

The Digital Welfare State and Distributive Politics in Emerging Democracies: Algorithmic Targeting, Policy Feedback, and Political Trust

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ABSTRACT

This literature review examines how digitally mediated welfare architectures reshape distributive politics in emerging democracies, with particular attention to algorithmic targeting, biometric identification, automated eligibility, and social registries. Drawing on an interpretive synthesis of 12 peer-reviewed journal articles, the study addresses two questions: how the digital welfare state is conceptualized in the literature, and through what mechanisms its core instruments influence political trust, legitimacy, accountability, and state-citizen relations. The review finds that the digital welfare state is most often conceptualized as an administrative and technological architecture grounded in bureaucratic modernization, data-driven governance, digital social protection infrastructure, and reconfigured state-citizen interfaces. Across the studies, the most recurrent instruments are automated decision-making systems, targeting and classification tools, biometric and digital identification, digital self-service platforms, and payment or verification infrastructures. The findings further show that the political effects of welfare digitalization are mediated through classification, inclusion and exclusion, administrative burden, opacity, grievance access, and policy feedback. Rather than producing uniformly positive or negative outcomes, digital welfare generates uneven consequences that depend on institutional design, procedural fairness, transparency, grievance capacity, and state capacity. The review concludes that digital welfare should be understood not merely as an administrative reform, but as a political-institutional arrangement with significant distributive consequences.



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INTRODUCTION

The global transformation of the welfare state is increasingly defined by the digitalization of social assistance governance. In both advanced and developing contexts, governments have proliferated the use of digital identity systems, social registries, automated eligibility assessments, interoperable databases, and digital payment channels to enhance the velocity, precision, and scope of welfare delivery. Within this emerging paradigm, the digital welfare state transcends mere bureaucratic modernization; rather, it represents a fundamental restructuring of how the state identifies, categorizes, monitors, and governs its beneficiaries (Pasi & Misuraca, 2020; Yakoviyk & Tragniuk, 2024). Digital infrastructures, including biometric identity systems and integrated registries, now constitute the foundational architecture of welfare administration. This transition is particularly evident in developing

nations, where these technologies are championed as mechanisms to mitigate leakage, optimize targeting, and integrate citizens into a broader spectrum of public services (Addo & Senyo, 2021; Masiero & Arvidsson, 2021).

The magnitude of this transformation is substantial. Extant literature demonstrates that approximately 73% of the global population remains either unprotected or only partially covered by adequate social protection, with non-contributory schemes fulfilling a critical function in low- and middle-income countries (Perera et al., 2022; Schmitt, 2019). Concurrently, digital infrastructures have undergone rapid expansion. For instance, the Aadhaar system encompasses over 1.2 billion individuals in India, while social registries across Latin America dictate benefit eligibility for millions of households (Addo & Senyo, 2021; Ludeña, 2021; Rustamova et al., 2025). Nevertheless, this proliferation simultaneously exposes profound inequalities. In Ecuador, a systemic registry recalibration resulted in the exclusion of approximately 400,000 households from a primary cash transfer program. Furthermore, cross-national empirical data concerning older demographics reveals digital exclusion rates fluctuating between 23.8% in Denmark and 96.9% in China, carrying particularly severe ramifications in lower-resourced settings (Lu et al., 2022; Ludeña, 2021).

Consequently, the escalating reliance on digital welfare infrastructures has pivoted scholarly discourse from administrative efficiency toward issues of systemic exclusion. While automated eligibility frameworks, biometric verification, digital-by-default service architectures, and integrated master data systems successfully curtail routine administrative burdens, they concurrently generate novel administrative frictions, procedural opacity, and legal marginalization for vulnerable cohorts. Contemporary studies indicate that datafied welfare systems frequently entangle low-income citizens in convoluted manual override procedures, generate opaque algorithmic determinations that defy easy contestation, and entrench preexisting class, educational, migratory, and age-based disparities (Giest & Samuels, 2022; Larsson, 2020; Peeters & Widlak, 2018; Schou & Pors, 2018). Moreover, biometric and digital verification protocols introduce distinct risks, notably authentication failures, demographic biases, and insurmountable barriers for populations lacking robust digital access or literacy (Carswell & De Neve, 2021; De Freitas Pereira & Marcel, 2020; Jain et al., 2021).

