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Sending Signals or Building Bridges? Digital Sovereignty in EU Communicative and Co-Ordinative Discourse

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Abstract

This article studies the role that 'digital sovereignty' performs in the EU's digital policy discourse comparing speeches by high-level European Commission officials and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). It indicates that the concept of digital sovereignty is not mentioned very frequently, neither in the European Parliament (EP) nor in the public statements of top EU officials. It is furthermore not closely linked to specific policy ideas, not even to the idea of promoting European values in the world as a way of openly projecting digital sovereignty outward. EP actors mainly refer to policy-related aspects of digital sovereignty, and these show systematic affinities to parties' ideologies – primarily along an axis of economic development versus protecting personal rights – and to EP committees. Hence, digital sovereignty does not seem to mainly serve as normative idea directed at the public sphere but emerges as a common denominator to which different relevant actors within the EU decision-making system can equally relate.

Keywords: data governance; digital sovereignty; European Union; policy discourse

Introduction

In recent years, the EU has shown a remarkable new assertiveness with its emphasis on sovereignty in the recent wave of major policies initiated under the Digital Agenda. In 2021, the European Commission (EC) announced the start of Europe's 'Digital Decade' to 'strengthen its digital sovereignty and set standards, rather than following those of others – with a clear focus on data, technology, and infrastructure' (European Commission, 2021). This rhetoric is set against the backdrop of the EU being caught up in geopolitical struggles over technological superiority, in which the EU faces threats of technological dependence and domination of its markets by foreign businesses (Christakis, 2020). It is asserting its own digital policy approach rooted in human rights against the global influence of the market-centred approach of the United States and China's state-led model (Aaronson, 2019; Laux et al., 2024; Roberts et al., 2023). Whilst the EU has lagged behind these players in terms of technologies and its digital economy, it has demonstrated the power to globally influence regulation and set standards (Bradford, 2019).

The goal of digital sovereignty has moved centre stage in this geopolitical setting. The term is used, however, in different ways and without a clear definition, which has occasioned various scholars to examine its meaning (Celeste, 2021; Glasze et al., 2023; Pohle and Thiel, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021). Most research points to a state, a business and an individual rights dimension of digital sovereignty, referring to control over infrastructure, strong domestic digital industries and the protection of norms, values and the

rights of citizens, respectively. What political role the idea of digital sovereignty performs in the larger discourse of EU digital policy is, however, not yet well understood. Is it mainly an external signal of the EU's policy commitments? Or does it reorder policy discourse also within EU institutions as digital sovereignty is perhaps more closely linked to some programmatic ideas than others?

To shed light on these questions, this article systematically studies how digital policy initiatives are communicated by and within the EU, focussing on the high-level EU actors in supranational roles (mainly from the Commission) and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). We focus on these actors as they most directly speak for the EU as polity.[1] Further, digital policy was highly dominated by the work of experts and the Commission (see, e.g., the different white papers), whereas the Council and the European Council were mainly relevant as agenda setters at certain points and important actors behind closed doors when it came to the final negotiations (e.g., the role of France in the Trilogue negotiations on the AI act). The Commission was also very active in its communication and emphasized the decision-making power of the EU institutions (as in the different acts related to the regulation of digital markets). Finally, being interested in the role of the EU as regulator of digital markets, we mainly use the legislative process as the backbone of identifying relevant speeches. Therefore, focussing on the European Parliament (EP) and the EC (as initiator of a bill) seems straightforward.

Theoretically, we draw on Schmidt's discursive institutionalism (DI) (Schmidt, 2008) and its application to the EU (Schmidt, 2014), distinguishing between discourses directed at two different major audiences: the 'communicative discourse' in the public sphere and the 'co-ordinative discourse' in the policy sphere. The former aims at generating support for certain policies in the public and has a signalling function that serves to manage the expectations of other actors outside the EU. The latter is about negotiating programmatic policy questions and is mainly directed at the policy-making sphere within the EU.

There are some indications that both types of discourses could be relevant. Regarding the communicative discourse, the fact that the rhetoric of digital sovereignty has found much resonance in EU studies (Bora and Lequesne, 2023) and beyond (see, e.g., Ovide, 2021) provides some illustration that signalling plays a major role. At the same time, it is also relevant for co-ordinative discourse – especially in the complex system of the EU – as the vagueness of the concept of sovereignty may allow policy actors to bring together different political groups. Different actors associate different policy aspects with digital sovereignty (Roberts et al., 2021; Seidl and Schmitz, 2023). As it is therefore compatible with different political agendas, appeals to digital sovereignty may thus serve to tie together broad coalitions (Lambach and Oppermann, 2023; Seidl and Schmitz, 2023). Hence, studying the idea of digital sovereignty in both communicative and co-ordinative discourses can shed light on its role in EU policy-making.

Empirically, our analysis uses two types of data – debates in the EP and official communication by EU officials, mainly from the EC, which has been shown to be a key actor,

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[1]We acknowledge that this strategy may exclude relevant parts of the discourses within nation-states where the issue of sovereignty has at times been discussed in some member states such as France since the 2000s (see, e.g., Clift and McDaniel, 2019; Schmidt, 2007). We also see that we might miss parts of the overall EU-level discourse, as national leaders may indeed target an EU audience (and the EU legislative process) when they give a speech in a national parliament, for instance (Puetter, 2012). An analysis of national actors would go beyond the scope of this article, which is therefore limited to an analysis of discourses focussing on supranational actors.

when it comes to justifying and framing political and geopolitical issues (see, e.g., Jones and Clark, 2008; De Ville and Orbie, 2013; Nugent and Rhinard, 2016). More concretely, we analyse the content of six recent EP debates about major strategies and regulation regarding digital issues and speeches by EC officials between summer 2020 and 2022, selected to match the examined issues discussed in the EP debates. We study this material based on a content analysis and quantitatively examine the distribution of the coded categories and the communication profiles of the studied actors.

The analysis suggests that the concept of digital sovereignty is more important for building consensus within the EU than for signalling the EU's ambition to define new rules via digital policies to external actors. In general, the concept of digital sovereignty is not mentioned very frequently, neither in the EP nor in speeches by top EU officials in which we would expect it to play a more important role, that is, for signalling EU policy commitments to non-EU actors. Moreover, the notion of digital sovereignty is not very closely linked to any specific policy ideas or actors, not even to the idea of promoting European values in the world as a way of openly projecting digital sovereignty outward. We instead find that speakers relate their remarks to a broad array of more concrete policy issues that matter for digital sovereignty, such as sustainability, cybersecurity, economic or societal benefits. Hence, the idea of digital sovereignty appears to primarily serve co-ordinative discourse by allowing different political actors to relate their own issues and policy priorities to one and the same underlying concept. Our analysis supports the view that the vagueness of the concept of digital sovereignty facilitates 'coalition-building efforts' (Béland and Cox, 2016, p. 428) in EU decision-making. It serves as a common denominator to which all parties can equally relate to – even whilst individual aspects of digital sovereignty show systematic affinities to different parties.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section I describes the theoretical assumptions and analytical framework guiding the analysis, followed by the presentation of the research design in Section II. Section III presents the findings from the analysis before the Conclusion section.

