
THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET ENVIRONMENT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF STATE POLICY

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Abstract. *The aim of this research is to analyze the impact of the number of Internet and*

social network users on indicators of citizens' trust in the government and the level of public participation in politics. The study employs correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis, and the descriptive method. The impact of indicators of citizens' trust in the government and public participation in political life on the electronic government (e-government) development rate is analyzed. The results of the study can be useful for the elaboration of digital development strategies for states, taking into account the connections and impacts identified.

Keywords: *Internet environment; social networks; state policy; political participation; trust in government; e-government.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *internetinė aplinka; socialiniai tinklai; valstybės politika; politinis dalyvavimas; pasitikėjimas valdžia; e. valdžia.*

Introduction

The spread of the Internet, especially social networks, led to a revolution in citizens' lives, enabling citizens and government officials to interact with each other effectively (Häussler 2021; Fatema et al. 2022). However, these directions of interaction also comprise the interactions of: citizens with each other and their associations; experts and critics (Postill 2020); journalists (Nuernbergk 2020; Splendore and Curini 2020); and persons who can spread propaganda (Schia and Gjesvik 2020; García-Orosa 2021). These relationships shape the system of complex interconnections that may affect state policy.

In terms of interaction with citizens, one of the most important implications of Internet use is the change in citizens' involvement in social and political life. A number of researchers (Boulianne 2020; Bessarab et al. 2022) deal with this issue; however, they differ in their conclusions and the level of effect identified. It is also assumed that the level of citizens' trust in the government could have changed due to increased access to information (Chen, Yang and Zheng 2023; Wang et al. 2023). Citizens' trust and participation are the main determinants of interaction between citizens and the state, particularly in the digital environment (Khurdei et al. 2023). These relationships are mediated by e-government. Thus, the effectiveness of the latter is a notable factor of the influence of the Internet on state policy.

The first hypothesis of this study is that citizens' trust and participation in politics, as the main determinants of interaction between citizens and the state in the digital environment, affect the effectiveness of state policy. In turn, the second research hypothesis postulates that citizens' trust and participation may correlate with Internet use – in particular, the number of Internet users.

The aim of this research is to analyze the impact of the number of Internet and social network users on citizens' trust and public participation in politics. This aim is pursued through the fulfilment of the following research objectives:

- study the impact of citizens' trust and public participation on e-government;

- study the impact of the number of Internet and social network users on the level of citizens' trust and public participation;
- study the impact of the number of Internet and social network users on the level of corruption perception and budget policy transparency.

Literature Review

The impact of the Internet on political participation

Many studies focus on the influence of the Internet and social networks on news consumption and the political participation of citizens. Shehata and Strömbäck (2021) came to the conclusion that social media is insufficient for learning about news and current events. However, many studies have noted the positive impact of social media on increasing citizens' activity in offline politics. Hoffmann and Lutz (2021) identified a positive impact of Internet use on the political participation of citizens, both offline and online. Kim and Ellison (2022) explained the mechanism of the influence of social media on citizens' participation in political life based on the social assimilation of political activity. Bhatti and Tareen (2021) investigated such influence in rural areas in Pakistan, and found that social networks contribute to increased offline engagement. Kipkoech (2023) confirmed the influence of using the Internet to obtain news on the political participation of citizens. Shandler, Gross, and Canetti (2020) noted that deprivation of access to the Internet reduces political participation within certain parameters. Gilardi et al. (2021) characterized the mutual influence of traditional and social media and the role of social media in shaping the agendas of different players. Some studies have also considered the individual tools used in the network to enhance the political participation of citizens (Farkas and Bene 2021; Johann 2022).