These developments carry profound political weight, as welfare distribution in emerging democracies transcends mere administrative function. It is deeply embedded within distributive politics, policy feedback mechanisms, and broader contestations surrounding institutional trust, legitimacy, and accountability. Scholarship highlights that welfare programs frequently operate as highly visible political instruments. This dynamic is particularly salient in contexts experiencing democratic backsliding, where targeted benefits are strategically deployed to consolidate electoral support, project state legitimacy, or enforce top-down societal control (Szikra & Öktem, 2022). However, the political ramifications of welfare provision are not deterministic. Policy feedback literature asserts that modifications in benefit conditionality, modes of delivery, and perceived procedural fairness directly influence citizen trust, political efficacy, participatory behavior, and blame attribution (Bussi et al., 2022; Garritzmman et al.,

2021). Translated to digital welfare ecosystems, this implies that seamless and transparent service delivery can foster political trust. Conversely, opaque algorithmic adjudications, systemic exclusion errors, and deficient grievance mechanisms are prone to precipitate public frustration, civic apathy, or delegitimizing feedback loops, a risk acutely amplified in regimes characterized by uneven state capacity and weak accountability structures (Brinkerhoff & Wetterberg, 2016; Shah & Shah, 2024; Tang et al., 2025).

Against this backdrop, a critical research gap crystallizes. The prevailing literature on digital welfare remains heavily saturated with administrative, technological, and legal preoccupations, focusing predominantly on automation, surveillance, exclusion, and digital rights. Concurrently, scholarship concerning distributive politics and policy feedback has yet to adequately integrate digital welfare architecture as a primary explanatory variable. Although emergent studies have initiated discussions regarding institutional trust, state-citizen relations, and algorithmic governance, these contributions remain largely fragmented, theoretically abstract, and disproportionately concentrated on high-capacity, industrialized settings (Agostino et al., 2021; Halling & Bækgaard, 2023; Parviainen et al., 2025; Theiss & Szelewa, 2025). Consequently, there is a pronounced dearth of synthetic research elucidating how specific architectural features of digital welfare, namely targeting systems, degrees of automation, transparency protocols, contestability mechanisms, and data governance frameworks, actively configure distributive politics, political trust, institutional legitimacy, and accountability within emerging democracies. Against this backdrop, the rapid proliferation of digitally mediated welfare delivery provokes a critical inquiry into how the architectural design of digital welfare reshapes the politics of distribution within emerging democracies.

Whereas contemporary research on the digital welfare state has predominantly concentrated on administrative efficiency, data governance, and bureaucratic modernization, the profound political consequences of these systems remain insufficiently integrated within the broader literature. Concurrently, scholarship concerning distributive politics and policy feedback has scrutinized the political impacts of welfare programs yet has largely failed to position digital architecture as a primary explanatory variable. Consequently, there remains a constrained understanding of how mechanisms such as algorithmic targeting, biometric verification, automated eligibility assessments, and social registries influence distributive fairness, political trust, institutional legitimacy, accountability, and the broader nexus of state-citizen relations. This scholarly lacuna is particularly pronounced in contexts characterized by uneven state capacity and an elevated societal reliance on public assistance.

In response to this deficit, this study endeavors to systematically examine and synthesize the literature regarding how digital welfare instruments reconfigure distributive politics in emerging democracies. Furthermore, it seeks to elucidate the theoretical conceptualization of the digital welfare state and articulate how its institutional design directly impacts trust, legitimacy, accountability, and state-citizen interactions.

To systematically operationalize this inquiry, the review is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the extant literature conceptualize the digital welfare state within the specific context of emerging democracies, and which specific digital instruments are most prominently featured in the administration of social assistance?
2. How does current scholarship articulate the influence of algorithmic targeting, biometric identification, automated eligibility, and social registries on distributive politics, political trust, state legitimacy, accountability, and state-citizen relations in these democratic settings?