I. Theory and Analytical Framework

Digital Sovereignty and DI

Digital sovereignty is an ambiguous concept because it can mean different things and is not used uniformly. When the French President Macron (2017) used the term in his much-noticed speech on the Future of Europe at the Sorbonne in 2017, he subsumed several aspects under this term, such as the defence of 'the rules protecting our individual freedoms and confidentiality to which everyone is entitled', the protection of 'companies' economic data' and the creation of a 'legitimate protection to persons and companies, which will allow European actors to emerge in a fair market'. Others, like Axel Voss (2020) in *A Manifesto for Europe's Digital Sovereignty and Geo-political Competitiveness*, additionally stressed the importance of control over and security of European infrastructures.

The literature broadly distinguishes between three central elements of digital sovereignty: (1) state control over infrastructure, (2) the development of competitive domestic digital industries and (3) the protection of citizens and their rights (e.g., Couture and

Toupin, 2019; Pohle and Thiel, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021). But evidently, these elements could be linked quite differently in political actor's statements on the EU level: for instance, in a way that clearly articulates the EU's willingness to export its own regulatory model to the world involving demarcation and self-assertion (Couture and Toupin, 2019) or by simply showing which policy-related changes would be introduced by the policies and how this may benefit certain policy goals, such as the environment or consumers.

Drawing on DI (Schmidt, 2001, 2008) allows us to be more specific about which function the concept of digital sovereignty may play in EU discourse. According to the theory, two types of discourse can be distinguished: a communicative discourse, which is characterized by normative ideas and directed at the public (for persuasion) or markets and market actors (for signalling and managing expectations) (Schmidt, 2014), and a co-ordinative discourse that is mainly directed at veto players within the policy process and made up of cognitive arguments to build consensus in the policy sphere. Accordingly, the institutional structure of a polity is relevant: when many veto points exist, co-ordinative discourse increases chances for policy change and vice versa for communicative discourse (Schmidt, 2001). At the same time, it is important to note that political actors may also mix both discourses in one and the same speech: emphasizing cognitive ideas does therefore not imply refraining from referring to normative ideas – rather, one can often see both elements together (see, e.g., Schmidt, 2014, on the sovereign debt crisis). Hence, DI simply suggests that differentiating between both types gives us analytical leverage, as it allows us to relate discourses to certain audiences (the public sphere for the communicative and the policy sphere for the co-ordinative discourse) and the institutional structure of a political system. In Schmidt's words, '[l]asting reform is ensured only where a convincing discourse – meaning one with sound cognitive and resonating normative arguments – is provided in coordinative and/or communicative spheres, depending upon the institutional context' (Schmidt, 2002, p. 900).

Theoretical Argument

How do both these kinds of discourses and the balance between them relate to the idea of digital sovereignty? First, *communicative discourse* may be important, as the policy itself is directed at the larger public and markets where mainly economic actors outside the EU compete and to which EU actors want to send a message to manage expectations (Schmidt, 2014). Indeed, the EU's discourse could be tied to major policy changes, either as an epiphenomenon of policy action or as a driver of policy change (Schmidt, 2001, 2008). It could also reflect a larger change linked to the EU's agenda in industrial policy that has shown to be linked to sovereignty (Seidl and Schmitz, 2023) and be related to the geopolitical debates about self-sufficiency of Europe and technological sovereignty (Haroche, 2022), which can be interpreted as part of a discourse about 'rebordering Europe' (see Bora and Lequesne, 2023, also see Schimmelfennig, 2021).

At any rate, there are several reasons why we would expect that political actors use 'digital sovereignty' as a concept in order to justify and promote policy change (Béland, 2009; Blyth, 2003; Schmidt, 2008; Schram and Soss, 2001). As digital policy has not been an electorally salient issue (König and Wenzelburger, 2019; Siewert and König, 2021), but important in geopolitics, one can presume that signalling to tech

companies as well as to other competing countries via communicative discourse is of comparatively higher relevance regarding digital policy. As Couture and Toubin (2019, p. 2317) argue,

> the use of 'sovereignty' also has rhetorical performativity. In particular, it seems to be used to mark an opposition to different kinds of hegemonies […] In many cases, technological sovereignty is framed as an opposition to the dominance of the United States over the Internet, and in more contemporary work, to the power of its biggest private tech companies, like Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft (sometime referred as the GAFAM).

This performativity of language is also potentially significant in the context of digital sovereignty to the extent that visibly and credibly communicating a commitment to certain policies creates shared expectations amongst – especially non-EU – tech companies about which rules will need to be accommodated (for a similar argument in other areas, see also Born et al., 2012; Braun, 2015). This can contribute to spreading EU standards in the world – much in line with the notion of a 'Brussels Effect' (Bradford, 2019). Along the same lines, clear references to digital sovereignty may also signal to non-EU governments a specific policy commitment to create converging expectations about what digital standards will prevail.

An early explicit use of the term by supranational high-level EU actors underscores this argument. Former economy Commissioner Oettinger defended the plans for the 'Digital Single Market' in 2015 by stressing that it would give the EU back digital sovereignty, achieve technological leadership and counter the dominance of US firms (Fairless, 2015). This reference to digital sovereignty is inherently linked to a message to non-EU, particularly US, businesses and policy-makers that the EU will compel tech companies to play by uniform EU rules. The direct reference to digital sovereignty thus also seems linked to the idea of defending and promoting European values abroad. Based on this notion of digital sovereignty as a strong performative signal, we would therefore expect the idea of digital sovereignty, directly expressed, to play a central role in communicative discourse as a way to signal EU policy commitments (*signalling thesis*).

Rather than directing their communication at external actors, policy actors in the EU policy sphere are dealing with concrete policy initiatives (such as the AI Act) that need to be passed by the EU institutions. They thus have stronger incentives to engage in 'co-ordinative discourse', in which arguments are put forward in order to reach agreement in the political sphere. This does not mean that the concept of digital sovereignty plays no role in this discourse, but rather that it is likely to be invoked differently. In fact, quite in line with what we would expect from a DI perspective, the literature on EU decision-making has shown that some concepts can serve as a common denominator to which different policy actors can subscribe whilst voicing their specific cognitive and policy-related ideas. This has been observed in the negotiations of the Maastricht Treaty and the concept of 'subsidiarity' (Van Kersbergen and Verbeek, 1994) as well as, more recently, in the field of trade policy, where the concept of 'strategic autonomy' has served as 'a coalition magnet to mobilize support for the EU's new doctrine of qualified openness' (Schmitz and Seidl, 2023, p. 834).

