

DEMOCRATIC BY DESIGN

Integrating democratic participation into
the ownership of tech companies



European
Partnership for
Democracy



HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
BRUSSELS
European Union | Global Dialogue



European Commissioners Henna Virkkunen and Dan Jørgensen speak to the media at the Berlaymont building in Brussels on June 3, 2026. | Thierry Monasse/Getty Images

How many times does the word “democracy” appear in the Tech Sovereignty Package?


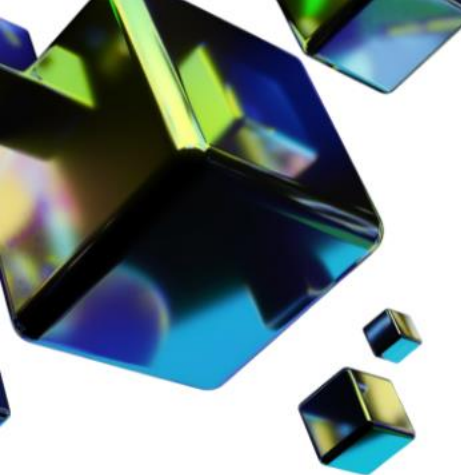
- a. 0
- b. 1
- c. 3

How many times does the word “democratic” appear in the Tech Sovereignty Package?

- a. 0
- b. 2
- c. 3







“As the US economy and government become increasingly dominated by hyperrich tech oligarchs, Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg embody a newly assertive ideological force in the governance of the digital public sphere: platform ownership. [...] On this basis I argue that Meta and X's ownership structure is distinctly oligarchic, as they are more directly controlled by individuals than other major platform firms such as Bytedance, Apple, and Microsoft, and, to a lesser extent, Google, Reddit and Bluesky.”

Paddy Leerssen, 'From Murdoch to Musk: Platform Ownership and the Political Economy of Online Content Governance' (2025) 2 *Platforms & Society* <<https://doi.org/10.1177/29768624251386260>>.





Research questions & methodology

1. Why should we integrate democratic participatory processes in the internal corporate structures of tech companies?

2. What are the best corporate governance models to do so based on ownership, purpose and control?


3. How can we incentivise these models in the EU, as part of the push for EU digital sovereignty and strategic autonomy?

Comparative analysis
of structure of selected
existing companies

**Review of existing
academic literature**
and policy-oriented
work on the topic

**2 stakeholder
workshops**

30 interviews with
stakeholders from
academia, civil society,
EU institutions and the
private sector



