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Christine Tapler BA

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ao. Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Gerda Falkner

Abstract

(English)

This master's thesis analyzes how the European Union is perceived by the United States in the context of digital policy and how the United States respond to it. The analysis covers the first Trump administration, the Biden administration, and the initial months of the second Trump presidency. Through a qualitative content analysis of official US government documents and media reports, the study finds that, throughout these administrations, the European Union is predominantly regarded as market-oriented rather than norm-driven. While both Trump administrations adopted a largely negative tone, portraying it as protectionist or obstructive, the Biden administration adopted a more constructive approach, emphasizing shared economic objectives and democratic principles. Clear patterns emerged in US responses: the first Trump administration was mainly reactive and rhetorical; the Biden administration focused on partnership; and the early second Trump administration intensified confrontation through sharper rhetoric and concrete countermeasures.

(Deutsch)

Die vorliegende Masterarbeit analysiert, wie die Europäische Union von den Vereinigten Staaten im Kontext der Digitalpolitik wahrgenommen wird und wie sie darauf reagiert. Die Analyse umfasst die erste Trump Administration, die Biden Administration und die ersten Monate der zweiten Trump-Präsidentschaft. Anhand einer qualitativen Inhaltsanalyse von offiziellen Regierungsdokumenten und Medienberichten kommt die Studie zu dem Ergebnis, dass die Europäische Union während dieser Amtszeiten überwiegend als marktorientiert und weniger als normorientiert wahrgenommen wird. Während beide Trump-Regierungen einen weitgehend negativen Ton anschlugen und die Digitalpolitik als protektionistisch oder hinderlich darstellten, verfolgte die Biden-Administration einen konstruktiveren Ansatz und betonte gemeinsame wirtschaftliche Ziele und demokratische Prinzipien. In den Reaktionen ließen sich außerdem klare Muster erkennen: Die erste Trump-Regierung reagierte hauptsächlich reaktiv und rhetorisch, die Biden-Regierung konzentrierte sich auf Partnerschaft, und die frühe zweite Trump-Regierung verschärfte die Konfrontation durch aggressivere Rhetorik und konkrete Gegenmaßnahmen.

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Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
DGA	Data Governance Act
DMA	Digital Markets Act
DPF	Data Privacy Framework
DSA	Digital Services Act
DSM	Digital Single Market
EU	European Union
FT	Financial Times
MPE	Market Power Europe
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NPE	Normative Power Europe
NYT	New York Times
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
TTC	Trade and Technology Council
US	United States
WHO	World Health Organization

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1. Introduction

In the current era, digitalization is a defining force that is reshaping societies, political systems, and markets around the globe. Although the integration of digital technologies into everyday life was already well underway, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic significantly accelerated this process, intensifying the reliance on digital infrastructure in both, the public and private sector. This digital transformation represents a fundamental change in the production, dissemination, and control of information. It therefore also raises critical questions about authority, governance, and power in the digital age. Not only has the internet improved access to information, but it has also diversified and intensified the ways in which information is exchanged, mobilized, and contested (Stengg 2024: 3-4). At the same time, the growing influence of digital technologies has raised political concerns – from data protection and disinformation to algorithmic bias and the dominance of a few powerful tech firms. This led to increasing calls from policymakers worldwide to define clearer legal and normative boundaries for digital platforms, particularly regarding the regulation of 'Big Tech'. It should not only protect consumers but also help businesses adapt to the pressure of rapid digital transformation (ibid.: 13-14).

In response, digital policy has also emerged as a central priority for the European Union (EU), reflecting the growing urgency to address issues such as data privacy, platform accountability, and fair competition in digital markets (European Commission 2021). In recent years, the EU has undergone a paradigm shift, positioning itself as a global leader in the governance of digital technologies, rather than merely as a regional regulator. This ambition is set out in the European Commission's vision to make the EU "a global leader" and "a global role model for the digital economy" (European Commission 2025a). This objective is being realized through the EU's digital agenda, a far-reaching policy programme encompassing legislation on digital infrastructure, the digitization of public services, and the protection of digital rights. These initiatives reflect the EU's dual aim of not only regulating its internal digital market but also shaping global digital governance by exporting its regulatory standards and promoting normative frameworks (European Commission 2025b). Consequently, this agenda constitutes the most comprehensive and far-reaching digital policy framework ever pursued at the European level (Stengg 2024: 15).

Now, this increasingly assertive regulatory role of the EU raises important questions about how the EU's pursuit of digital leadership is perceived internationally, especially in the United States (US). The power dynamics between the EU and the US are particularly evident in digital policy, as American tech giants, whose global influence has grown substantially, find themselves directly affected by the EU's regulatory efforts (Schraik 2024: 1-3).

Building on this context, this master's thesis explores how EU digital policy is perceived and by the US. While much research has focused on the EU's internal self-perception – particularly in relation to its identity – it is equally important to consider how external actors interpret and respond to the EU's global ambitions. As Diez (2005) notes, the EU's self-image may not always align with how it is perceived externally. To investigate this, the thesis analyzes US perceptions and reactions to the EU's digital policy efforts through a qualitative content analysis of official White House documents and media reports. It draws on a conceptual framework combining Normative Power Europe (NPE), Market Power Europe (MPE), and the logic of Weaponized Interdependence. The aim is to gain an understanding of how one of the EU's most influential external partners, the US, perceives, frames and challenges EU's digital policy.

1.1. State of the art literature review

In the context to the evolving importance of digitalization, digital policymaking has attracted growing scholarly interest, particularly regarding the evolving role of the EU in this field. The following literature review outlines key research and their findings on two interconnected fields: the development of digital policymaking in the EU and the EU's broader role in global politics. Both areas are central to the thematic focus of this thesis.

Bjola and Holmes (2015) were among the first to explore digital diplomacy as an evolving and increasingly important aspect of international relations. In their book, they emphasize the policy-related and institutional dimensions of digital diplomacy, examining the strategic approaches of the EU, the US, Japan, and China (Bjola / Holmes 2015: 199-200). Newman (2020) shifts the focus more specifically to digital policymaking within the EU. As digital technologies continue to transform European societies and economies, the EU has responded with a broad set of digital policies. He argues that a central challenge lies in balancing and

implementing market-making with market-correcting efforts – trying to foster economic growth while protecting citizens' rights (Newman 2020: 276-277).

Additionally, scholars have increasingly paid attention to the concept of digital sovereignty in the context of EU digital policymaking, with various authors offering different interpretations of its meaning and implications. Obendiek's (2021) analysis of digital sovereignty highlighted the EU's unique position in the global arena, situated between dominant US and Chinese tech powers. She explained that although digital topics are on top of the priorities in the EU agenda, the EU still struggles to establish its role as global actor. Rather than striving to compete with the US and China, she argued that the EU should build on its normative strengths and pursue a value-based digital strategy (Obendiek 2021: 11). Further, Braun and Hummel (2024) observed that, although the term digital sovereignty is widely used in analyses of digital developments, it often lacks conceptual clarity. They therefore proposed a more nuanced understanding of the concept by examining it within the context of data and digital spaces. They argued that a normatively justifiable interpretation of digital sovereignty must consider not only control, but also broader issues of justice, autonomy, and freedom (Braun / Hummel 2024: 11). Falkner et al. (2024) examined digital sovereignty as a new conceptual approach through which the EU seeks to establish guiding principles for internet governance. They highlighted a gap in the existing literature concerning the extent to which discourse related to sovereignty has translated into actual policy change in the digital domain (Falkner et al. 2024: 2100-2102). Through their analysis of recent developments in EU digital policymaking, the authors concluded that the EU has indeed moved towards greater regulatory control in this area. Although they observed policy change, they also noted that these changes were not always accompanied by discursive alignment with the concept of digital sovereignty (ibid.: 2114).

Within the context of EU's broader role in global politics, various conceptual approaches have been developed to capture its actorness. Among these, Ian Manners' (2022) work is particularly important because it formed the basis for subsequent discussions about NPE. He redefined the EU's role in international relations by emphasizing its commitment to promoting norms. In contrast, Chad Damro's (2012) concept of MPE offers a different perspective, emphasizing the EU's influence through its internal market. While a more detailed discussion

of these two approaches will follow in Chapter 2 on the theoretical framework, Diez' (2005) work on the identity-shaping dimension of NPE is noteworthy in this context. He argued that the EU forms its identity by contrasting itself with others (a process known as 'othering') and that this phenomenon is often overlooked by mainstream constructivist research. Rather than merely considering how norms influence EU foreign policy, he emphasized that presenting the EU as a normative power is an instrument for shaping its global image (Diez 2005: 614-616). More critical perspectives on NPE have also emerged, notably from Hyde-Price (2006), who adopted a structural realist standpoint. He argued that the EU's external actions are primarily shaped by strategic interests and power considerations rather than normative commitments. He criticized the overlooking of power dynamics by focusing too heavily on domestic and subnational factors (Hyde-Price 2006: 218-219).