For concepts to work as coalition magnets, they require 'the ambiguous or polysemic character of the idea that makes it attractive to groups that might otherwise have different

interests, and the power of policy entrepreneurs who employ the idea in their coalition-building efforts' (Béland and Cox, 2016, p. 428). Digital sovereignty could fulfil such a consensus-building function if it allowed linking different political groups that have different policy-related interests – an observation that relates directly to the recent work arguing that a main feature of the concept of digital sovereignty is its openness and 'interpretive flexibility' (Lambach and Oppermann, 2023, p. 705; in a similar vein: Roberts et al., 2021). In terms of ideas visible in the discourse, we therefore expect different actors involved in the policy process to mention different concrete policy-related arguments (i.e., mainly cognitive ideas) that reflect facets of the overarching concept of digital sovereignty (*consensus-building thesis*). This also implies that whilst the use of these policy-related arguments will differ depending on party membership, direct references to 'digital sovereignty' will not be more characteristic of some actors than of others.[2]

To sum up our theoretical framework, we do not expect that signalling or consensus-building should exclusively dominate the discourse on digital sovereignty. Instead, our assumption is that incentives for signalling and consensus-building vary and that the balance of arguments and the structure of the debate that we may find in the analysed empirical data – speeches by key officials of the EU and EP debates – may vary according to the audience the respective speakers target (see Table 1). The empirical analysis will show to what extent this is actually the case.

II. Research Design

To study the role of digital sovereignty within the digital policy agenda, we focus on data governance (Aaronson, 2019; König, 2022), where the core notion of digital sovereignty can be understood in terms of control over the conditions under which the collection, process and use of data to create value take place and by whom. We analyse EU policy discourse for incisive measures to bolster the technological or digital sovereignty of the EU. *First*, we examine communication by key EU actors in speeches about the updated Digital Strategy together with the AI Act, the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and the Data Governance Act as subsequent milestone regulations. Looking at such public speeches makes sense, as they could be used specifically to signal the EU's commitment to regulate the digital sphere. We have selected 13 speeches held by different high-rank officials of the EU between July 2020 and February 2022 and that are directly related to these regulations (see Table S1a in Appendix S1).[3]

The focus is on the EC as the key supranational institution on the EU level capable of initiating legislation. The EC has also been very active and present in the area of digital policy, in which experts have played a pivotal role. We make one exception by including communication by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, who held a

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[2]For instance, members of the European Peoples Party group or the liberal Renew group, who are ideologically more concerned with economic issues (McElroy and Benoit, 2012), could be more inclined to argue that digital policies will help the economic tech industry to grow.

[3]The speeches were identified using the EC press corner search and web search. To qualify for selection, they needed to be directly related to the following regulations that have been subsequently discussed in the EP but occurred *before* the EP debates (as the EC initiates legislation): Digital Europe Programme, April 2021; Digital future of Europe, May 2021; Digital Service Act, January 2022; Artificial intelligence in a digital age, March 2022; Digital Service/Digital Markets Act, April 2022; Data Governance Act, April 2022. The speeches were the only ones available that have a direct reference to the respective EU regulation that followed.

Table 1: Overview of the Theoretical Argument.

Type of discourse	More communicative than co-ordinative (*signalling*)	More co-ordinative than communicative (*consensus-building*)
Content and structure of discourse	More prominent evocation of the strong normative concept of digital sovereignty, linked to promoting European interests and values	Arguments relate to specific policies that the regulation covers, digital sovereignty as a concept to which many actors can relate their policy ideas
Audience	Geopolitical competitors, tech companies	Actors in the policy sphere, other parties, veto players, interest groups
Sphere/source	Statements of key EU actors in the *public sphere*, for example, speeches or press conferences	Statements of EU actors in the *policy sphere*, speeches in the EP debates

seminal speech on the EU's re-oriented agenda regarding digital policy (Michel, 2021). The president of the European Council can be seen as a supranational office that operates in an intergovernmental arena and can advocate for nation states' interests (Tömmel, 2018). However, research on 'New Institutionalist Leadership' argues that the role of the president also involves assuring linkage to the supranational level and mainly to the EC 'by informal delegation of instrumental leadership tasks to a collaborative network centered around the European Council President and trusted officials in his cabinet and the Council Secretariat, with close links to high-level Commission officials' (Beach and Smeets, 2020, p. 851). We thus include communication by Charles Michel in the analysis. Overall, we have coded 1033 sentences from speeches that range from shorter interventions (50 to 60 sentences) to longer speeches (80 to 116).

The *second* source of data are EP debates based on the reasoning that it is one of the main forums for discussing policy proposals, and we would therefore expect that a pattern of consensus-building in co-ordinative discourse is particularly present when using EP data. Similar to the speeches by officials, we have selected MEPs' statements in EP debates on the digital strategy, AI regulation, Data Governance Act, and the DSA and DMA. In total, we have coded 3425 sentences of parliamentary speeches related to the different debates in the EP (more details, see Table S1b in Appendix S1).

For analysing both sources of data, we have used structuring content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014) and employed the same coding scheme to achieve comparability. Our goal was to create a coding scheme that enables us to identify both policy-related arguments in the speeches – for instance, when AI was seen as problematic for data protection – as well as direct mentions of digital sovereignty and statements about European norms and values as more value-laden arguments. With our theoretical framework as a guide, differentiating between policy-related arguments and those more value-laden arguments as well as direct mentions of digital sovereignty enabled us to empirically explore whether consensus-building or signalling was important in three ways. First, by analysing frequencies of coded categories, we could see whether policy-related arguments (more co-ordinative than communicative) or more value-laden arguments (more communicative than co-ordinative) dominate the speeches of EU officials to the press and the debates in the EP. Second, by coding the different categories, we could break down the speakers by parties or roles to grasp whether some categories were more important to some speakers

(e.g., economic benefits for Renew MEPs). And, most importantly, by also coding direct mentions of digital sovereignty, we could study the relationships of this concepts to other categories and the centrality of the concept in the entire discourse (on methods, see below).

The scheme was first developed using the speeches of MEPs. We started deductively, following the literature about digital sovereignty and its three meanings of ensuring security (of infrastructures), economic strength and protection of personal rights. Accordingly, we created variables for cybersecurity, economic benefits, competition, data protection, consumer protection and digital sovereignty itself. This last category was reserved for statements that expressly refer to digital or technological sovereignty. Multiple codings are possible. After having coded several hundreds of sentences from a selection of MEP debates, we created additional categories inductively when we saw that MEPs regularly mentioned aspects in their speeches that had not been covered by the initial coding scheme. These are sustainability, social benefits, liberal rights and promotion of European values.