Limitations

**Organisational
aspects /
corporate
governance**

**Principle of
participation**

**Tech sector as a
whole**

**Looking at new
companies**

**Relevant outside the
EU**



Democratic participation

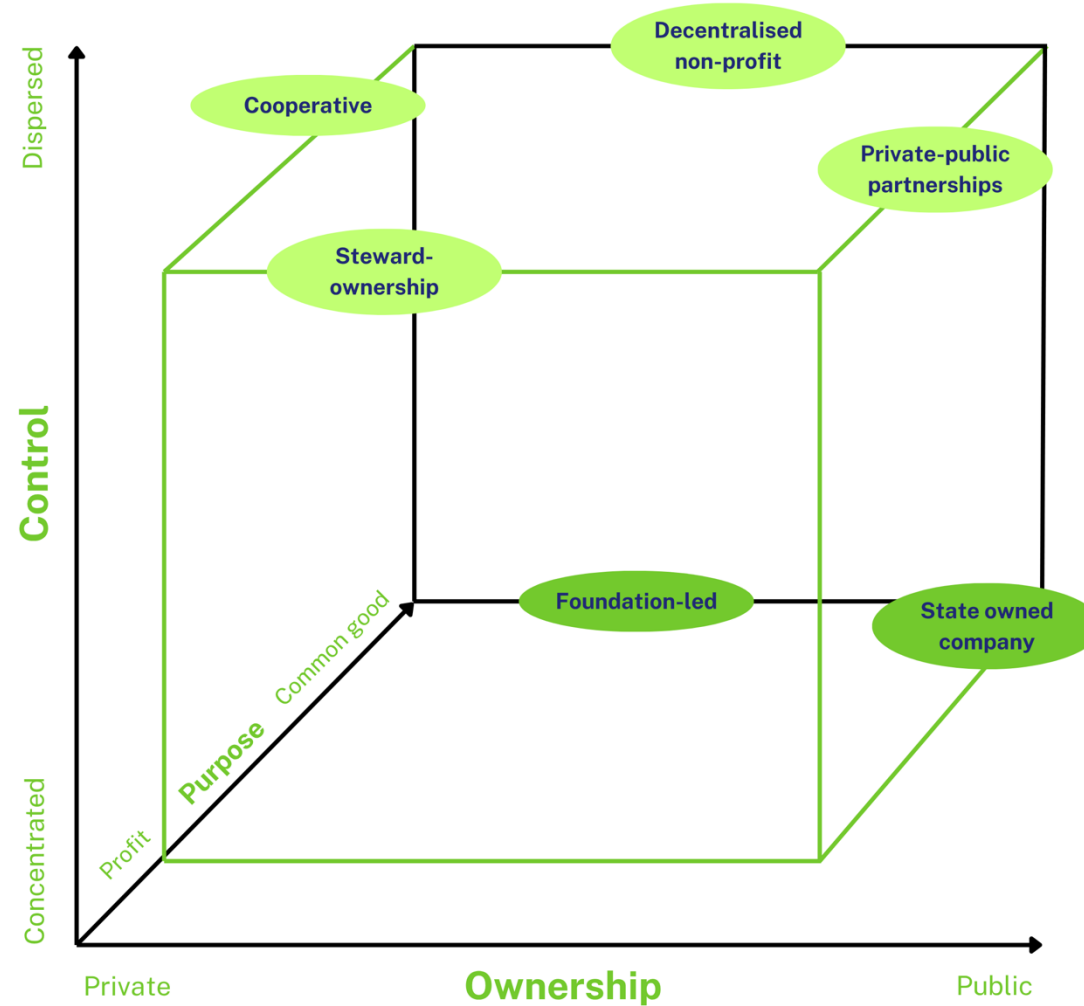
active involvement of a group of individuals in a collective process, in order to **maximise the number of individuals involved for better outcome** that is representative of the public interest.

- the number of individuals involved,
- the time invested in and the frequency of participation,
- the involvement of individuals,
- the extent of influence on the process with respect to the issues addressed; and
- the level of participation that individuals are entitled to.



Can we apply this to tech organisations?

A corporate governance analysis



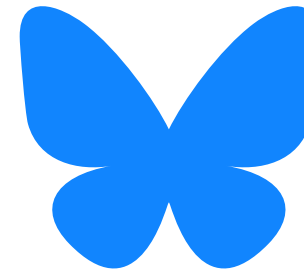
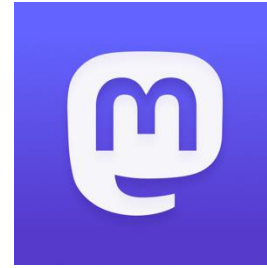
Big Tech



**“Mainstream”
tech companies**



**“Alternative” tech
companies**





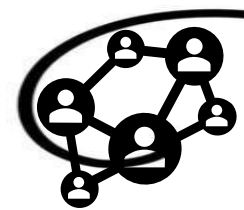
Some alternatives: more democratic models for dispersed control



Public-private partnerships



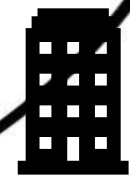
Media-inspired hybrid models



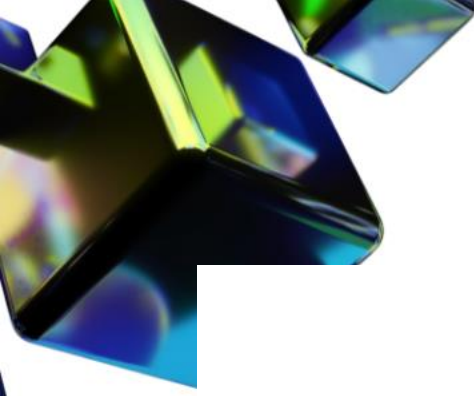
Decentralised no-profit



Cooperatives



Purpose-led companies



The big question: how do we get there?



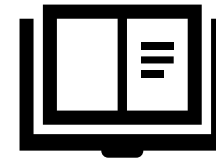
Legal requirements



Public procurement



Funding incentives



Evidence based
recommendations



More intervention

Less intervention



The background features a gradient from light green at the top to dark blue at the bottom. On the left side, there are several 3D geometric shapes, including a large rectangular prism at the top and several smaller cubes below it, all rendered in a metallic blue and green color scheme with highlights and shadows.

Q&A



Thank you!

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