Building on these conceptual foundations, subsequent research has further developed and applied the idea of the EU as a normative actor. For example, van Schaik and Schunz (2012) examined the EU's role in global climate politics, portraying it as a norm-driven actor. Del Sarto (2016) offered a more critical perspective by arguing that the EU's external promotion of norms and rules serves its own economic and security interests. Other scholars, like Morozov and Rumelili (2012), have focused on how the normative image of the EU is perceived externally. Their work highlighted how actors situated in liminal positions to the EU, such as Russia and Turkey, actively contribute to shaping the perception of European identity (Morozov / Rumelili 2012: 28-30). As part of a broader effort to systematize external perspectives on the EU's international identity, Skolimowska (2018) examined how the EU's self-identification as normative actor is viewed by external actors in different world regions and revealed that this identity is disputed and not widely accepted. Further, Schraik explored the EU's digital actorness in her 2024 dissertation, comparing its self-image with external perceptions from the US and Africa. She investigated to what extent the EU's external digital policies are presented and perceived to be interest-driven and analyzed their normative dimensions in self-presentation and external perception (Schraik 2024: 4-5).

While previous research has examined the EU's digital actorness and external perceptions of such, this thesis offers a novel perspective by shifting the focus to US perceptions and comparing three different US administrations (Trump I, Biden, and Trump II). Moreover, this

study is based on a different empirical foundation: it examines official documents from the three US administrations alongside relevant media reports. An additional innovative aspect of the study is the integration of not only the theoretical frameworks of NPE and MPE but also the concept of Weaponized Interdependence.

1.2. Research questions

This master's thesis is guided by two research questions. The first research question examines how EU digital policy is perceived in the US. It focuses on publicly stated perceptions of European digital policy, drawing exclusively on official positions and narratives, since internal or purely subjective perceptions are inaccessible. Therefore, it questions: ***How do the Trump (I & II) and Biden administrations differ in their perception of European digital policy?***

The second research question focuses on analyzing the administrations' announced actions towards EU digital policy. Broader political activities, such as general diplomatic relations or multilateral engagements, are deliberately excluded. It therefore examines: ***How do the Trump and Biden administrations act towards the European Union in relation to digital policy?***

2. Research Design

2.1. Theoretical lenses

This thesis draws on the concepts of Normative Power Europe (NPE) and Markets Power Europe (MPE) to analyze how European identity is perceived by the United States. These frameworks are particularly relevant because they highlight the role of norms and regulatory influence in the EU's external relations. They offer different yet complementary perspectives on how the EU exercises power and how it is viewed internationally. In addition, the concept of Weaponized Interdependence helps analyze how the US responds to these efforts based on global power structures.

First of all, the concept of NPE, introduced by Ian Manners (2002), redefined the EU's role in international relations by focusing on the promotion of norms. It was initially introduced as a concept to rethink the EU's role by moving away from predominant concepts of military and civilian power of Europe (Manners 2002: 235-238). Manners argued that the EU's strength particularly lies in its historically constructed normative basis and the commitment to these values. The normative basis has been developed through various treaties, declarations, policies, and includes five core norms: peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law, and human rights. Peace and liberty originated in the post-war-period, whereas democracy, rule of law and human rights arose later to distinguish democratic Western Europe from communist Eastern Europe. Additionally, he identified four minor norms: social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, and good governance (ibid.: 242-244). Further, Manners argued, the EU can shape international standards by diffusing those norms, a process he categorizes into six types: contagion (the unintentional spread of ideas), informational diffusion (through strategic communication), procedural diffusion (via formalized relations, such as cooperation agreements or membership of international organizations), transference (through the exchange of goods and services), overt diffusion (through the EU's physical presence in third countries), and the cultural filter (the adaptation of norms through local political learning and cultural context). Through these different types of norm diffusion, the EU can influence what is considered 'normal' in relation to international actors. Therefore, it acts normatively – as a normative power – in world politics (Manners 2002: 244-245). Overall, NPE refers to the idea that the EU grounds its actions in a set of core norms and seeks to exert

influence by serving as a model and promoting the global adoption of these values through diffusion (Schraik 2024: 21-25).

However, a related yet distinct concept is MPE by Chad Damro (2012), which provides an alternative viewpoint on how the EU exercises power. Damro (2012) interpreted the EU's external behavior primarily through its identity as a large, highly institutionalized single market. Although the EU frequently presents itself as a normative actor, he argued that it also uses its economic power to influence international norms and regulations by intervening in the market via economic and social regulation (Damro 2012: 682-684).

Damro stated that the EU has always been a significant player in the global economy, with a long-standing presence dating back to the Treaty of Rome in 1957. His conceptualization of MPE relies on three key characteristics: material existence, institutional features (regulatory standards), and interest contestation. Firstly, he stated that the European single market represents the EU's material existence as the world's largest industrialized market. Its size in the global economy is a significant factor in its associated power. Therefore, the EU is able to "[...] exercise its power in the international system by affecting material incentives and others' perceptions of possible outcomes [...]" (Damro 2012: 687). Secondly, the institutional structure of the EU shapes who contributes to MPE and how they do so. Often described as a regulatory state, the EU primarily governs through extensive economic and social rules. At the same time, MPE acknowledges the variations in EU decision-making processes and highlights the Union's capacity to externalize its institutional characteristics. Thirdly, various interest groups compete for regulation within the EU. Therefore, contestation of interests determines the outcome of internal regulation and its role in externalization (ibid.: 687-689). These features enable the EU to promote its economic and social policies beyond its borders, primarily through trade (agreements). Furthermore, Damro explained that MPE exercises its power in two stages. On the one hand, EU institutions

"[...] attempt to get other actors to adhere to a level of regulation similar to that in effect in the European single market or to behave in a way that generally satisfies or conforms to the EU's market-related policies and regulatory measures." (ibid.: 690)

On the other, it requires private or public non-EU targets to adhere to this level of regulation or behave in this manner. This is primarily intentional behavior because the EU, as a market power, intends to externalize market-related policies and regulatory standards. Overall, the concept of MPE also rethinks the EU's identity, viewing it not as a fundamentally normative actor, but as one that seeks to exert influence by externalizing its economic interests (Damro 2012: 696).

Having outlined the concepts of NPE and MPE, it becomes clear that they are closely related, which is why these two concepts form one of the two analytical foundations of this thesis. As the focus lies on the perception of the EU, the analysis draws on both NPE and MPE to examine whether the EU is perceived as an actor that promotes normative values or as one that primarily exports regulatory standards through trade.

The second theoretical framework employed in this thesis is the concept of Weaponized Interdependence, developed by Farrell and Newman (2019). It offers a structural explanation of global interdependence and argues that globalization has created network-based power asymmetries. It therefore contrasts liberal perspectives that focus on mutual dependence. According to the authors, the advancement of globalization led to new network exchanges and new power structures (Farrell / Newman 2019: 45). In general, the authors argued that networks determine the scope of action for different actors, resulting in asymmetric power relations. According to network theory, these structures form through a so-called 'hub-and-spoke' model, whereby nodes represent the actors within the network and the connections between them are indicated by ties. These ties can transmit resources or influence in both directions. A node's degree – which is the number of connections that it maintains – determines its position within the network: the more connections, the greater the influence. Once established, network structures tend to become fixed and difficult to disrupt. The most central nodes are usually found in advanced industrial economies, especially in the US. As a result, states occupying such central positions can weaponize global economic networks through either panopticons or chokepoints for their own benefit (ibid.: 54).

Farrell and Newman employ the 'panopticon' as an instrument to illustrate how certain states can exploit their position within global networks. Those that control important hub nodes can

gather large amounts of information. With modern technology, this has become even more advanced, as these states can also access data from internet providers, social media platforms and other digital services. This gives states an informational advantage, which they can exploit to influence international negotiations and shape public perception in a way that serves their interests (Farrell / Newman 2019: 55). On the other side, states that control key 'chokepoints' in networks can exploit this position by limiting or denying access to others. They can achieve this through various means, such as statecraft or exclusive legal authority. These chokepoints are important because states with physical or legal control over hub nodes can gain a strategic advantage. However, there are differences between countries in their actual realization, as domestic legal systems may restrict their ability to exercise such power. For instance, the EU has legal limitations that can hinder certain forms of weaponization. Therefore, a state's ability to exploit chokepoints depends not only on its position within the network but also on its national institutional framework (Farrell / Newman 2019: 56-58). The authors showed in their case studies from the financial and digital communications sectors that the effective weaponization of interdependence requires control over key network hubs and institutional capacity. Nevertheless, many states remain deeply embedded in existing network structures because the costs of disengaging often outweigh the benefits (ibid.: 74-76).

