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Introduction

The European Union's (EU's) quest for what it terms "tech sovereignty" has become one of the bloc's most striking policy priorities. In April 2025, the European Commission launched a new artificial intelligence (AI) strategy, which, with a suite of other initiatives, aims at sharpening the EU's technological competitiveness and independence.[1] This firmly rooted agenda has been given a decisive prompt forward by the politicized empowerment of U.S. tech companies under the second administration of President Donald Trump. Twin concerns dominate EU technology policy: the need for tougher rules to hold at bay the nefarious influence of tech companies, on the one hand, and measures to spur a European tech sector better able to compete against these U.S. and Chinese actors, on the other.

The EU's geoeconomic competitiveness agenda and its efforts to constrain large tech companies might be necessary, but they have increasingly sidelined democracy concerns in technology debates. The EU needs to supplement its strategy for tech sovereignty with one for tech citizenship. While the union promotes its tech governance model as inherently democratic, democracy-oriented technology initiatives have lost prominence in the EU policy mix, and fresh ideas are needed for how technology might help refashion democratic practices in positive ways. A new EU tech citizenship initiative needs to upgrade existing digital-democracy support programs and be ambitious enough to explore how technology might foster radical democratic renewal. In mapping out this potential renewal, this paper covers EU digital technology policy in a broad sense while focusing especially on AI, as this has risen in salience in recent policy debates.

Gathering Threats

It has become clear that many elements of digital technologies have had a negative impact on democracy and helped boost authoritarian dynamics. The dial of analytical opinion has moved decisively. If ten or fifteen years ago there was optimism that technology could improve democracy, there is now a stronger consensus that it has had the opposite outcome.

This impact is contrary to digital technology's early democratic promise of decentralizing power and equalizing citizen participation. Extensive analysis has shown how technology takes power away from democratically elected governments, undermines accountability, empowers the harmful and oligarchic influence of so-called tech titans, and dramatically enhances surveillance powers that boost illiberal authoritarianism.[2] Some of these downsides are about technology itself, while others are about the corporate structures that sustain it; some are direct effects, and others are symptoms of further problems that beset democracy. Digital technology brings both intrinsic and contingent disadvantages to democracy.

Big tech companies, many of which are headquartered in the United States, are now unequivocally part of and complicit in a dramatic concentration of economic and political power and a circumvention of democratic accountability. Data companies provide more and more services to public bodies that influence policies with little or no oversight. Cryptocurrencies and blockchain have evaded democratic governmental accountability and helped autocrats tighten their hold on power. Digital infrastructure, such as energy-intensive data centers, has often been built against the will of local communities and is becoming a primary source of environmental damage.[3]

The spread of generative AI has raised questions of even greater existential urgency.[4] There are mounting fears that AI will further undermine democratic politics by subverting democratic agency and representation and eroding political trust.[5] The latest iteration of AI models has dramatically intensified digital interference in elections and the spread of disinformation tailored to accentuate people's existing biases.[6] Some experts fear that algorithms may militate against democracy's defining capacity for self-corrective change, as they reinforce existing patterns of behavior and stifle citizen-led policy correction.[7] Citizens are caught in a pincer movement, as tech companies battle for power over states, but states also gain more tech-driven power over citizens.

While these concerns have been gathering for some time, they have reached fever pitch because of developments under Trump's second administration. U.S. tech moguls are now clearly using their control of platforms to distort and neuter online debate even more overtly for political ends. In this latest phase, some argue that the political power of U.S. big tech has moved up several gears.[8] Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk's use of AI in the purge of U.S. state bodies raised uncomfortable questions for democracy: Musk acted either with a degree of autonomy from the elected government or at the behest of a president set against checks and balances; both of these scenarios sit uneasily with democratic norms.[9] In many respects, digital technology's menace to democratic quality has reached alarming levels.

