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EU Policy-Making in the Digital Age: Major Trends and Insights From Public Policy Research

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ABSTRACT

Has digitalization changed policy-making dynamics at the European Union (EU) level? To investigate this issue, this article presents a scoping review of the literature on EU digital policy-making. While much scholarship adopts a ‘Governance’ approach, two conceptually rich strands emerge: critical approaches, and digital sovereignty. Although these frameworks provide valuable insights, they do not fully capture the specific dynamics that digitalization introduces to the policy-making process. To bridge this gap, the article suggests two analytical directions rooted in public policy theory. The first focuses on issues related to control *through* the digital by emphasizing digital instrumentality, exploring how digitalization reshapes traditional boundaries between the political and technical spheres of policy-making. The second concentrates on the issue of control *over* the digital, where digital ‘ubiquity’ emerges as a major challenge, calling for analytical frameworks that reflect the cross-sectoral and hybrid nature of the EU’s digital transition.

1 | Introduction

Checking the weather in the morning, buying a train ticket in the afternoon, or watching our favorite TV show in the evening—our interactions with digital applications are numerous and shape our daily routines. Digitalization refers to the transformation of human activities through the use of digitized information and information technologies (Frenzel et al. 2021). The omnipresence of digitalization influences policy-making, as more digital operations fall under public regulation. This is particularly evident at the European Union (EU) level, where, despite seemingly limited jurisdiction (Bonnamy and Perarnaud 2023), the EU has been highly proactive in regulating the digital sector (Bradford 2023). Yet what do we actually know about the transformations that digitalization has brought to EU policy-making dynamics?

Answering this question is crucial, as digitalization is often portrayed as having the potential to radically reshape existing power structures. Some argue that we have entered an era of ‘techno-feudalism’, where private companies are the new lords and citizens their vassals (Durand 2020; Varoufakis 2023). Others foresee a complete retreat of the State into a mere ‘platform’—a passive host for applications replacing traditional public services (O’Reilly 2011). While these scenarios remain under development and debate, it is both timely and necessary to examine how current trends in digitalization are already transforming conventional policy-making dynamics, especially at the EU level, where decisions significantly impact everyday digital experiences and the protection of fundamental rights. Understanding the policy actors involved, their roles, and the extent of their influence is vital for the future of our democracies.

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The EU has been particularly active in the digital sector over the past few years. This increased engagement has, as in previous cases, prompted significant attention in political science, leading to a growing body of research on EU Digital Policy-Making (EU DPM). Consequently, navigating this field has become increasingly complex (Newman 2021), despite recent efforts by several scholars to provide a comprehensive overview of this area (Engelbrekt et al. 2021; Mariniello 2022; Savin and Trzaskowski 2023; Troitiño et al. 2023). While the outcomes of EU DPM are increasingly well-documented, the specific policy-making dynamics that shape them remain more elusive.

In an effort to address this issue, the article presents the results of a scoping review conducted between 2023 and 2024 on EU DPM. The publications analyzed in this study deliberately span various policy sectors where EU DPM has occurred and cover different time periods to capture potential evolutions in the field, including the most recent research on policy-making and EU digital policies.

The primary focus of this literature review is public policy research, particularly the dynamics of policy-making as examined in international public policy scholarship (Cairney et al. 2025; Weible 2023). This perspective has shaped every aspect of the study, from selecting keywords for article searches to evaluating the contributions of articles to the literature. Broadly speaking, public policy researchers explore the EU's policy process by analyzing its structure, timing, and the roles and influences of actors, institutions, and ideas (Zahariadis 2013). Consistent with this approach, the overarching aim of this study is to advance cumulative knowledge of policy-making dynamics in a digitalized world, with insights that could potentially inform the study of political systems beyond the EU. This choice of focus necessarily omits other significant questions, such as those concerning political theory, sociology, elections, public opinion, or citizen engagement. Addressing these areas might require alternative analytical frameworks, which lie outside the scope of this study.

The first section outlines the scoping review methodology, including article selection and the analytical approach used. The second section summarizes the main findings on EU DPM, emphasizing the field's diversity and the dominance of 'Governance' approaches. It also draws attention to two conceptually rich perspectives: critical approaches to the digitalization in the EU, and the framework of EU digital sovereignty. While insightful, these perspectives do not offer a structured answer to this paper's central question—how digitalization transforms EU policy-making.

To address this, the third section builds on the review and public policy research to propose two analytical directions for understanding digitalization-specific policy dynamics at the EU level. The first focuses on control *through* the digital, where technologies function as policy instruments that drive change autonomously. Here, digitalization may profoundly transform the traditional boundary between political and technical spheres of decision-making, an essential aspect of policy-making. The second direction concerns control *over* the digital—cases where policy actors explicitly seek to regulate digital objects or sectors. In this context, the ubiquity of

the digital transition presents a major theoretical challenge, which a comparative research design may help to address.

