The digital Europe under debate
6-9 June European Parliament Elections

Queralt Tornafoch Chirveches

How do parties envision a digital Europe? An analysis of the main proposals of political parties for the upcoming European elections.

In recent years, the European Union has made an unprecedented commitment to **digitalization** and **digital transformation**, making this a policy priority for the Union as a whole. In fact, it is among the six priorities for the 2019–2024 legislature: A Europe fit for the digital age. In the words of the European Commission, this priority aims to "adopt the digital transformation by investing in companies, conducting research and innovation, reforming data protection, training people with the necessary skills for a new generation of technologies, and designing rules that fit this reality". Different ideas can be extracted from this precept about **what is understood at the European political level by digital transformation**.

The European Union has promoted both legislation and numerous relevant policy actions covering topics such as **artificial intelligence**, **connectivity**, **data**, **digital rights** and **cybersecurity**, among others. All of these actions are included under The Digital Decade, a comprehensive framework that seeks to guide all actions related to this issue in the European Union. It pursues four goals: a digitally trained population and highly qualified digital professionals; secure and sustainable digital infrastructures; digital transformation of companies; and digitalization of public services.

Considering the time horizon and its relevance, the issue of digital transformation is guaranteed to enjoy years of political relevance, including the period of the next **European Parliament Elections** that will take place between **June 6 and 9, 2024**. In this article, **we analyze the main proposals from European party groups on digital technology**. However, **how they understand digitalization and how they approach digital transformation** has many nuances and implications. It is therefore important not only to learn their proposals on digital transformation, but also how they place themselves on this spectrum that offers different possibilities to position and differentiate themselves from other political parties.

In the election manifestos, we see three main aspects that will no doubt be present in the next electoral cycle: the increasing relevance of artificial intelligent and the need for **regulation and control** of its uses and purposes; the **protection of the workforce** amid an undeniable digital transition and the **safeguarding of European rights and values** in the current digital era. Beyond these aspects, the vision of a Digital Europe and its attendant policies differ across parties and political ideologies. For some, it is an **opportunity for companies to be more efficient** and benefit from technological advancement, as well as a commitment to the digital training of people. For

others, it is safeguarding the **protection of rights and freedoms thorough the promotion of legislation** to navigate this constantly-changing digital horizon.

Digital transformation is key for European politics, and hence is essential for European political party groups to address. The analysis that we present below shows that **there is not a single possible digital Europe, but several**. Depending on what political option wins out, we will see which policies are prioritized and which are left behind. In some cases, the importance of digitalization for European competitiveness will prevail, while in others the guarantee of digital inclusion predominates as a means of generating opportunities for citizens.

The debate is an open one. **What is the Digital Europe that we envision for the upcoming years?** This is one of the questions that the forthcoming elections lay on the table. As European citizens, we have to develop an informed point of view on this novel but crucial issue.

Analysis of the election manifestos

European People's Party

In the last European elections, the *European People's Party* obtained the greatest number of seats in the European Parliament as well as the presidency of the European Commission after a governance agreement with the European Socialists and Renew Europe. For its **leading role in the European executive** it is relevant to go through the proposals in terms of digital policies. The main proposals are as follows:

- ✓ To create a **Cyber Brigade** to ensure external and internal security. The EU should develop cybersecurity strategies and improve the European Agency of Cybersecurity (EINSA).
- ✓ To accelerate investments in R&D and digital infrastructure to ensure a single digital market and a "competitive Europe that boosts its economy and creates quality jobs while building a good economic future for everyone" **ECONOMIC**
- ✓ 5G and 6G should be rolled out in Europe.
- ✓ The EU should harness the **potential of AI** by cutting over-regulation. **ECONOMIC**
- ✓ The **Charter of Fundamental Rights** should be adapted to the digital world. **SOCIAL**
- ✓ To create an **EU Workers' Guarantee for the Digital Market** to protect employment rights in the digital age, i.e. the *gig economy*. **ECONOMIC**
- ✓ **Non-digital services should remain accessible** for people without easy digital access, especially for the elderly. However, Europe needs to regain its ambition in this area. **SOCIAL**
- ✓ A **Women in STEAM start-ups fund** should be launched. **ECONOMIC**

The Party of European Socialists

Following the results of the previous 2019 elections and their presence in the European executive, we analyze the proposals of the *European Socialists*. This party group holds the vice-presidency for the initiative, *A Europe fit for the digital age*. The proposals are the following:

- ✓ An **Investment Plan for the Green and Digital Transitions** to create new jobs and to reindustrialize our economy and make it innovative, competitive and circular. **ECONOMIC**
- ✓ The digital transformation of our societies must **respect EU fundamental values** through the promotion of **digital inclusion** and investment in **public digital infrastructure and digital education.** **SOCIAL**
- ✓ AI should respect the "human in control" principle. **SOCIAL**
- ✓ Equal access to the potentials of digitalization. **SOCIAL**
- ✓ Fight against **cybercrime** and **digital fraud**. **ECONOMIC**
- ✓ Collaboration in **cybersecurity** and the **protection of critical infrastructures** should be developed in the framework of **defense**.

