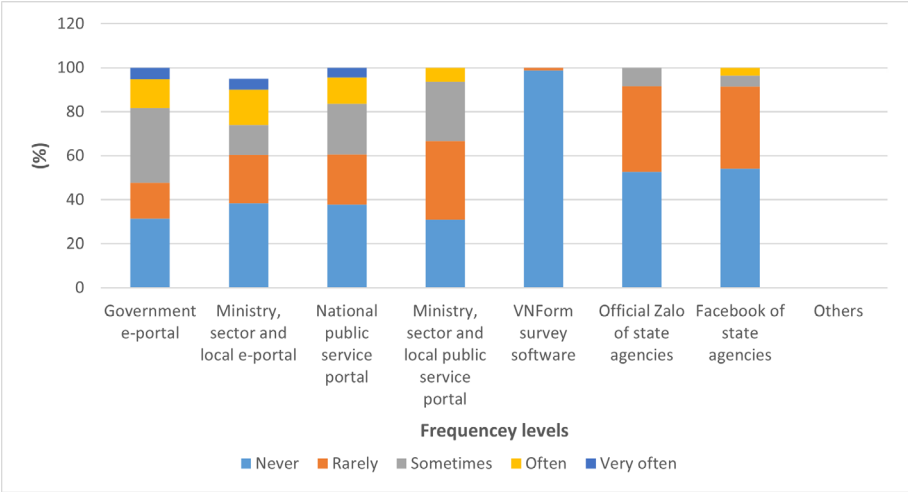

Figure 4. Percentage of Citizens Using Digital Technology Applications to Participate in Policy and Law-Making and Public Service Delivery

Social media has also been leveraged, with Zalo OA and Facebook fan pages serving as real-time communication channels between state agencies and the public. Despite their ubiquity, engagement with these platforms remains underdeveloped. More than half of the surveyed citizens had never interacted with government Zalo OA accounts or Facebook pages, highlighting the need for improved outreach and content strategy (Doyle, 2015).

The "Policy and Lawmaking" section at https://xaydungchinhsach.chinhphu.vn, introduced in 2022, aims to provide comprehensive updates and forums for citizen input. However, the actual level of participation remains low. Among 30 posted policy proposals, only 1,290 comments and 489 expressions of interest were recorded, suggesting limited public impact (Government of Vietnam, 2024). Further analysis shows that while citizens appreciate the simplicity and completeness of the application, they remain unsatisfied with the transparency of opinion processing and feedback integration (Grabow et al., 2002).

Consultations conducted between August and November 2024 indicate that for 20

draft legislative documents, no public feedback was received. This lack of interaction was compounded by incomplete documentation, with only 40% of proposals accompanied by explanatory reports and no agencies providing formal feedback templates (Justice, 2001).

Moreover, survey responses underscore the public's dissatisfaction with how state agencies manage feedback. Citizens perceive a lack of responsiveness and poor transparency in how their opinions are handled and integrated into policymaking. This reveals a pressing need to improve not only digital tools but also the institutional culture and mechanisms that support citizen participation (Webler et al., 1995; Doyle, 2015).

5. General Assessment

Vietnam has made notable progress in fostering citizen participation through digital technology applications in public administration. Legally, the country has developed a relatively comprehensive framework that affirms the right of citizens to engage in governance processes (Nguyen, 2015). Article 28 of the 2013 Constitution explicitly guarantees citizens' rights to participate in the management of the state and society, further reinforced by the Law on Access to Information, the Law on Promulgation of Legal Documents, and the Law on Grassroots Democracy Implementation.

In addition to the legal architecture, state agencies have demonstrated efforts in diversifying technology applications to facilitate citizen interaction. The integration of multiple platforms, ranging from the National Public Service Portal to ministry-level and local portals, has provided citizens with increased access to administrative services and opportunities to contribute opinions (Government of Vietnam, 2024). Most platforms offer user-friendly interfaces with automated features for submitting feedback and receiving notifications, while certain portals publish engagement metrics such as comment counts and approval ratings to enhance transparency (IAPP, 2000).

Nevertheless, several challenges constrain the effectiveness of these initiatives. A primary issue lies in the incomplete disclosure of consultation documents on official portals. Although regulations require full publication of proposals, explanatory notes, and impact assessments, many agencies share only partial information (Justice, 2001). This limits the public's capacity to provide constructive input. Additionally, citizens report dissatisfaction with agency responsiveness, noting frequent delays or complete absence of replies to submitted feedback, which undermines trust and discourages future engagement (Doyle, 2015). Figure 5 presents citizens' evaluation of how government agencies provide feedback to public opinion.
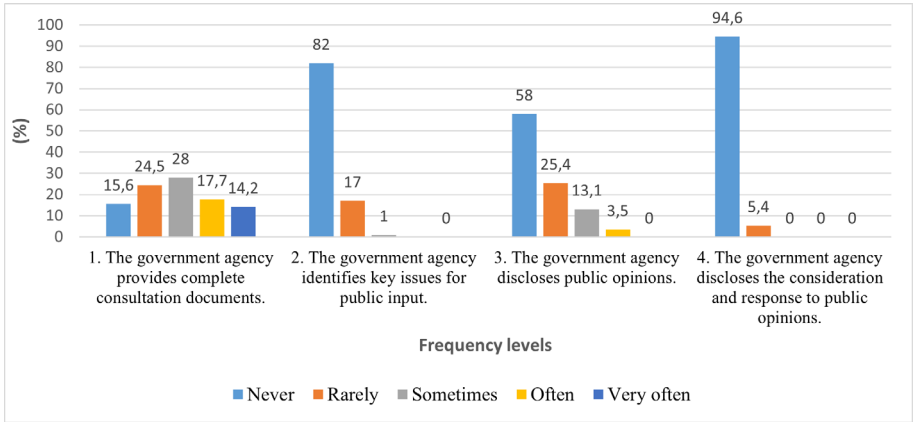
Figure 5. *Citizens' Evaluation of the Provision and Reception of Feedback by Government Agencies on the Government's Electronic Information Portal*

