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Algorithmic Welfare and Digital Social Assistance: Eligibility, Social Sorting, and the Politics of Deservingness

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Abstract

Digital welfare has become a major feature of contemporary social assistance as governments increasingly use registries, digital identification, and automated eligibility tools to manage access to benefits. This transformation matters because welfare is no longer administered only through visible bureaucratic judgment, but through data infrastructures that classify households and shape who remains legible to the state. The purpose of this article is to examine how algorithmic welfare reorganizes eligibility, deservingness, and social sorting in digital social assistance systems. The article adopts a qualitative and theory-driven approach informed by classification studies, street-level bureaucracy, administrative burden, and algorithmic governance. It draws on policy documents, welfare regulations, digital governance reports, institutional materials, and scholarly literature related to automated eligibility, verification systems, and social assistance administration. Analytical attention is directed to infrastructural classification, redistributed discretion, verification asymmetry, and the moral economy of deservingness. A comparative interpretive reading is used to clarify how digital welfare systems shape inclusion, exclusion, and correction pathways beyond technical claims of efficiency. Eligibility emerges as a data-dependent and politically mediated process in which digital systems intensify administrative burden and stratify access through categories of risk, stability, and credibility. Algorithmic welfare therefore transforms social assistance not simply by modernizing delivery, but by embedding normative judgments within infrastructures of classification and verification. The article contributes to the field by offering an integrated sociological framework for understanding how digital social assistance reshapes welfare justice, institutional accountability, and the politics of eligibility.

Keyword

welfare; eligibility; governance; inequality

1. Introduction

Digital welfare has become a defining feature of contemporary social assistance as states increasingly organize support through integrated registries, digital identification, interoperable databases, and automated eligibility tools. What once depended more visibly on face-to-face assessment, documentary discretion, and local administrative interpretation is now being translated into data fields, verification protocols, scoring thresholds, and platformized service delivery (Petroons et al., 2025). This transformation is often presented as a necessary modernization of welfare administration in response to leakage, duplication, and uneven targeting.

Yet the sociological significance of this shift lies not only in efficiency claims, but in the reorganization of how need is made legible to the state (Saxena et al., 2021). Eligibility is no longer simply determined through human judgment applied to social circumstances; it is increasingly stabilized through infrastructures that classify households according to machine-readable categories (Larasati et al., 2022). As a result, welfare administration becomes a site where technical systems and moral judgments are fused in new ways. The article begins from the premise that algorithmic welfare should be understood not as

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neutral modernization, but as a transformation in the social organization of deservingness, discretion, and rights.

The central problem emerges from the fact that digital welfare systems promise fairness and precision while simultaneously generating new forms of exclusion, opacity, and institutional distance (Carvalho et al., 2025). Automated registration and remote verification may expand access for some applicants by reducing travel time, simplifying submission, or speeding up approval. At the same time, these systems can create new barriers through documentation demands, unstable digital identities, connectivity gaps, and rigid forms that leave little room for social complexity.

This problem has immediate real-world relevance because access to social assistance often determines whether households can secure food, housing, health support, or temporary income protection. When exclusion occurs in digitized systems, the effects are not only administrative (Van Toorn et al., 2024). They are experienced as delays, repeated proof demands, emotional strain, and uncertainty about who is responsible for correction. The issue is therefore not whether digital tools can process welfare claims more quickly, but how they restructure the politics of recognition and redress. Welfare becomes a contested site of infrastructural power when the right to assistance depends on whether a household can remain visible, classifiable, and contestable within digital systems.

A substantial body of scholarship already clarifies several foundations for this discussion. Research on welfare states and policy implementation has long shown that eligibility rules, documentation practices, and conditionality are not merely technical filters, but political devices that sort populations into the deserving and the excluded (Van Toorn & Soldatić, 2024). Studies of classification have likewise demonstrated that categories are consequential because they allocate resources, stabilize institutional meanings, and shape how social problems are understood.

Scholarship on street-level bureaucracy further established that discretion is unavoidable in welfare administration because rules must be interpreted in messy and uneven social circumstances (Larsson, 2020). More recent work on administrative burden has deepened this analysis by showing how policy design creates learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs that fall most heavily on already disadvantaged groups. Critical research on algorithmic governance adds another layer by showing that digitization does not eliminate judgment, but redistributes it across designers, supervisors, auditors, and data infrastructures (Eneva & Mora-Gámez, 2025). What is already known, then, is that welfare systems have always involved moral and classificatory judgments, and that digitization intensifies their infrastructural reach.