The influence of the Internet on trust in the government

Many studies have analyzed the influence of the Internet on citizens' trust in the government. Pérez-Morote, Pontones-Rosa, and Núñez-Chicharro (2020) emphasized the problem of insufficient use of e-government by citizens due to mistrust. Lee, Lee, and Lee-Geiller (2020) noted that new technologies benefit the state only if users are able and willing to use them. Such benefits can be expressed through citizens' trust in government portals. Lu, Tong, and Zhu (2020) and You, Yu, and Xiao (2022) determined the effect of Internet use on trust in the government in China. Guriev, Melnikov, and Zhuravskaya (2021) examined the effect of mobile Internet access on attitudes toward government.

The impact of online manipulation and disinformation

Online manipulation and the spread of disinformation in cyberspace remain hot topics. Reisach (2021) found that modern machine learning technologies are capable of increasing

the influence of propaganda on voter decisions. Bail et al. (2020) noted that social media can be used by countries such as Russia to implement campaigns aimed at deepening the political divide in the US. Bradshaw et al. (2020) and Pavlíková, Šenkýřová, and Drmola (2021) examined how social media was used to implement influence campaigns during the 2016 US presidential election. Baptista and Gradim (2022) noted that fake news was widely used as a political weapon during the 2019 Portuguese elections.

In most works, social networks are considered as a part of the Internet, and therefore the influence of the number of Internet users and the number of social network users on public policy as separate indicators is understudied. This study intends to fill this gap by considering these indicators separately.

Methods

Research design

The first stage of the study involved testing the relationship between the effectiveness of e-government and citizens' trust and participation. The aim of this stage was to assess whether the citizens' trust and participation really determine the effectiveness of e-government. The second stage included an analysis of the influence of the number of Internet and social network users on the level of citizens' trust and participation. This stage was aimed at identifying how the use of the Internet affects the level of trust and participation in order to determine the effectiveness of public policy. The third stage provided for an analysis of the influence of the number of Internet and social network users on corruption perceptions and the transparency of budget policy. The purpose of this stage was to obtain additional confirmation that the use of the Internet significantly affects public policy.

Sample

The sample of indicators for the study consists of the E-Government Development Index (United Nations 2024), Transparency (using the Open Budget Index; International Budget Partnership 2023), the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International 2023), the Political Participation Index (Our World in Data 2024), Social Media Users by Country (World Population Review 2024a), and Trust in Government by Country (World Population Review 2024b). The sample contains data for 193 countries. The limitations of the study concern the absence of data on individual indicators for some countries. This may have slightly distorted the conclusions, but given the sample size, the results were not significantly affected.

Methods

Correlation analysis was applied to: 1) indicators and components of the E-Government Development Index; and 2) indicators of citizens' trust and participation (Trust in

Government by Country, Political Participation Index). The correlation analysis also revealed the relationship between: 1) the indicators of Trust in Government by Country and the Political Participation Index; and 2) the indicators of the number of Internet users (Users) and social network users (Share on Social Media). Multiple regression analysis was applied to the indicators of the E-Government Development Index as a dependent variable, and Trust in Government by Country and the Political Participation Index. Regression analysis was used to identify the influence of Users and Share on Social Media on the following dependent variables: Trust in Government by Country, the Political Participation Index, Transparency, and the Corruption Perceptions Index. The descriptive method helped to explain the results.

Results

The relationship between the effectiveness of e-government and the trust and participation of citizens was tested by applying correlation analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of correlation analysis between: 1) the indicators of citizens' trust in the government and public participation; and 2) the E-Government Index and its components

	Trust in government	Political participation
E-Government Index	0.510*	0.298*
E-Participation Index	0.197	0.283*
Online Service Index	0.242	0.258
Human Capital Index	0.566*	0.331*
Telecommunication Infrastructure Index	0.515*	0.219

*statistically significant correlation

The results in Table 1 show a positive, statistically significant relationship between the integral value of the E-Government Index and the majority of the Trust in Government and Political Participation indicators. Therefore, the indicators of citizens' trust and participation correlate with the e-government development rate. In particular, citizens' participation online through government portals is positively correlated with offline participation. Table 2 presents the results of regression analysis between the integral indicator of the E-Government Index (dependent variable) and the indicators of trust and participation of citizens.