The primary novelty of this research resides in its strategic integration of digital welfare state scholarship with established literature on distributive politics and policy feedback. Rather than conceptualizing digital welfare strictly as an administrative apparatus, this study evaluates it as a profound political and institutional framework that actively dictates civic visibility, inclusion, blame attribution, avenues for grievance redress, perceptions of procedural fairness, and ultimate trust in the state. Furthermore, by deliberately focusing on emerging democracies, this research brings necessary analytical attention to contexts that are frequently marginalized in mainstream academic discourse.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a focused qualitative literature review utilizing an interpretive synthesis design. Rather than pursuing exhaustive database saturation, the review concentrated on a final corpus of 12 peer-reviewed journal articles. These selected studies had successfully met a rigorous relevance screening threshold and were deemed uniquely capable of addressing the dual research questions concerning the digital welfare state and its political ramifications. The full texts were subjected to a close reading and analyzed via a structured data extraction process encompassing six core dimensions: publication type and research design, geographic or regional context, specific welfare domain, digital instruments under examination, principal analytical concepts, and the substantive contribution of the article to either the first or second research question, or both. The coding framework was meticulously designed to capture not only the typologies of digital technologies under investigation, such as automated decision-making, digital self-service, biometric identification, smartcards, digital platforms, and data-driven welfare administration, but also the specific mechanisms by which each study linked these instruments to broader themes of governance, exclusion, legitimacy, accountability, and state-citizen relations.

The resulting evidence base exhibited methodological pluralism, although it was predominantly characterized by qualitative and conceptual scholarship. Numerous articles utilized in-depth qualitative methodologies, including interviews with citizens and welfare actors, ethnographic inquiry, participant observations, focus groups, and case-based analyses of public service delivery. This methodological pattern is evident across several key works, notably a Danish study examining administrative burdens in mandatory digital self-service, an Austrian interview-based study assessing artificial intelligence in public employment services, an Indonesian case study of the Pre-Employment Card program utilizing semi-structured elite

and provider interviews, and an ethnographic analysis of biometric and digital welfare delivery in Tamil Nadu. Complementing these empirical investigations, the corpus also incorporated a comparative sociolegal analysis of six European nations, a survey experiment evaluating legitimacy perceptions among Finnish citizens and public administrators, and several conceptual or critical interventions. These latter works theorized critical concepts such as datafication, care and control, resignation, discrimination, and historical continuities within digital welfare governance.

Substantively, the reviewed literature encompassed a broad spectrum of welfare sectors, incorporating social assistance, employment services, food distribution, disability benefits, child protection, education, healthcare, housing, and correctional services. Geographically, however, the distribution of the corpus remained uneven. A significant proportion of the literature was concentrated within Nordic and broader European contexts, while a smaller yet highly critical subset examined emerging democratic settings, most notably India and Indonesia. Consequently, the synthesis proceeded thematically rather than statistically, dedicating specific attention to recurrent analytical motifs across the disparate cases, namely automation, classification, transparency, mediation, discretion, deservingness, exclusion, and legitimacy. This thematic approach enabled the review to effectively delineate both the conceptual architecture of digital welfare and the principal political pathways through which digital systems systematically reshape distributive governance and public trust.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Characteristics of the Reviewed Studies

To establish a foundational understanding of the evidence base, this section delineates the primary characteristics of the 12 studies comprising the review. The objective of this preliminary mapping is to elucidate the predominant geographic contexts, methodological frameworks, and substantive foci of the selected literature prior to advancing to the thematic synthesis.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Reviewed Studies

No	Study & Context	Design/Data	Main Focus	Key Findings
1	Madsen et al. (2022) – Denmark; digital self-service for welfare benefits	Qualitative; observations, interviews, focus groups	Administrative burden in digital welfare	Mandatory digital services shift learning, compliance, and emotional burdens to citizens, though some features simplify access.
2	Andreassen et al. (2021) – Nordic welfare states	Conceptual-analytical; documents & interviews	Datafication of welfare states	Datafication is embedded in welfare systems but raises concerns about bias, commercialisation, low transparency, and limited data diversity.