Statements within the categories can be both positive and negative, for example, referring to economic benefits and a lack of desirable economic conditions. This aspect is less relevant for the analysis. Rather, what the categories can tell us is what criteria are salient for different political actors when talking about EU digital policies. At the same time, the relative salience of one aspect in relation to others also offers a positional interpretation as they tell us which possible desirable aspects of a policy political actors prioritize over others. In sum, our final codebook consisted of 10 categories, for which we developed a definition and 'anchoring examples' (see Table S2 in Appendix S1). In a second step, we applied the same coding scheme to the sample of public speeches by EU officials. All speeches were coded by the authors and/or research assistants. Unclear cases were discussed in the team and coding decisions taken accordingly.

Based on the coding, we use descriptive statistics to identify which categories are used more than others and how important digital sovereignty is. In addition, to see the structure of the discourse on digital sovereignty more clearly, we use correspondence analysis to position the parties in the EP based on their speeches in a political space. We additionally probe how this space changes when including the public speeches by the EU officials together with the EP speeches – in this sense generating a space as if those officials had spoken in the EP. Correspondence analysis is suitable for using count data as obtained with the coding of the material to extract the relative affinity between actors but also between the actors and the coded categories based on their chi^2 distances calculated from the frequency table. It therefore allows us to analyse how the actors position themselves to each other based on how they refer to aspects of digital sovereignty and to the concept of digital sovereignty itself. It also describes and visualizes how much these actors emphasize the various categories. Importantly, the less the presence of a category discriminates between the actors and the greater the weight of that category, the more it will be located in the centre of the space that correspondence analysis extracts. In this way, we can, for instance, identify a pattern of *consensus-building* in the data when the correspondence analysis indicates that digital sovereignty takes a position close to the centre of the political space. In contrast, evidence for the *signalling thesis* would mean that digital sovereignty is not necessarily in the centre but particularly close to certain actors or coded

concepts (and particularly closer to value-laden concepts than to policy-related arguments).

III. Analysis

Descriptive Analysis: Patterns of Discourse about Digital Policies

This section presents an overview of what (a) debates in the EP and (b) speeches by high-ranking EU officials about recent digital policy initiatives look like and how they take up digital sovereignty. Starting with the *debates in the EP*, our analysis shows that direct references to digital sovereignty as such are far from central to the discussions (see Figure 1). In fact, most of the coded sentences referred to concrete policy-related issues of the discussed digital policy, such as the benefits it would generate for the European economy or for European societies.

Looking more closely at the possible use of digital sovereignty for building consensus, we have broken down the coded categories in the EP debates according to the speakers' political affiliation and their committee membership. Indeed, if digital sovereignty works to build consensus in policy debates, we would expect that MEPs' interventions mainly refer to specific policy issues that their own party cares about or which have been

Figure 1: References to Coded Categories in European Parliament Debates on Digital Policies. Notes: Scores are relative frequencies based on all sentences. Numbers do not add up to 100% as some sentences were coded as 'other' as they did not contain a reference to one of the categories. Own illustration based on coded material.
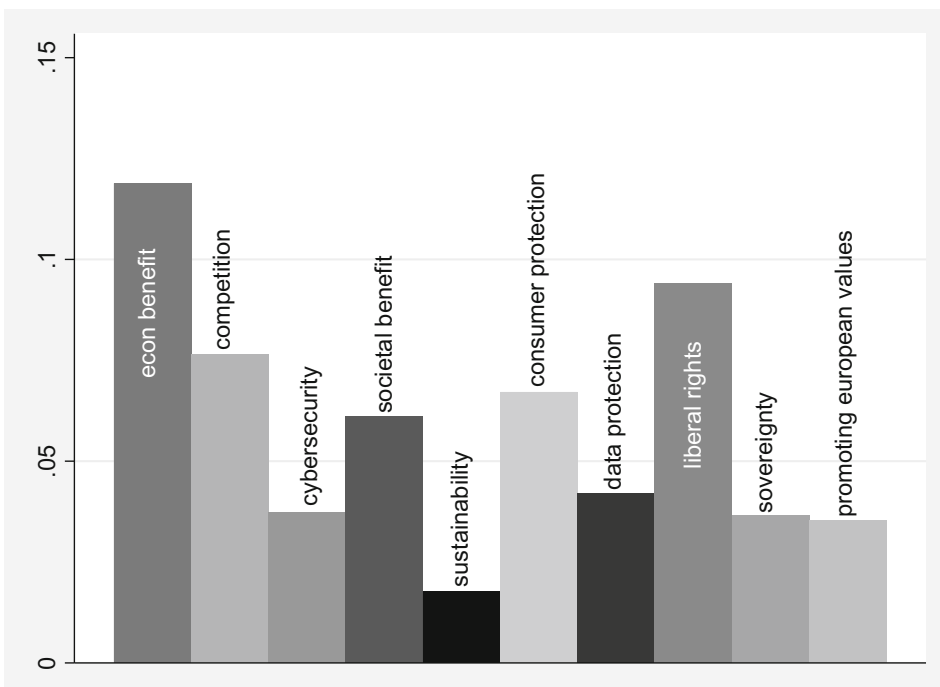
discussed in their respective committees. Hence, empirically, we would expect that membership in a committee in charge of the legislation and membership in a certain party group influence which aspects speakers raise in the debate. Such a pattern would indicate that speakers aim at coalition-building and that these policy-related arguments, directed at important veto players, such as party groups or committees, dominate the discourse.

Figure 2 presents the results for the coded EP debates broken down by the committee membership of the respective speaker (first panel) and the party group (second panel).[4] Concerning committees, the results indicate that several of the coded categories from the debates are over-represented in speeches from members of those committees that are thematically linked to the coded category. For instance, economic benefits are most prominent in speeches by members of the international trade (INTA) committee and the committee for Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE); references to competition are rather frequently made in interventions of INTA members. In contrast, data protection is a major issue in speeches by members of the committee for Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE), whereas consumer protection is the main issue in the interventions by members of the Internal Market and Consumer Protection committee (IMCO). This pattern is in line with the idea that policy actors in co-ordinative discourse relate their own policy ideas (and those dear to their committee members) to digital sovereignty, thus facilitating consensus behind a policy.

The second panel in Figure 2 breaks down the coded category by parliamentary group to which the respective MEP is affiliated (plus the Commission). The results show patterns that are, again, in line with our consensus-building thesis: economic aspects are referenced more in the interventions by members affiliated to conservative parties and the EP as well as the Commission. This is also true for speeches that strongly link digital policies to the international competition, but here, MEPs from the liberal Renew group are also very active. Second, parties from the left relate digital policies much more to questions of data protection, and, especially the SD group, to consumer protection. Again, this fits their general ideological stance on digital policy (Siewert and König, 2021). Third, when we look at direct mentions of sovereignty, it is mainly the Commission representatives that refer to this concept and, partly, members of the Renew group. This is notable as the Commission representatives, on the one hand, speak in the EP (where we would expect them to focus on more policy-related arguments in co-ordinative discourse), but they, on the other, show a stronger emphasis on digital sovereignty as such that we would expect in communicative discourse in the public sphere.