Table 2. Results of regression analysis between: 1) indicators of citizens' trust in the government and public participation; and 2) the E-Government Index

	BETA	Standard error	B	Standard error B	t(165)	p-value
Free term			0.739*	0.049*	14.902*	0.000*
Trust in Government	0.482*	0.145*	0.201*	0.060*	3.329*	0.002*
Political Participation	0.057	0.145	0.003	0.008	0.391	0.697

* statistically significant correlation

These results indicate the statistically significant impact of Trust in Government on the E-Government Index. The influence of Political Participation on the E-Government Index is not statistically significant. Table 3 contains the results of correlation analysis between the indicators of the number of Internet and social network users and the indicators of trust and citizens' participation.

Table 3. Results of correlation analysis between: 1) the number of Internet and social network users; and 2) citizens' trust and participation

	Users	Share on Social Media
Trust in Government	-0.364	0.481
Political Participation	-0.299	0.216

Table 3 proves that the relationships between Trust in Government and both indicators of Internet use are statistically significant. The relationship between Trust in Government and Users is inverse, and the relationship between Trust in Government and Share on Social Media is direct. Therefore, an increase in the number of people using the Internet reduces trust in the government. In turn, an increase in the number of citizens registered on social networks has a positive effect on trust in the government. Table 4 shows the results of applying regression analysis to Trust in Government (dependent variable) and the indicators of Internet use.

Table 4. Results of regression analysis between: 1) Users and Share on Social Media; and 2) Trust in Government

	BETA	Standard error	B	Standard error B	t(165)	p-value
Free term			-0.320	0.229	-1.399	0.169
Users	-0.286*	0.131*	-0.159*	0.073*	-2.187*	0.034*
Share on Social Media	0.285*	0.131*	0.518*	0.238*	2.179*	0.034*

* statistically significant correlation

The results of the analysis indicate the statistically significant influence of both indicators of Internet use on Trust in Government. The influence of Users on Trust in Government is inverse, while the influence of Share on Social Media is direct. Table 5 contains the results of multiple regression analysis for Political Participation (dependent variable) and both Internet usage indicators.

Table 5. Results of regression analysis between: 1) Users and Share on Social Media; and 2) Political Participation

	BETA	Standard error	B	Standard error B	t(165)	p-value
Free term			0.039	0.072	0.542	0.588
Users	-0.031	0.073	-0.029	0.066	-0.433	0.665
Share on Social Media	0.484*	0.073*	0.473*	0.071*	6.657*	0.000*

* statistically significant correlation

Multiple regression analysis helped to identify relationships that were not detected using correlation analysis. A statistically significant direct influence of Share on Social Media on Political Participation was noted. The corruption rate and the transparency of budget policy are also important aspects characterizing state policy. Table 6 contains the results of regression analysis for Users, Share on Social Media, and the Corruption Perceptions Index (as a dependent variable).

Table 6. Results of regression analysis between: 1) Users and Share on Social Media; and 2) Corruption Perceptions Index

	BETA	Standard error	B	Standard error B	t(165)	p-value
Free term			0.040	0.059	0.684	0.495
Users	-0.039	0.059	-0.038	0.057	-0.664	0.507
Share on Social Media	0.652*	0.059*	0.635*	0.059*	10.931*	0.000*

* statistically significant correlation

Share on Social Media has a statistically significant, direct effect on the Corruption Perceptions Index. Therefore, the number of social network users has a significant impact on citizens' corruption perceptions. Table 7 contains the results of regression analysis for Users, Share on Social Media, and Transparency (as a dependent variable).