In summary, economic globalization has created new structural conditions by transforming decentralized patterns of exchange into highly centralized global networks. These network structures have reshaped the distribution and exercise of power, providing states with new tools of diplomacy (Farrell / Newman 2019: 74). In this context, the concept of Weaponized Interdependence is particularly relevant to this thesis as it provides a framework for understanding how the US uses its central position within global networks to exercise power, especially in the digital sphere. This is crucial for addressing the second research question, which explores how the Biden and Trump administrations engage with and act upon the EU.

2.2. Methods

To address the two research questions, this study analyzes two sets of data: primary sources, such as official US government documents and secondary sources in the form of media reports. Combining these materials allows for an analysis that captures both stated perceptions (the explicit framing of the EU) and announced actions (including both intended

and implemented measures in response to EU digital policy). Rather than quantifying media coverage, the analysis focuses on the discourse itself, aiming to reveal how EU digital policy is framed and interpreted by US governments. Furthermore, media sources are expected to report on the same policies as those covered in official government documents, as well as on potentially lower-level political initiatives that may be relevant to the analysis. As media reports are likely to provide a broader range of material, it is important to distinguish clearly between instances where journalists report directly on political statements and those where they offer their own interpretation or commentary, as this influences the interpretation and weight of the statements. At the same time, however, the analysis acknowledges that media representations can potentially be shaped by the editorial stance of each outlet and the personal views of individual authors, which may affect how EU-US digital relations are portrayed.

The material is analyzed through a qualitative content analysis that adheres to the principles of Mayring's (2015) approach. It emphasizes a systematic, rule-based process with clearly outlined analytical steps. In line with Mayring's concept of theory-driven analysis, the formation of categories is guided by theoretical frameworks that influence categorization decisions throughout the entire process. However, the analysis also remains open to inductive category development, allowing new themes to emerge from the material as appropriate (Mayring 2015: 84). This is applied in the following thesis by deriving categories deductively from the concepts of NPE, MPE and Weaponized Interdependence, while remaining open for additional inductive categories.

The primary unit of analysis in this study is the underlying EU policy to which the statements refer. This captures the broader EU policy context to which each statement refers, enabling the study to assess which aspects of EU digital policy attract attention and are considered significant by US stakeholders. By tracking the frequency and framing of these references, it is possible to compare administrations and media sources, and to reveal which policies receive more attention or are perceived as more significant. The second unit of analysis consists of individual statements referring to EU digital policy that are found in official US government documents or media reports. Each statement represents an instance in which a political figure

addresses, interprets, or responds to EU digital initiatives. The content, actors, and framing of these statements are examined.

The analysis is structured across three time periods: the first Trump administration (January 21, 2017 – January 20, 2021), the Biden administration (January 21, 2021 – January 20, 2025) and the early second Trump administration (January 21, 2025 – June 30, 2025). This enables possible shifts, continuities, or contrasts between administrations to be identified. Although the early phase of the second Trump presidency only covers a few months, its inclusion is useful. It allows for a direct comparison with the Biden administration and an examination of potential changes or continuities between Trump's first and second terms. This adds another dimension to the analysis by showing whether Trump's approach to EU digital policy evolved or remained consistent over time.

As the study compares three distinct political administrations, the analysis employs a case-comparative approach within the qualitative content analysis framework. The category system is applied to all three cases (administrations) to identify similarities and differences in how the Trump and Biden presidencies perceive and act upon EU digital policy.

To code the material, this thesis draws on Saldaña's (2021) approach, which defines coding as a cyclical, interpretive process and is more flexible than Mayring's (2015) approach. Codes are understood as concise labels or phrases that capture the essence of specific data segments, which can range from single sentences to entire paragraphs. The coding process involves organizing these segments into broader categories based on shared characteristics or thematic similarities (Saldaña 2021: 5-16). In accordance with Saldaña, the analysis proceeds through multiple coding cycles, allowing codes to be refined and reclassified during the process (ibid.: 87).

2.3. Data

As mentioned above, this study draws on two corpora of data. The first consists of fact sheets as primary source material, which were retrieved from the US government websites of the Trump and Biden administrations. For Trump's first term, data was retrieved from the 'News' section of the 'Briefings & Statements' page in the White House archives. A keyword search

for 'digital' – chosen for its broad coverage of areas such as the digital economy, infrastructure, innovation, and regulation – was conducted. Three fact sheets were identified as thematically relevant due to implicit or explicit references to EU-related digital policy.

For the Biden administration, the search was conducted on the archived White House website in the 'Briefing Room' and 'Statements and Releases' section. The documents were reviewed manually rather than being searched by the term 'digital' due to the lack of a keyword search function. The focus was on fact sheets to EU-relevant digital topics, such as data privacy and digital standards. Seven relevant documents were identified in this process, either directly addressing transatlantic cooperation or mentioning the EU in the context of digital policy.

For the current Trump administration, documents were collected from the active White House website via the 'News' section, using the keyword 'digital'. This search resulted in one fact sheets that was selected based on its thematic alignment with EU digital policy. Fact sheets were chosen as the sole type of document because they present formal, consolidated policy positions, typically reflecting the president’s and the administration’s official stance and strategic priorities. Using only fact sheets ensures comparability across administrations and avoids mixing formats with different purposes and rhetorical functions. Documents were included if they addressed EU digital policy, European digital norms, or US digital policy with European reference. The following Table provides an overview of the official US government fact sheets analyzed in this study.

Table 1: Overview of official US government documents used for analysis (Fact sheets) (author’s own visualization)

Administration	Source	Search term	Number of fact sheets
Trump I (January 21, 2017 - January 20, 2021)	White House Archive Trump	'digital'	3
Biden (January 21, 2021 - January 20, 2025)	White House Archive Biden	none	7
Trump II (January 21, 2025 - June 30, 2025)	Current White House Website	'digital'	1
			11 in total

The second corpus consists of media reports from three different media outlets. First, the pan-European news platform Euractiv was utilized, with particular attention to its 'Tech Brief' newsletter, which covers developments in EU digital policy (Euractiv n.d.). As the Tech Brief series only began in May 2019, an additional keyword search was conducted across the wider Euractiv website to provide coverage of the entire analysis period, which started on January 21, 2017. Euractiv was chosen because it provides specialized, and policy-focused reporting on EU digital regulation. Second, the Financial Times (FT), a British newspaper specializing in international business and policy, was included for the analysis because of its global economic perspective (FT n.d.). To counterbalance the EU-centric perspective of the European outlets, a third source was included: the New York Times (NYT), a leading US media outlet offering insights into American perceptions of EU digital policy (NYT n.d.). Covering both European and American media outlets allows for a more nuanced understanding of how US actors perceive and respond to EU digital policy.

Data collection efforts involved searching the three media outlets within the timeframes of the three administrations. In the Tech Brief newsletter, keywords such as 'digital', 'administration', 'Trump', 'Biden' and 'White House' were used to identify relevant entries. The analysis includes short thematic paragraphs within the newsletter, as well as linked full-length articles. Each relevant paragraph or article was treated as a distinct entry. Additionally, relevant Euractiv articles from the period 2017-2019 were identified using the same keywords and filtered within the 'tech' section of the website. In total, the analysis comprises 50 entries from Euractiv, including both newsletter content and separate articles, all of which explicitly or implicitly referred to EU digital policy in relation to the US. Unlike Euractiv's structured newsletter format of the Tech Brief, the FT and the NYT required broader search terms that combined political and thematic elements, since their content is not organized around recurring digital policy segments. A keyword search was therefore conducted using terms such as 'Trump EU digital', 'Trump EU tech', 'Biden EU tech' and 'Biden EU digital'. Through this search, 25 articles were selected in the FT, which are considered relevant based on their coverage of EU digital policy in relation to the US. Following the same pattern, 18 relevant articles were selected in the NYT across the three US administration periods. In all media outlets, articles were selected based on their thematic relevance to perceptions and actions towards EU digital policy. This included statements by US officials, reactions to EU regulations,

reference or mentioning of transatlantic cooperation, and reporting on the impact of EU policy on US interests. Table 2 summarizes the key parameters of this process. These include the selected media outlets, search terms used, and the number of relevant articles used for the analysis per administration.

