The Platform Trap

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INTRODUCTION

American intervention in foreign elections is far from novel. Since 1945, the United States has repeatedly involved itself in elections abroad to install sympathetic governments, frequently with the cooperation of its European allies (Mohan & Wall, 2019). What is unprecedented, however, is the contemporary hostility between the United States and the European Union, as a litany of political threats and manoeuvres from actors within the US is now aimed directly at the elections of its closest allies. This adversarial stance taken by the US against its EU allies is a stark departure from nearly a century of established foreign policy and more closely resembles

the disinformation and democracy-subversion tactics of Russia. However, understanding the current dynamic requires looking not at a bilateral relationship between a monolithic United States and Europe but a set of competing actors and interests within American domestic politics with divergent visions for the transatlantic relationship. What are the threats posed by the second Trump administration to European democracy? While the Trump administration's overt attempts to influence European elections have been largely unsuccessful, the most durable threat lies not in public endorsements or diplomatic provocation but in the weaponisation of digital platforms by the American tech elite. By reshaping the informational infrastructure upon which democratic discourse depends, tech platform owners have made digital platforms a new frontier of sovereignty, one where influence operates through control of the systems that mediate twenty-first-century democratic life itself.

THE LIMITS OF OVERT INTERFERENCE

One of the primary strengths of Trump's 2024 campaign, the breadth of his coalition, has evolved into one of the central constraints on its capacity to formulate a consistent transatlantic policy. Trump remains the symbolic and rhetorical leader of the MAGA movement, but his personal approach has not demonstrated a systematic effort to reconstruct US-EU relations outside of the longstanding grievances articulated during his first term, such as NATO burden-sharing (Richter, 2021). He rejects multilateral cooperation in favour of transactional bilateralism; however, his governing priorities appear less oriented towards constructing a coherent transatlantic order than towards advancing personal and clientelistic financial interests. His recurring tactic of inflaming tensions to destabilise existing arrangements, then re-engaging to extract concessions, resembles a form of madman theory-style brinkmanship often associated with Vladimir Putin (Axios, 2024). Thus, Trump is better understood not as a leader with genuine grievances against Europe but as a central figure presiding over competing factions whose conflicting priorities he channels and directs towards Europe for profit. It is these factions rather than Trump that seek to substantially redefine the transatlantic relationship.

During the first Trump administration, the US foreign policy approach to Europe was often arbitrated by establishment Republicans in cabinet positions who treated transatlantic ties as a strategic asset. However, after Trump's return to power in early 2025, it was immediately clear from his cabinet appointees and ministerial picks that their approach towards Europe would be different. Vice President JD Vance's excoriating speech at the 2025 Munich Security Conference, where he accused European nations of violating democratic principles and free speech, set the tone for what followed: Elon Musk's expressed support for Alternative für Deutschland co-leader Alice Weidel in the lead-up to German elections, Vance and

Musk's criticism of the Romanian constitutional court for annulling an election in which a far-right candidate had entered the top-two runoff, and the 2025 National Security Strategy forecasting the civilisational downfall of Europe and calling for intervention (Siggelkow, 2025; Propastop, 2025; The White House, 2025).

However, evidence suggests these overt attempts have been electorally counterproductive in influencing European politics. A December 2025 YouGov tracker found Trump's unfavourable ratings at 81% in Germany, 75% in France, and 89% in Denmark (YouGov, 2025). A Eurobazooka poll found that 48% of Europeans view Trump as an 'enemy of Europe,' while 79% say Musk cannot be trusted and 58% favour boycotting Tesla (Cluster 17/ Le Grand Continent, 2025). Furthermore, research by the European Policy Centre confirmed that far-right party support across Europe held steady at 24–25% between October 2024 and April 2025, unmoved by either Trump's victory or Musk's endorsements (Euronews, 2025). The inherent divergence in interests between the American and European far-right has only compounded this discontent. European far-right parties depend on sovereigntist voters for whom national autonomy is non-negotiable, and when Trump's actions have threatened European sovereignty (as in the Greenland crisis in January 2026), even his closest ideological parallels in Europe, such as France's Bardella and Germany's Weidel, broke with him (CNN, 2026). His tariff threats further endangered the blue-collar constituencies that form a significant portion of these parties' electorate, making ideological alignment with Washington a political as well as an economic liability.

Furthermore, in the past year, European institutions have made significant legal moves to guard against external manipulation. The European Democracy Shield, the centrepiece of the EU's pro-democracy strategy, unveiled in November 2025, created the European Centre for Democratic Resilience to coordinate detection and response to foreign information manipulation, a network of independent fact-checkers operating in every EU language, and a DSA crisis protocol for rapid-reaction measures during elections (European Commission, 2025). These defences are among the most robust in the world, but they were designed primarily to counter identifiable foreign interference operations and state-backed manipulation networks like those associated with Russia. The deeper challenge posed by the American tech elite is not external propaganda but the reshaping of the platforms on which European democratic discourse takes place.

THE ROLE OF THE TECH ELITE

The explanation lies in the political realignment that brought Silicon Valley into the Republican coalition. Over the past decade, as debates over digital regulation intensified in Washington and Brussels, Silicon Valley figures gravitated towards the Republican Party's deregulatory agenda. During Trump's 2024 campaign, this realignment crystallised. Elon Musk

contributed over $290 million through the America PAC, venture capitalists Marc Andreessen and Ben Horowitz each gave $2.5 million to pro-Trump super PACs, and Palantir founder Peter Thiel personally lobbied Trump to select Vance as his running mate (CNN, 2025; Bloomberg News, 2024; Fox Business, 2024). Their motivations for supporting Trump went beyond laissez-faire economic policy; Thiel himself declared in a 2009 essay that he 'no longer believed that freedom and democracy are compatible' (Cato Unbound, 2009). The broadly ultra-libertarian worldview pervasive among elite figures in tech, treating democratic governance as an obstacle to technological acceleration and capital expansion rather than a legitimate constraint on power, places the tech elite at odds with the European Union, whose regulatory model is premised on precisely the principle they reject: that democratic institutions should govern markets, not the reverse.