Table 7. Results of regression analysis between: 1) Users and Share on Social Media; and 2) Transparency (Open Budget Index)

	BETA	Standard error	B	Standard error B	t(165)	p-value
Free term			0.099	0.082	1.213	0.228
Users	-0.071	0.082	-0.057	0.066	-0.871	0.386
Share on Social Media	0.519*	0.082*	0.514*	0.0812*	6.335*	0.000*

* statistically significant correlation

This analysis also allows us to note that Share on Social Media has a statistically significant effect on Transparency. Therefore, increased numbers of social network users may increase budget policy transparency through increased awareness, enhanced citizen involvement, and the provision of wider control opportunities. Given the significant influence of social networks on public policy, it is worth determining which are the main sources of news for users. Table 8 provides a list of social networks used to access news.

Table 8. Indicators of the use of social networks for news (monthly data)

	Global active users, million	Use it as a news source, %	Use it as a news source, million
Facebook	3,065	59.1	1,811.415
Instagram	2,000	54.2	1,084
TikTok	1,582	41.7	659.694
Reddit	850	30.8	261.8
LinkedIn	830	28.6	237.38
Snapchat	800	21.2	169.6
X (Twitter)	611	61.1	373.321
Pinterest	498	14	69.72

Table 8 shows that Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are the most popular social networks in percentage terms when it comes to accessing news. They cover more than three-quarters of users who use social networks to find out about the latest news (Figure 1).

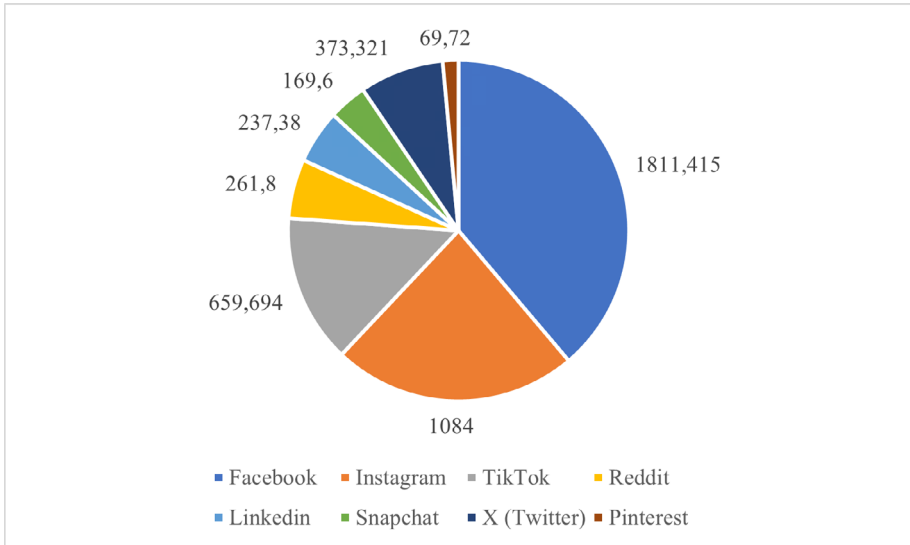


Figure 1. Number of users using specific social networks for news

(Source: created by the author based on Datareportal (2024))

The most popular social networks for news are Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. While X is used more for news in percentage terms, its reach is smaller due to the smaller total number of users.

Discussion

The results of the analysis conducted in this paper correlate with the conclusions of other authors (Lazor et al. 2024). Kipkoech (2023) established that the use of the Internet and social networks to raise awareness of politics has a positive effect on political participation. Shandler, Gross, and Canetti (2020) found that opportunities for political expression and civic association are significantly reduced without access to the Internet. Gilardi et al. (2021) found that the influence of social media outweighs the influence of traditional media. Kim and Ellison (2022) observed that cultivating the norms of citizenship involved in political life will increase citizens' participation offline. This work confirmed this using the multiple regression method. Hoffmann and Lutz (2021) found that the use of the Internet has a positive effect on citizens' participation, both online and offline. Bhatti and Tareen (2021) proved that information consumption through Facebook contributes to increased public participation away from the Internet.

