

# Winning Essay in the 2024 School Competition of the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations

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## EU democracy and digital transformation: What are the challenges and opportunities for democratic processes?

Digitalisation entails both opportunities and threats for democracy within Europe. To explain why this is the case, we have taken inspiration from a text by Hurenkamp (2024)<sup>1</sup>, which essentially discusses four characteristics of a democracy. We have considered each of these characteristics in the context of developments caused by digital transformations in our society. What we refer to as a supersystem, or artificial intelligence (AI), presents both opportunities and challenges for us as Europeans in terms of how we want to shape our democracy in the years to come. Looking at each criterion in turn, we initially outline a number of threats to democracy that arise under the influence of digitalisation. Some general suggestions are made that could be taken into account when formulating policy. We then go on to explain how digitalisation also presents opportunities for realising each of these four suggestions.

The first criterion is that nobody should feel subservient or subordinate in a democracy. A democracy that does not serve everyone serves no purpose. The question is: can all European citizens look each other in the eye, without fearing that they are selling each other short? This question is all the more relevant for European politicians: can they look the ‘ordinary European citizen’ in the eye? In our view, the use of artificial intelligence by politicians presents a risk. After all, it is common knowledge that AI is not always considered reliable. People in the Global South are being exploited to feed AI datasets and the algorithms used are not free of bias, as research and witnesses from the tech industry itself have repeatedly revealed. If European politicians rely increasingly on AI to make policy decisions, the question is whether democracy will be serving everyone. Will existing groups who are already poorly represented see their political invisibility perpetuated in a digital system that is steadily gaining legitimacy, but at the same time becoming less transparent? Or are we on the way to creating a new class of European serfs, subordinate to the will of a digitally literate class that is actually well served by AI-based decision-making processes? We are therefore advocating that any political decision taken with the help of artificial intelligence within the European Union be subjected to a minorities test.

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<sup>1</sup> Hurenkamp, M. (2024). Valse vrienden: democratie als mensenwerk. *Tijdschrift Sociologie*, 5(0). <https://doi.org/10.38139/ts.2024.03>

The second criterion is that everyone must feel a degree of ownership of a democracy. Do we, as residents of the European Union, feel that we are all enjoying the collective benefits of European governance? This requires equal access to the opportunities that Europe has to offer us. In this era of digitalisation in particular, it is becoming ever easier for us to find out about the possibilities open to us as European Union citizens. As European citizens we must have equal access to authorities, the law, etc., but also, first and foremost, to the information that AI relays to our representatives in positions of power. Only then can we describe our democracy as a fair process. And this is the nub of the problem. To what extent are we as citizens able to trace complex AI decision-making mechanisms in any decisions that are taken? Furthermore, are we, as Europeans, able to depend on reliable information at a time when fake news is rife? This situation is resulting in a manipulation of the populace that is difficult to reverse, with a risk that European citizens will find it increasingly difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. Democracy will be weakened as a result. We are therefore advocating that communication about decisions made at European level be optimised further, that control mechanisms be introduced to monitor and communicate on reliability, but also that information be provided on how decisions are reached if they are partly based on AI.

The third criterion for a functioning democracy is equal participation. Democracy is a matter for all Europeans and not just a select club of technocrats to whom we entrust power. At this time of digitalisation there is a greater need than ever for an honest dialogue that allows scope for emotion and a European gut feeling, conducted in a climate that also takes the spirit of the times and the specific political context into account. It is the streets of Europe that are the beating heart of our democracy, not the politically translated insights of a handful of experts who are increasingly allowing themselves to be controlled by algorithms and are out of touch with ordinary people. Without the involvement of European citizens, it is impossible to take decisions that enjoy broad support. It is precisely for that reason that the technocrat is both the friend and enemy of democracy. We are therefore advocating a broad European civil society that guarantees contact with European citizens, keeps its finger on the pulse of the concerns of the European population and is also able to give voice to them at political level. This supranational civil society is still not visible enough at present.

The fourth and final criterion is reciprocity. Rejecting the opinions of European citizens because we are unable to identify with them is damaging for democracy, which is based on everyone's views being of equal value. The wave of digitalisation that has been engulfing us all for some years now means that, as citizens, we are increasingly relying on information that confirms our own way of thinking. A confirmation bias in the way we search for, process and use information gives rise to greater polarisation rather than dialogue. The 2020 coronavirus crisis and the aftermath of the vaccination policy adopted in European countries illustrates this well. Vaxxers and antivaxxers were diametrically opposed and took up positions by surrounding themselves with like-minded people online. Reciprocity and creating the conditions for reciprocity are crucial in this regard. We are therefore advocating that the European Union play an active role in facilitating dialogue at national and supranational level. Only in this way can democracy remain something that belongs to everyone.

Overall, it is clear that our democracy is an extremely vulnerable system. The above arguments demonstrate how digital transformations have the potential to further aggravate existing pitfalls or bring new challenges.

Does that mean that digitalisation and artificial intelligence really present no opportunities for us? On the contrary, each of the challenges to our democracy outlined above and the suggestions we have formulated can also benefit from the digital transformations that our European society is undergoing.

Take the quick response we receive if we ask our supersystem a question, for example. The system cannot see the physical appearance of the person behind the screen, so we do not have to deal with bias. A chatbot answers everyone and is equally helpful to all. AI gives people the opportunity to enhance their knowledge and broaden their opinions. In this way European citizens will better understand our democratic system and there will be a beneficial impact on their voting behaviour. This will benefit minority groups within Europe in particular, as it will raise them to the position of actors instead of making them serfs. These same digital tools can also be used in the fight against fake news and can guarantee the accessibility of reliable information. This should allow reliable communication to become a quality mark of the European Union on the world stage. As a leader in guaranteeing reliable information and overseeing the applicable privacy legislation, Europe can set itself apart globally and once again be at the vanguard. Digitalisation also creates opportunities for us on a socioeconomic level. AI can help us quickly process figures in vast quantities to ensure we also remain economically competitive, but also presents opportunities to develop a European civil society capable of translating between politicians and the people, and vice versa. This will allow the population to participate more directly and European politicians to better keep in touch with the people. Finally, digitalisation can also guarantee that dialogue takes place in a contemporary way. The many European initiatives promoting exchange in the area of education (e.g. Erasmus), whether in digital form or otherwise, are already a major asset in this regard, and in our view should be extended to other layers of European society.

From all the ideas that we have presented above we can conclude that digitalisation and artificial intelligence have much to offer us, provided that, as a European society, we manage to use these tools in a way that serves us and not vice versa. Adopting a critical attitude and maintaining control of democracy will be crucial here. If we keep in mind the various criteria that characterise a democracy, as outlined by Hurenkamp (2024), we will have access to a compass that will give us, as European citizens, the tools we need to ensure that IT innovations are used in the interests of all Europeans. European politicians must constantly strive to achieve a united Europe and focus on ensuring that they enjoy the confidence of the people, so that democracy continues to belong to both citizens and politicians, who can map out the Europe of tomorrow together.

Kind regards,

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