3	Choroszewicz & Mäihäniemi (2020) – Six EU countries	Comparative sociolegal study	Data protection & automated decisions	GDPR safeguards alone are insufficient to regulate automated decision-making in digital welfare states.
4	Nguyen et al. (2025) – Indonesia; Kartu Prakerja	Qualitative; interviews with policymakers & providers	Digital welfare-to-work programs	Digital systems improve speed and monitoring but expose digital divides, technical problems, and governance issues.
5	Bagger et al. (2023) – Denmark/Nordic welfare context	Conceptual commentary	Digital resignation in welfare	Public datafication normalises forced digital participation, privacy discomfort, and compliant citizenship.
6	Zenkl (2025) – Austria; public employment services	Qualitative; 23 interviews	AI in welfare services	AI is seen as reducing routine work and improving counselling, but also creating dependency and uncertainty.
7	Hillo et al. (2025) – Finland; child protection services	Quantitative survey experiment	Legitimacy of automated decisions	Transparency and human oversight increase trust and legitimacy, especially among administrators.
8	Ranerup & Henriksen (2022) – Sweden; social assistance services	Qualitative interpretive case study	Human–technology discretion	Automation reshapes rather than removes human discretion, creating hybrid decision-making systems.
9	Carswell & De Neve (2022) – Tamil Nadu, India	Qualitative ethnographic study	Digital welfare & exclusion	Biometric and digital welfare reforms create new exclusion, opacity, and dependence on intermediaries.
10	van Toorn et al. (2024) – Transnational digital welfare context	Conceptual sociological article	Digital welfare governance	Digital welfare states increase surveillance, social sorting, and administrative control while still relying on human labour.
11	van Toorn & Soldatić (2024) – Transnational context	Critical conceptual analysis	Disablism & racism in digital welfare	Automated welfare systems reproduce ableist and racialised exclusion in governance processes.
12	Zakharova et al. (2024) – Europe/Global North	Conceptual article with empirical vignettes	Care and control in digital welfare	Digital welfare prioritises surveillance and efficiency over care, while shifting hidden work to citizens and workers.

As illustrated in Table 1, the reviewed corpus constitutes a diverse yet structurally uneven evidence base. Regarding geographic distribution, the majority of the studies are concentrated within Europe and the broader Global North, specifically within Nordic welfare states such as Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. Conversely, a markedly smaller subset of the literature directly investigates emerging democratic contexts, notably Indonesia and India. Methodologically, the scholarship is predominantly characterized by qualitative and conceptual approaches, demonstrating a comparatively limited application of quantitative research designs. Across this corpus, the most pervasive thematic motifs encompass administrative burden, automation, datafication, institutional legitimacy, systemic exclusion, procedural opacity, and the inherent tension between care and control within digitally mediated welfare provision.

Consequently, the data presented in Table 1 demonstrates that while the extant literature has yielded profound insights into the institutional and experiential facets of digital welfare, it exhibits a pronounced imbalance regarding geographic representation and empirical diversity. This structural asymmetry is highly significant, as it indicates that the current academic discourse remains disproportionately influenced by conceptual debates and empirical cases derived from the Global North. Ultimately, this observation underscores the critical necessity for a more integrated, contextually sensitive examination of digital welfare as it intersects with distributive politics in emerging democracies.

B. Conceptualizing the Digital Welfare State in Emerging Democracies: Core Instruments and Administrative Logics

In addressing the first research question, the corpus of 12 reviewed studies indicates that the digital welfare state is predominantly conceptualized as a fundamental transformation of welfare administration, driven by digital infrastructures, data-intensive governance, and significantly reconfigured interfaces between the state and its citizens. Across the extant literature, the digital welfare state is conceptualized not as a monolithic institutional model, but rather as a highly layered administrative formation. One theoretical strand characterizes this phenomenon as bureaucratic modernization, wherein governments adopt digital apparatuses to optimize welfare delivery, enhance procedural consistency, expand operational scale, and minimize administrative expenditures (Hillo et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025). A second strand conceptualizes it as data-driven governance, emphasizing the systemic conversion of welfare subjects, societal needs, and state-citizen interactions into quantifiable data. This data is subsequently processed, classified, and operationalized via automated or semi-automated systems (Andreassen et al., 2021; Choroszewicz & Mäihäniemi, 2020). A third perspective defines it as a comprehensive digital social protection infrastructure comprising interconnected platforms, regulatory frameworks, integrated databases, verification protocols, and organizational routines that collectively reconfigure welfare provision far beyond the deployment of isolated technologies (van Toorn et al., 2024; Zakharova et al., 2024). Finally, several studies implicitly operationalize the concept through the state-citizen interface. These

works demonstrate how welfare provision increasingly functions through digital self-service portals, remote interactions, and system-level automation, fundamentally altering how citizens apply for assistance, verify eligibility, receive benefits, and ultimately experience state authority (Carswell & De Neve, 2022; Madsen et al., 2022; Ranerup & Henriksen, 2022). Synthesizing these perspectives, the literature conceptualizes the digital welfare state as a complex administrative regime wherein digitalization profoundly reorganizes not merely service delivery, but the foundational informational and relational architectures of welfare governance.