Table 2: Overview of media reports used for analysis (author's own visualization)

Media	Keyword Search	Trump II	Biden	Trump I	Articles / entries used for analysis
Euractiv	'digital', 'White House', 'Trump', 'Biden', 'administration'	21	15	14	50
Financial Times	'Trump EU Tech', 'Biden EU Tech', 'Biden EU Digital', 'Trump EU Digital'	9	9	7	25
New York Times	'Trump EU Tech', 'Biden EU Tech', 'Biden EU Digital', 'Trump EU Digital'	8	4	6	18
		38	28	27	93 in total

Drawing on Table 1 and 2, the data used for analysis consists of a total of 104 documents. However, rather than examining the documents as a whole, the analysis focuses on individual statements extracted from them. A statement may consist of one or two sentences, but never of the entire article. Since most documents contain several, though in rare cases only one, the dataset includes 178 statements in total. These can be classified into different categories that need to be distinguished. First, there are original statements which are made by the President or the White House. Sometimes, the exact same statement may occur again in another White House document and count as duplication. Secondly, so-called reporting statements appear in the media, which are original statements that are reported in media articles by quoting the original statements, summarizing them, or providing contextual reporting. Duplications can appear here as well if several media outlets report the same statement or when one outlet mentions it several times. Without these duplications, the dataset consists of 145 statements. Thirdly, so-called media statements appear in reports as the direct comments or opinions of journalists. These predominantly appear in transition periods between presidencies and

require careful consideration, as they do not reflect the perceptions of the US. Therefore, they are not coded as statements from the US government but are used for contextualization in the discussion of the results.

Table 3 below illustrates how these different types of statements are distributed among the three US administrations and between the two datasets.

Table 3: total number of materials to be evaluated (author's own visualization)

Administration	Source	Documents	Statements (including repetition)	Statements (without duplication)
Trump I	Official documents	3	7	7
	Media reports	27	42	31
Biden	Official documents	7	19	17
	Media reports	28	40	36
Trump II	Official documents	1	4	4
	Media Reports	38	66	50
		104	178	145

2.4. Operationalization

The operationalization is structured around the two research questions: the first focusing on how the EU is perceived by the Trump and Biden administrations in digital policy, the second on how the different administrations act towards the EU in this policy field. In line with the theoretical framework, this thesis develops categories that guide the analysis of statements in official government documents and media reports.

To address the first research question, the analysis examines how US administrations portray the EU in digital policy, primarily as a normative or market-oriented actor. On the one hand, the first dimension is based on Ian Manners' (2002) concept of NPE, which, as previously discussed, describes the EU as an international actor that seeks to influence global affairs by promoting and disseminating norms. A statement is considered to fit this dimension when US

actors refer to the EU as upholding or advancing such principles in the context of digital policy. Indicators include references to data protection, democratic values, or the EU's advocacy for technology standards. On the other hand, the second dimension is based on Chad Damro's (2012) concept of MPE, which views the EU as a global actor that exerts influence through its market and regulatory reach. Accordingly, the EU exercises power by externalizing its economic interests and shaping international rules through trade and standard setting. A case is assigned to this dimension if US actors describe the EU as pursuing economic self-interest or leveraging its regulatory power to influence global digital governance. Relevant indicators include references to the EU's regulatory influence, its role in setting international standards or the economic impact of its digital legislation on US businesses. In both dimensions, the material is categorized based on whether the EU is portrayed accordingly with 'yes' or 'no'.

The second research question, which is based on the concept of Weaponized Interdependence by Farrell and Newman (2019), explores how the US responds to EU digital policy. This approach emphasizes how powerful states can exploit their position within global networks to exert pressure on others. Based on this logic, US actions are classified according to two contrasting dimensions: threat and cooperation. The threat dimension is derived from the core assumption of the theory that powerful actors weaponize network interdependencies by exploiting so-called chokepoints. A case is classified as 'threat' when US actors frame EU digital policy as a source of strategic rivalry. Indicators include criticism over EU regulatory dominance, criticism of European digital sovereignty, and growing pressure to roll back regulatory standards. In contrast, the cooperation category was developed inductively, capturing instances where actors express support for EU digital initiatives or signal a willingness to work together. This includes references to shared values, strategic alignment, joint initiatives, or regulatory coordination. Accordingly, statements are categorized in whether they reflect US actions that signal threat or cooperation to the EU, with each being coded as 'yes' or 'no'.

In order to connect the dimensions of perception and subsequent action, an additional 'neutral' category was introduced for both threat and cooperation. This is necessary because not every statement can be clearly assigned to either a 'yes' or 'no' category. Simply coding 'no' would be misleading in both cases: 'no cooperation' does not necessarily mean that the

statement is not mentioning cooperation and the same applies to threat. Therefore, the 'neutral' code covers cases where no indication of cooperation or threat is indicated – in other words the dimension is simply not addressed. This distinction makes the coding more accurate as it allows to differentiate between the absence of a reference explicit rejection. Table 4 outlines the operationalization structure.

Table 4: Operationalization for content analysis (author's own visualization)

Theoretical Framework	Dimension	Indicator	Category
Normative Power Europe (Manners 2002)	Normative perception	References to EU promoting norms; data protection; democratic values; technology standards	Yes / No
Market Power Europe (Damro 2012)	Market-oriented perception	References to the EU's economic self-interest; regulatory influence; trade; impact on US businesses	Yes / No
Weaponized Interdependence (Farrell / Newman 2019)	Threat	Announcing threatening actions against EU digital policy; protest over regulatory dominance; criticism of digital sovereignty; expressions of rivalry	Yes / No / Neutral
	Cooperation	Announcing actions that support EU digital policy; aligned regulation; strategic and cooperative dialogue; shared values	Yes / No / Neutral

3. EU Digital Policy

3.1. Contextualization

The EU's digital policy is shaped by a multi-level governance system that goes beyond traditional regulatory approaches. Although the EU still relies on legal instruments such as Directives and Regulations, it also makes use of mechanisms, such as the open method of coordination to shape member state policies. As digital technologies have developed and political responses have adapted, governing the digital realm has become more interconnected with other policy areas. Digital policy is now closely tied to areas such as competition, trade, security, fundamental rights, and industrial policy. This means digital issues no longer exist in isolation – they affect and are affected by many other policy areas, both within and beyond the EU (Newman 2020: 290-292). For this reason, the EU introduced new methods of managing digital governance, involving various stakeholders and levels of government, to keep up with technological changes (ibid.: 295-296).

The development of the EU's digital policy began as part of its wider aim to achieve economic integration and establish a Single Market. The EU has worked on aligning legislation on competitiveness across its member states to avoid regulatory differences. Since the 1980s, these efforts concentrated on sectors such as telecommunications, privacy, and copyright, which had largely been under national control. As internet-based commerce became increasingly important, the EU launched key initiatives like the eEurope programme. This aimed to strengthen the infrastructure of the digital economy, establish legal safeguards for e-commerce, and promote e-government services. It also included the 2002 e-Commerce Directive, which granted internet service providers protection from legal claims against the content on their platforms (Newman 2020: 280-285). Throughout this period, the EU ensured that its regulations supported innovation and were as market friendly as possible (Stengg 2024: 108).

Consequently, when developing digital policy in its early stages, the EU focused on maintaining light regulation to avoid slowing down the development of emerging technologies. However, as digital technologies began to affect more areas of policy and society, the limitations of this approach became apparent. That is why, around a decade ago, the European Commission started advocating for a reform of the regulatory strategy that would adapt digital regulation

within the framework of the Digital Single Market (DSM), particularly regarding e-commerce and online services (Stengg 2024: 21). As a result, the DSM Strategy was introduced by the European Commission in 2015. Described as a preparatory step towards integrating the EU into the global digital economy, the DSM Strategy represented a significant shift in the EU's digital ambitions (European Commission 2015). It was built upon three core objectives: improving access to online goods and services for consumers and businesses, creating suitable conditions for digital networks and services to function effectively, and supporting the growth potential of the digital economy. To achieve these goals, the Commission introduced a set of legislative proposals targeting key policy areas such as data governance, e-commerce, and digital infrastructure. Notable legislative milestones were achieved in 2016 and 2017, particularly in the fields of cybersecurity, digital connectivity, and public sector modernization. The most prominent initiatives included the elimination of mobile roaming charges, the adoption of the General Data Protection Regulation to modernize data protection frameworks, and the removal of unjustified geo-blocking practices to facilitate cross-border e-commerce (European Council 2020).

Alongside these internal developments, the foreign policy dimension of EU digital policy also became increasingly important. The external role of digital policy is evident in several significant transatlantic initiatives. For example, the EU-US Privacy Shield Agreement was adopted in 2016 and initially aimed to protect the fundamental rights of individuals when personal data was transferred to the US. This agreement requires companies to adhere to binding privacy standards, thereby excluding any form of indiscriminate surveillance (European Commission 2016). Although the Court of Justice of the EU later invalidated the framework, its principles influenced the subsequent development of the transatlantic data protection regime: the EU-US Data Privacy Framework of 2023. It ensured that personal data could flow freely and safely between the EU and the US, while embedding binding safeguards to limit access by US authorities. Companies were subject to strict obligations, supported by monitoring mechanisms (European Commission 2023). Additionally, the Trade and Technology Council (TTC) was established in 2021 as an EU-US collaboration on global trade, economic, and technological issues between the EU and US. Since its inaugural meeting in September 2021, the TTC has held six meetings. It operates through ten working groups that address critical issues such as AI, semiconductors, export controls, cybersecurity, and secure

connectivity (European Commission 2024a). Together, these initiatives demonstrate how digital policy has evolved from internal market regulation to a tool of international diplomacy and strategic cooperation.