The EU's Regulatory Approach

These developments have led to increasingly urgent concerns with addressing technology's mounting harm to democracy and given EU policies a particular flavor. In Europe, the tech-and-democracy debate has been largely about the need to rein in powerful tech companies and reestablish public authorities' leverage over the main platforms as well as about dealing with autocratic regimes' political uses of digital technologies. The EU's logic is that regulatory constraints will have a spillover benefit of limiting digital technology's harmful impact on democracy. Commonly, this view goes hand in hand with calls for public control over technology—that is, for digital infrastructure and social media to be run for public not private interests.[10] Alongside this approach come calls to ban technology's most dangerous manifestations and impose stricter transparency requirements on the large platforms.

These arguments are well grounded and now command a strong consensus of support across the EU institutions and member states as well as among experts. But it is important to clarify that these arguments' link to democracy is largely oblique rather than direct. Pushing back against the tech giants carries an indirect impact on democracy by extension. Given current controversies and corporate actions, it is understandable that tech sovereignty should be the EU's main priority. Yet, this focus risks displacing a debate about democratic practices themselves.

Emerging EU policies have a clear and specific focus on tougher regulation against large tech companies, flanked by investment in the EU's own digital infrastructure and AI start-ups. The EU's tellingly named European commissioner for tech sovereignty, security, and democracy is focusing hard on advancing and expanding a suite of measures that includes the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). Carrying an impact in Europe and internationally, these acts tighten the large platforms' responsibility for content and transparency requirements. In April 2025, the commission fined Apple and Meta under the DMA.[11] The EU's flagship Democracy Shield initiative, which is due to be finalized and introduced by late 2025, aims to draw existing measures together in pursuit of a more systematic and assertive assault against foreign disinformation.

The commission has also stepped up the deployment of its various regulatory instruments to protect European elections from large platforms' distortive interventions.[12] The EU has built tech regulation into its cooperation with third countries, making this a pillar of the union's foreign economic policy.[13] And crucially, the notion of public-interest technology is gaining ground. This idea is found in the emerging concept of the so-called EuroStack: an interconnected system of advanced technologies that are developed in Europe, designed to spur innovation to supplant U.S. technology, and built on open-source data.[14] The commission is launching several sizable investment funds to support European AI and wider tech-sector growth, including through its Digital Europe program and InvestAI initiative.

The French government has initiated a public-interest AI fund, and many other European governments support this approach.

These EU laws and regulatory frameworks represent a crucial step forward in the attempt to wrestle back European digital self-determination—a core precursor to any meaningful notion of democracy. Yet, they do not in themselves suffice as a strategy for digital democracy. Indeed, the EU's tech sovereignty approach carries new risks and concerns for the democracy component of European digital policies. While the measures are generally welcome and overdue, they alone cannot be assumed to have a positive impact on democracy, as the EU's standard narrative now claims.

Debates often contrast three models of internet governance: the U.S. commercially driven model, the Chinese autocratic-nationalist model, and the EU's democratic republican model. The latter is generally framed in terms of rights and of rules and laws that work for the benefit of society.[15] The assumption is that Europeanizing the tech sector will be good for democracy because the EU model is itself more democratic than those of other powers.

The main European debate currently is over exactly how tough the EU should be in enforcing its digital rule book and what the right level of regulation is. Much analysis focuses on asserting that the EU must not drift too far toward deregulation in the name of competitiveness but must retain its regulatory leverage, with an assumption that rules themselves are the primary democracy component of EU policy.[16] Despite the fines against Apple and Meta, for now the commission seems to be holding back from fully mobilizing legal measures against U.S. tech companies. The strongest calls come from those who insist that the EU must maintain its regulatory power through strict enforcement of rules against U.S. tech companies and not be tempted into a deregulation agenda.[17]

This position may well be right, but it constitutes a relatively narrow and indirect prism on democracy. The EU's tech governance model is not clearly conceived in terms of pluralist or proactive citizen engagement in technology-related decisions. While stricter standards, regulations, and laws are necessary, these do not axiomatically equate to boosting the democratic strand of technology policy.[18] The EU's approach is aimed mainly at minimizing distortions to the information ecosystem that surrounds democratic processes and institutions, rather than at revitalizing the essence of such practices for the digital era.