2 | Scoping Review Methodology

Some research fields may be more theoretically structured than others. In the case of the EU DPM literature, the field is at the same time relatively new, expanding quickly, and particularly dispersed between topics and analytical traditions. In this context, the objective of the literature review was first to build analytical categories that would be relevant to map this particular field of research. This specific type of exploratory literature review is called a scoping review. In scoping reviews, both the goal and the strategy used to survey the literature differ from those of systematic reviews, which typically aim to investigate the effect of one variable (X) on another (Y) (Arksey and O'Malley 2005; Colquhoun et al. 2014; Dalmer 2020; Heyvaert et al. 2017; Logan et al. 2024; Pham et al. 2014; Tricco et al. 2016). In this study, common practices for scoping reviews were applied (Arksey and O'Malley 2005; Tricco et al. 2018):

- **Identifying relevant studies** by employing a combinatorial strategy (Logan et al. 2024; Pham et al. 2014; Sutton et al. 2019): 'snowball' search,¹ search engines, hand-searching key journals, expert input, academic databases (see Table 1).
- **Study selection** by defining inclusion and exclusion criteria. In scoping reviews, exclusion criteria can be defined post hoc in an iterative manner (Heyvaert et al. 2017; Levac et al. 2010).
- **Charting the data** using qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo, to enable thematic and numerical analysis.
- **Collating, summarizing, and reporting** the results using narrative techniques and considering the targeted audience for the review (Heyvaert et al. 2017).

Identifying the relevant studies for this scoping review was an iterative process that involved several steps over the course of a year (Table 1). The initial selection (Steps 1 to 3) was primarily conducted in October 2023 and resulted in 62 publications. This stage included an initial set of publications identified through a snowball strategy, a Google Scholar search with three keywords ('EU digital policy-making', 'EU digital politics', and 'EU digital governance'),² and a manual review of major EU political science journals dating back to 2010.³ This latter review involved going through every volume and issue and using the browser's search function to locate articles with 'digital' in their titles. Selection criteria included the relevance of the abstract to the research topic, publication by well-established scientific publishers,⁴ online accessibility, and English language writing (for practicability reasons).

The 62 publications identified in this first stage—homogeneous in type—were screened and classified using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, to construct an initial conceptual map of the field. The NVivo analysis relied on several categories, including policy actors, policy sectors,

TABLE 1 | Overview of publication collection steps.

Step	Method	Date/period of retrieval	Publications before screening	Publications after screening (and removal of duplicates)
1	Initial set ('snowball strategy')	2022 – 2023	N/A	8
2	Google Scholar	Week of 23/10/2023	300	40
3	Main EU studies journals	Week of 23/10/2023	5942 ³	14
	Systematic analysis through coding			62
4	Peer input (scientific conferences and academic evaluation); updated search in main EU studies journals	Jan–Dec 2024	N/A	40
5	Scopus	Dec 2024	112	24
	Final selection			126

and analytical framework (see Annex 1, Table 2 for the complete list of categories and further details on the creation of the codebook).

In the second stage, the initial selection was expanded to include additional types of publications—such as book chapters, monographs, and key works that were not captured in the first round—with the goal of more accurately reflecting the field of EU DPM. These additions were primarily identified through peer input (e.g., during conferences), academic reviews, and ongoing monitoring of major EU studies journals to capture newly published relevant works (Table 1, Step 4).

As the volume of research on EU DPM continued to grow, a final search was conducted in Scopus in December 2024 (Table 1, Step 5). The same keywords used in the Google Scholar search were applied,⁵ and journals related to political science, international relations, regulation, governance, public administration, digital studies, migration, security, and culture were targeted, yielding 112 results. After reviewing abstracts for relevance and removing duplicates, 24 articles were included, bringing the final selection to 126 publications (the complete list can be found in Annex 1, Table 1).

Similar to the publication collection process, the analysis combined several strategies. In this study, the initial systematic analysis was conducted using NVivo and provided a useful overview of the literature. However, the results revealed that most studies reflected broader trends in EU studies, offering limited insight into the specificities of EU DPM compared to analogue sectors (see the next section). Although this finding is noteworthy, it was deemed insufficient to fully capture the more promising lines of theoretical debate likely to attract academic attention in the field.

In such cases, systematic analysis can be enriched by narrative techniques that help identify key conceptual features of the literature (Arksey and O'Malley 2005; Hammersley 2001; MacLure 2005; Sutton et al. 2019). This process may reflect the peculiarities of the object of study or the emergence of specific trends. The outcome is naturally shaped by the researcher's academic background, though input from other experts can

help mitigate bias and highlight relevant theoretical perspectives. While this method was used to further develop the paper's two conceptual foci—Critical Approaches to the Digital in the EU and EU Digital Sovereignty—it also informed the discussion section.

3 | The Realm of EU DPM: Major Trends and Diversity

3.1 | A Patchwork of Themes and Theoretical Approaches

Like light passing through a prism, EU digital policy-making disperses into a vast array of colours and shades when examined closely. To explore this complexity and answer the research question, the following section presents results based on the categories defined in the NVivo codebook, particularly from the initial stage of the analysis. It first examines the policy sectors addressed by EU DPM, then discusses the relevant policy actors, and finally analyzes the analytical frameworks employed by researchers.

3.1.1 | Policy Sectors

What stands out first is the diversity of topics in EU digital policy-making, spanning from the regulation of the digital market to the digitalization of traditional policy sectors, as well as the governance of objects specific to the digital world, such as artificial intelligence (AI). In this light, the results of this scoping review attest to the pervasiveness of the digital transition.