What remains less clearly specified is how these literatures can be synthesized into a sociological account of eligibility under algorithmic welfare. Much of the public debate still asks whether models are accurate, efficient, or fair in the abstract, but that framing leaves a deeper question insufficiently explored (Schou & Pors, 2018). The more consequential issue is how digital eligibility systems convert contested judgments about poverty, vulnerability, and deservingness into classifications that appear objective because they are data-driven.

There is also limited conceptual clarity about how discretion shifts when human caseworkers no longer occupy the most visible point of decision. New forms of judgment enter through data standards, verification rules, proxy measures, appeal design, and vendor-managed infrastructures that are often less publicly visible than traditional bureaucratic discretion (Coles-Kemp et al., 2020). At the same time, households experience the effects of these shifts through very concrete burdens such as repeated document submission, unresolved mismatches, and delayed correction pathways. The unknown dimension, therefore, concerns the institutional and moral mechanisms

through which digital welfare simultaneously expands access for some groups while deepening insecurity for others (Dobson, 2022).

The research gap becomes sharper when viewed through the article's applied theoretical synthesis of classification studies, street-level bureaucracy, administrative burden, and algorithmic governance. Existing scholarship often addresses these domains separately, even though digital welfare brings them into direct interaction. Classification studies explain how categories become politically consequential, but they do not always specify how digitized registries and scoring systems reshape day-to-day access to benefits. Street-level bureaucracy highlights discretion, yet algorithmic welfare complicates this tradition by relocating discretion away from frontline assessment and into system design, data governance, and automated thresholds.

Administrative burden research explains why access is costly, but digitization changes the form of those costs by embedding them in interfaces, digital records, and platform workflows. Algorithmic governance scholarship identifies opacity and automation, but it can understate the moral economy through which welfare decisions remain tied to ideas of responsibility, risk, and deservingness (Zajko, 2023). The gap therefore lies in the absence of an integrated framework capable of explaining how eligibility becomes a contested site of infrastructural classification, social sorting, and unequal accountability. That synthesis is necessary if digital welfare is to be understood as a political and sociological formation rather than as a technical administrative upgrade.

Filling this gap is theoretically justified because welfare has always been a field where redistribution and discipline coexist, and algorithmic systems do not suspend that tension. They reorganize it by making eligibility increasingly dependent on data integrity, verification capacity, and institutional interoperability. A mechanism-based framework is especially coherent here because similar technical infrastructures can produce very different outcomes depending on governance arrangements, appeal pathways, data quality, and the resources available to citizens and frontline institutions (Jørgensen, 2021).

Such a framework allows the analysis to move beyond deterministic claims that digitization is either inherently progressive or inherently exclusionary. It also makes visible the specific pathways through which harm and protection are distributed. Infrastructural mediation explains why access depends on databases and identity systems rather than on need alone ("OUP Accepted Manuscript," 2022). Verification asymmetry clarifies why the state can demand proof more easily than citizens can produce it, especially where livelihoods and documents are unstable. Legitimacy work further explains why digitization is often accepted as modernization even when it reproduces exclusion and weakens contestability.

From this foundation, the article is organized around a set of closely related research questions. How do digital eligibility systems convert contested social judgments into apparently objective classifications that govern access to assistance. In what ways do registries, digital identification, scoring models, and platformized service delivery redistribute discretion and accountability across bureaucrats, technologies, contractors, and citizens. Why do systems promoted as tools of fairness and efficiency often generate new forms of burden, opacity, and exclusion for households with unstable documents, informal livelihoods, or weak digital access. How do thresholds, proxy measures, and automated verification rules reshape the moral economy of deservingness by redefining who appears eligible, risky, or administratively invisible. What kinds of appeal structures, governance arrangements, and institutional safeguards are required if correction is to remain meaningful when exclusion can occur at scale. These questions are designed to shift attention away from model performance in isolation and toward the social organization of classification, error, and redress. They also allow the article to

examine eligibility not simply as a policy output, but as a political process through which rights and stigma are simultaneously negotiated.