Finally, the pattern for the mentions of liberal rights is somewhat conspicuous and needs more elaboration. In fact, MEPs of the Greens and the right-wing populist ID group are the ones relating digital policies most frequently to the question of liberal rights. This strange co-variance can be explained by the fact that, for the ID members, digital policy regulation was often mentioned as endangering free speech, whereas interventions by MEPs from the Greens often praised the regulation for its protection of liberal rights. Hence, both parties linked liberal rights in quite different ways to the digital policies discussed in the EP.

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[4]In the rare cases of full membership in several committees, we chose the one closest to the policy, for instance, IMCO instead of AGRI.

Figure 2: First Panel: Committee Membership and EP Debates; Second Panel: Party Groups and EP Debates. Notes: In the first panel (relative frequencies), we display only categories with at least 140 codes here (plus sovereignty with 125 codes) and include only the four committees to which most of the spoken sentences in the debates were affiliated via the respective speakers (IMCO, Internal Market and Consumer Protection; ITRE, Industry, Research and Energy; JURI, Legal Affairs; LIBE, Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs) plus the International Trade (INTA) committee, which is important in terms of the relevance of digital policies for trade policies. In the second panel (relative frequencies), we display only categories with at least 140 codes here (plus sovereignty with 125 codes). We included the major parliamentary groups as well as the Commission (COM) as a separate category. We excluded short interventions from the presidency of the EP. Party groups from left to right: EKR, European Conservatives and Reformists; EVP, European Peoples Party; GR, Greens; ID, Identity; LEFT, left group; Renew; SD, Social Democrats.
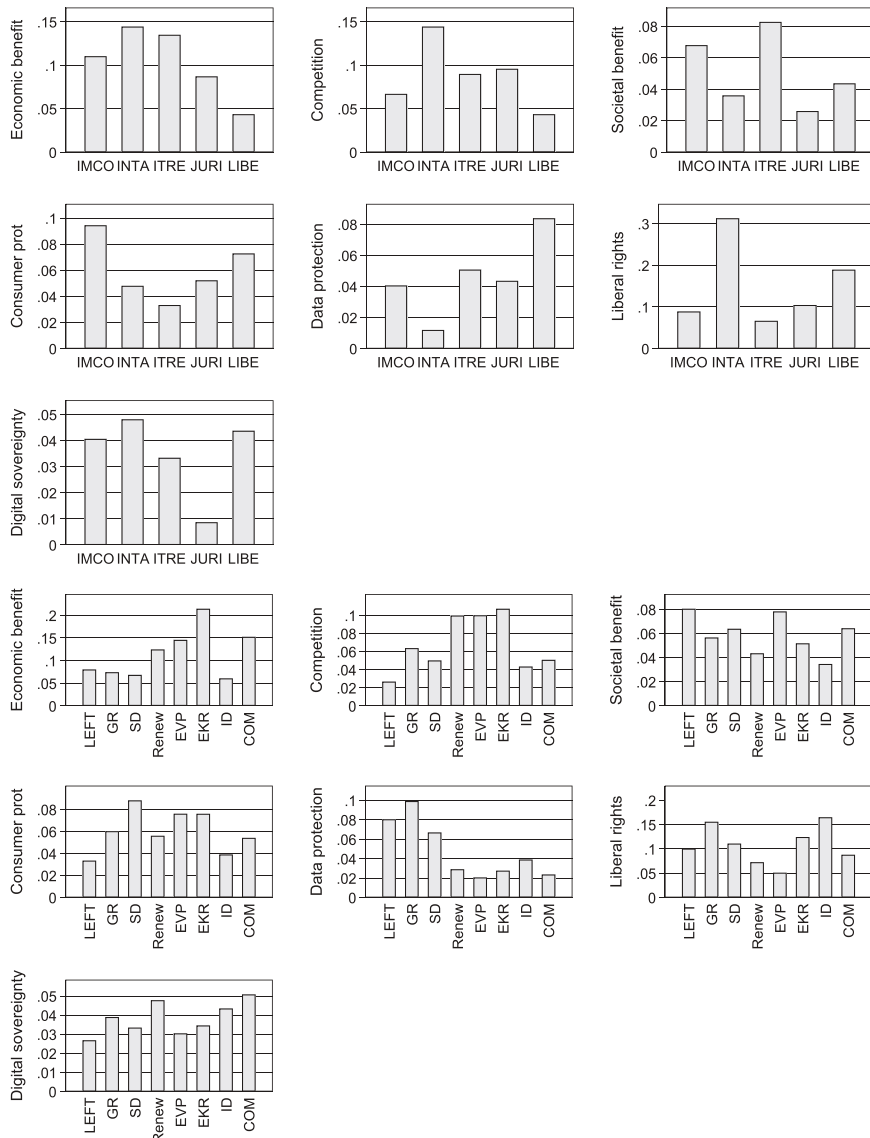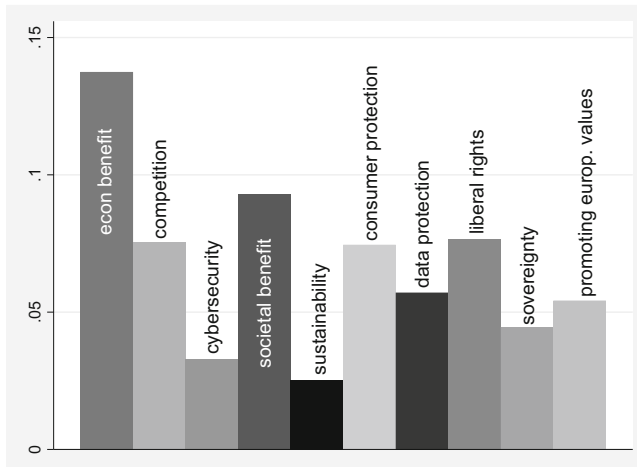
Figure 3: References to Coded Categories in Speeches of EU Officials on Digital Policies. Notes: Scores are relative frequencies based on all sentences. Numbers do not add up to 100% as some sentences were coded as 'other' as they did not contain a reference to one of the categories. Own illustration based on coded material.

In sum, the descriptive analysis of the data from the EP indicates that a more prominent rhetoric directly referring to digital sovereignty is somewhat more frequent only for certain actors and mainly in interventions by the Commission. In general, though, the EP debates are strongly dominated by concrete policy aspects, which is why building consensus around policy-related ideas seems more important than putting out strong normative claims.