To begin with, a significant portion of the literature focuses on EU legislation that addresses various aspects of digital market regulation (e.g., Breindl and Briatte 2013; Christou 2019; Cini and Czulno 2022; Datzer and Lonardo 2023; Dunn Cavelty and Smeets 2023; Farrand 2018; Gelepithis and Hearson 2022; Giannone and Santaniello 2019; Goyal et al. 2021; Heermann 2024; Heidebrecht 2024; Kalyanpur and Newman 2019;

Lips 2020; Mügge 2023; Papaevangelou 2023; Timmers 2018). This refers to all EU-level initiatives aimed at defining the roles and obligations of stakeholders in the digital field, including platforms (or intermediaries), online vendors, governments, and citizens.⁶

According to the literature, this body of legislation defines the uniqueness of the European Union in the digital sector. Indeed, the EU is known for being particularly protective of citizens' fundamental rights, especially regarding data protection (Caliskan et al. 2024; Goyal et al. 2021; Holt and Malčić 2015; Kalyanpur and Newman 2019; Laurer and Seidl 2021; Marelli et al. 2020; Schünemann and Windwehr 2021; Stainforth 2022; Van Dijk et al. 2021), imposing constraints on platforms' limited liability as well as restricting governments' ability to implement oppressive policies based on digital technologies (Bradford 2023). Compared to China and the USA, the EU is seen as offering an alternative model, characterized by its capacity to enact stringent regulations aimed at preserving citizens' rights—regulations that are likely to influence the global digital landscape through the so-called 'Brussels effect' (Bradford 2020).

Using traditional terminology from EU studies, some researchers underline the historical evolution of the EU's position on digital issues. While the EU's role was initially best described as 'market-making', driven by initiatives to liberalize the telecommunications sector, current efforts are better characterized as 'market-correcting' (Heidebrecht 2024; Newman 2021).⁷ Recent work has even suggested that EU intervention in the digital realm could be labelled as 'market-directing', reflecting the desire of some European actors to take a more proactive role in steering the technological market (Hoeffler and Mérand 2024; Seidl and Schmitz 2024).

In parallel, the EU's role in the digital world can be examined through the specific policy sectors it impacts. This includes 'conventional' policy sectors undergoing digitalization processes, such as security, migration and border controls, public services (eGovernment), health, environment, and finance, as well as issues inherent to the digital world, such as telecommunications, the internet, and artificial intelligence (Table 2).

Most articles in these categories focus on describing sector-specific technologies or issues and results in a mosaic of case studies that illustrate the various forms of EU intervention in policy sectors affected by digitalization.

While analyzing EU DPM through the policy sectors it affects helps highlight major trends in policy outcomes—such as the shift toward market-correcting and market-directing policies—this perspective alone makes it difficult to identify policy dynamics specific to the digital world. This is due to the multiplicity of cases addressed in this context, which complicates the identification of global trends in policy-making dynamics.

3.1.2 | Policy Actors

Additionally, this review of the EU DPM literature reveals that the policy actors involved strongly resemble those traditionally observed in other fields of study, particularly regarding the role

of private actors and EU institutions, such as the European Commission.

First, private actors emerge as pivotal participants in the policy process, dominating a significant portion of EU DPM studies. For instance, in the systematic analysis of the 62 research articles, 30 papers highlight private actors as having a significant impact on EU DPM, making them the most important category of actors coded in the analysis (See Annex 1, Figure 1). However, this result is not specific to the digital sector and reflects broader trends in EU policy-making (Dür et al. 2015; Greenwood 2011; Klüver 2013; Saurugger 2008).

In addition, while tech giants are often perceived as benefiting from unprecedented power and influence (Culpepper and Thelen 2020), the literature thus far shows more contrasting results, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the specificity or extent of this power. Indeed, some authors demonstrate that these actors do not always prevail in the battle for influence, despite the substantial resources invested in lobbying at the EU level (Bonnamy 2021; Cini and Czulno 2022; Heermann 2024). Furthermore, in the case of high-salience issues, opposition from citizens to tech giants can undermine their influence. This dynamic was particularly evident during the GDPR negotiations, which were profoundly shaped by Edward Snowden's revelations about mass surveillance by American authorities (Goyal et al. 2021; Kalyanpur and Newman 2019; Laurer and Seidl 2021; Rossi 2018).

In parallel, the European Commission is often portrayed as a proactive actor, frequently described as a 'policy entrepreneur', advocating for strong EU-level regulations (Cini and Czulno 2022; Fuchs 1994; Goyal et al. 2021; Henrich-Franke 2020; Justo-Hanani 2022; Laurer and Seidl 2021; Lips 2020; Schünemann and Windwehr 2021; Simpson 2011; Steen 2011). This, once again, is a common feature of EU policy-making (Ackrill et al. 2013; Copeland and James 2014; Deruelle 2016).

Just as the examination of policy sectors reveals interesting patterns, studying EU DPM through policy actors also uncovers valuable insights. However, too much remains unknown to pinpoint precisely what the specificity of the EU DPM field might be, especially in comparison to other traditional fields of EU studies.

3.1.3 | Analytical Frameworks

Finally, the analytical frameworks were examined to identify specificities in how EU DPM is approached, with the aim of assessing how these trends contribute to answering the paper's research question.

From a public policy research perspective, a significant portion of the literature falls under the broad category of 'Governance Studies', which explores how various actors in the EU's multi-level system influence decision-making processes (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Stephenson 2013).⁸ A notable part of this study