EU digital policy measures were further intensified during the 2019-2024 Commission, when 'A Europe fit for the digital age' was declared one of the six political priorities. This led to policy reforms in areas such as cybersecurity, digital skills, education, connectivity, finance, and the completion of the DSM (European Commission 2024b). The EU has declared the 2020s to be 'Europe's Digital Decade' and has signaled its intention to lead the development of global digital standards rather than simply adopting them. By setting international standards and supporting digital transitions in developing economies, the EU is trying to establish itself as "a global role model for the digital economy" (European Commission 2025a). This ambition is being pursued through a programme of policy reforms. The first steps in this process were the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), European Data Strategy, and the EU Cybersecurity Strategy.

Most recently, the Commission's strategy for 2024-2029 also places digital transformation at the heart of all EU policies, viewing it as essential for enhancing competitiveness, achieving climate goals, ensuring security, and promoting social fairness. The EU intends to continue investing in areas such as AI, cybersecurity, and digital infrastructure and at the same time is promoting technological sovereignty (European Commission 2024c).

3.2. Key initiatives

To better understand the scope and priorities of the EU's current digital policy agenda, several key legislative initiatives are presented, including the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), the Data Governance Act (DGA), the Data Act, the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act, and the Cyber Resilience Act. Together, these measures represent some of the EU's most significant and far-reaching regulatory efforts over the past few years.

The DSA was proposed by the European Commission in December 2020 and officially adopted in October 2022. It addresses the increasing influence of online platforms, which have become an integral part of daily life for many EU citizens. However, they also present challenges,

including the dissemination of illegal content, misinformation, and threats to user safety. Therefore, the DSA introduces harmonized rules for intermediary services across the EU. It applies to service providers operating in the EU, regardless of their location of origin, and includes very large online platforms (more than 45 million EU-based users per month), online platforms, and hosting services. The legislation creates specific obligations that require them to adhere to stricter standards. These platforms must conduct risk assessments and implement mitigation strategies to address issues such as disinformation, online abuse, and public security risks. Hosting services must also provide tools for users to report illegal content. Therefore, under certain conditions, the DSA grants the European Commission supervisory powers over these platforms (LOEP 2025a).

Adopted alongside the DSA in 2022, the DMA focuses on ensuring fair competition in the digital economy and is one of the central legislative Acts of the EU digital strategy. Although there are thousands of platforms operating in Europe, a few major firms hold most of the market power. The DMA targets those so-called 'gatekeepers', major platforms such as search engines, app stores, and messaging services that control key digital services. On September 6, 2023, the EU officially designated six gatekeepers: Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, ByteDance, Meta, and Microsoft (European Commission 2024d). The DMA establishes regulations to prevent these firms from exploiting their dominant position and to promote fair and open competition online. For instance, they can no longer prioritize their own services in search results or app stores and are required to ensure fair access to their platforms for business users. The European Commission under the DMA has powers to request information, conduct inspections and take measures to ensure compliance. In case of repeated non-compliance (three violations within eight years), it can impose fines and, if necessary, open a market investigation (LOEP 2025b).

Adopted in May 2022 and as part of the European Data Strategy, DGA's primary objective is to establish a harmonized legal framework for voluntary data exchanges. A key aspect of the DGA is the establishment of shared European data spaces where data sharing can happen. The DGA also introduces rules for new types of data intermediaries and safeguards for the use of public sector data, with the aim of making data sharing both trustworthy and legally compliant (LOEP 2022). Alongside the DGA, the Data Act entered into force in January 2024

and applies from September 2025. It sets out cross-sector rules for the fair access and use of data. The Act clarifies who can use and benefit from data, ensuring that users – whether individuals or businesses – can access, share, or transfer data. The Act also enables public sector bodies to request data from companies in situations of public interest, especially during emergencies (European Commission 2024e).

Proposed in April 2021 and adopted in June 2024, the AI Act aims to harmonize rules for artificial intelligence by setting requirements to protect safety, fundamental rights, and the rule of law. As AI technologies become increasingly integrated into public and private services, the need for rules across the EU has grown. The AI Act takes a risk-based approach, under which providers of high-risk AI systems must undergo strict conformity checks, including transparency, accuracy, and human oversight requirements. Before deployment, these systems must also pass fundamental rights impact assessments. Implementation is assured through an AI Office within the Commission, a scientific expert panel, an AI Board with representatives from each Member State, and a stakeholder advisory forum (LOEP 2024a).

The Cyber Resilience Act, proposed in September 2022 and adopted in October 2024, is part of the EU's wider Cybersecurity Strategy. It is aimed at establishing mandatory cybersecurity requirements for all products with digital elements. Unlike previous sector-specific laws, this Regulation establishes a legal framework applicable to all connected products, whether they are linked directly or indirectly to networks or other devices. Building upon existing initiatives such as the Network and Information Systems Directive from 2016 and the EU Cybersecurity Act from 2019, it aims to close regulatory gaps and ensure consistent standards across the Single Market. The Act requires manufacturers to design and develop products in line with essential cybersecurity requirements, and to conduct risk assessments before placing products on the EU market. The Act's primary objective is to safeguard consumers and businesses from insecure digital products, thereby strengthening the EU's overall cyber resilience (LOEP 2024b).

4. Case Study I: Trump I administration

As outlined in Chapter 2, the results of the analysis are presented over three time periods and therefore structured along three case studies. The first period under examination is the first Trump presidency. Before analyzing statements from media reports and official documents, a brief overview of the context of the administration is provided.

4.1. Political context

Donald J. Trump, a businessman and real estate developer from New York, entered the American political arena relatively late. He first gained national attention in 2012 through his involvement in the 'birther' movement, that questioned President Barack Obama's birthplace and legitimacy in office (Zelizer 2022: 15). In June 2015, he announced his candidacy for the US presidency in the lobby of the Trump Tower in New York, declaring his intention to seek the Republican Party's nomination despite having changed party affiliation multiple times. Most experts dismissed his chances, citing his lack of political experience as he never held a public office before, his absence of a conventional campaign structure, and his strained relationship with the Republican establishment. Nevertheless, his personal wealth allowed him to bypass traditional campaign norms. By framing his campaign around the slogan to "Make America Great Again", Trump used the frustrations of voters who felt left behind by globalization and political elites (Bierling 2020: 31-33). The campaign was characterized by unprecedented media attention, largely driven by his extensive use of Twitter. At that time, the platform's political role was still evolving, and Trump exploited this to his advantage. Further, he attracted widespread attention with a campaign speech referring to Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists, and framing immigration as a central threat to the nation. His close ties to far-right figures also attracted attention, with some of them playing roles within his campaign team (ibid.: 40-45).

Further, Trump's Twitter presence during the campaign emphasized rejecting existing free trade agreements, promising to build a wall along the Mexican border to curb illegal immigration, and creating new jobs. His provocative rhetoric and unconventional communication strategy quickly generated a media coverage that shaped the public perception of his candidacy. On November 8, 2016, Trump won the presidential election

against his democratic opponent Hillary Clinton. Although Clinton secured a greater share of the popular vote (nearly three million more votes than Trump), he prevailed in the Electoral College by 304 to 227 (Zelizer 2022: 21). On January 21, 2017, he became the 45th President of the United States.

Donald Trump's first term in office was defined by his campaign promise to "Make America Great Again", which implied rolling back many of his predecessor's regulatory and international commitments. For this purpose, he relied heavily on executive orders, issuing them at a significantly high rate. On his very first day in office, Trump signed an order to scale back the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare). This was followed by withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, deregulation of financial markets and passage of the 2017 tax reform. The principle of 'America First' also guided his energy policy, emphasizing domestic independence over international cooperation (Conley 2020: 290). In foreign policy, Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), threatened to withdraw from the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and initiated US withdrawal from both the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Iran Nuclear Deal (Smith 2022: 109-110). Further, his migration policy was one of his most controversial and included the 2017 travel ban on individuals from several predominantly Muslim countries. Although it was officially framed as a foreign policy measure intended to protect national security, it was widely criticized as a 'Muslim ban' (Conley 2020: 287-288). Digital policy during his term in office was shaped less by legislative initiatives and more by Trump's personal use of social media. His unconventional communication style, speed, and directness set new precedents in the relationship between politics and social media platforms. More broadly, Trump's administration corresponded to a time at which digital technologies and tech companies moved to the center of public attention (O'Mara 2022: 222-232).