The *speeches of high-level EU officials*, our second data source, exhibit a pattern (see Figure 3) rather similar to the EP debates: taken together, the top EU officials talk much about economic benefits in relation to the digital policy initiatives, and in addition, the top-five categories are similar to the EP. Moreover, digital sovereignty as a concept is again far from a dominant feature of discourse. These findings underscore the idea indicating that signalling based on 'digital sovereignty' as a rhetoric device is not the central motive.

Several differences are nonetheless noteworthy. First, the top officials emphasize the societal benefits more strongly than the MEPs, whereas liberal rights are more important in EP debates; and second, whilst direct references to digital sovereignty are overall comparatively infrequent, the inherently outward-looking statements about promoting European values are slightly more prominent in the speeches by EU officials than in EP debates.

If we break down the coded categories by speaker rather than examining them as a bloc, we also obtain a pattern that partly resembles the one from the EP debates (see Table 2).[5] Whereas, in the EP, speakers linked digital policy initiatives to issues related to their partisan affiliation or committee membership, the statements by EU high officials

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[5]For a visualization of their relative affinities to the categories, see Appendix S1, Figure 3.

Table 2: Frequency of Coded Categories by Speaker.

	Economic benefit	Competit.	Cybersec.	Societ. benefit	Sustainab.	Consumer prot.	Data prot.	Lib. rights	Sovereignty	European values
Breton	**0.20**	**0.14**	**0.06**	***0.02***	0.01	0.00	0.03	***0.00***	**0.13**	0.05
Jourova	***0.04***	***0.00***	***0.01***	0.03	***0.00***	0.08	***0.00***	**0.22**	0.08	0.06
Michel	0.13	0.13	***0.01***	0.06	0.04	0.03	0.06	0.06	**0.13**	**0.10**
Vestager	0.15	0.09	0.05	0.11	0.02	**0.12**	**0.09**	0.07	0.01	***0.04***
Von der Leyen	0.12	0.01	0.02	**0.14**	**0.05**	0.05	0.03	0.09	***0.00***	0.05
Total	0.14	0.08	0.03	0.09	0.03	0.07	0.06	0.08	0.04	0.05

Notes: Row-wise relative frequencies are based on all sentences. Rows do not add up to 100% as some sentences were coded as 'other' as they did not contain a reference to one of the categories. Bold numbers indicate commissioners with the highest frequency in a certain category; bold-italic numbers indicate commissioners with the lowest frequency in a certain category.

reflect their portfolios to a certain extent. Thierry Breton, as commissioner for the internal market, often links digital policy initiatives to economic benefits and competitivity, whereas Vera Jourova, commissioner for values and transparency, not surprisingly emphasizes liberal rights. Interestingly, the commissioner of competition, Margarethe Vestager, leads the way in the category of consumer protection – which is due to the fact that she often talks about the need to control tech giants with the interests of consumers. Finally, Ursula von der Leyen as president of the Commission strongly emphasizes general societal benefits and sustainability – which are mentioned less by the other commissioners, and Charles Michel as president of the European Council is the one with most mentions of digital sovereignty (together with Breton) and European values.

Overall, this descriptive overview suggests that signalling through strongly emphasizing digital sovereignty is not dominating the discourse – neither in the EP nor by EU top officials. Instead, emphasizing certain policy-related aspects of digital policies that are in line with one's policy expertise or partisan affiliation seems to be more central. Only by analysing the differences between EP debates and official speeches more closely do we find some nuances. These indicate that signalling is more present when top EU officials talk in public compared to the EP debates.

Correspondence Analysis

The second step of our analysis takes the investigation one step further by systematically comparing communication on aspects of digital policies and situating them in a two-dimensional space using correspondence analysis. We present our analysis in two steps. First, we look at the EP discourse to see whether digital sovereignty indeed works as a concept around which consensus can be built or whether it is found close to certain actors or concrete aspects of digital sovereignty, such as the promotion of European values or competition. Second, we include communication in the speeches by EU top officials in the analysis in order to see how the constellation changes.

Figure 4 presents the *first part of the correspondence analysis*, namely, EP discourse as mapped by the correspondence analysis based on the similarities extracted from the underlying cross table. In the graph, the distances between the actors and the distances between the categories can be directly interpreted as similarities. The relations of distances from actors to categories cannot be directly interpreted, but they do indicate relative affinities between actors and categories. The generated dimensions do not have any inherent meaning but are the result of optimally reducing the variation in the data (differences between actors' communication profiles) to few dimensions. They are created in a way such that they represent and summarize the most variation in the data. Their interpretation depends on meaningful contrasts between categories positioned in the figure, which we will examine below to characterize the dimensions. We follow the common approach to examine the first two dimensions. As these together summarize between 60% and 80% of the variation in the data in the main analyses (in Figures 4 and 6), two dimensions are suitable for the visualization.

Several points are noteworthy. First, the analysis shows that differences between the speakers, and thus political conflict potential, exist primarily on the first dimension, which binds almost 60% of the variation. From the categories that form the endpoints of the x-axis, we can interpret this dimension as the opposition between economic development

Figure 4: Communication on Aspects of Digital Sovereignty by Actor – European Parliament.
Notes: Correspondence analysis with symmetric normalization.
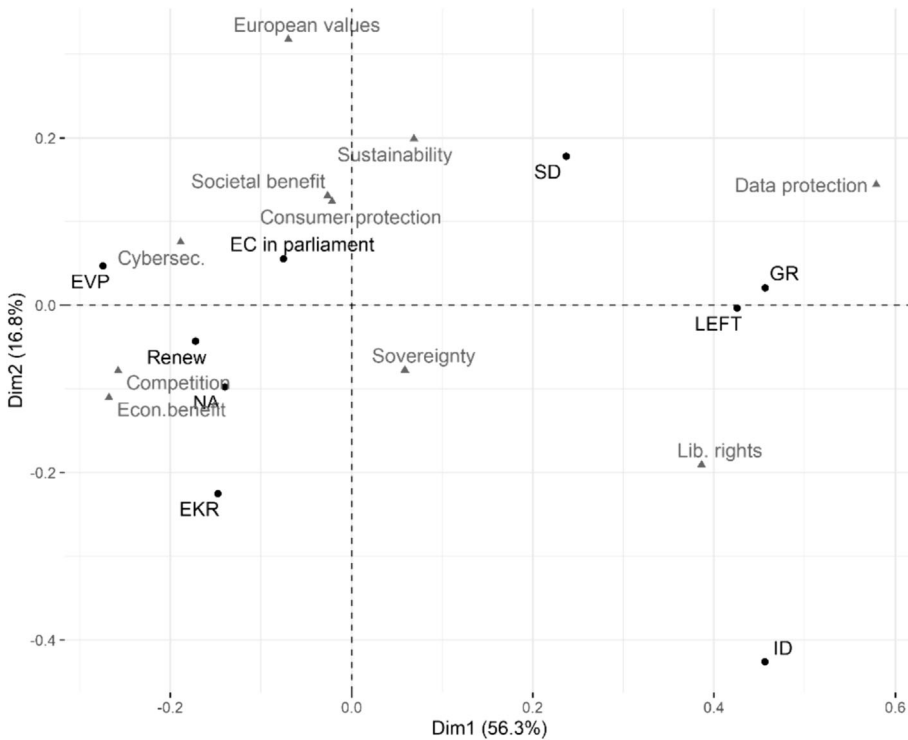
(left) and the protection of personal rights (right). The vertical dimension is characterized by a more traditional contrast of economic strength versus consumer protection, social protection and sustainability, but this pattern is slightly blurred as European values are also opposite the economic categories. Second, the various policy arguments linked to the digital policies debated in the EP show inherently meaningful differences in the graph with consumer protection and societal benefits being very close, as are economic benefits and competitivity.