However, some researchers do not consider social networks to be the most important

source of information. According to Shehata and Strömbäck (2021), the use of social media as the only source of news does not compensate for news consumption from traditional media and websites. Specific tools used on the Internet that contribute to increased engagement were considered by Farkas and Bene (2021), who established that visualization is widely used in political communication. Johann (2022) found that the use of political Internet memes contributes to increased participation.

A number of works confirmed the influence of the use of the Internet and social networks on trust in government. In some studies, attention is focused on the issues of using e-government. Pérez-Morote, Pontones-Rosa, and Núñez-Chicharro (2020) found that citizens' use of e-public services significantly depends on their evaluation of e-government, the digital divide, and trust in government. Lee, Lee, and Lee-Geiller (2020) found that usefulness and trust in a government portal depend significantly on information literacy and information overload. This reinforces the author's conclusions that state strategies for digital development should take into account the improvement of digital literacy.

Lu, Tong, and Zhu (2020) found a positive effect of Internet use on Chinese users' trust in government. In contrast, You, Yu, and Xiao (2022) found that new network users are characterized by lower trust in government. Accordingly, the spread of the Internet contributes to the reduction of political legitimacy in authoritarian countries. Guriev, Melnikov, and Zhuravskaya (2021) established that mobile Internet access helps to detect corruption and increase its perception. The present study also found that growth in the number of Internet users is negatively correlated with trust in the government. However, a positive relationship between trust in government and the number of social network users was found.

Many works deal with the relationship between Internet use, public policy, the spread of propaganda, and disinformation. Pavlíková, Šenkýřová, and Drmola (2021) studied various online propaganda tools, including the threat of deepfakes. Reisach (2021) noted that the current trends in the spread of online propaganda require the establishment of responsibility for social networks. Bradshaw et al. (2020), Bail et al. (2020), and Baptista and Gradim (2022) considered the impact of propaganda during elections. Machowicz (2022) emphasized the importance of information quality, as intentionally poor-quality information can have a negative impact on freedom of speech. The correlation between the use of the Internet and the spread of propaganda was not directly investigated in this study. However, countering propaganda is defined as one of the directions of an effective state digital development strategy.

Conclusions

Both hypotheses put forward in this research were confirmed: citizens' trust and participation affect the effectiveness of e-government as an important element of public policy.

While the influence of trust is more noticeable, the influence of political participation is not statistically significant. In turn, the level of trust and participation is influenced by Internet use. The influence of the number of users of social networks is statistically significant and has a direct impact on all of the studied indicators. The influence of the number of Internet users is statistically significant only in relation to Trust in Government, while the direction of influence is reversed.

Therefore, the development of digital development strategies is important in order to increase the effectiveness of state policy, and the following recommendations should be taken into account:

- it is essential to increase digital literacy through the implementation of educational programs;
- it is appropriate to improve access, including mobile access, to the Internet through the development of technological infrastructure in order to increase awareness and involvement;
- transparency should be ensured by providing access to budgetary information through state portals;
- it is necessary to strengthen the fight against disinformation by blocking certain web resources, imposing sanctions for social networks, ensuring accountability for persons spreading disinformation, etc.;
- political campaigns should focus on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X.

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INTERNETINĖS APLINKOS POVEIKIS VALSTYBĖS POLITIKOS ĮGYVENDINIMUI

Tyrimo tikslas – išanalizuoti interneto ir socialinių tinklų vartotojų skaičiaus įtaką piliečių pasitikėjimo valdžia rodikliams ir visuomenės dalyvavimo politikoje lygiui. Tyrime taikyta koreliacinė analizė, daugkartinė regresinė analizė ir aprašomasis metodas. Išanalizuota piliečių pasitikėjimo valdžia ir visuomenės dalyvavimo politiniame gyvenime rodiklių įtaka elektroninės valdžios (e. valdžios) raidos tempui. Tyrimo rezultatai gali būti naudingi dėl nustatytų sąsajų ir poveikio rengiant valstybių skaitmeninės plėtros strategijas.

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