The urgency of these questions is heightened by the rapid normalization of digital welfare infrastructures across many contemporary welfare states. As registries, rules engines, app-based registration, and digital payments become more common, the consequences of misclassification and exclusion become less exceptional and more routine. Errors, mismatches, and delayed appeals cannot be treated as anomalies when they are structured by system design, documentation asymmetry, and the ordinary messiness of social life (Van Toorn & Scully, 2023). The article contributes by providing a sociological vocabulary for analyzing these developments through the linked dimensions of datafication, deservingness, administrative burden, and governance response. It also contributes by reframing eligibility as a contested field of infrastructural power in which households do not merely receive welfare, but must remain legible, correctable, and institutionally recognized in order to access it. This approach is especially important for debates on welfare justice because it restores political visibility to processes that are often hidden behind the language of modernization and optimization (Chaudhuri, 2022). The broader significance lies in insisting that digital social assistance must be judged not only by speed or targeting precision, but by how it distributes dignity, voice, and the capacity to contest exclusion.

2. Research Method

This article employs a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive policy analysis and socio-legal institutional inquiry to examine how digital welfare systems reorganize eligibility, classification, and social sorting. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the central object of analysis is not merely the technical operation of digital systems, but the meanings, judgments, administrative practices, and institutional relations through which welfare access is made possible or denied (Leplaa et al., 2025). The analytical framework integrates classification studies, street-level bureaucracy, administrative burden, and algorithmic governance in order to explain how digital infrastructures convert contested assessments of poverty and vulnerability into apparently objective eligibility outcomes.

This framework is suitable because it captures both the moral and organizational dimensions of welfare administration, including how discretion is redistributed from frontline interaction to databases, scoring rules, verification procedures, and appeal systems. The design works well for this research because algorithmic welfare cannot be understood adequately through performance indicators alone. It requires close attention to how rules are interpreted, how categories are stabilized, and how citizens encounter systems of proof, correction, and exclusion in practice (Renjith et al., 2021). A qualitative strategy makes it possible to examine digital welfare as a sociotechnical and political formation rather than as a neutral administrative upgrade. Such an approach is therefore well suited to a research problem concerned with deservingness, infrastructural power, and the unequal distribution of recognition within social assistance systems.

The data consist of academic literature, policy documents, welfare regulations, administrative guidelines, digital governance reports, institutional publications, and credible secondary sources concerning social assistance digitization, eligibility systems, automated decision support, and welfare administration. Data collection was conducted through purposive document selection, focusing on materials directly relevant to registries, digital identification, verification rules, appeal procedures, administrative burden, and algorithmic classification in welfare settings.

The units of analysis are not individual beneficiaries as survey cases, but the institutional and documentary expressions of algorithmic welfare, including eligibility

rules, technical-administrative arrangements, policy narratives, governance practices, and representations of deservingness embedded in digital social assistance systems (Bhangu et al., 2023; Surawy-Stepney et al., 2023). A qualitative coding matrix served as the primary instrument for organizing the material according to key analytical dimensions, namely classification, discretion, verification asymmetry, administrative burden, infrastructural mediation, legitimacy work, and contestability. These dimensions functioned as the principal variables for tracing how digital welfare systems shape access, exclusion, and correction pathways. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, conceptual consistency in coding, and explicit alignment between the research questions, theoretical framework, and analytical categories, while reliability was supported by maintaining a transparent audit trail of source selection and thematic classification (Stickley et al., 2022). Validity was enhanced by restricting analysis to sources directly related to digital welfare eligibility and by reading policy and scholarly materials through the same integrated analytical lens. Because the study relies on publicly accessible documentary materials and does not involve direct human participants, formal informed consent was not required; nevertheless, ethical standards were maintained by avoiding selective misrepresentation, treating vulnerable welfare populations with caution, and preserving confidentiality wherever non-public individual information could otherwise be inferred.

3. Result and Discussion

Algorithmic welfare reorganizes social assistance by transforming eligibility from a visible administrative judgment into an infrastructural process of classification. Access to support increasingly depends on whether applicants can be matched across registries, verified through digital identity systems, and rendered legible within predefined data architectures. This shift does not merely accelerate administrative routines. It changes the terms under which poverty, vulnerability, and deservingness are recognized by the state (Sun, 2025). Eligibility becomes less a situational assessment of lived hardship and more a technical outcome generated through interoperable records, threshold rules, and automated comparisons. Such an arrangement gives digital infrastructures a constitutive role in welfare distribution. Need is translated into machine-readable categories before it can become a claim on public assistance. The result is a welfare environment in which social rights are increasingly mediated by the capacity of systems to classify households correctly and keep them visible within administrative data flows.