Third, parties' affinities to these categories are in line with these parties' ideological cores: the liberal and conservative groups cluster closer to the economic aspects of sovereignty, whereas the Greens and the left are closer to data protection and liberal rights with the Social Democrats in the mid-left. In this sense, policy aspects that realize digital sovereignty are refracted according to party lines that resemble a traditional left–right axis. There remain clear contrasts in affinities to the more concrete policy facets of digital sovereignty – a finding in line with earlier work on digital policies that also found that parties emphasize certain aspects of digitization that are linked to their owned issues (König and Wenzelburger, 2019; Siewert and König, 2019). Fourth, EC members speaking in the Parliament took a rather central position according to Figure 4, closer to the categories of societal benefits and consumer protection. However, they are not particularly close to promoting European values, including beyond the EU, or the digital sovereignty

category. Finally, and fifth, the category for digital sovereignty itself lies close to the centre. It thus appears to be a construct that many parties can equally relate to – as compared to other aspects at the endpoints of the horizontal dimension, like data protection or competition. Hence, overall, the findings fit the idea that the concept of digital sovereignty serves as a common denominator of different political actors and thus facilitates consensus-building.

A rather similar picture emerges when we replace the speaker's party affiliation with their committee affiliation, as presented in Figure 5 (using only committees with at least 50 codings). Again, most of the variation (42.5%) is accounted for by the first dimension (which is similar to the one in the party-related analysis above), which again opposes liberal values and economic benefits. Moreover, we also see a certain thematic focus related to committee membership – as we did for parties (although a bit less clear-cut): speakers from the ITRE and ECON (Economic and Monetary Affairs) committee are positioned in the direction of economic benefits (on Dimension 1), whereas liberal rights are more often

Figure 5: Communication on Aspects of Digital Sovereignty by Committee – European Parliament. Notes: Correspondence analysis with symmetric normalization. AFET, Foreign Affairs; ECON, Economic and Monetary Affairs; EMPL, Employment and Social Affairs; IMCO, Internal Market and Consumer Protection; INTA, international trade; ITRE, Industry, Research and Energy; JURI, Legal Affairs; LIBE, Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs; REGI, regional development; TRAN, Transport and Tourism; for others, see text.
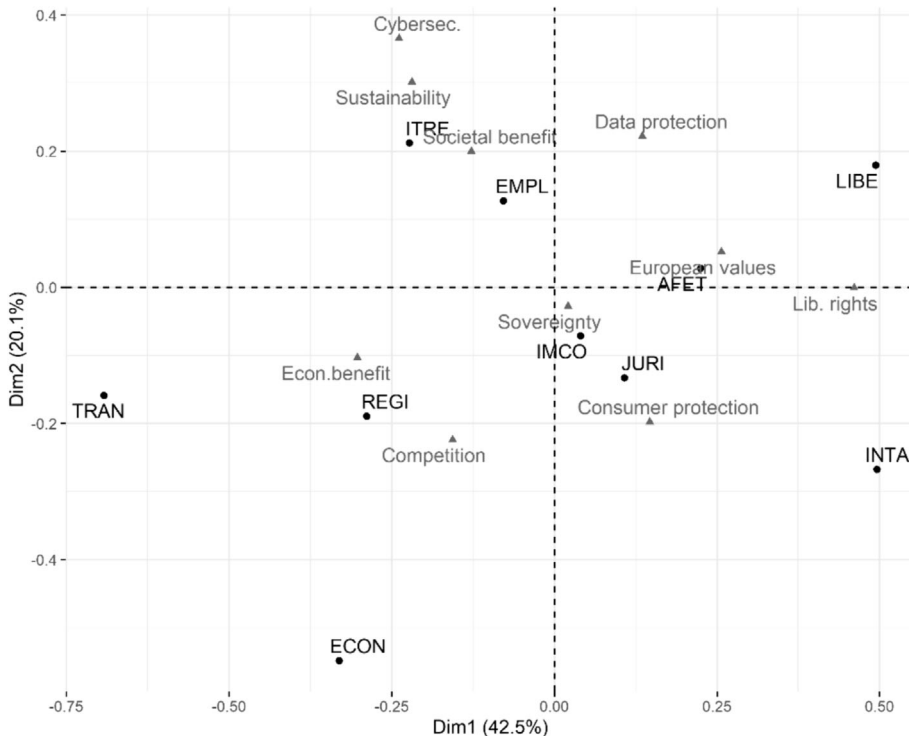
Figure 6: Communication on Aspects of Digital Sovereignty by Actors – European Parliament with external EU official speeches. Notes: Correspondence analysis with symmetric normalization. The distances between the actors and the distances between the categories can be directly interpreted as similarities. The relations of distances between actors and categories cannot be directly interpreted, but they do indicate relative affinities.
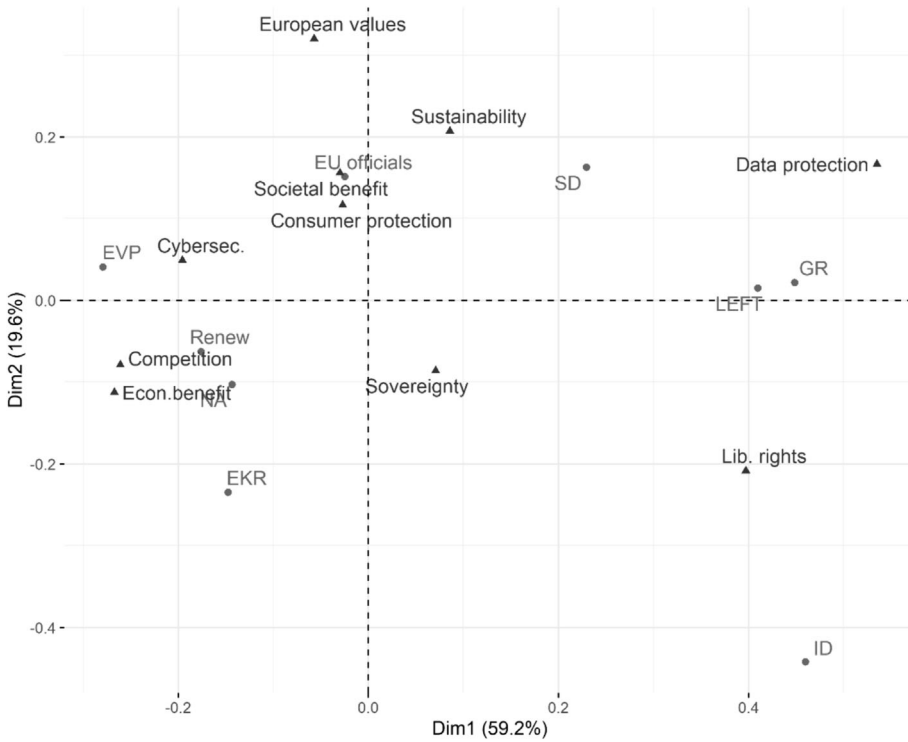
mentioned by speakers from the liberal rights committee, as could be expected, but also by speakers from the INTA committee.