Trump lost the 2020 election to Joe Biden, but he refused to concede and repeatedly claimed that there had been widespread electoral fraud. He blocked the transition process by withholding funds and office space while pressuring officials to reject certification. These efforts culminated in the events of January 6, 2021, when Congress met to certify the Electoral College vote. That morning, Trump addressed supporters at the 'Stop the Steal' rally, repeating his claims that the election had been stolen (Smith 2022: 148-151). A large group of attendees

then stormed the Capitol, breached the building violently and halted the certification process. The assault resulted in five deaths. Although Trump posted a video later that day urging protesters to go home and calling for law and order, he expressed sympathy for his supporters. Democrats and some media outlets described the events as an insurrection and said that Trump had encouraged people to do this. In the aftermath, Democrats in Congress pursued impeachment proceedings (ibid.: 151-153).

The 2021 transition was the most violent in US history, symbolizing the deep divisions of Trump's presidency. Overall, his term was characterized by deregulation, nationalist economic policy, confrontational foreign relations, and an unprecedented use of digital media. It ended in a political crisis that shook both domestic institutions and America's international reputation (Smith 2022: 154).

4.2. US engagement with EU digital policy

Building on the political context outlined in the previous section, this chapter examines how the first Trump administration perceived and engaged with EU digital policy. As discussed in chapter 2.3., the analysis draws on both official documents and media reports and includes the evaluation of 49 statements. Those were coded according to the categories of Normative Power Europe (NPE), Market Power Europe (MPE), cooperation or threat. Although some statements appear in more than one article or repeatedly across different media outlets, these duplications were intentionally included in the discussion of the results. This is because their recurrence demonstrates which formulations or narratives were particularly significant and widely shared. Therefore, the analysis captures not only what was said but also how certain framings were emphasized and disseminated across sources.

4.2.1. Data basis and policy reference

The first unit of analysis focuses on identifying the underlying policy references within media reports and fact sheets. The data shows that during the first Trump administration, different policies played a central role. Most frequently, the implementation of digital service taxes was mentioned 11 times, followed by the Privacy Shield Agreement with 8 statements mentioning it. The prominence of these policies likely reflects both their immediate relevance at the time and their ongoing importance for transatlantic digital relations. Five statements referred to

the EU's AI Strategy and AI regulation in general, suggesting that the topic of AI was already gaining relevance during this period. However, 24 statements occurred without any specific policy reference. Rather than focusing on a single law or policy, these statements addressed the general discourse of EU digital policy and touched on themes such as protectionism, regulation, potential agreements between the EU and the US, and the implications for trade. This implies a focus on overall trends or themes in EU digital policy, rather than specific policies. However, the absence of many explicit policy references makes it harder to link the perceptions and consequent actions to concrete policy actions.

Further categorization was applied, as described in Chapter 2.3., based on the different statement categories. A distinction was made between original White House statements and their duplications, reporting statements that report on the original ones by directly or indirectly quoting or contextualizing it as well as their identical repetition, and media statements that stem from journalists. Since those reflect journalistic opinions or interpretations, rather than the intent of administration officials themselves, they were excluded from the coding. Nonetheless, they are considered relevant, and are discussed at the end of this chapter. Table 5 illustrates the distribution of statements in the analysis of the first Trump administration.

Table 5: Distribution of statement categories in the analysis of the Trump I administration (author's own visualization)

Statement categorization Trump I	
Original statement by White House	7
Duplication of original statement by White House	0
Reporting statement	26
Duplication of reporting statement	11
Media statement	5
	49 statements in total

4.2.2. Perception of EU digital policy: Normative vs. Market Power Europe

As outlined above, each statement was coded along the four predefined categories, which captured perceptions of EU digital policy and subsequent actions. The analysis examined the

frequency of these codes, initially focusing on perceptions of Normative Power Europe (NPE) and Market Power Europe (MPE). After excluding media statements from the coding, 44 statements were identified relevant for the coding of perceptions of EU digital policy. Among these, only one statement was coded as indicating NPE, whereas 43 statements were coded as not indicating NPE. Further, 32 statements were coded indicating MPE and 12 as not indicating MPE. This distribution shows that explicit recognition of the EU as a normative power in digital policy was notably rare. Specifically, none of the seven original statements by the White House were coded as reflecting NPE. Consequently, during the first Trump administration, the perception of the EU as a normative actor promoting values such as human rights and democracy appears to have found limited resonance.

Instead, the EU was repeatedly framed through the lens of market power. Across the datasets, the EU is more often than not identified as an economic regulator with influence in the digital domain. Thus, MPE emerged as a stronger explanatory lens through which to understand how the first Trump administration perceived EU digital policy than NPE. In this sense, regulation efforts from the EU within digital policy were perceived as market interventions with adverse economic effects on the US. Yet, this perception was rather negative as MPE was sometimes even linked to accusations of discrimination, protectionism, and overregulation. EU digital regulation is framed as using regulation against the US. For example, the US Secretary of Commerce denounced the French digital service tax in the following terms:

“The digital service tax that France and other European countries are pursuing is clearly protectionist and unfairly targets American companies in a way that will cost U.S. jobs and harm American workers [...]” (Statement 156, NYT, 10.07.2019)

Here, EU tech regulation was linked to broader trade disputes. The EU was thus portrayed as engaging in unfair trade practices that disadvantaged US companies and secured Europe an economic advantage at the expense of American workers.

The criticism of Trump towards EU digital regulation even extended to personal attacks on EU officials. Commissioner Margrethe Vestager, who was responsible for many of the EU’s digital regulation agenda at that time, was singled out repeatedly. Trump referred to her as the “tax lady” and accused her of being hostile to US interests:

“She hates the United States perhaps worse than any person I’ve ever met [...]. What she does to our country. She’s suing all our companies. [...]” (Statement 162, FT, 26.06.2019)

4.2.3. US responses: cooperative and threatening approaches

Having looked at the perceptions of EU digital policy, the focus now shifts to the subsequent actions of cooperation or threat. However, as discussed in Chapter 2.4., not every statement aligns neatly with all dimensions, hence the introduction of a neutral category. This category encompasses statements that evaluate NPE or MPE without suggesting concrete action. For the Trump I administration the analysis shows that, 11 statements actively reject cooperation efforts; 19 take a neutral position by not addressing cooperation efforts at all; and 14 suggest willingness to cooperate. When it comes to threats, 15 statements indicate threatening actions; 22 remain neutral towards threatening actions and do not address it; and 7 do not suggest any threats. The frequent occurrence of neutral codings suggests that whether perceptions are NPE or MPE related, they do not necessarily correspond with cooperation or threatening actions. This means that there are not always straightforward patterns linking perceptions to subsequent actions.

Nevertheless, the first Trump administration included specific arguments and examples of threatening or cooperative actions. The 15 statements indicating threatening actions varied in their scope and in their style and intensity. At times, they took the form of vague, pressure-inducing statements without concrete measures, such as Trump’s statement: *“They truly have taken advantage of the U.S., but not for long!”* (Statement 169, NYT, 19.07.2018). This was issued in reaction to the European Commission’s fine against Google. Such a reaction, portraying the EU as exploiting the US, was not an isolated incident, but appeared three times in the media. In this sense, threats served as warnings intended to exert pressure without necessarily taking specific action. These threatening statements are also closely related to the MPE perception as they expressed criticism of what was seen as overregulation and the negative economic impact of EU digital policy on the US.

At other times, however, threats were more explicitly used as an attempt to exert pressure on the EU. This included, for example, a statement from the White House in which it urged

the EU to “avoid heavy-handed innovation-killing” regulatory approaches, particularly regarding emerging AI technologies (Statement 141, Euractiv, 07.01.2020). More frequently, threats were directly and explicitly linked to retaliation and countermeasures, such as investigations into EU taxation or legal protections for US firms. Furthermore, tariffs were described as instruments of retaliation, not as offensive measures, but as defensive responses to what Trump characterized as the EU’s unfair treatment of American companies (Statement 155, NYT, 10.07.2019).

Occasionally, the discourse on digital policy shifted towards cooperation, usually framed around specific legal uncertainties or pragmatic needs such as data privacy agreements, data sharing, and the Privacy Shield. For example, one statement from the White House emphasized the importance of transatlantic commitments to data protection as the following:

“[...] [it] will demonstrate the strength of the American promise to protect the personal data of citizens on both sides of the Atlantic [...].” (Statement 175, Euractiv, 19.09.2017)

Some cooperative references emerged in context to trade negotiations, the digital economy, or efforts to advance the digitalization of the global economy. In a fact sheet from August 2019, the White House stated:

“We should promote positive development through new technologies, while also ensuring these technologies are not misused to repress the rights of citizens. President Trump is committed to working with other countries to find solutions to the challenges presented by the increasing digitalization of the global economy.” (The White House 2019, Statement 151)

By contrast, the one statement in which NPE was acknowledged, it appeared in connection with cooperation rather than threat. However, given the near absence of normative framings, this incident is marginal in the overall discourse.