Although the EU has moved to boost state powers over companies, it has been less committed to increasing citizen power over states. If anything, the opposite is the case. Critics argue that the overwhelming focus on regulatory constraints is leading to an increasingly closed, centralized, and technocratic approach to technology and AI that sits uneasily with pluralist democracy and accountability.[19] This trend points toward what some have labeled a hyper-technocratic state paternalism.[20] Decisions about what to allow online are at risk of being made by the commission, state regulators, and companies with little open, participative debate.[21] Some experts note that EU regulations are already working well as combative geo-economic tools; the EU's main weaknesses now lie not here but in the underlying domestic politics of technology policy.[22]

While the standard EU line is that the competitiveness and democracy strands automatically go hand in hand, there is at least some degree of trade-off between them. Most current proposals tend to work on the basis that reducing the EU's dependence on external technologies will help revitalize European democracy.[23] Yet, this assumption can easily be overstretched. European tech sovereignty is not intrinsically good for democracy. It cannot be assumed that an autonomous European tech sector would fully respect democratic principles. As two experts put it, "even if European companies could reach critical mass, there is no guarantee that European big tech would be any more democratic than its US counterpart."[24] Or, as another cautioned, "just because companies are European does not mean they will be aligned with European values."[25]

Indeed, the EU's aim is increasingly to raise the power of European companies over other private actors rather than to fundamentally enhance popular, democratic power over markets.[26] And much EU policy still relies on the largest platforms in pushing back against externally driven malign influences—generating a kind of elite collusion supposedly against antidemocratic influences but in practice to the detriment of increasingly needed democratic control over digital technologies.[27] The risk is that the tech sovereignty approach simply extends the pathologies of the tech-sector business model with a formal European imprimatur.

Pushed too far, the quest for European tech sovereignty, driven by the aim to regain competitiveness relative to other countries and regions, could easily elide into nationalist, zero-sum rivalry and unsettle the liberal-order principles that sustain democracy. Europe needs to think beyond its regulatory tools rather than lean so exclusively on them as supposed instruments for regaining technological autonomy. If the EU wants to push back harder and more effectively against U.S. tech giants, the democracy component must be an important part of developing a distinctive European digital sphere.

Such a sphere or EuroStack will not in itself enhance proactive citizen influence and participation. It might be a desirable and necessary step toward rescuing democracy from tech companies, but it is not sufficient for improving democratic quality. While public-sector technology might well mitigate the distortions of so-called surveillance capitalism, it is not entirely immune from biases and possible misuse against democracy. More open-source AI may help reduce corporate control but raises thorny questions about how accountability is to be exercised over it—by whom, how, and on what terms.[28]

Moreover, the EU's democratic template has its own blemishes: When member states exhibit low democratic standards, their governments tend to use digital technologies, especially AI, in ways that reinforce unaccountable and predatory executive control.[29] The EMFA may be a tool to push back against global companies' control over online media content, but some of the most serious infringements of media independence come from the EU's member state governments.[30] While it is widely assumed and ritually asserted that the European digital model is structurally more democratic than that of other powers, this assumption can be overstated. As the EU focuses more assertively on protecting itself from external digital influences—the Democracy Shield being the latest manifestation of this priority—a more effective democracy focus is clearly needed within Europe, too.

The Tech-Democracy Strand

Alongside its focus on regulations and tech sovereignty, the EU has for many years formally committed to foster technology's democratic potential. In many strategies and documents, the EU has referred to the importance of digital empowerment and making sure citizens fully benefit from e-government services.[31] The union has reiterated such democratic commitments in a battery of measures: a European initiative for digital commons, a 2016 e-government strategy, the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles, the 2020 Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Value-Based Digital Government, and others. Most recently, the EU declared 2025 the European Year of Digital Citizenship Education. And as the proposed Democracy Shield has evolved over 2025, the commission has—at least rhetorically—stressed the importance of building in a more prominent strand of democratic participation alongside the initiative's regulatory focus.