TABLE 2 | Examples of EU digital policy-making across specific policy sectors.¹²

	Topic	References
Digital issues in conventional policy sectors	Security	Bellanova and Glouftisios (2022b); Bellanova and Glouftisios (2022a, 2022b; Bode and Huelss (2023); De Hert and Gutwirth 2006; Farrand and Carrapico (2022); Fragapane and Minaldi 2018; Jeandesboz (2016); Leese (2014), 2020; Liebetrau (2024); Maguire (2024); Mügge (2023); Obendiek and Seidl (2023); Sontowski (2018)
	Migration/border control	Bellanova and Glouftisios 2022a, 2022b; Broeders and Hampshire 2013; Fragapane and Minaldi 2018; Jeandesboz 2016; Leese 2014; Oliveira Martins et al. 2022; Sontowski 2018; Vrăbiescu, Ioana 2022
	Cultural policy	Bonnamy (2021), 2024; Capurro, Plets and Jaap Verheul 2024; Goggin 2020; Heermann (2024); Levy 1997; Schlesinger and Doyle 1995; Steen (2011)
	Foreign policy	Adler-Nissen and Eggeling 2022; Broeders et al. 2023; Carver 2024; Christou and Simpson 2011; Danescu 2020; Datzer and Lonardo 2023; De Gregorio 2021; Dunn Caveltly and Smeets 2023; Renard 2018; Smith 2023; Timmers 2018; Vlassis 2021
	Public services (eGovernment)	Chadwick and May 2003; Campmas et al. 2022
	Environment and energy	Francisco and Linnér (2023)
	Health	Marelli et al. (2020)
	Finance	Donnelly et al. 2024
	Telecommunications	Breindl and Briatte (2013); Fuchs (1994); Goggin 2020; Henrich-Franke (2020); Pelkmans 2001; Simpson (2011)
	Internet	Breindl and Briatte (2013); Christou and Simpson (2011); Gadringer 2020; Goggin 2020; Perarnaud and Rossi (2024)
Objects specific to the digital world	Artificial Intelligence	Bode and Huelss (2023); Calderaro and Blumfelde 2022; Carlsson and Rönnblom (2022); Francisco and Linnér (2023); Justo-Hanani (2022); Leese (2014); Mügge (2023, 2024; Palladino (2021); Starke and Lünich 2020; Van Dijk et al. (2021)

also emphasizes frames, ideas, values, and discourses, reflecting broader trends in (EU) policy analysis shaped by the turn toward sociological and discursive neo-institutionalism (Saurugger 2013; Schmidt 2000).⁹

Nevertheless, these ‘Governance’ approaches encompass relatively heterogeneous perspectives. Some draw on classic political science debates, such as the tension between private and public actors in the policy process (Bode and Huelss 2023; Christou and Simpson 2011; Cini and Czulno 2022; Gorwa et al. 2024; Heermann 2024; Kalyanpur and Newman 2019; Obendiek and Seidl 2023). Others adopt frameworks from international public policy literature, such as the Multiple Streams Framework, to analyze the interaction among actors, issues, and solutions in EU DPM (Goyal et al. 2021; Lips 2020). Finally, a distinct body of research contributes more directly to EU-centred debates—for instance, by examining the role of supranational actors relative to the influence of member states in the decision-making process (Christou and Simpson 2011; Dunn Caveltly and Smeets 2023; Fuchs 1994; Schünemann and Windwehr 2021; Sivan-Sevilla 2021).

These EU DPM ‘Governance’ studies provide valuable insights into the intricacies of EU DPM. However, they often lack structured answers on whether the dynamics in this field differ from traditional EU policy-making processes. That said, certain branches of the literature—although not yet dominant in terms of volume—are beginning to crystallize around ideas that could help shape this study agenda, as discussed in the following sections.

3.2 | Critical Approaches to the Digital in the EU

During the NVivo coding process, it became apparent that most of the articles directly questioning the notion of power in the digitalized world were rooted in critical approaches (8 out of 12 articles in this category). These critical frameworks focus on how digitalization transforms EU power and highlight the growing risks of a society subjected to extensive surveillance practices. They show of digitalization contributes to the making of an increasingly neoliberal EU, while enhancing its power to exert control ‘at a distance’ (Giannone and Santaniello 2019).

Typically, these studies aim to build theories about how power operates differently in a digitalized context, using the EU, and more specifically, EU security, borders, and migration, as a case study. While all these studies examine how digitalization shapes social norms, the categorization (and marginalization) of individuals, perceptions of the real world, and the very frameworks through which individuals and populations are governed, the literature can be roughly divided into two branches. The first focuses on the introduction of digital devices within broader contexts (e.g., the entire process of crossing a border), while the second examines the digital infrastructures that support such practices, analyzing their creation, implementation, and maintenance.

First, a number of studies critically examine how the introduction of new technologies into previously fully analogue processes enables novel forms of control over citizens and empowers private actors (Bode and Huelss 2023; Broeders and Hampshire 2013; Obendiek and Seidl 2023; Oliveira Martins et al. 2022). For example, some scholars explore how AI profiling techniques reshape societal norms about ‘risky’ individuals through data processing (Leese 2014), creating new mechanisms of surveillance and control over both EU and non-EU residents. Similarly, other studies highlight how the EU’s digitalization of borders profoundly affects citizens’ physical interactions with border control systems (Sontowski 2018), even before they reach EU frontiers (Broeders and Hampshire 2013).

Second, a set of studies focuses more specifically on the digital infrastructure underpinning surveillance practices, particularly by examining the integration of EU databases related to migration, identity, and crime (Bellanova and Glouftsiou 2022a, 2022b; Maguire 2024). These works are often inspired by sociological approaches rooted in Science and Technology Studies (STS), which explore the reciprocal relationship between social organization and technical systems. These scholars investigate how social processes shape the design and use of infrastructure, and how technical systems, in turn, influence societal norms and practices. Such analyses reveal social phenomena embedded in the construction and operation of digital infrastructure, including meaning-making processes (Jeandesboz 2016), boundary work that delineates responsibilities and roles (Van Dijk et al. 2021), and issues related to fragility, maintenance, and frictions (Bellanova and Glouftsiou 2022a).