Cooperation was also evident in statements that did not reference either NPE or MPE, suggesting that the focus could also be on neither normative or market power, but rather on pragmatic collaboration on general digital policy issues. Yet even in moments of cooperation,

it sometimes remained fragile and conditional. Commitments to negotiations were undermined by simultaneous references to potential conflict if no agreement could be reached, as Trump stated in early 2020, when he threatened to impose tariffs if negotiations failed (Statement 137, FT, 22.01.2020). Similarly, the Secretary of Commerce made threatening announcements by the end of 2020:

"[...] 'severe economic consequences' could be in store for the future of digital trade between Europe and the US, should the two parties not be able to find a way forward in building a functioning transatlantic data transfer accord." (Statement 131, Euractiv, 06.11.2020)

This demonstrates a dual nature of cooperation, meaning that although agreements were presented as possible to benefit both US and EU, they were sometimes overshadowed by threats of retaliatory measures.

In general, however, the results show a fragmented image: cooperation was occasionally affirmed, but just as often not addressed. Outright rejections of cooperation were comparatively rare. This suggests that cooperation did not tend to be central to the discourse. Similarly, threats were salient but not constant. However, they frequently appeared in the context of trade disputes.

The following Table 6 summarizes the tendency of US engagement with EU digital policy under the first Trump administration.

Table 6: Tendency of US engagement with EU digital policy under the first Trump administration (author's own visualization)

Tendency of Trump I administration	
Perception of EU digital policy	Market-oriented
Actions towards EU digital policy	Announcing threatening actions, cooperation possible

Overall, the analysis shows that references to the EU's normative power were, except for one statement, absent during the first Trump administration and therefore EU's leadership in global digital governance was not acknowledged. Instead, perceptions were dominated by the EU's

market power and criticism of such. This became evident through repeated references to the EU's economic self-interest, regulatory influence, trade conflicts, and the negative effect of its policies on US businesses. Reactions to EU digital policy tended to be rather reactive and situational, which means they appeared more as isolated responses than as part of a broader strategic approach. This is supported by the lack of underlying policy references as the majority of statements did not connect their positions to concrete digital policies of the EU. Mostly, these responses focused on criticizing the EU's regulatory influence and calling for a reduction of regulatory efforts. Cooperation remained possible, however, it was often tied to conditional engagement, rather than partnership. Furthermore, the discrepancy between media coverage and official documents is notable: while the latter avoided overt confrontation and made no mention of threatening action, the former expressed threats through retaliatory announcements, protests EU regulatory dominance and accusations of unfair competition.

As illustrated in Table 5, eleven duplications appeared in reporting statements. Within these, several narratives received particularly high salience and appeared repeatedly in all three media outlets: the personal criticism directed at the EU Commissioner was picked up the most – in five different articles. The warning of the US administration against heavy AI regulation of the EU as well as claims that the EU was taking advantage of the US was repeated three times. Accusations of unfair trade practices or unfair targeting of US companies were repeated five times and in four different articles. The repetition of these themes indicates that such framings were especially prominent in the media.

The media statements, that were excluded from the coding because they don't reflect US direct perceptions but rather journalistic comments, touched broader themes. One highlighted uncertainty about the future of the EU-US Privacy Shield under the Trump administration and another the growing divergences over digital taxation. Further, one pointed out how Washington might react to EU's measures and potentially intensifying disputes at the 2018 G20 summit. In addition, two statements noted that the Trump administration appeared to widen the cultural gap between the US and the EU regarding approaches to privacy protection.

5. Case Study II: Biden administration

The second period covers the Biden administration, lasting from January 21, 2021, until January 20, 2025. As in the previous case study, an evaluation of the statements is preceded by a discussion of the political context of the administration.

5.1. Political context

Joseph R. Biden entered his presidency with a long political career that spanned over 40 years. His early engagement in politics began at the local level as a county councilman before he moved to national politics. From 1973 to 2009 Biden represented the state of Delaware in the US Senate as a member of the Democratic Party. Upon leaving the Senate, Biden served as the 47th Vice President of the US under Barack Obama from 2009 until 2017. Biden had already attempted to secure the presidency twice before, in 1988 and again in 2008, but both campaigns ended unsuccessfully (Gale 2021: 7).

Speculation about Joe Biden's candidacy for the 2020 election began in early 2019 and culminated in April of that year with the official announcement of his campaign to challenge President Donald Trump. From the outset, Biden quickly established himself as one of the most prominent candidates within the Democratic field. The election campaign itself unfolded under highly unusual circumstances due to the outbreak of COVID-19 (ibid.: 81-82). While early polls in 2020 indicated an advantage for Trump, the rapid escalation of the pandemic dramatically altered the political landscape. Public criticism of Trump's response – widely seen as slow and inadequate – combined with his own infection in the fall of 2020, pushed the pandemic to the center of political debate (Wayne 2022: 3-5). Consequently, for Biden, the crisis limited the possibility of traditional in-person campaigning, forcing his team to rely on alternative strategies such as virtual town halls, telephone outreach, and other remote formats (Gale 2021: 11).

In general, Biden's campaign message emphasized the restoration of democratic values, the protection of institutions, and the promotion of unity. He promised to lead with cooperative diplomacy abroad and to focus on domestic issues, such as combating the pandemic, revitalizing the economy, addressing systemic racism, reforming immigration, and confronting climate change. He also pledged to expand healthcare. These promises resonated with an

electorate increasingly concerned with the state of the pandemic, the economy, and Trump's often inaccurate statements. In the election, Biden secured more than 81 million votes, around seven million more than Trump. In the Electoral College, Biden won 309 votes to Trump's 232, the same margin by which Trump had defeated Hillary Clinton in 2016 (Wayne 2022: 6).

As discussed in Chapter 4.1, Biden's inauguration in January 2021 was overshadowed by the Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021. The occasion, which is typically celebrated as a peaceful transition of power, was instead characterized by heightened security and tension. Nevertheless, on his first days in office, Biden swiftly began to implement his priorities. He rejoined the WHO and the Paris Climate Agreement, stepped up vaccination efforts to combat the pandemic, and reversed restrictive immigration measures such as the travel ban. He also halted the construction of the US-Mexico border wall and ordered a review of regulations from the final days of the Trump administration. The overarching theme of his early presidency was national unity and a return to a pre-Trump governance (ibid.: 30-33).

Overall, during his presidency, Biden sought to distance himself from his predecessor's unilateral 'America First' approach. He emphasized internationalism and cooperative leadership, as well as strengthening ties with traditional allies, particularly in Europe. His administration expressed a commitment to revitalizing NATO, repairing democratic alliances, and confronting global challenges within a multilateral framework. Biden criticized Trump's trade war with China, his tolerance of Russian election interference, and his personal diplomacy with autocratic leaders. Instead, Biden sought to present the US as a cooperative leader. He also aimed to rejoin the nuclear deal with Iran, though negotiations failed when Tehran refused to accept new conditions (Wayne 2022: 57-62). Beyond these efforts, Biden was confronted with multiple international crises and challenges during his administration. These included Russia's ongoing cyber operations and hostility towards Ukraine, and China's assertive economic and territorial policies. There were also conflicts requiring US diplomatic intervention, such as the fighting between Hamas and Israel (ibid.: 172-173). Overall, Biden's presidency was shaped by the extraordinary context of the pandemic, the aftermath of the Capitol insurrection, and a shifting global order (Wayne 2022: 188).

5.2. US engagement with EU digital policy

This chapter now turns to the Biden administration's engagement with EU digital policy. Following the same approach as in the Trump I analysis, 59 statements from media reports and official documents during the Biden administration were examined. As before, duplications of statements were included in the analysis to capture the prominence and salience of key narratives. This captures how certain framings were particularly emphasized.

5.2.1. Data basis and policy reference

First, the analysis of the underlying EU policies shows that certain policies clearly dominated the discourse. The Data Privacy Framework (DPF) with 13 and both the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) with 11 statements were prominently addressed, reflecting a focus on transatlantic relations around privacy regulation as well as digital competition. These flagship EU initiatives were developed during Biden's term, which is why they are particularly relevant in this context of EU-US interactions. The Trade and Technology Council (TTC) was mentioned 21 times. 14 statements do not refer to a specific policy, instead addressing general topics such as digital policy, EU-US cooperation, or technological regulation. Those are only found in media reports, whereas all official documents contain explicit policy references. As the majority of statements occur with specific policy reference it is easier to link the perceptions and consequent actions to concrete policy actions in the following interpretation.