European policymakers have long asserted the general principle that democratic participation is needed over central aspects of digital policy and the way algorithms work. The notion of co-creation in fact checking and counter-disinformation is well established in EU policy initiatives. Many governments and civil society organizations (CSOs) have run citizen assemblies on digital policy and sometimes experimented with AI-moderated deliberation. Most European governments now have some kind of e-governance mechanism. A network of CSOs has formed a Global Alliance for AI and Democracy to collaborate on such tools.[32]

However, while the policy and analytical focus on constraining corporate power has intensified, the EU's support for digital technologies' democratic potential has lost momentum. Such support has had a relatively modest reach so far and has not given a major boost to democratic renewal. European initiatives for participative co-creation of technology have struggled to gain traction at scale. Practitioners and experts involved in long-standing civic-tech initiatives lament that these have not met expectations and have in recent years atrophied in their engagement with citizens.[33] Most AI-democracy initiatives have come from private-sector actors or CSOs, rather than governments or local or international authorities—and more from the United States than from Europe.[34]

Initiatives to improve the uses of technology and online standards have proliferated, but few of these are participative or concerned with democracy as such. EU states have fallen a long way behind countries like Taiwan and Ukraine on the citizen-participation component of technology policies. Formal EU initiatives have proved useful but fairly underwhelming in terms of their impact on democracy. The European Citizens' Initiative offers an online petition system, whose use has been strikingly limited. Various EU consultation exercises over the years have had online components—including, most recently, the Conference on the Future of Europe—but these have not generated large-scale citizen involvement or identifiable influence over EU policy decisions. The EU has used online forums for communication or information gathering more than for a clearly developed rationale of deepening democracy.[35]

Tech companies' oversight boards and advisory councils have given some input to experts without opening to meaningful citizen participation. The EuroStack proposal suggests giving civil society a place alongside EU policymakers, governments, and industry in a strategic dialogue on technology policies but does not map out firm or detailed mechanisms of active democratic engagement or accountability.[36] The much-repeated European calls for a democratic internet seem disconnected from any vision for clearly redefined decisionmaking. Translating the principle of the digital commons into specific democratic reforms has proved challenging. Democracy-tech issues have been explored at a philosophical level—for instance, through the many books and articles that examine what AI means for the concept of rights—but less so at a concrete, operational level.

If EU policy initiatives can be grouped into those that use technology to protect democracy and those that promote participation, the latter are dramatically more limited than the former.[37] The EU is engaged in the deployment of technologies to protect European democracies from malign influences but not greatly in the positive promotion of digital democracy.[38] When the EU alludes to the democracy components of its policies, it is questionable whether these directly promote democratic practices—or it might be said that they reflect a shallow understanding of the democracy component of technology policy.

EU policy focuses mainly on certain techniques to help users trace where content comes from, identify fakes, or protect their online anonymity rather than on the structural politics of technology. Although such tools are commonly referred to now as "democracy affirming technologies," this term is something of a definitional stretch.[39] To employ one distinction often used in democratic analytical frameworks: The EU pushes for certain techniques or generic technology norms but without paying much attention to citizen involvement in decisionmaking.[40]

The Case for Rebalancing

The growing imbalance between the competitiveness and democracy strands of EU technology policy should be of great concern. The tech sovereignty narrative has drawn attention away from reflection on how technology might, at least in some modest ways, benefit democracy. While it might seem fanciful to even pose this question today, the depth of tech companies' malign hold over political and social life means it is even more vital that the EU does more to explore how digital technologies, specifically AI, might help improve democratic practices. The push toward mercantilist regulation should not prejudice the equally important European imperative of democratic renewal.