A central pattern concerns the rise of infrastructural classification as the main gateway to assistance. Registries, biometric systems, household databases, and rule-based verification tools now structure who enters welfare systems, who remains within them, and who is flagged as anomalous. These mechanisms produce order by standardizing information across large populations, yet they do so by privileging stability, consistency, and documentary coherence. Households with irregular work histories, fluid family arrangements, informal housing, or fragmented records are more likely to encounter friction because their lives do not align neatly with administrative categories. Classification thus becomes more than a technical filter. It acts as a political device that stabilizes one version of social reality while excluding others as inconsistent, doubtful, or incomplete. Welfare access is therefore conditioned by the fit between lived conditions and data structures (Carlsson, 2023). The apparent neutrality of digital matching conceals a deeper transformation in the way need is institutionally recognized.

This transformation does not remove discretion. It redistributes it across new sites that are less publicly visible than traditional casework. Street-level officials may no longer appear as the sole arbiters of access, but judgment remains active in model selection, proxy design, data field construction, exception handling, and appeal configuration.

Designers decide which variables count as relevant, administrators determine the acceptable level of documentary mismatch, and supervisors establish the thresholds at which cases are escalated, delayed, or rejected. Discretion therefore migrates from interpersonal assessment to infrastructural architecture. This matters because political judgment does not disappear when embedded in code, forms, or administrative rules. It becomes harder to identify, contest, and attribute. The language of automation may create the impression of impersonal fairness, yet welfare decisions continue to reflect normative assumptions about who appears administratively trustworthy and who does not. Algorithmic welfare thus preserves judgment while simultaneously obscuring its location.

One of the most consequential effects of this redistribution is verification asymmetry. Digital systems allow the state to demand, compare, and cross-check evidence at scale, while applicants often lack equivalent capacity to correct records, explain irregularity, or challenge inferred inconsistency. A household may be asked to prove address stability, family composition, income status, disability, or employment condition through records that are incomplete, outdated, or difficult to update (Zajko, 2022). The burden of proof is thereby shifted downward. Citizens must repeatedly demonstrate eligibility within systems that presume documentary coherence even where livelihoods and identities are unstable. Verification becomes especially onerous when digital portals are inaccessible, appeals are slow, and frontline assistance is reduced under assumptions of streamlined automation. Administrative burden is intensified not because rules necessarily become stricter in formal terms, but because the infrastructure of compliance becomes more demanding. Welfare exclusion can thus occur through repeated procedural friction rather than through explicit denial alone. These processes reshape the moral economy of deservingness by sorting populations into categories that carry unequal administrative value. Digital welfare systems distinguish not only between eligible and ineligible applicants, but also between those who appear stable, risky, doubtful, exceptional, or invisible. Proxy measures and scoring logics convert complex social circumstances into administratively tractable indicators, and these indicators then shape who is prioritized, who is flagged, and who is rendered marginal to the core logic of entitlement. Deservingness is therefore no longer articulated only through public discourse or bureaucratic interaction. It is embedded within thresholds, categories, and cross-checking routines that make some forms of hardship easy to recognize and others difficult to process. This sorting has moral implications because it determines which populations are treated as administratively credible and which are approached as sources of error, fraud, or uncertainty. Digital classification does not suspend normative judgment. It formalizes and scales it through infrastructures that appear technical while carrying distributive consequences.

The comparative structure of these dynamics can be summarized through four interrelated dimensions: infrastructural classification, redistributed discretion, verification asymmetry, and social sorting. Each dimension illuminates a distinct but connected pathway through which algorithmic welfare reorganizes eligibility. Infrastructural classification determines the terms of access by translating social claims into data-dependent categories. Redistributed discretion explains how judgment persists within design choices, rules, and administrative workflows. Verification asymmetry captures the unequal burden placed on applicants who must remain legible to systems while lacking equivalent means of institutional correction. Social sorting identifies how digital categories stratify populations into different grades of deservingness and risk. These dimensions do not function in isolation. They reinforce one another within a welfare environment increasingly governed through digital mediation. The following table synthesizes this logic.