Renew Europe

Renew Europe, together with the People's Party and the European Socialists, took part in the constitution of Ursula von der Leyen's cabinet. In their manifesto, the following proposals stand out:

- ✓ **Digital transformation** to ensure a **thriving single market** and reinforce the EU's **competitiveness**. **ECONOMIC**
- ✓ **Implementing already existing regulation** in this area to avoid over-regulation that could burden businesses. **ECONOMIC**
- ✓ **Digitalization** should be promoted **in all aspects of citizens' lives**, including interaction with public administration, and guarantee connectivity, particularly in rural in remote areas. **ECONOMIC SOCIAL**
- ✓ **Digital Critical Infrastructure** should **be protected against external interference**.
- ✓ **Upskilling the labor force with digital know-how** to improve digital transition and increase competitiveness. **ECONOMIC**
- ✓ A **safe online environment** free of cyberbullying and disinformation. Enforcement of the **EU Code of Conduct on Disinformation** and the establishment of an **EU Digital Watchdog**. **SOCIAL**

European Green Party

The European Greens obtained their best result in the 2019 elections, promoting the fight against climate change and social and economic justice in the Union. Currently, they have **a commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries in the European Commission**. In terms of digital transformation, they propose the following:

- ✓ **Protection of workers** affected by the digital and green transition. **SOCIAL**

- ✓ Adoption of a **Digital Fairness Act** to protect people from intrusive advertising. **SOCIAL**
- ✓ Legislation to increase the **recyclability and reusability of digital devices and components** and **reduce the consumption of energy** related to the processing of data and cryptocurrency, to massively reduce massively the internet's carbon footprint. **SOCIAL**
- ✓ Protecting workers from AI-based surveillance tools. **SOCIAL**
- ✓ **Copyright legislation** to protect creators from AI. **ECONOMIC**
- ✓ Fight against **disinformation** for the proper function of democratic institutions. **SOCIAL**
- ✓ **Digital inclusion** for all (*antiageism*). **SOCIAL**
- ✓ Preserving the analog world's **freedoms and protections** in the digital space. **SOCIAL**
- ✓ Adoption of **legislation to end gender-based violence online and offline.**

Party of the European Left

Finally, we focus on the last party group that got a share of 28 members in the last European Parliament Elections. This party group is not part of the cabinet of the current European Commission. Below, the main proposals are presented:

- ✓ Support for the trade union conception of **a just transition towards a new digitalized** and ecological economy centered on the human being. **ECONOMIC SOCIAL**
- ✓ A progressive **cloud tax on digital platform revenues** should be introduced **ECONOMIC SOCIAL**
- ✓ **Public services should remain accessible offline** despite increasing digitalization to avoid digital exclusion. **SOCIAL**
- ✓ The controlled introduction of **digital technology in education** must respect and enhance the work and status of teachers, avoid exacerbating social inequalities, and limit negative impacts on the environment. **SOCIAL**
- ✓ **Effective regulation of AI** with the principle of human control must be incorporated into EU legislation. **SOCIAL**
- ✓ Any regulation of AI by the EU must take into account **the impact of AI on the world of work and social systems**, and exclude possible discriminatory uses of AI or racially-biased Systems. **SOCIAL**

Further parties

There are other political party groups represented in the European Parliament, such as the European Free Alliance, Identity and Democracy or European Conservatives and Reformists. However, through the reading of their election manifestos, **no policy or proposal focused on the digital issue has been identified**, and therefore, we cannot analyze them.

Summary table

Digitals policies proposals Areas classification	ppe	PSE	renew europe.	European Greens	EuropeanLEFT
Right and freedoms	✓	✓		✓	
Digital inclusion and in-person service	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Digital education		✓			✓
Workers protection	✓	✓		✓	
Work training			✓		
Economic competitiveness	✓	✓	✓		
Digital infrastructure	✓	✓	✓		
Cloud tax on digital platform revenues					✓
AI regulation		✓			✓
Cybersecurity	✓	✓			
Fight against disinformation			✓	✓	✓
Ecological digital transition				✓	

This table classifies the main proposals of the political party groups in terms of digital policies by major areas. Although the proposals can be grouped by area, it should be noted that the way in which these proposals are approached responds to different logics, some more focused on improving productivity and others more focused on strengthening social rights.

Original article

24.05.2024