Even if regulatory control over large platforms may be the EU's highest priority, ideas are also needed to recover some of the positive side of the digital agenda. The EU is right to explore a combination of regulatory constraint, for instance over OpenAI and applications

built on its models, on the one hand, and support for EU-centered AI models, on the other. But a third leg is also required—democratic engagement—a leg that the EU ritually promises but that, in practice, lags behind the other two.

The EU is pumping a huge amount of funding into the competitiveness and sovereignty strands of its technology strategy. If it invested even a modest part of this in the democracy component, this would represent a major upgrade of current policy. Yet, there is no fund proposed under the Democracy Shield specifically for building digital participation. This requires a different kind of focus from that on EU tech sovereignty, autonomy, and control, as the core question here is whether technology can itself help fashion different kinds of democratic practice.

The democracy dimension is clearly not a solution to the most structural problems of digital technology: big companies' political influence or the polarizing impact of social media platforms. Yet, without this dimension, the EU's approach risks taking the digital sphere even farther from citizens' influence, even as it rightly tries to wrestle control away from the tech giants and regulate online actions. It is extremely ambitious to think that EU companies can, in the short term, outcompete U.S. tech giants or that a huge number of European citizens might cease using U.S. platforms in favor of European ones. Given this, the EU's distinctive value proposition needs to be on a different vector: active democratic engagement.

Beyond all its generic rhetoric about such democratic concepts, the EU needs to engage in more concrete policy actions to find innovative ways of giving citizens more influence over the development of technology, in particular AI. As part of any public-interest digital infrastructure, the EU needs to focus far more on societal democratic leverage over the state, alongside state regulations on companies. Stronger and more tailored democratic measures are needed to ensure that states do not use EU public-interest technology initiatives for illiberal political purposes. As tech companies assume political relevance and technologies impinge on citizens' rights, so citizens need some kind of prior say over these matters. Active political agency is a crucial criterion for the future of resilient democracy and technology, and one that needs to be brought back to citizens from both companies and surveillance-oriented governments.

Moreover, democratic institutions, practices, and ideologies need to be rethought around technological developments. The challenge is not simply to graft digital technology onto existing political processes but to step back and ask about democracy's core rationale in a digital era. More effort is required to map how democracy itself needs to change because of technological advances. There needs to be a tighter relationship between democracy and technology communities, to ensure that each can positively influence the other.[41] At present, the democracy and technology communities can still feel separated from each other; the debates and terminology that are prominent among democracy practitioners and analysts feel very different from those of the digital-tech domain.

Many reports and articles outline the ways in which digital technologies, in particular AI, could be useful for democracy, but they are invariably pitched at a general level: The policy realm lags far behind in the practical application of such sentiment. The EU needs some kind of fully structured and more active initiative that goes beyond the standard, indeterminate "digital tech and AI could be good, could be bad" flavor of so many policy and analytical reports.

Extending Existing Innovations

This extended work on the democracy component of technology policy can build on many existing initiatives and approaches. The commission and some member state governments have funded exploratory research on digital technologies, AI, and democracy that could be taken forward into a more operational phase. The EU could usefully invest more resources and political effort in extending democratic innovations that have been gathering some momentum for many years.

The EU could do much more to home in on better deliberation. It could prioritize a more systematic development of digitally moderated democratic debate. Already, hundreds of local assemblies either use AI in some form or deliberate on technology developments.[42] Many national and subnational authorities and nonstate actors have experimented with AI tools to find points of agreement within polarized deliberation, and AI dispute-settlement mechanisms have existed for a long time. AI can be prompted to soften polarizing messaging by overseeing online deliberation and help fashion agreement; so-called argument mining by AI helps collate points of view and present a possible consensus.[43] AI can also raise the profile of marginalized or minority voices in such forums.

While experts have been discussing this potential for many years, it remains conspicuously unfulfilled, and much more could be done through EU policy to develop it in different ways. More proactive EU support is needed to maintain momentum in experimentation on technology-moderated deliberation, or these initiatives could begin to wither. Some practitioners talk of a reverse deliberative wave now setting in, with many previously enthusiastic public authorities pulling back from funding such exercises as resources dry up and disillusionment sets in over what the innovations have achieved. This calls for more concerted EU action, beyond the long-heard rhetorical backing for digital deliberation.