These studies are crucial for addressing power dynamics in the digital age, revealing how new forms of control and power inequalities emerge. However, despite their valuable contributions, integrating such critical perspectives with dominant frameworks in public policy research—often focused on developing global models to explain policy-making dynamics—poses significant challenges (Courmont 2018). This is partly because critical approaches tend to discuss power transformations at a more abstract or theoretical level, which can make translating their concepts into explanations of specific policy outcomes or decisions difficult.

Yet, this abstraction also offers an opportunity: by challenging established assumptions, critical perspectives can enrich public policy research. Building on this potential, one way to bridge

the gap between these two approaches is to focus on the concept of ‘control *through* the digital’ and the notion of EU digital ‘instrumentality’. This line of inquiry, explored in the final section of this article, not only facilitates dialogue between critical and mainstream perspectives but also extends the discussion beyond EU security and border control.

3.3 | EU Digital Sovereignty

In parallel with critical approaches, the review process brought to light the growing prominence of the ‘digital sovereignty’ framework within the academic community (Bellanova et al. 2022b; Broeders et al. 2023; De Gregorio 2021; Farrand 2024; Heermann 2024; Heidebrecht 2024; Perarnaud and Rossi 2024; Timmers 2018). Today, the term ‘digital sovereignty’ is likely familiar to many, as it is frequently used by decision-makers addressing digital issues, both domestically and at the EU level (Couture and Toupin 2019; Falkner et al. 2024; Fratini et al. 2024; Pohle and Thiel 2020). While this concept has gained traction in EU political science research, the literature on EU digital sovereignty remains relatively diverse in its approaches, as the term lacks a stable definition (Adler-Nissen and Eggeling 2024; Celeste 2021; Couture and Toupin 2019; Troitiño et al. 2023). Despite this diversity, these approaches reflect a growing concern among researchers and policy actors about control in the digital age (Falkner et al. 2024; Farrand and Carrapico 2022), and more specifically about the (non)replication of traditional power forms in the digital sector. Indeed, contrary to the visions of pioneering techno-libertarians at the dawn of the internet (Bradford 2023; Lessig 2006), the digital world and its power dynamics are not isolated from the physical world (Kaufmann and Jeandesboz 2017), and this interest for the EU’s digital sovereignty reflects this phenomenon.

As of today, two main approaches have emerged: the first associates the issue of EU digital sovereignty with a growing ‘geopoliticization’ and securitization of policy-making dynamics, while the second views ‘digital sovereignty’ as a specific form of discourse that produces diverse effects on policy-making.

First, a strand of research has used the term ‘digital sovereignty’ to highlight the ‘geopoliticization’ of EU digital policy-making, emphasizing the growing connection between the internal and international dimensions of digital issues (Broeders et al. 2023; Monsees and Lambach 2022; Smith 2023). In this context, authors show that internal EU digital policies may increasingly be employed to respond to international challenges, and vice versa. Often, this geopoliticization is accompanied by an increased focus on security issues, which in turn reshape the framing of economic matters related to the digital world (Christou 2019; Farrand 2024; Farrand et al. 2024; Liebetrau 2024; Mügge 2023).

Then, other researchers have more explicitly adopted the perspective that ‘digital sovereignty’ functions as a specific form of discourse, examining its multidimensional effects on policy-making dynamics. For instance, one strand of this literature focuses on the (dis)connection between EU discourse surrounding this term and the practical measures adopted

(Adler-Nissen and Eggeling 2024; Barrinha and Christou 2022; Roberts et al. 2021). In a related development, a recent special issue – published in the *Journal of European Public Policy* and drawing on public policy approaches and the discursive institutionalist perspective (Schmidt 2008)—seeks to link discourse more meaningfully to different types of policy change, ranging from no change to comprehensive change (Falkner et al. 2024). These studies generally highlight that the link between discourse and change is far from automatic, demonstrating, for example, that policy actors do not systematically consider references to ‘EU digital sovereignty’ politically relevant.

In parallel, other scholars have focused on the types of actors deemed to be the ‘opponents’ to this sovereignty, whether they are states, international actors, or platforms, pointing to the plurality of meanings associated with the term (Alauzen 2024; Mügge 2024). This semantic flexibility enables EU institutions, under certain conditions, to use digital sovereignty as a ‘coordinative discourse’, facilitating consensus-building through its role as a ‘coalition magnet’ (Moghior 2022; Wenzelburger and König 2025).

Albeit crucial to current studies of EU DPM, the focus on digital sovereignty presents several challenges for the development of future scholarship. One notable concern is the potential for concept-stretching (Sartori 1991), whereby virtually any EU intervention related to the digital realm—whether internal or external—might be labelled as a case of ‘digital sovereignty’ (Fratini et al. 2024).

However, the phenomena highlighted by these approaches (e.g. geopoliticization, securitization, and sovereignty discourses) raise new and stimulating questions that merit further exploration. In particular: are these tendencies inherent to the digital world, or can they also be observed in analogue policy sectors? In this respect, research has already shown that the use of sovereignty discourse is not exclusive to the digital domain, as the concept is also invoked by political actors in traditional fields in response to globalization and geopolitical tensions (e.g., ‘food sovereignty’ or ‘energy sovereignty’) (Jarosz 2014; LaBelle 2024; Roch and Oleart 2024). To address this issue, the discussion section offers further reflections and methodological guidance on how to analyze ‘control over the digital’ and to highlight the specific dynamics of EU DPM, as opposed to those found in conventional analogue policy sectors.