For this faction, Europe matters because it is the jurisdiction most capable of restraining their business model. The EU has built the most developed regulatory apparatus in the world for holding technology companies accountable to public interest, and because the European single market is the world's second-largest consumer bloc, its regulations have impacts far beyond its borders. This dynamic, known as the Brussels Effect, means that global firms typically conform to the EU's standards rather than building separate systems for each jurisdiction, effectively turning European law into a global baseline for data protection, platform governance, and AI deployment (Bradford, 2021). It is this global reach that makes dismantling the EU's regulatory framework a strategic priority for the tech-aligned faction. In this sense, the conflict over digital regulation is fundamentally a contest over digital sovereignty: whether democratic entities retain the authority to govern the platforms that shape their citizens' political reality, or whether that authority is handed to firms whose commercial interests are directly at odds with democratic accountability.

THE PLATFORM TRAP AS A THREAT TO DIGITAL SOVEREIGNTY

Unlike Russian interference, which operates through identifiable bot networks and troll farms that existing counter-disinformation tools can detect, Big Tech's influence is built into the platforms that hundreds of millions of Europeans use every day, working through gradual erosion rather than coordinated episodes of disruption. Negative political content spreads nearly twice as far as positive content on social media (Stanford HAI, 2024), and recommendation algorithms exploit this asymmetry to create what researchers call a radicalisation pipeline, systematically steering users from moderate political content into increasingly extreme viewpoints (Ribeiro et al., 2020). European far-right parties have already learned to weaponise this digital infrastructure. For example, during the past two election cycles, the AfD flooded TikTok with AI-generated videos depicting overcrowded

migrant boats and fabricated scenes of immigrant violence, and an investigation found that a new TikTok account interested in German politics would have ~78% of its For You page populated by pro-AfD content (Global Witness, 2025). National Rally in France, Vox in Spain, and Law and Justice in Poland have adopted similar tactics, using AI-generated visuals to amplify right-wing and anti-immigrant narratives through platforms whose engagement-maximising algorithms reward inflammatory content (EDMO, 2025). This is a feature of platforms designed to maximise engagement for profit, and far-right parties across the globe have learned to exploit it while American tech owners have little incentive to correct it.

Moreover, American Big Tech firms have become active participants in undermining the European regulatory structures designed to constrain them. In the current term, Meta held 38 meetings with right-wing MEPs (up from a single meeting in the previous term) to lobby the proposed Digital Omnibus package, a Commission proposal that would weaken both the General Data Protection Regulation and the Artificial Intelligence Act by delaying enforcement, loosening data-processing restrictions for AI training, and reducing transparency obligations (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2026). Civil liberties organisations have characterised the Digital Omnibus as giving Big Tech exactly what it has been lobbying for (Liberties.eu, 2025). From outside Europe, the Trump administration has weaponised trade policy to shield these firms from regulation: Trump warned Europe to 'show respect to America and our amazing Tech Companies, or consider the consequences'; US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer threatened to use 'every tool at its disposal' against European digital regulation (Euronews, 2025; Fortune, 2025). The pressure is already fracturing Europe's coordinated response, as several member states have moved independently on platform regulation, with officials openly expressing doubt that Brussels can act quickly or forcefully enough (Reuters, 2026).

These dynamics are already outpacing the EU's institutional capacity to respond. Current AI tools can generate fabricated content convincing enough to dominate election-related algorithmic feeds; the next generation will produce entire disinformation ecosystems faster and at greater scale than any existing fact-checking infrastructure can process. When these capabilities converge with rapidly improving recommendation algorithms, the threat moves beyond content fabrication into something more structural: what could be called algorithmic opinion management, in which recommendation systems construct individualised information environments that isolate users from opposing perspectives entirely. Platform algorithms amplify like-minded content and limit users' exposure to opposing viewpoints. Research on echo chambers has shown that even small initial biases compound into widening polarisation across entire networks (Ahmmad et al., 2025). Thus, rather than encountering a shared informational commons in which competing arguments can be weighed, individuals online may be

segmented into algorithmically curated enclaves where their existing grievances are validated and reinforced.

CONCLUSION

The overt provocations of the Trump administration have produced limited electoral results in Europe, and they are unlikely to become more effective. The Republican coalition is too fractured, the European public too hostile, and the differences between American and European far-right interests too deep for public endorsements and diplomatic threats to directly reshape the continent's politics. However, the visible failures of traditional interference have obscured a more fundamental transformation. The platforms through which European citizens consume political information are owned by individuals who are ideologically opposed to the European regulatory frameworks that govern them. This is not a problem that can be resolved through counter-disinformation protocols or platform fines alone. European policymakers must begin treating digital infrastructure with the same strategic importance they place upon energy or defence, as a domain where dependence on foreign-controlled systems carries inherent political risk. That means not only enforcing existing regulation but building the infrastructure to replace the dependency: sovereign cloud services to end reliance on American providers who host two-thirds of Europe's computing needs, public-interest social media platforms that do not place democratic discourse at the mercy of actors with no commitment to its preservation, and AI systems developed and deployed under European oversight to decrease dependence on American and Chinese models. The limits of European sovereignty must now extend beyond defending borders and trade policy to include the institutional capacity to govern the digital systems through which citizens form political judgements.

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