The digital instruments most frequently analyzed across the reviewed corpus include automated decision-making algorithms, computational classification and targeting mechanisms, digital self-service platforms, biometric or digital identification architectures, and digitized payment or verification infrastructures. Automated eligibility assessments and decision-support systems feature prominently in analyses of social assistance, child protection, and public employment services. Within these domains, algorithms are deployed to classify clientele, segment institutional risk, expedite case processing, and standardize benefit adjudications (Choroszewicz & Mäihäniemi, 2020; Hillo et al., 2025; Ranerup & Henriksen, 2022; Zenkl, 2025). Intimately connected to these processes is algorithmic targeting, which is particularly salient in labor market governance and predictive welfare administration, where digital systems systematically sort, match, segment, and prioritize claimants and jobseekers (Andreassen et al., 2021; Zenkl, 2025). Biometric identification and digital ID frameworks are exceptionally prominent in empirical evidence derived from the Global South. This is most vividly illustrated by India's Aadhaar-linked welfare architecture, wherein biometric verification, mobile telecommunications, and integrated financial infrastructures are indispensable for welfare access and citizen authentication (Carswell & De Neve, 2022). The facilitation of digital payments is correspondingly examined most concretely within these contexts, particularly regarding the JAM infrastructure, which seamlessly integrates financial inclusion, digital identity, and mobile-enabled transactions into the core of welfare delivery (Carswell & De Neve, 2022). Conversely, social registries are less explicitly theorized as standalone instruments across the 12 studies, despite the reality that data integration, algorithmic profiling, and centralized record-keeping definitively underpin broader digital welfare operations. Overall, the evidence indicates that the most recurrently analyzed instruments are those designed to facilitate identification, classification, automation, and interface management, rather than technologies explicitly framed as fundamentally political or distributive in nature.

The principal finding of this synthesis is that contemporary literature continues to approach the digital welfare state predominantly as an administrative and technological architecture. Even when incorporating highly critical perspectives, the reviewed studies consistently direct their core analytical focus toward data infrastructures, automation mechanics, legal safeguards, service delivery optimization, and organizational redesign, rather than interrogating the inherent dynamics of distributive politics (Andreassen et al., 2021; Choroszewicz &

Mäihäniemi, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2025). While political dimensions are unequivocally present within scholarly discussions concerning state surveillance, deservingness heuristics, the dialectic of care and control, systemic exclusion, and institutional legitimacy, these themes are frequently embedded within broader macro-level debates regarding digitalization. Rarely are they isolated as the central explanatory variable (Bagger et al., 2023; van Toorn & Soldatić, 2024; Zakharova et al., 2024). This theoretical blind spot is particularly critical for emerging democracies. In these contexts, the existing empirical evidence remains comparatively sparse, and the implementation of digital welfare is persistently framed through the lenses of modernization, service efficiency, and foundational infrastructure-building, largely neglecting its profound implications for distributive conflict, policy feedback mechanisms, and political trust (Carswell & De Neve, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2025). Consequently, the prevailing literature conceptualizes the digital welfare state primarily as an assemblage of administrative instruments and governing logics, leaving its comprehensive political significance substantially underdeveloped.

C. From Digital Delivery to Political Consequences: Mechanisms Linking Welfare Digitization to Distributive Politics and Political Trust

Addressing the second research question, the reviewed literature indicates that the political consequences of welfare digitization manifest through a set of identifiable mechanisms. These mechanisms directly link digital architectural design to the precise ways in which citizens are classified, treated, and ultimately recognized by the state.