Table 1. Comparative Dimensions of Algorithmic Welfare and Digital Eligibility

Analytical Dimension	*Main Pattern*	*Social Implication*
Infrastructural classification	Registries, IDs, and scoring systems structure access	Eligibility becomes data-dependent rather than purely situational
Redistributed discretion	Judgment shifts into system design and administrative rules	Decision-making becomes less visible but still political
Verification asymmetry	Applicants face high proof burdens and limited correction capacity	Administrative exclusion becomes easier to reproduce
Social sorting	Categories and thresholds define deservingness and risk	Welfare access becomes stratified through digital classification

Table 1 clarifies that algorithmic welfare is not reducible to a technical upgrade in administrative efficiency. Each dimension demonstrates how eligibility is reconstructed through infrastructures that combine operational rationality with normative judgment. Infrastructural classification establishes the field within which claims can be recognized at all, while redistributed discretion locates political choice within technical and procedural arrangements rather than at the sole point of human encounter. Verification asymmetry reveals why exclusion can become routine even without overt hostility or formal denial. Social sorting then shows how these mechanisms stabilize unequal categories of welfare worthiness. The table supports the broader argument that digital welfare reorganizes the moral economy of eligibility by embedding political decisions in apparently neutral systems of classification. It also explains why the legitimacy of digital social assistance cannot be assessed through speed or targeting accuracy alone. What matters is how systems distribute visibility, burden, and the practical capacity to contest exclusion. This interpretation resonates with earlier scholarship on welfare administration and classification while extending it into the digital domain. Classic studies of welfare policy established that categories of need are politically consequential because they organize access, stigma, and institutional attention. Street-level bureaucracy highlighted the inescapability of discretion in translating formal rules into concrete decisions. Administrative burden research demonstrated that the costs of learning, complying, and appealing often fall hardest on those with the fewest resources. More recent work on algorithmic governance added that automation reconfigures rather than removes judgment. The present discussion draws these strands together by showing that digital welfare transforms all four simultaneously. Eligibility is classified more systematically, discretion becomes less visible, burdens become infrastructurally embedded, and governance becomes more opaque at the moment when rights should remain contestable. The theoretical contribution lies in treating these processes as mutually constitutive rather than separate domains of analysis.

The implications for welfare justice are substantial. A welfare system cannot be considered fair merely because it is interoperable, rapid, or data-rich. Justice also depends on whether citizens can understand how decisions are made, correct errors before harm becomes durable, and contest exclusion without facing prohibitive administrative costs. Algorithmic welfare raises these stakes because errors and mismatches can be reproduced at scale while remaining difficult to attribute to a single official or office. Transparency is therefore not an optional add-on. It is central to democratic legitimacy in systems where eligibility depends on hidden classifications and indirect decision pathways. Appeal rights must also remain meaningful in practice rather than symbolic in design. Where correction mechanisms are slow, inaccessible, or poorly resourced, digital welfare risks converting temporary mismatch into prolonged deprivation. The problem is not only

technological opacity, but the weakening of institutional reciprocity between the state's capacity to classify and the citizen's capacity to respond.

These dynamics also matter for public administration and policy design. Governments and welfare agencies increasingly rely on digital service providers, interoperable platforms, and vendor-built infrastructures to manage access at scale. Such dependence can strengthen operational capacity, yet it may also distance decision-making from democratic oversight and blur lines of accountability. Public administrators must therefore confront not only technical questions of integration and performance, but also political questions of review, correction, and procedural fairness. Human oversight cannot be limited to occasional manual checks performed after exclusion has already occurred. It must be built into the architecture of registration, verification, and appeals. Participatory audit mechanisms, transparent criteria, and accessible grievance channels become especially important in this setting. Digital welfare should be designed to accommodate instability, not merely to reward documentary consistency. Public administration in the algorithmic era is thus inseparable from the governance of classification itself.