In line with what we found for the analysis of the party affiliations, the category for digital sovereignty again lies close to the centre, indicating its role as a relatively uniform point of reference amongst committees. In sum, both analyses of the EP speeches further support our interpretation of the descriptive analyses according to which consensus-building is facilitated through the construct of digital sovereignty by allowing actors from different party groups and from different committees to link their respective core aspects to one and the same 'vague' concept.

The following *second part of the analysis* allows inspecting more closely to what extent the picture changes when we analyse the public speeches by top EU officials together with the parliamentary debates (replacing the EC in the EP space). When we introduce the speeches by the top EU officials to the correspondence analysis, we can observe slight changes in the resulting patterns. Indeed, compared to the purely parliamentary debates, the pattern in Figure 6, when we look at the vertical dimension, shows that the supranational high-level officials speaking outside the EP are more likely to emphasize European

values compared to the EC in Parliament. This second dimension, however, captures only 20% of the variation, and the communication profile is otherwise very similar to that of the EC in Figure 1. Hence, overall, we do not find clear evidence of a greater emphasis on digital sovereignty in communication by the high-rank officials (mainly from the EC) outside the EP. Instead, our analysis supports the idea that digital sovereignty allows political parties (as well as committee members) to relate those aspects of digital policies to the overarching concept that are salient to them.[6] Hence, the evidence is more compatible with the idea that the concept of digital sovereignty helps to facilitate building coalitions and consensus around it. It appears to be much less a central rhetorical device that actors directly refer to in order to signal their stance.

Conclusion

In recent years, the EU has launched several policies, specifically in the area of data governance, that together amount to a notable change of its digital policies and create a regulatory framework with important consequences for EU citizens and digital markets worldwide. Starting from the observation that recent EU digital policies are linked to the idea of digital sovereignty, this article has examined how actors within the EU make use of this concept in their discourse around those policies. Is it a central part of rhetoric EU officials use to externally signal the EU's policy commitments (*signalling*) in the public sphere? Or does it reorder policy discourse within EU institutions through allowing different policy actors to link their own ideas to the idea of digital sovereignty and therefore enable *consensus-building* in the policy sphere – as has been argued by some observers (Schmitz and Seidl, 2023)?

Studying this question by investigating debates on major EU digital policy acts in the EP as well as speeches by EU top officials, this article has yielded evidence suggesting that, amongst core supranational EU institutions and offices, the concept of digital sovereignty is more important for building consensus within the EU than for signalling the EU's ambition to define new rules for digital policies to the markets and non-EU governments. References to digital sovereignty are far from being a central rhetoric device and show a lower frequency than most of the examined ways of justifying the digital policies. This is not even the case for the public speeches of top EU officials, which should be more likely to show characteristics of communicative discourse based on stronger incentives to engage in signalling. Nor is the concept very closely linked to ideas that directly project digital sovereignty outward, such as the promotion of European values in the digital world. Instead, speakers relate the concept to a broad array of issues that have to do with digital policies such as sustainability, cybersecurity, economic or societal benefits.

Hence, seen through the lens of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008) employed in this article, the idea of digital sovereignty appears to primarily serve co-ordinative discourse. It does so by allowing different political actors (e.g., from various parties) to relate their own issues and justifications (e.g., competitivity for the liberals or data protection and liberal values for the Greens) that matter for digital sovereignty to digital policies. Our analysis is most in line with the view that the vagueness of the concept of digital

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[6]Additional analyses that combine economic benefits with competitiveness/competition and data protection with cybersecurity yield no major discrepancies to the main findings; see Appendix S1, Figure 1 and Figure 2 respectively.

sovereignty facilitates 'coalition-building efforts' (Béland and Cox, 2016, p. 428) in the EU decision-making system. Digital sovereignty seems to work as an umbrella term in the co-ordinative discourse that enables consensus-building between different political actors in the policy sphere. Indeed, a political space generated from the analysed statements about aspects of digital sovereignty locates the notion of digital sovereignty right at the centre of that space. It thus emerges as a consensual idea that, compared to other ideas, is not tied to any party group or any specific aspect of digital sovereignty notably more than others.

Further research is needed to see whether the findings generalize to other actors in the EU's political system. As Lambach and Oppermann (2023, p. 14) point out, claims to digital sovereignty on the EU level may come into conflict with the ambitions and the understanding of the term on the level of national governments – particularly eurosceptic ones. Its consensus-building role may thus be limited beyond the actors studied further above. One should also note that the results cannot say a lot about the quality of a certain speech. Yet, some speeches can be seen as more important than others – for example, because they take place in a certain context (such as Macron's Sorbonne speech). Indeed, when we look at key documents by the EC, digital sovereignty is very present, and its pivotal role in the EU's digital policy is repeatedly emphasized: the Shaping Europe's Digital Future strategy itself speaks of 'technological sovereignty' (European Commission, 2020, p. 3) and very clearly reiterates the idea that the EU needs to protect and promote its own values and interests in the world ('creating the right conditions for Europe to develop and deploy its own key capacities, thereby reducing our dependency on other parts of the globe').

Also, the reception of the digital policy agenda shows that the EU's initiatives were very much interpreted as a signal towards the global competitors. The concept of sovereignty elicited some strong reactions, such as the allegation of protectionism by Charlene Barshefsky (2020). The former US trade representative under the Clinton administration argued that EU policies 'reflect an emerging European view that greater state control of the digital economy is needed to nurture and protect local technology companies'. Similarly, the Biden administration warned the EU against anti-American and protectionist tech policy (Espinoza and Politi, 2021). Overall, however, we conclude from the empirical findings that whilst signalling has occurred through the use of digital sovereignty, the concept seems to be more important for generating consensus between key actors, political parties and committees – by allowing them to relate their own ideas about why certain digital initiatives were important to the broader notion of digital sovereignty.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix S1. Online appendix.