The primary mechanism concerns systemic classification, civic visibility, and the highly uneven distribution of inclusion and exclusion. Across the synthesized studies, digital welfare systems transcend the mere efficient delivery of benefits; they actively stratify populations via data-driven categorization, behavioral profiling, stringent eligibility filters, and automated or semi-automated adjudications. These processes dictate who becomes legible to welfare institutions and under what specific conditions (Andreassen et al., 2021; Choroszewicz & Mäihäniemi, 2020). Algorithmic targeting and automated eligibility frameworks are foundational to this dynamic, as they translate complex social needs into rigid administrative categories capable of prioritizing, segmenting, or outright excluding claimants. Consequently, these systems institutionalize normative judgments regarding deservingness and risk within ostensibly neutral technical routines (Ranerup & Henriksen, 2022; van Toorn & Soldatić, 2024; Zenkl, 2025). Within the reviewed literature, biometric identification and digital IDs perform a corollary function by rendering service access strictly conditional upon successful authentication and seamless data matching. This is most acutely observable in India's Aadhaar-linked welfare architecture, wherein the technological inclusion of certain beneficiaries is inexorably accompanied by the denial, delay, or systemic misrecognition of others (Carswell & De Neve, 2022). Furthermore, even when social registries are not explicitly theorized as standalone instruments, they remain functionally omnipresent within integrated databases and profiling infrastructures. These architectures render specific demographics highly visible to the

state while leaving others marginally visible, erroneously classified, or heavily dependent upon informal intermediaries to secure their statutory entitlements (van Toorn et al., 2024; Zakharova et al., 2024). Consequently, digital welfare comprehensively reshapes distributive politics not merely by dictating allocative outcomes, but by fundamentally defining whose socioeconomic needs are validated, whose claims are deemed verifiable, and whose relationship with the state achieves administrative intelligibility.

A secondary mechanism operates via the imposition of administrative burdens, procedural opacity, and diminished contestability. Numerous studies demonstrate that digitized welfare infrastructures systematically transfer cognitive, procedural, and emotional burdens from frontline bureaucrats directly onto citizens. These individuals are consequently compelled to navigate labyrinthine digital portals, stringent documentation requisites, highly fragmented information architectures, and convoluted verification procedures, frequently with minimal institutional support (Carswell & De Neve, 2022; Madsen et al., 2022). Such burdens are profoundly exacerbated when algorithmic decision rules remain opaque or when automated processes defy easy comprehension, prediction, or challenge. This is particularly prevalent in systems where data processing and eligibility determinations unfold behind impenetrable technical interfaces or organizational boundaries that obscure citizen visibility (Choroszewicz & Mäihäniemi, 2020; van Toorn et al., 2024). Within this environment, equitable access to grievance mechanisms and the fundamental right to contestability acquire paramount political significance. The literature indicates that when systemic errors inevitably occur, successful redress frequently relies upon informal mediation by family members, local political brokers, or sympathetic frontline workers, rather than upon transparent and accessible institutional complaint channels. This structural deficiency severely attenuates citizens' capacity to rectify misclassifications or formally contest exclusionary outcomes (Carswell & De Neve, 2022; Zakharova et al., 2024). Conversely, certain studies suggest that maintaining human oversight and discretionary intervention can partially mitigate these systemic vulnerabilities. Preserving interpretive flexibility renders these complex systems more intelligible and procedurally legitimate to both users and administrators (Hillo et al., 2025; Ranerup & Henriksen, 2022; Zenkl, 2025). The critical implication is that digitalization transforms not only the mechanics of welfare adjudication but also the degree to which those adjudications remain challengeable, thereby directly conditioning whether citizens encounter the state as a responsive entity, a remote bureaucracy, or an arbitrary authority.

A tertiary mechanism encompasses policy feedback loops, trust formation, institutional legitimacy, systemic accountability, and the broader macro-politics of distribution. The reviewed scholarship posits that citizens' lived experiences with digital welfare systems catalyze both positive and negative feedback effects, contingent entirely upon whether service delivery is perceived as equitable, comprehensible, and institutionally responsive. In instances where digital systems successfully mitigate bureaucratic delays, expand programmatic reach, and project operational transparency, they can fortify public perceptions of administrative competence and institutional legitimacy. This is corroborated by empirical evidence

