# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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***Abstract:***

*The European Union and the evolving AI environment present a new challenge for democracy initiatives. A key issue is to create a unique environment where artificial intelligence and civic engagement coexist.*

*The study examines the role of AI in boosting civic engagement within the EU, examining its impact on democracy, governance, and public trust. The EU has taken a proactive approach through regulations for trustworthy artificial intelligence, but more is to come. Successful AI integration in civic engagement requires strong legal frameworks, digital literacy programs, and careful consideration of ethical concerns. Proactive legislative measures and multi-stakeholder collaboration are crucial for maximising AI's potential while upholding democratic integrity in the European context.*

**Keywords:** Artificial intelligence (AI), civic engagement, European Union, interactive governance.

From the beginning, we had issues of finding a suitable definition of artificial intelligence (AI). Displaying the increasing connection between civic engagement and AI proved to be a relatively straightforward task, sustained by EU regulations and initiatives, civil society recommendations, and academic research.

As usual, the EU assumes the role of supervisor, seeking to establish harmonised rules on artificial intelligence to safeguard public interests and fundamental rights protected by Union law.[1] European Union lawmakers signed the final version of

[1] European Parliament, Council of the European Union (2024), REGULATION (EU) 2024/1689 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence and amending Regulations (EC) No 300/2008, (EU) No 167/2013, (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1139 and (EU) 2019/2144 and Directives 2014/90/EU, (EU) 2016/797 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Artificial Intelligence Act), *Official Journal of the European Union 2024/1689*, art. 5, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1689/oj/eng, accessed 25.05.2025.

the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act in June 2024. The AI Act, the first binding worldwide horizontal regulation on AI, sets a common framework for the use and supply of AI systems in the EU. It offers a classification for AI systems with different requirements and obligations tailored to a 'risk-based approach.'[2] The proposal required Member States to designate one or more competent authorities, including a national supervisory authority, to be tasked with supervising the regulation's application and implementation. It proposed to establish a European Artificial Intelligence Board (composed of representatives from the Member States and the Commission) at the EU level. National market surveillance authorities would assess operators' compliance with the obligations and requirements of high-risk AI systems. Administrative fines of varying scales, depending on the severity of the infringement, were set as sanctions for non-compliance with the AI Act.[3]

However, the European Union does not offer too much credit to the Council of Europe and the Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence (AI), which the European Commission signed on behalf of the EU.[4] The Convention is the first legally binding international agreement on AI, and it aligns entirely with the EU AI Act. The Convention provides for a common approach to ensure that AI systems are compatible with human rights, democracy and the rule of law while enabling innovation and trust. It includes several key concepts from the EU AI Act, such as a risk-based approach, transparency along the value chain of AI systems and AI-generated content, detailed documentation obligations for AI systems identified as high-risk, and risk management obligations with the possibility to introduce bans for AI systems considered a clear threat to fundamental rights.[5].

The concept of AI is, from the start, multidisciplinary. Hence, we agree with the pragmatic view of researchers like N. Lahdili, M. Önder and In. Nyadera, according to which AI depends on the work of AI researchers and their focus.[6]

The final version of the EU AI Act offers a complex definition of the AI system. *„AI systems are designed to operate with varying levels of autonomy, meaning that they have some degree of independence of actions from human involvement and of capabilities to operate without human intervention. The adaptiveness that an AI system could exhibit after deployment refers to self-learning capabilities, allowing the system to change while in use. AI systems can be used*

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[2] T. Madiega (2024), *Artificial intelligence act. Briefing*, EPRS, European Parliament, p. 1, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698792/EPRS_BRI(2021)698792_EN.pdf, accessed 30.05.2025.

[3] *Ibid,* p. 3.