The EU should equally foreground better citizen-politician interaction. While many observers speculate about AI replacing politicians, the more grounded aim should be to reboot the representative function by using technologies to provide politicians with more information on voter preferences, give voters more information on politicians' proposals, and encourage more interaction between the two.[44] Policymakers have long expressed a hope that technology might be especially useful in helping mobilize more voters at elections, prevent electoral fraud and manipulation, and connect politicians and citizens in election campaigns.[45]

Some parliaments around the world have already experimented with digital or AI initiatives, and the EU should be doing a lot more to learn from these.[46] Civil society initiatives have for some time been running online platforms that use technology to moderate citizen engagement on particular policy issues or to mobilize around elections. The large number of elections held across the world in 2024 was accompanied by a marked increase in the use of AI to improve electoral management and campaign information.[47]

Companies are already offering AI twins of politicians: Voters can put policy questions to AI equivalents of their parliamentarians and ministers, and the digital clones provide information in the style of the politicians.[48] The EU could home in on AI initiatives to help citizens monitor politicians' records against them. While some research projects and digital apps have offered functions in this area, European politicians and policymakers have clearly not prioritized the use of technology to tighten citizen accountability over elected representatives.

Linked to this, AI can help foster a tighter connection between representation and direct citizen votes. It could do this by connecting the information it collates on voter preferences to the holding of referendums and, in this way, mediate between representative and direct democracy.[49] AI and technology can also assist in the running of these referendums, including online, and help political parties take part in consultations to gauge support for their manifesto proposals. The EU could support such exercises to investigate technology itself, including the roles and responsibilities of tech companies and the way algorithms are set.

Toward Tech Citizenship

These approaches have been evolving for some time and need more systematic EU support to reach their full potential. This potential should not be overstated, however. AI-moderated consultations, e-service delivery, data gathering, and political information provision are all valuable but relatively modest backups to existing processes. The EU should not only do more to support these approaches but also move more ambitiously into a further phase of digital democracy. This next stage of the EU's digital strategy needs to be rooted in a more politicized and pluralist notion of democratic practice. It should aim at a more radical democratic rethink around the notion of active tech citizenship.

An EU tech citizenship initiative could usefully push beyond existing tech-for-democracy approaches, which follow a relatively sanitized and controlled understanding of how democracy needs to adapt to the digital or AI era. Deliberative platforms have become fairly standard and widely used, but their impact seems to have plateaued at a modest level after higher expectations in earlier years of what they could achieve. AI may moderate conversations at scale, but democratic renewal is also a question of power imbalances and deeper structural impediments to effective citizen power; the ideas normally suggested to make AI work for democracy look fairly minor or conservative alongside the magnitude of that challenge.[50]

Even if AI-chaired deliberation helps generate consensual statements to which participants agree in formal panels, finding consensus is not in itself synonymous with good-quality democracy. Indeed, having technology narrow the spectrum of political positions might even be the antithesis of a vibrant clash of ideas. Democratic debate must go beyond technology that helps administrative efficiency and the current trend toward depoliticized decisionmaking. Rather, it must encompass the most major and polarized political questions about technology.[51] European democracy will not be sufficiently revived by AI moderating conversations, data on public services, or better-packaged and -collated political information. The weak point of many democracy-tech or AI-democracy initiatives is their disconnect from other parts of the political system; they may be valuable as isolated projects but have not generated a wider impact because they do not work through their relationship to other democratic channels.

While some technologists believe AI can provide the long-awaited key to more mass-scale careful deliberation, others fear this focus is deepening a reliance on formats that take democracy even farther away from politicized mass engagement.[52] Having AI adjudicate on the outcome of deliberation might help in terms of procedural efficiency but raises its own questions about democratic agency. For skeptics, the focus on using AI in scaling up deliberation risks falling into the category of overly easy techno-solutionism. It places the policy stress on using technology to assist in deliberative formats rather than on making deliberation itself impactful at a systemic level or meaningfully embedded in political institutions.