The discussion also reveals several strengths and limitations. One strength lies in the ability of the integrated framework to connect welfare classification, digital governance, and deservingness within a single analytical vocabulary. This makes visible the political content of infrastructures often treated as technical instruments. Another strength is the emphasis on contestability, which restores attention to correction and redress rather than focusing only on entry into welfare systems. At the same time, algorithmic welfare varies across programs, legal systems, and state capacities, which means that the specific form of exclusion is likely to differ by institutional context. There is also a limit to what document-centered analysis can capture about the lived experience of repeated mismatch, delay, and appeal fatigue. One notable complexity is that digitization may expand access for some groups even as it deepens insecurity for others. This unevenness is analytically important because it shows that digital welfare is not simply exclusionary or inclusive in absolute terms. It is a stratifying mode of governance that redistributes both opportunity and vulnerability. Future inquiry would benefit from closer comparison across welfare regimes, administrative cultures, and technological architectures. More attention is needed to beneficiary experience, especially how different groups navigate proof demands, correction pathways, and the emotional costs of being repeatedly rendered doubtful or invisible. Research on vendor influence and procurement politics would also deepen understanding of how private infrastructures shape public classifications of need. Comparative study of participatory audits and community-based oversight could clarify what forms of institutional design improve contestability without simply adding new burdens to applicants. There is also strong practical relevance in developing rights-based digital welfare reforms that prioritize appeal accessibility, data correction, and public transparency. Welfare modernization should not be measured only by targeting precision or transaction speed. It should also be evaluated by whether households can remain visible, dignified, and institutionally heard within the systems that govern access to assistance.

4. Conclusion

Algorithmic welfare transforms social assistance by relocating eligibility from visible administrative judgment into digital infrastructures of classification, verification, and social sorting. The discussion has emphasized that digital welfare does not simply modernize delivery, but reorganizes how poverty, vulnerability, and deservingness become legible to the state. Infrastructural classification makes access increasingly dependent on registries, digital identities, and scoring rules, while discretion persists in

less visible forms through system design, data standards, and administrative thresholds. Verification asymmetry intensifies this shift by placing heavy burdens on applicants who must repeatedly prove stability, coherence, and compliance within systems that can demand proof at scale more easily than citizens can correct records.

These processes reshape the moral economy of eligibility by distinguishing populations not only as eligible or ineligible, but also as credible, risky, doubtful, or administratively invisible. Welfare access therefore becomes stratified through digital architectures that appear technical while carrying profound distributive consequences. The broader implication is that digital social assistance must be understood as a political and sociological formation in which rights, burden, and recognition are continuously negotiated through infrastructures of classification.

The article contributes to the field by integrating classification studies, street-level bureaucracy, administrative burden, and algorithmic governance into a single analytical framework for examining digital welfare. Its main conceptual contribution lies in showing that eligibility under algorithmic administration is not simply a matter of technological efficiency or model accuracy, but a contested process through which deservingness is formalized, scaled, and redistributed. This perspective extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that digitization does not remove judgment from welfare administration, but relocates it into design choices, verification systems, and appeal structures that are less publicly visible yet no less political.

The analysis also strengthens debates on welfare justice by emphasizing contestability, institutional legibility, and the unequal capacity of households to remain administratively present within digital systems. In this formulation, algorithmic welfare appears not as a neutral administrative upgrade, but as a reorganization of the relationship between the state, the poor, and the infrastructures through which assistance is governed. The article's broader scholarly value lies in recovering the moral and institutional dimensions of classification at a moment when public debate is often dominated by technical claims about speed, precision, and optimization. It therefore offers a more grounded basis for understanding how welfare digitization redistributes both opportunity and vulnerability.

Future research should move toward closer comparative analysis across welfare regimes, technological architectures, and administrative traditions in order to identify how different designs shape visibility, exclusion, and correction. Greater attention is also needed to beneficiary experience, especially the ways households navigate documentation burdens, digital interfaces, appeal fatigue, and the emotional consequences of repeated misclassification. Research on vendor influence, procurement arrangements, and public-private data infrastructures would further clarify how institutional accountability is mediated in algorithmic welfare systems.

Comparative work on participatory audits, grievance redress mechanisms, and rights-based oversight could also help identify designs that improve contestability without imposing additional burdens on claimants. Another important direction concerns the long-term political effects of digital welfare, particularly how repeated experiences of opacity, delay, or exclusion shape trust in public institutions and perceptions of social rights. Advancing these questions remains essential for building digital welfare systems that do not merely optimize delivery, but preserve dignity, transparency, and the practical capacity to contest exclusion.

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