[4] European Commission (2024), Commission signs Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence, *Press Release*, 05 September 2024, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/commission-signs-council-europe-framework-convention-artificial-intelligence, accessed 30.05.2025

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] N. Lahdili, M. Önder, In. Nyadera (2024), Artificial Intelligence and Citizen Participation in Governance: Opportunities and Threats, *AHBVÜ Public Administration Journal*, 57(3), p. 207, https://www.jurix.com.tr/article/39279?u=0&c=0, accessed 25.05.2025

*on a stand-alone basis or as a component of a product, irrespective of whether the system is physically integrated into the product (embedded) or serves the functionality of the product without being integrated therein (non-embedded)"*[7].

Using AI features to ease up the work, AI Overview of Google Search[8] defines artificial intelligence as the „ability of a computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks that are typically associated with human intelligence, such as reasoning, learning, and problem-solving. In simpler terms, it is about creating machines that can think and act intelligently."[9]

Regarding the term „civic engagement," AI Overview of Google Search defines it as „the involvement and participation of individuals in their communities and society, aimed at improving the public good and addressing issues of public concern. It encompasses a wide range of activities, both political and non-political, that contribute to the well-being of communities and society as a whole."[10]

Civic engagement remains an umbrella term. Its primary role is participation, a process vital to the democratic process. Mechanisms of direct participation are not a strict alternative to political representation or expertise but instead complement them. Public participation, at its best, operates in synergy with representation and administration to yield more desirable practices and outcomes of collective decision-making and action.[11] From the citizens' lens, it is a form of self-expression. Hence, this relationship transcends treating citizens merely as taxpayers and clients to becoming „critical" and „shapers" of policies that affect their lives, especially considering the rise of the third sector in creating partnerships between the public and private sectors or what can be described as a multi-stakeholder participation model.[12]

The question is whether civic engagement benefits from the inclusion of AI systems, leading to digital governance in the EU.

For the EU, participation is becoming an increasingly normative expectation that EU institutions and civil society must comply with. In this sense, the mutual

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[7] European Parliament, Council of the European Union, *op. cit.*, art. 12.

[8] AI Overviews appear in Google Search results when our systems determine that generative responses can be especially helpful - for example, when you want to quickly understand information from a range of sources, including information from across the web and Google's Knowledge Graph. No action is needed for publishers to benefit from AI Overviews. https://developers.google.com/search/docs/appearance/ai-overviews, accessed 30.05.2025.

[9] „artificial intelligence", AI Overview Google Search, accessed 30.05.2025. AI Overview shows the following links: https://www.britannica.com/technology/artificial-intelligence, https://cloud.google.com/learn/what-is-artificial-intelligence.

[10] „civic engagement" AI Overview Google Search, accessed 30.05.2025. AI Overview shows the following links: https://www.apa.org/education-career/undergrad/civic-engagement, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civic_engagement#:~:text=Civic%20engagement%20is%20%22a%20process,passed%20to%20fix%20these%20problems.

[11] A. Fung (2006), Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance, *Public Administration Review*, 66, p. 6, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2006.00667.x, accessed 25.05.2025.

[12] N. Lahdili, M. Önder, In. Nyadera, *op.cit.*, p. 209.

pressure from each actor increases, with the Commission being asked to pay more attention to the track record of participatory mechanisms, and civil society organisations being watched more closely in terms of their participation.[13]

There are significant potential benefits in leveraging AI-based systems by governments and their public administrations for the governance of the common good throughout Europe. As a simple reminder, the potentials of interactive governance include increased internal efficiency, enhanced public administration decision-making, and improved citizen-government interactions.[14]

Through AI-based platforms and tools, governments can interact with citizens in a more personal way, allowing them to voice their concerns, provide feedback and actively contribute to policy formulation. Chatbots, social media analytics and online forums equipped with AI algorithms facilitate dialogue, making government more accessible and responsive to the diverse needs of communities. However, integrating AI into interactive governance also raises important concerns, such as several ethical considerations related to data privacy, algorithmic bias, and liability for the misuse of technology. [15]

Civil society can deploy AI to take more ownership of public administration through funding (e.g. crowdfunding), horizontal governance, cultivating a diverse pool of human resources, operations (e.g. operations focusing on filling existing gaps or finding the highest returns for minimal effort), scaling up (especially when initiatives empowering political participation through AI are open-code and fully transparent).[16]

Participation in AI is frequently intertwined with trust in the government's utilisation of AI, encompassing considerations of citizens' confidence in the ethical and responsible deployment of AI and the accuracy of its outputs. Education could foster a better understanding of AI's benefits and alleviate public apprehension. Education is a fundamental component of trust. Without AI literacy, AI could widen inequalities and exacerbate the digital divide.[17]

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[13] L. Bouza García (2015), *Participatory Democracy Civil Society in the EU: Agenda-Setting and Institutionalisation*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, p. 8.