highlighting the efficacy of transparency protocols, human-in-the-loop arrangements, and the perceived procedural fairness of automated decision-making (Hillo et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025). Conversely, when digital welfare becomes inextricably associated with pervasive surveillance, coerced digital participation, latent algorithmic classifications, privacy infringements, or chronic systemic exclusion, it invariably engenders civic alienation and profound distrust. Such dynamics cultivate a pervasive public sentiment that the state governs primarily through coercive control rather than genuine social care (Bagger et al., 2023; van Toorn et al., 2024; Zakharova et al., 2024). Furthermore, these experiential encounters fundamentally recalibrate accountability relations. When distributive outcomes are heavily mediated by complex algorithms, biometric authentication, or platformized infrastructures, the responsibility for administrative failures frequently becomes diffused across disparate agencies, proprietary technologies, and third-party intermediaries. This diffusion significantly impedes citizens' ability to accurately assign institutional blame or secure effective redress (Carswell & De Neve, 2022; Choroszewicz & Mäihäniemi, 2020). Conversely, when institutional roles remain transparent and human discretion is explicitly preserved, citizens exhibit a greater propensity to interpret administrative decisions as politically and administratively accountable, rather than merely as deterministic technical outputs (Hillo et al., 2025; Ranerup & Henriksen, 2022). In strictly distributive terms, this signifies that digital welfare design transcends mere programmatic efficiency; it structurally dictates how social benefits are politically interpreted, how systemic fairness is adjudicated, and whether foundational state-citizen relations are ultimately fortified or destabilized. For emerging democracies, this insight is of paramount importance. The available empirical evidence from contexts such as Indonesia and India already demonstrates that while digital delivery can exponentially expand programmatic reach, it simultaneously amplifies structural inequality, deepens reliance on informal mediation, and generates highly uneven state recognition, particularly under conditions of asymmetric state capacity and unequal digital access (Carswell & De Neve, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2025).

Synthesizing these findings, the reviewed studies unequivocally demonstrate that the political ramifications of digital welfare are neither inherently positive nor intrinsically negative. Rather, they are highly contingent upon institutional design, perceived procedural fairness, operational transparency, robust grievance capacity, and overarching state capacity. Ultimately, welfare digitization achieves profound political consequence precisely when these technological systems classify citizens in materially impactful ways, displace administrative burdens onto vulnerable users, modulate the strength of civic contestability, and fundamentally dictate whether the state is experienced as an equitable, accountable, and trustworthy sovereign entity.

D. Cross-Study Synthesis and Future Research Agenda

This subsection synthesizes the 12 reviewed studies to elucidate the principal cross-study dynamics of digital welfare and to delineate the subsequent research frontier concerning its

political ramifications. Across the reviewed literature, the most salient pattern is a definitive paradigm shift from an efficiency-centric narrative toward an exclusion-centric framework. Digital welfare is still acknowledged to yield administrative efficiencies, including accelerated processing, expanded scalability, enhanced monitoring, standardization, and, under specific conditions, augmented perceived legitimacy, particularly when transparency and human oversight are maintained (Hillo et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025; Ranerup & Henriksen, 2022). However, the overarching trajectory of the scholarship has grown increasingly critical. Rather than conceptualizing digitalization as a neutral mechanism for service enhancement, contemporary studies demonstrate that it frequently displaces administrative burdens downward onto citizens via complex digital interfaces, stringent compliance pressures, opaque procedural mechanisms, social sorting, and highly mediated access to statutory entitlements (Carswell & De Neve, 2022; Madsen et al., 2022; van Toorn et al., 2024). This critical turn is further substantiated by research illustrating how datafication within welfare institutions can normalize pervasive surveillance, privacy infringements, coerced participation, and novel modalities of institutional control, even within historically high-capacity welfare states (Andreassen et al., 2021; Bagger et al., 2023; Zakharova et al., 2024). Furthermore, the political consequences of these systems manifest unevenly rather than uniformly. While institutional legitimacy can improve when automated systems are transparent and human discretion remains visible, the responses of both welfare workers and citizens remain profoundly ambivalent, and regulatory safeguards exhibit stark jurisdictional variations (Choroszewicz & Mäihäniemi, 2020; Hillo et al., 2025; Zenkl, 2025). Most critically, the burdens imposed by digital welfare are not socially neutral; they disproportionately impact demographics already subjected to administrative dependency or systemic marginalization, notably benefit claimants, rural populations, individuals with disabilities, migrants, and groups targeted by intensified deservingness classifications (Carswell & De Neve, 2022; van Toorn & Soldatić, 2024; Zakharova et al., 2024).