4 | Discussion: Policy-Making Analysis in a Digitalized EU

Is digitalization transforming policy-making dynamics at the EU level? As noted earlier, the literature remains open-ended, leaving room for more structured answers to emerge. This section aims to draw on these results and insights from mainstream public policy frameworks to identify potential research paths for exploring the transformations induced by digitalization at the EU level, which could subsequently inform more specialized reflections within the broader public policy research literature. To identify these paths, the first step was to apply a

heuristic distinction from the EU DPM literature: control *through* the digital and control *over* the digital (Bellanova et al. 2022a; Oliveira Martins et al. 2022). Combined with insights from public policy research, this distinction helps disentangle the effects of digital transition on policy-making. Although often intertwined empirically, it is argued that these two elements lead to distinct policy-making dynamics.

Control *through* the digital refers to political processes triggered by digitalization that policy actors may neither perceive nor intend when addressing digital topics. It contrasts with control *over* the digital, which focuses on the behaviours and influence of actors as they attempt to regulate an object or issue that is digital in nature. In other words, while control *through* the digital concerns transformations resulting from operating within a digitalized environment, control *over* the digital deals with political transformations caused by efforts to address digital issues. The latter typically involves clearly identifiable processes, whereas control *through* the digital is often less visible.

4.1 | Control Through the Digital: Uncovering Digital Instrumentality in EU Policy-Making

From the control *through* the digital perspective, the digital is not simply an object to be regulated, but a distinct type of policy ‘instrument’ that drives change by itself. This perspective challenges traditional boundaries between the ‘political’ and ‘technical’ aspects of policy-making, highlighting how seemingly technical features may carry deep political implications. While critical studies often adopt this view to develop broad theoretical reflections on the nature of power and its deployment across society at large, public policy research tends to focus more on how this perspective can help explain shifting power balances among actors involved in the policy-making process. In this context, the concept of instrumentality, as developed in public policy scholarship, addresses, among other things, the factors shaping the choice of policy instruments and the emergence of ‘instrument constituencies’ (Béland et al. 2018; Capano 2025; Capano and Lippi 2017; Halpern et al. 2014; Lascoumes and Le Galès 2005). This approach pays particular attention to the nature of the actors involved in decision-making, how they organize around the political/technical divide, and how such organization affects power relations within specific political systems or configurations.

In this view, considering the instrumentality of the digital transition in EU DPM may lead to the exploration of three analytical directions:

- Employing public policy frameworks that account for all stages and dimensions of the policy process
- Analyzing the transformation of boundaries between the political and the technical in EU DPM, and how this affects traditional power balances
- Examining the new distribution of competences between the EU and its member states emerging from these transformations

First, to comprehensively address both the political and technical dimensions of policy-making, the analytical framework chosen by a researcher must go beyond the study of the debates among policy actors and their engagement in official decision-making channels. Although these debates are crucial, they typically reflect only a limited portion of the many decisions that ultimately constitute a public policy, while so-called technical decisions are most often made outside these arenas. Going further, some scholars have argued that a public policy can be fully understood only when the implementation stage is taken into account, where micro-level technical decisions continue to shape the process (Lipsky 2010). Arguably, this approach calls for the use of theoretical frameworks that examine the detailed ‘stages’ of the policy process, where abstract and micro-level decisions interweave to form a complex policy instrument (Bérut 2023; Howlett 2009; Howlett et al. 2015, 2016; Jones 1970).

Second, with respect to the boundaries between the technical and the political, digitalization plays a transformative role by altering the nature of those involved in EU policy-making processes. While legal experts, economists, and private companies have traditionally been central to EU-level expertise (De Bruycker 2016; Robert 2013; Saurruger 2002), the digital transition brings to the forefront the skills and competencies of information technology (IT) and computer engineers (Bigo 2020). These experts may come from the public or private sectors, at either the domestic or EU level, but their precise location and roles within the policy-making process remain difficult to analyse.

In the case of digital health, for instance, the Commission relies on a specific network of IT experts to develop standards for the European Health Data Space.¹⁰ These experts may not belong to an official body, but they form a highly structured community that has emerged over the past 20 years through the implementation of EU-funded projects on digital health. Despite their prominent role in shaping EU-level digital health infrastructure, little is known about this group – the academic backgrounds of its members, the organizations they represent, or their connections to digital platforms.

Recent debates also suggest that the *status quo* in how expertise is incorporated into policy-making—particularly the delegation of technical standards to standardization bodies—is increasingly contested, including by the European Commission itself. Indeed, the Commission appears determined to prevent such expertise from being fully monopolized by standardization bodies, as has often been the case in analogue sectors under the New Approach (Borraz 2007). This shift was evident during the development of the European Health Data Space and was further emphasized by the political controversy surrounding the election of ETSI’s (European Telecommunications Standards Institute) new director. Ongoing tensions between this organization and the Commission have already resulted in ETSI’s exclusion from policy-making processes related to AI and cyber resilience.¹¹ Therefore, digitalization appears to be a new driving force behind changes in how expertise is exercised in EU DPM, with the political sphere seeking to reassert control over the more ‘technical’ aspects of policy-making.

Third, beyond the evolving politics of technical expertise, digitalization may also be redefining competences between the EU and its member states. Traditionally, the distribution of competences has been the domain of legal experts, with each legislative act—digital or not—sparking debates over legal bases and their interpretation. What appears to be changing is that, in certain digital areas, the EU is becoming the only authority with the technical capacity to regulate digital issues. As a result, it can now wield powers in domains where its role was previously limited to soft law and nonbinding guidance (Terpan 2015).

