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How Do Government Chatbots With and Without Deployed Generative AI Influence Institutionalized Political Participation Willingness of Chinese Citizens?

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the potential of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in enhancing institutionalized political participation willingness. By comparing public use scenarios of government service chatbots with and without the deployment of generative AI, the study examines whether generative AI can promote institutionalized political participation willingness among Chinese citizens. The researchers employed a model with political efficacy as a mediator and conducted a scenario-based experiment in Beijing. The results indicate that although the deployment of generative AI in government service chatbots increased institutionalized political participation willingness, it simultaneously reduced political efficacy. This reduction in political efficacy, however, led to a higher level of institutionalized political participation willingness.

KEYWORDS

Generative AI, Institutionalized Political Participation Willingness, Scenario-Based Experiment

INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of the concept of "Digital China," the Chinese government has regarded the development of Digital China as a key initiative. Digital technology brings new energy and new opportunities to social development. It also changes the way citizens take part in politics. The Digital China Development Strategy Outline states that the country is expanding Internet plus government services to improve the accuracy of social governance. Under this policy, grassroots governments build online interactive platforms and strengthen communication with citizens. These platforms help local

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governments hear public opinions more quickly and help citizens express their views more easily. In this way, the policy increases citizens' willingness to participate in politics and strengthens their sense of civic responsibility (Zhao & Cao, 2024). Over time, generative AI technology has also entered government governance. This technology creates new opportunities for government services and social governance. It helps governments provide smarter and more personalized services to citizens. It also supports the further development of Digital China. More importantly, it gives citizens more efficient and more innovative ways to join public affairs and governance.

In modern national governance, public political participation plays an important role. In recent years, China has shown different forms and different levels of political participation. During the past two decades, citizens have taken part in political activities on a larger scale and at a deeper level. Scholars usually divide political participation into institutionalized participation and non institutionalized participation. They also classify it by type, such as rights protection struggles like petitioning and appeals, interest expression like online discussions, and participation in People's Congress elections. Among these forms, online discussions belong to interest expression and represent a form of institutionalized political participation (Zhao & Cao, 2024). Research has shown that technological progress increases the public's willingness to join institutionalized political participation (Makasi et al., 2022). In particular, progress in network technology, including generative AI, strongly increases the public's willingness to take part in institutionalized political participation.

The internet is an open, accessible, and interactive platform. It gives citizens more convenient and more diverse ways to take part in governance decisions. It also promotes an interactive model of group governance through community structures. In this process, it changes citizens' daily lives and their institutionalized political participation. In the context of the Digital China initiative, digital platforms help different governance actors share resources and build closer connections. These platforms also improve communication among them. At the same time, digital technology creates virtual spaces for interaction and reduces many barriers in the real world. As a result, citizens and different social actors can join public consultation more easily across the country. This process strengthens citizens' independence in public service participation and supports the growth of new governance models. In addition, digital networks spread information in a decentralized, hidden, and instant way. This change weakens the strong control that elites once held in informal governance. The digital network now gives every citizen a chance to express personal views. It also gives ordinary citizens a chance to become opinion leaders in the online space. Therefore, more ordinary citizens take the initiative to join governance, and some of them can even influence political activities such as government decision making.

On the other hand, the country has actively developed 5G networks, digital base stations, and other network infrastructure across the nation. These developments have created a stronger digital foundation for public life and governance. In this context, generative AI technology has gradually entered public life and government affairs. Its introduction has changed the way citizens engage in institutionalized political participation. Generative AI technology can process information quickly and provide timely support for public communication and decision making. It can also offer citizens more accurate and more personalized access to public information and participation channels. As a result, citizens can understand public affairs more clearly and take part in institutionalized political participation more efficiently. Under the Digital China framework, the introduction of generative AI technology creates new conditions for wider and deeper citizen participation in political decision making

However, the academic community has not reached a clear agreement on whether generative AI can truly increase the public's willingness to engage in institutionalized political participation. At the same time, empirical research on this issue remains limited. To fill this research gap, this paper builds an analytical framework based on social cognitive theory and includes the concept of political efficacy. This framework examines the internal link between generative AI and the public's willingness to engage in institutionalized political participation. In addition, this study uses scenario