The risk is that this approach diverts from the most serious underlying imbalances in European democracy and gives an overinflated sense of progress being made.[53] The field becomes one of software developers and consultancies using AI to run set-piece deliberative exercises on a quasi-commercial basis. Indeed, many of these service providers now operate in European municipalities and regions. This emerging, market-based model of democracy as a service can be positive and undoubtedly generates valuable individual deliberative exercises.[54] But it is a piecemeal, service-driven, and haphazard way to develop civic-tech usage, not one based on any coherent, overarching democratic strategy by the EU as a whole.

Even if skeptics' criticisms of civic tech seem overly cynical, some of their points do merit policy attention. An EU tech citizenship initiative needs to help spur a more open and pluralist conception of democracy. The democracy challenge goes well beyond providing people with online tools to spot false content and the like; it requires a rebuilding of the active, cohesive political community so damaged by technology's emphasis on individuality. European policies need to explore ways to use technology and AI to get citizens, political parties, social movements, protesters, and others working together.

Better democracy is not smooth administration or policy midpoints; crucially, it is pluralist contestation, challenge to power, the generation of controversial ideas, and disputation. Democracy needs to be understood as participative self-government that is unruly and subversive to dominant interests—a more politicized concept than the EU's apparent preference for seeing technology primarily as a means to improve public administration or the flow of information through existing institutions.

This kind of democratic digital renewal needs to go beyond set-piece consultations or the online gathering of inputs into government services. E-governance might be valuable, but it is not democracy. Political renewal also needs to go beyond the often-cited notion of civil society being given a role on consultative committees in tech companies, as with Meta's community forums. This role may be useful, but it works with the grain of corporate agency rather than challenging it in any fundamental way.[55] In a similar vein, many reports make a familiar plea for the European Commission to consult with CSOs or include them on monitoring bodies related to the DSA or the AI Act. Again, while this is welcome, it falls woefully short as a democratic approach and replicates a long-standing weakness in wider EU governance: EU institutions consulting with formalized groups of interested, insider civic organizations as a substitute for open, unstructured pluralism.

To these ends, an EU initiative could help harness technology for better democratic mobilization. This is the area in which the civic sphere has gone most seriously adrift in recent years. Early EU digital policy focused more on democratic mobilization and empowerment, but this element has diminished as the tech sovereignty and competitiveness angle has gained prominence. As both states and companies have accrued tech-driven power, there appears little left of the early conviction that digital technology would propel citizen mobilization. Reversing this trend would help ensure that more open forms of participation become integral to the development of digital democracy, rather than the EU simply grafting technology onto existing practices. Robust and critical democratic engagement must itself be the way that technology develops.[56]

The concepts of citizenship and civic movement were prominent in earlier analysis of digital democracy but have more recently become less preeminent.[57] Early academic work focused on the internet drawing citizens into a modified form of engagement, triggering large-scale online campaigns. Yet, at the formal policy level, little systematic support took shape around such dynamics.[58] After analysts centered a great deal of their attention on the transformative potential of digital networks in the early 2010s, formal policies did not follow through into efforts to enhance such networks' political role.[59]

The EU needs to explore the potential for technology-empowered pro-democracy mobilizations in new and more effective ways than the early wave of so-called Twitter revolutions, which often failed in their aims. One major initiative reports that links between social movements and the tech-developer community have become more glaringly underused; that there is strikingly untapped potential to help pro-democracy protests and other direct mass mobilization through open programming platforms; and that more support is needed for the use of anonymized online services to help democratic movements evade regime repression.[60] The EU needs to draw from emerging work on urban governance moving from tech-centered service provision and online consultations to a more citizen-centered aim of community organization.[61]