A clear example is the issue of disinformation and fake news. While national laws still determine what is illegal and must be removed, the Digital Services Act (DSA) introduces an exception for very large online platforms and search engines. These actors are now required to address not only illegal content but also broader ‘systemic risks’ defined by the EU and overseen by the Commission. These include potential harms to civic discourse, electoral processes, and public security (DSA, Article 34)— areas traditionally regulated by member states and previously covered only by a voluntary Code of Conduct (Datzner and Lonardo 2023).

Healthcare offers another striking example. Traditionally, EU integration in digital health relied on soft law, in line with Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (Bérut 2021). However, the new regulation on the European Health Data Space marks a shift, introducing binding standards for health data. The EU now determines what types of data must be included in Electronic Health Records and in what format, decisions that were once made by national health agencies or professional bodies. Through digitalization, the EU is thus gaining regulatory reach in sectors previously beyond its jurisdiction.

Therefore, by reshaping the technical dimensions of policy-making, digitalization is likely to bring various transformations in EU DPM that can be further explored through the lens of policy instrumentation, particularly using frameworks that comprehensively account for the multiple aspects of policy-making. These transformations may include new political dynamics tied to the rise of IT expertise and a gradual transfer of competences to the EU, as well as other phenomena yet to be uncovered.

4.2 | Control Over the Digital: Ubiquity as a Challenge to Existing Policy Analysis Frameworks

The recent surge in EU regulations on digital issues has sparked a growing number of publications on the topic. While the object of regulation, the digital, is relatively new, a key question arises: is the handling of digital issues transforming established power relations between actors, beyond the political/technical divide identified above? This broad question can be broken down into a variety of more specific research inquiries, many of which are only beginning to receive scholarly attention: Is the European Parliament adequately equipped to address digital issues (Zenner 2021)? Do digital issues produce distinctive patterns of party alliances within the European Parliament (Tyler 2024)? Are the strategies and participants involved in digital-related

advocacy notably different from those in analogue sectors (Breindl 2012; Breindl and Briatte 2013)?

As these questions illustrate, there is still no comprehensive theory that accounts for the many differences involved in studying EU DPM. While some digital sovereignty approaches point to what appear to be specific features of EU DPM—such as geopoliticization or the emergence of particular forms of discourse—it remains unclear whether these phenomena are inherent to digitalization alone.

Typically, such a line of inquiry would lead a public policy researcher to adopt a comparative approach between EU DPM and other, more traditional ‘analogue’ policy sectors. This approach is anchored in a long-standing tradition within public policy research, where scholars often specialize in the study of specific areas. This perspective is considered relevant because policy sectors generally exhibit distinct issues, institutions, and actors that shape policy processes and outcomes (Howlett and Ramesh 1998; Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1994; McGee and Jones 2019).

However, in the case of EU DPM, adopting such a comparative approach is particularly challenging due to the ubiquity of the digital transition, which does not take place within a clearly defined area but potentially affects every policy sector simultaneously. In this context, two analytical considerations emerge. The first concerns the methodology to be applied in future comparative research on EU DPM, while the second pushes the reflection further by considering the theoretical implications such an approach may entail.

First, the ubiquity of the digital transition invites a reconceptualization of the sectoral mode of comparison typically used in public policy research. Indeed, one major challenge in applying a comparative approach to EU DPM is selecting relevant cases. Case selection is generally guided by prior knowledge and theoretical frameworks that help researchers to identify cases likely to contribute to theory-building, often through designs such as ‘most similar’ or ‘most different’ systems approaches (Blatter and Haverland 2012; Engeli and Allison 2014; Lijphart 1971). However, the ubiquity of the digital transition makes it particularly difficult to determine which cases effectively meet these criteria.

Although further work is needed on this issue, insights from public policy research and the EU DPM literature suggest a promising starting point. Rather than following the traditional division of policy sectors by issue area, this approach proposes distinguishing cases based on the degree of digitalization within each sector. In this sense, it contrasts sectors centred entirely on digital issues (e.g., AI, internet, data protection) with those that incorporate digital elements into otherwise analogue domains.

According to recent findings in the EU DPM literature, this line of division is likely to generate fruitful insights, as researchers have pinpointed new and unexplored political dynamics in fully digitalized sectors. In the field of AI, for instance, scholars have highlighted the rise of actors whose expertise lies at the intersection of technology, ethics, and fundamental rights (Bode and Huelss 2023; Mügge 2023; Palladino 2021; Van Dijk et al. 2021).

While some of this expertise is closely linked to the private sector—particularly in areas like military AI—other domains, such as AI ethics, remain loosely defined, with boundaries that are still evolving and difficult to grasp. At the other end of the continuum, we may expect older, well-established policy sectors subject to a lower degree of digitalization to display very different political dynamics. This hypothesis aligns with ongoing public policy research that examines differences between nascent and more mature policy subsystems, providing a useful framework for understanding such contrasts (Bandelow and Kundolf 2011; Beverwijk et al. 2008; Howlett and Newman 2013; Ingold et al. 2017; Lemke et al. 2023; Stritch 2015).

Then, beyond the methodological challenges associated with studying EU DPM, this analytical perspective is likely to reshape prevailing theoretical expectations about the digital transition. Often, the ubiquity of digital transitions leads researchers to emphasize global and radical systemic transformations, where every relationship between political actors is reconfigured. This is exemplified by the techno-feudalist approach (Durand 2020; Varoufakis 2023), which argues that the power of private platforms reshapes the very economic structure of societies, and by theories of the ‘platform state’, which contend that the fundamental functioning of the state is altered due to the digital transition (Jeannot 2020; O'Reilly 2011).