[14] M. Manzoni, R. Medaglia, L. Tangi, C. Van Noordt, L. Vaccari & D. Gattwinkel (2022), *AI Watch, road to the adoption of artificial intelligence by the public sector: a handbook for policymakers, public administrations and relevant stakeholders*, Publications Office of the European Union, p. 4, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/288757, accessed 30.05.2025.

[15] M. Pislaru, C. S. Vlad, L. Ivascu, & I. I. Mircea (2024), Citizen-Centric Governance: Enhancing Citizen Engagement through Artificial Intelligence Tools, *Sustainability*, 16(7), 2686, p. 3, https://doi.org/10.3390/su16072686, accessed 25.05.2025.

[16] P. Savaget, T. Chiarini & S. Evans (2019), Empowering political participation through artificial intelligence, *Science & Public Policy*, *46*(3), pp. 369-380. https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scy064, accessed 25.05.2025.

[17] R. Sieber, A. Brandusescu, S. Sangiambut, & A. Adu-Daako (2024), What is civic participation in artificial intelligence?, *Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science*, 0(0), p. 11, https://doi.org/10.1177/23998083241296200, accessed 25.05.2025.

Education is necessary for all institutional subjects (political class, public administration, society) to guide change responsibly, mitigating the possible risks of abuse or misuse of technology. The education of society enables, on various levels, the dissemination of a critical culture regarding the use of technologies, promoting an active citizenship role (both individually and collectively) and safeguarding individual freedom in the face of technology's pervasive influence.[18]

The valorisation of society's information potential is a fundamental prerequisite for data-driven interactive governance in the context of digital awareness and protection of both old and new rights. A prerequisite for implementing a widespread enabling strategy is the creation, adaptation, and dissemination of a shared lexicon, as well as new teaching and social engagement methodologies, to promote new legislative reflection and adapt existing systems, as necessary.[19]

AI presents a complex frontier for civic engagement, with significant disciplinary-bound concepts of participation. This diversity hampers a unified understanding of meaningful participation at any level of government. AI was largely viewed as a neutral tool to ease participation and was deemed relatively unproblematic. Civic participation is complicated by AI if we assume that citizens' identities and concerns are resistant to alterations of technology.[20]

Let us consider the final version of the AI Act, along with the comments and recommendations of experts and civil society. The EU finds itself in a scenario where AI-based technologies reflect current attitudes and trends. The leading actor remains the market force, with an emphasis on corporate efficiency.[21]. The core anxiety concerns civic engagement, digital education, and political efficiency.

One of the loud reactions belongs to the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL). It draws attention to the fact that the AI Act fails to effectively protect the rule of law and civic space, instead prioritising industry interests, security services, and law enforcement bodies. While the Act requires AI developers to maintain high standards for the technical development of AI systems (e.g. in terms of documentation or data quality), measures intended to protect fundamental rights, including key civic rights and freedoms, are insufficient to prevent abuses. They are riddled with far-reaching exceptions, which lower protection standards, especially in the areas of law enforcement and migration.[22]

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[18] Sineglossa, Baltan Laboratories, Fundaciyn Zaragoza Ciudad del Conocimiento - FZC, Ohme (2024), Recommendations on AI for participation. Artificial Intelligence and policy making: A methodological reframing, *CERV - Machines For Good. Engaging teenagers through AI and Arts*, p. 8, https://sineglossa.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Machines-for-Good_Recommendations.pdf, accessed 25.05.2025.