Concurrently, the extant literature exhibits specific limitations that directly substantiate the theoretical argument of this research. The field remains heavily saturated with administrative, legal, and technological preoccupations, thereby producing granular accounts of service delivery, data protection, automation, and implementation mechanics. However, it lacks a systematic theoretical framework explaining how digital welfare actively reshapes distributive conflict, political interpretation, and broader state-society relations (Choroszewicz & Mäihäniemi, 2020; Madsen et al., 2022; Zenkl, 2025). Even scholarship that is normatively critical and highly attentive to issues of surveillance, systemic racism, disablism, or the tension between care and control does not consistently translate these empirical findings into an explicit analytical framework for evaluating political feedback mechanisms, namely institutional trust, blame attribution, civic compliance, political withdrawal, or mobilization (Bagger et al., 2023; van Toorn & Soldatić, 2024; van Toorn et al., 2024). A secondary critical limitation is empirical concentration. The current evidence base is disproportionately weighted toward Nordic and broader European welfare regimes, demonstrating only marginal engagement with the Global

South and a severe deficit of sustained analysis regarding emerging democracies. This gap persists despite the high probability that weaker institutional capacity, acute socioeconomic inequality, and intensely contested welfare politics fundamentally alter the experiential and politicized nature of digital systems in these regions (Andreassen et al., 2021; Hillo et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025). Consequently, scholarship on distributive politics and policy feedback continues to relegate digital architecture to a peripheral administrative background, rather than recognizing it as a central explanatory variable that dictates access, social classification, perceived deservingness, and ultimate political response.

Accordingly, a robust future research agenda must advance in three interconnected directions. First, empirical investigations must be significantly expanded within the Global South and emerging democracies. There is a pressing need for comparative research capable of capturing how digital welfare operates under conditions characterized by uneven digital access, informal institutional mediation, fragile accountability structures, and politically contested resource distribution, thereby building upon the nascent evidence emerging from contexts like Indonesia and India (Carswell & De Neve, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2025). Second, research on administrative burden must be explicitly synthesized with political outcomes. Future studies should systematically examine how digital interfaces, automated classifications, biometric verification protocols, and human-in-the-loop arrangements directly configure citizens' trust in public institutions, their perceptions of procedural fairness, and their corresponding propensity to comply, appeal, disengage, or mobilize politically (Hillo et al., 2025; Madsen et al., 2022; Ranerup & Henriksen, 2022). Third, the literature requires a more profound analysis of blame attribution, grievance redress mechanisms, civic protest, and democratic legitimacy. This imperative entails investigating whom citizens hold culpable during systemic digital failures, evaluating the accessibility and efficacy of redress mechanisms, and determining the specific conditions under which experiences of algorithmic opacity, exclusion, or misclassification precipitate civic resignation, public protest, or systemic distrust in democratic institutions (Bagger et al., 2023; van Toorn et al., 2024; Zakharova et al., 2024). Ultimately, this thematic synthesis fortifies the central contribution of the present study by definitively demonstrating that digital welfare architecture is not merely a peripheral technical stratum, but rather a foundational mechanism through which distributive politics, policy feedback, and political trust are structurally engineered in emerging democracies.

CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that the digital welfare state is most consistently understood in the literature as a layered administrative regime built around data infrastructures, automation, identification systems, and digitally mediated service interfaces. In answering the first research question, the reviewed studies show that digital welfare is predominantly framed through bureaucratic modernization, data-driven governance, digital social protection infrastructure, and state-citizen interface logics. The most recurrent instruments are algorithmic targeting, automated eligibility, biometric and digital identification, digital self-service, and payment or verification systems. However, this conceptualization remains dominated by

administrative and technological concerns, while the distributive and political implications of these architectures are often secondary rather than central to analysis.

In answering the second research question, the review finds that digital welfare influences distributive politics and political trust through identifiable mechanisms, especially classification and visibility, inclusion and exclusion, administrative burden, opacity, grievance access, contestability, and policy feedback. The literature indicates that digital welfare can strengthen legitimacy when systems are transparent, procedurally fair, and supported by meaningful human oversight, but it can also deepen exclusion, diffuse accountability, and erode trust when opacity, weak redress, and uneven state capacity prevail. The broader contribution of this article therefore lies in showing that digital welfare architecture is not a neutral delivery tool, but a political-institutional arrangement that structures recognition, access, blame attribution, and the quality of state-citizen relations. Future research should expand empirical attention to emerging democracies and the Global South, while integrating administrative burden more explicitly with questions of democratic legitimacy, protest, and political response.

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