In contrast, adopting a comparative approach that distinguishes between the various conditions under which the digital transition induces change may help develop more nuanced theories, in which political transformations are primarily hybrid in nature. Adopting such a vantage point could help make sense of the myriad findings emerging from the EU DPM literature, including those concerning the power of tech giants, which appears to vary significantly across contexts.

In sum, this approach offers a first step toward a theory of EU DPM that can account for divergent empirical findings. Building on current research, it suggests that the degree of digitalization across policy sectors may help explain the emergence of distinct political dynamics. Further comparative inquiry could uncover additional explanatory factors, thereby enriching our understanding of how digital transitions are reshaping EU policy-making dynamics.

5 | Conclusion

After this scoping review, the answers to how and why digitalization induces transformations in EU-level policy-making dynamics remain uncertain. This is not due to a lack of interest in the topic within political science—on the contrary, it has generated increasing research in recent years. However, due to the pervasiveness of the digital transition and the diversity of approaches used, achieving convergence across perspectives remains challenging, limiting the development of a comprehensive theory on digitalization's impact on EU policy-making. While promising research avenues exist, particularly in critical approaches to the digital and digital sovereignty, they also face notable challenges from mainstream public policy research,

such as difficulties in translating concepts to explain specific policy outcomes or the risk of concept-stretching.

In response, two paths were developed to advance this study agenda. The first, focused on control *through* the digital, explores digital instrumentality at the EU level, questioning the political and technical boundaries of decision-making and how digitalization alters them, creating new policy-making dynamics. The second, focusing on control *over* the digital, advocates for analytical frameworks that consider the ubiquity of the EU-level digital transition, with comparative, cross-sectoral analysis being a key feature of future EU DPM research.

While these avenues warrant further questioning and investigation (e.g., are sectors such as healthcare, education, or the environment truly comparable in terms of their respective digital transformations?), they are expected to yield a range of insights from diverse strands of literature, fostering continued academic dialogue. One possible outcome of these inquiries is that digitalization integrates into existing sectoral dynamics without fundamentally altering them, or that the nature of change diverges significantly from what has been outlined here. Ultimately, adopting a structured and comparative research agenda will be crucial for scholars to collectively advance the research question posed in this article.

Finally, while these developments might suggest that EU DPM research should evolve into yet another isolated area of study, this paper argues against such an approach. Instead, it contends that this specialization will be most beneficial if integrated into a continuous dialogue with traditional forms of policy-making. Facilitating this dialogue from the outset is essential to ensure that digital policy dynamics are meaningfully integrated into broader political and institutional contexts.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹Traditional 'snowball' search strategy refers to the method where relevant publications are included when they are cited in an article.

²For each keyword, the first hundred results were screened. Google Scholar was initially used as the primary search engine due to its free access. Later, institutional access to Scopus allowed for complementing this strategy (see below). No time filter was applied, as the goal was to obtain a comprehensive overview of the literature—not just the most recent publications—and because this is the first scoping review on the topic.

³Publications included: Journal of Common Market Studies (1341); West European Politics (919); Journal of European Public Policy (1318); European Union Politics (456); European Journal of Political Research (728); Journal of European integration (785), European political science review (395). The numbers in brackets indicate the total number of articles published by each journal between 2010 and 2023, based on data from Scopus. They are provided for context, as the initial search was conducted manually and did not allow for a precise count of relevant hits at the time.

⁴Science direct, Taylor & Francis, Cambridge University Press, Wiley, Sage, Springer, Oxford academic

⁵The Scopus query can be summarized as follows: TITLE-ABS-KEY (eu AND digital AND (policy-making OR policymaking OR politics OR governance)). The complete Scopus query is available upon request from the author.

⁶For a more detailed presentation and discussion of the EU's role in regulating the digital market, see Engelbrekt et al. (2021); Mariniello (2022); Savin and Trzaskowski (2023)

⁷For a diverging interpretation of this evolution, see: König 2022

⁸A summary of the number of articles per analytical frame coded in NVivo is provided in Annex 1, Table 3. Annex 1, Table 4 shows the distribution of analytical frames by policy sector.

⁹See for instance: Breindl and Briatte 2013; Carlsson and Rönblom 2022; Chadwick and May 2003; Christou 2019; Francisco and Linnér 2023; Fuchs 1994; Gelepithis and Hearson 2022; Heermann 2024; Henrich-Franke 2020; Jeandesboz 2016; Lips 2020; Monsees and Lambach 2022; Obendiek and Seidl 2023; Papaevangelou 2023; Perarnaud and Rossi 2024; Van Dijk et al. 2021

¹⁰This example is drawn from the results of the research project PO-LiN, funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 101107888 (MSCA-IF-GF).

¹¹Bertuzzi Luca (2023). 'European standardization organization's leadership election embarrasses EU Commission', Euractiv website, Available on: https://www.euractiv.com/section/tech/news/european-standardisation-organisations-leadership-election-embarrasses-eu-commission/?_ga=2.181948967.1257785271.1744643086-1062273656.1744643086

¹²For the complete list of references mentioned in Table 2, please refer to Table 1, Annex 1.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Table 1: List of References in Alphabetical Order. Table 2: Nvivo Codebook with Number of Publications per Code. Table 3. Number of Publications Per Analytical Framework Code. Table 4. Number of references per Analytical Framework Code According to the Policy Sector Selected.