For the EU to help harness technology for such a mobilized form of democratic practice would be a significant shift. This is an area in which EU policy has been hesitant and overly cautious. Both in Europe and in its global democracy actions, the EU has been uneasy about citizen mobilizations, rather than supporting them as a vital part of democratic dynamism. Social movements have themselves pioneered many civic-tech applications, but the EU has largely declined to give the movements official support to spread these initiatives. Digital tools have helped new, informal civic movements build local networks and are more central to this emerging activism than to more formal CSOs—and yet, these local activists lament that the EU commonly shuns their efforts.[62]

While Taiwan's Sunflower Movement gave rise to the vTaiwan platform, which became a centerpiece of the country's famed digital-democracy infrastructure, equivalent European efforts to support such radical, grassroots approaches to democracy are strikingly absent.[63] When the EU refers to citizen involvement, it is commonly in the sense of educating people about online risks. That is clearly necessary, but simple awareness raising is several steps back from helping citizens wield effective counterpower—either to companies or to EU institutions and governments. If a European publicly oriented digital infrastructure takes shape, the EU could mobilize it precisely for these kinds of citizen mobilization—assuming citizens continue to use U.S. platforms for other functions.

The change toward a more radically reformist democratic strategy is surely necessary. The focus on participative pluralism is especially needed as AI is now pushing strongly toward automated decisionmaking that may usefully collate voters' preferences but excludes active citizen agency in determining what technology is used for. This aspect of citizen agency is at least as vital as the technical regulation of large platforms. Political dynamism needs to emerge from citizens themselves to give digital-democracy initiatives a more supply-driven and less top-down ethos. AI is still at an early stage; given the uncertainties and major decisions ahead, there needs to be open debate and regular citizen input into the big changes likely to present themselves.

In sum, the EU and European governments need to do a lot more to link novel analytical thinking on digital technology issues to practical options for democratic reform. An EU initiative tilted in this ambitious direction might go at least a few steps toward bolder experimentation of genuinely new democratic templates as these emerge from the praxis of active tech citizenship. Such ideas need to propel debates on the democracy-technology nexus into a new phase.

Conclusion

EU technology policy debates need to be widened beyond regulatory concerns and rethink how democracy functions in the digital era.[64] European policies need to look beyond tech sovereignty and map ways to ensure proactive citizen engagement in the shaping of a digital society. In addition to tech sovereignty, an EU framing of tech citizenship is needed. In the United States, the democracy narrative tends to be about free speech in digital forums; in Europe, it can and should be more about harnessing technology for active citizenship and pluralist contestation. Strong EU regulation is required but is a reactive attempt to patch up problems. The EU needs a longer-term strategy that tackles the root causes of digital distortions and attempts more preemptively to shape the technological sphere.

EU tech policy needs two recalibrations. First, it must make sure that the geoeconomic, competitiveness strand of its technology policies is accompanied by a more meaningful political component. To be true to the genuine meaning of the term, European tech sovereignty must refer not simply to the sovereignty of European tech companies but to that of European citizens. Tech citizenship and tech sovereignty need to go hand in hand; it is the former that will underpin any effective EU pushback against U.S. and Chinese tech dominance. While EU technology strategies pay lip service to rights-based approaches, and this is often assumed to be a defining feature of European digital templates, more tangible democracy initiatives are needed that give greater substance to these ritualistic declarations. In a second recalibration, when the EU does focus on democracy, it needs a less managerial, conservative approach if it is to help technologies make a positive contribution to democracy's most embedded fragilities.

Digital technologies and AI will continue to place many additional strains on democracy, and technology cannot be inverted into an entirely positive impulse for democratic renewal. There can be no false ideal of techno-solutionism that evades companies' nefarious impacts on democracy and paints them as heroic saviors of the deficiencies they created. Yet, where directed by publicly oriented accountability, some aspects of these technologies can add to active citizenship and potentially nourish a more participative turn in democratic practices. An EU tech citizenship initiative could be highly significant because in the three vertices of the state-companies-citizens triangle, it is the citizens who have been most overlooked in digital technologies' evolution to date.

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