Technological shortcomings also persist. Fragmented software ecosystems, low inter-operability, and inadequate interface design hinder participation, especially among disadvantaged groups (WHO, 2002). Security and privacy concerns further impede usage, with citizens hesitant to provide personal data on digital platforms due to fears of misuse or breach (Webler et al., 1995).

Institutionally, citizen engagement has yet to be mainstreamed as a strategic priority. Consultation processes often lack dedicated funding or trained personnel, and some agencies regard public opinion as secondary to administrative efficiency (Grabow et al., 2002). Stereotypes about citizens' lack of expertise or capacity further contribute to tepid efforts at fostering participatory governance.

Finally, citizen-related constraints remain significant. While internet penetration is high in urban centers, rural areas face infrastructural gaps. Groups such as older adults, ethnic minorities, and low-income populations struggle with digital literacy and civic awareness, leading to low levels of proactive engagement.

6. Strategic Approaches to Strengthening Citizen Engagement

Promoting citizen engagement in digital governance requires a holistic approach that combines technical innovation with institutional reform and capacity building. First, awareness campaigns should leverage traditional and digital media to disseminate knowledge about e-governance benefits, targeting demographics with limited access or skills (Nguyen, 2015). Educational programs in schools and communities can introduce digital skills and civic responsibilities, fostering long-term engagement (WHO, 2002).

Second, digital platforms should adopt inclusive design principles. Features such as

voice guidance, simplified interfaces, and multilingual support can improve accessibility. The government's VNeID application serves as a successful model of user-centric design (Government of Vietnam, 2024). Trust-building is equally crucial; implementing robust cybersecurity measures and ensuring user data protection can mitigate privacy concerns (Justice, 2001).

Third, institutionalizing feedback mechanisms is key. Multi-channel systems (e.g., websites, apps, and hotlines) should be implemented with transparent workflows for receiving and responding to citizen input. The presence of independent oversight, possibly through civil society organizations, can help monitor response quality and fairness (Doyle, 2015).

Fourth, policy and infrastructure reforms must accompany digital transitions. Updating legal frameworks on electronic authentication, online service validity, and privacy protection will align Vietnam with global best practices (IAPP, 2000). Expanding broadband access, particularly in remote areas, and supporting public-private partnerships to build smart solutions can further strengthen infrastructure (Webler et al., 1995).

By implementing these multi-dimensional solutions, Vietnam can progress toward a digital public administration system that empowers citizens as active stakeholders in governance.

7. Discussion

Despite the proliferation of digital platforms, meaningful citizen participation in Vietnam remains limited due to both institutional and structural constraints. The most persistent challenge is institutional responsiveness. Survey respondents frequently reported that their feedback on official portals receives slow or generic replies, which diminishes confidence in digital participation and discourages continued engagement.

A second challenge concerns digital inequality. Older adults, ethnic minorities, and rural residents continue to face barriers related to internet access, device availability, and digital literacy. As a result, participation remains concentrated among groups with higher education and better digital skills, creating unequal opportunities to influence policy.

The analysis also highlights shortcomings in platform design and information provision. Many consultation portals publish draft documents without accompanying explanatory reports or impact assessments, limiting citizens' ability to provide informed opinions. Likewise, although Zalo OA and Facebook have wide reach, government accounts mainly disseminate information rather than facilitate two-way discussion, leaving their participatory potential underutilized.

The limited engagement of intermediary actors such as civil society organizations or community groups reduces support for citizens who lack the capacity or confidence to navigate digital systems. Without these facilitators, participation remains largely individual rather than collective, and marginalized voices remain underrepresented..

8. Conclusion

This study underscores the growing significance of citizen participation in Vietnam's digital public administration. While digital platforms and legal foundations have been established, the real challenge lies in converting technical capability into meaningful civic engagement. Through mixed-method research, the paper reveals barriers that limit public involvement, ranging from institutional responsiveness to digital literacy gaps. Importantly, it contributes new insight by evaluating the actual usage and effectiveness of national e-government tools from the citizens' perspective. The proposed solutions focused on inclusive platform design, feedback transparency, and strategic outreach offer a practical roadmap toward more responsive, citizen-driven governance. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a shift from technology-led reform to one rooted in human-centric, participatory state management. This study contributes to governance theory by demonstrating how digital inclusion requires more than infrastructure; it demands institutional responsiveness, inclusive design, and civic trust. By mapping participation across four levels, we offer a scalable framework for evaluating citizen engagement in digital contexts.

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