[19] *Ibid*.

[20] R. Sieber, A. Brandusescu, S. Sangiambut, & A. Adu-Daako, *op. cit.,* p. 13.

[21] N. Lahdili, M. Önder, In. Nyadera, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

[22] European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL) (2024), Packed with loopholes: why the AI Act fails to protect civic space and the rule of law, *Tech and AI,* https://ecnl.org/news/packed-loopholes-why-ai-act-fails-protect-civic-space-and-rule-law, accessed 30.05.2025.

Civic participation in the implementation and enforcement of the AI Act is not guaranteed. Meaningful and accessible mechanisms for the engagement of civil society and people impacted by AI systems are crucial for effective and rights-based implementation and enforcement of the AI Act. The Act, however, does not go far enough to guarantee the right to participation. Notably, public authorities or companies will not be required to engage with external stakeholders when assessing the AI impact on the fundamental rights.[23]

The Commission is aware of potential policy actions to increase the uptake of AI in the public sector in Europe like developing a set of guidelines and best practices for co-creation approaches in the public sector, encouraging the development of co-creation initiatives between public sector organisations and citizens; leveraging civic engagement and participation in the development and deployment of AI; creating an EU-wide network of governance bodies for streamlined management of AI in the public sector; developing and applying umbrella impact assessment frameworks based on key influencing factors to measure the use and impact of AI in the public sector.[24]

## Conclusions

To benefit all parties, AI policies, frameworks, and regulations should be based on established standards, ethical principles, and societal values.[25]AI can thus act in parallel and in support of citizen participation, which is based on numerous processes of public engagement that can lead to dialogue and collaboration with public administrations, as well as citizen engagement, which involves citizens in the strategic planning and implementation decision-making of services, particularly digital ones. AI tools are increasingly drawing the attention of public administrations as a means to enhance the quality and effectiveness of their citizen engagement initiatives.[26] The requirement for an interaction between institutions and citizens is based on thematic awareness and recognition of the essential character of artificial intelligence as a new agent of automated intermediation.[27]

Public awareness of the benefits of artificial intelligence (AI) is crucial in shaping perceptions and promoting acceptance of this transformative technology. As it continues to evolve and impact various aspects of our lives, raising awareness of its benefits becomes essential.[28]

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[23] *Ibid*.

[24] European Commission, Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, Artificial Intelligence Policy Development and Coordination (2024), *Adopt AI Study. Final study report*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, p. 236, https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/redirection/document/108555, accessed 30.05.2025

[25] N. Lahdili, M. Önder, In. Nyadera, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

[26] *Ibid*.

[27] Sineglossa, Baltan Laboratories, Fundaciyn Zaragoza Ciudad del Conocimiento - FZC, Ohme, *op. cit.*

[28] M. Pislaru, C. S. Vlad, L. Ivascu, & I. I. Mircea, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

The impact of AI on the future of democracy and citizen participation will depend on how it is developed, deployed, and regulated. Policymakers, researchers, and citizens alike need to carefully consider the potential risks and benefits of AI and work to ensure that it is used in ways that support, rather than undermine, democratic values and institutions.[29]

Building on previous initiatives, the April 2025 EU AI Continent Action Plan focuses on developing trustworthy AI technologies to enhance Europe's competitiveness while safeguarding and advancing its democratic values. It aims to bring the benefits of AI to various sectors, such as healthcare, education, industry, and environmental sustainability. The plan includes actions to build large-scale AI data and computing infrastructures, increase access to high-quality data, foster AI adoption in strategic sectors, strengthen AI skills and talent, and facilitate the implementation of the AI Act. Key components include the establishment of AI Factories and Gigafactories, the InvestAI Facility to stimulate private investment and the launch of the AI Skills Academy.[30]

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[29] N. Lahdili, M. Önder, In. Nyadera, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

[30] European Commission (2025), European approach to artificial intelligence, *Shaping Europe's digital future*, 9 April 2025, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/european-approach-artificial-intelligence, accessed 30.05.2025.

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