In the same pattern as in the analysis of the first Trump administration, further distinction is made regarding the statement category. Again, a distinction is made between original statements by the White House, their identical repetitions, reporting statements that directly or indirectly quote the original ones as well as their duplications, and media statements coming from journalists. Media statements were excluded from the coding as they do not reflect the intentions of the administration but are still briefly examined at the end of this chapter. Table 7 demonstrates the distribution of statement categories in the analysis of the Biden administration.

Table 7: Distribution of statement categories in the analysis of the Biden administration (author's own visualization)

Statement categorization Biden	
Original statement by White House	17
Duplication of original statement by White House	2
Reporting statement	32
Duplication of reporting statement	4
Media statement	4
	59 statements in total

5.2.2. Perception of EU digital policy: Normative vs. Market Power Europe

First, the material was analyzed and coded according to the categories of Normative Power Europe (NPE) and Market Power Europe (MPE) for the perception of digital policy by the US. After excluding media statements from the coding, the results of 55 statements show a rather balanced distribution: 25 were coded as indicating NPE, whereas 30 were coded as not indicating NPE. This suggests that references to NPE were present but not dominant. Concerning MPE, 41 statements were coded as indicating a MPE perception, while 14 do not. This shows a slight tendency to a more market-oriented perception of EU digital policy.

Overall, under Biden, the EU is perceived more frequently as NPE than it was under Trump I. The normative references emphasize that EU and US digital policy approaches are built on shared values, such as rejecting technologies that undermine democracy, establishing value-based digital governance, and protecting human rights, freedom, and inclusivity in the digital space. For example, in a fact sheet from December 2022 the White House highlights the objectives of the TTC, including the goal of promoting values online:

“Advancing the principles of the Future of the Internet – protection of universal human rights and fundamental freedoms, a global internet, and inclusive and affordable access to the Internet – which are global in scope. Deepening cooperation between U.S.- and EU-funded emergency mechanisms in support of human rights defenders worldwide. [...]” (The White House 2022a, Statement 87)

Furthermore, numerous statements emphasize the shared commitment to facilitating data flows, upholding the protection of citizens, as well as strengthening, and safeguarding democratic standards. In the announcement of the DPF in 2022 it is highlighted that it:

“[...] underscores our shared commitment to privacy, data protection, the rule of law, and our collective security as well as our mutual recognition of the importance of trans-Atlantic data flows to our respective citizens, economies, and societies.” (The White House, 2022b, Statement 101)

Such statements indicate instances in which the EU is associated with value-based digital governance, particular in areas related to democracy, human rights, and the protection of individuals.

However, the analysis shows a clearer emphasis on market-oriented perceptions of EU digital policy, as they are referenced more frequently than normative perceptions. Even when shared values are acknowledged, they are often embedded within narratives of competitiveness and regulatory coordination between the US and EU. In other words, the EU is often perceived as a market regulator and this perception seems to determine transatlantic economic relations. This also means that in many cases, the discussions revolve around economic strategy, rule-based governance, and joint investments in the digital future and on the use of digital technology:

“TTC working groups are broadening and deepening U.S.-EU cooperation in both trade and technology [...], including cooperation on technology standards, sustainable trade, support for innovation, export controls, efforts to counter the misuse of technology that undermines the functioning of democracies and human rights [...].” (The White House 2013, Statement 83)

Similarly, the statement of June 2021 concerning the TTC emphasized the importance of deepening trade and investment ties between EU and US to align technology standards and promote a digital transformation based on innovation and democratic values:

“[it] will expand and deepen trade and investment ties, align key policies on technology and standards, launch a new initiative on biotechnology and genomics, and drive a

digital transformation that boosts innovation and is based on democratic values." (The White House 2021, Statement 125)

At the same time, this administration period also features moments of criticism. For instance, the US Secretary of Commerce criticized EU regulation as being overly restrictive and potentially harmful to US companies, portraying EU digital policies as protectionist. At times, US representatives also argued that draft EU legislation unfairly targeted American firms:

"This is not the first time US officials have complained about EU draft legislation unfairly targeting American companies. Last June, the US accused Brussels of pushing 'protectionist' technology policies that were specifically targeting American companies." (Statement 107, FT, 18.12.2021)

These complaints often even included calls to reduce the impact of EU regulations on US businesses, thereby reinforcing the idea that EU digital policy acts as a protectionist tool. While these criticisms acknowledge the EU's market power and global regulatory influence, they simultaneously portray it in a restrictive and negative light.

5.2.3. US responses: cooperative and threatening approaches

Further, the categories of cooperation and threat were analyzed to identify the consequent actions resulting from US perceptions of EU digital policy. Again, as stated in chapter 2.4., not every statement aligns with all dimensions, which is why the neutral category is used. This category includes remarks that evaluate NPE or MPE without corresponding to concrete actions. The analysis shows that 40 statements indicate cooperation efforts, while 5 do not and 10 remain in a neutral position by not addressing it. Similarly, threatening actions appear in only 2 statements, whereas 40 contain no threats and 13 remain neutral. This suggests that explicit references to threat are rare, while most statements lean towards cooperative positions.

In the analysis of the Biden administration, it becomes evident that anticipation of cooperation mostly emerges as a direct outcome of NPE framings. Cooperation is presented as necessary in order to uphold shared values, and to shape the global order together. This is expressed through references to consultations and dialogue, institutionalized cooperation (for example

on the TTC), and active efforts to strengthen existing frameworks. In this sense, US Secretary of Commerce noted the following:

“This is a culmination of our joint efforts to restore trust and stability to transatlantic data flows, and is a testament to the enduring strength of the US-EU relationship and our shared values [...]” (Statement 92, FT, 07.10.2022)

However, cooperation is also related to MPE perceptions, where the emphasis is on harmonizing global digital regulation and competition policy, particularly regarding cross-border digital trade, and regulatory alignment. Often, cooperation is presented in market-driven terms. For example, one statement highlights the EU-US Data Privacy Framework in the following way:

“The EU-US data privacy framework will [...] create greater economic opportunities for companies and citizens on both sides of the Atlantic [...]. It will enable a continuous flow of data that underpins more than a trillion dollars in cross-border trade and investment every year.” (Statement 93, FT, 07.10.2022)

Importantly, cooperation is not presented as one-sided leadership, but rather as the EU and the US working together to achieve digital leadership and increase economic opportunities for both. These statements evaluate cooperation positively, associating it with strength, trust, shared economic norms, and practical collaboration in areas such as competition policy and data flows. The importance of the transatlantic relationship is also particularly underscored in the fact sheets on the TTC and the DPF, where it is repeatedly emphasized as a cornerstone of digital policy collaboration. Overall, this confirms that, even under Biden, the EU continued to be predominantly perceived through the lens of market power, with economic cooperation remaining central.

Further, cooperation was also central in cases where it was not presented as a direct result of NPE or MPE. Instead, cooperation focused more on joint economic and technological priorities:

“US President Joseph Biden, European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen will meet for a second time to ‘review the

strong cooperation between the United States and the European Union’, including digital infrastructure and artificial intelligence.” (Statement 76, Euractiv, 29.09.2023)

Nonetheless, the two statements coded as threatening actions contain warnings that the US might adopt a tougher stance against EU’s regulation over US tech companies. It was argued that these measures could disadvantage American’s Bic Tech:

“The US has warned the EU against pursuing ‘protectionist’ technology policies that exclusively target American companies, ahead of Joe Biden’s first presidential visit to Brussels.” (Statement 116, FT, 15.06.2021)

Equally notable is one statement from early January 2025 that constitutes an exception. It relates to the transition period from the Biden to the (already elected) Trump II administration. While it falls within the temporal scope of Biden’s term of office, including it without consideration of this thematic mismatch could distort the interpretation of Biden’s partnership-oriented narrative. Specifically, it reflects anticipated threats under the new Trump II administration and possible shifts from Biden to the new President Trump.

Table 8 provides an overview of US engagement with EU digital policy during the Biden administration.

Table 8: Tendency of US engagement with EU digital policy under the Biden administration (author’s own visualization)

Tendency of Biden administration	
Perception of EU digital policy	Market-oriented
Actions towards EU digital policy	Focus more on cooperation

Overall, the Biden administration’s arguments demonstrate that, although perceptions of the EU’s market power remain common, they tend to form cooperative narratives. While statements repeatedly highlight the EU’s regulatory influence on trade, competition, and data flows, these perceptions are predominantly presented as opportunities for collaboration through institutional mechanisms such as the TTC and the DPF. However, this emphasis should be interpreted considering the source material. Since several of the analyzed fact sheets focus

specifically on these initiatives (three on the TTC and two on the DPF), the prominence of cooperative framing reflects the documents' thematic orientation. At the same time, Biden's discourse differs from Trump's in that it also recognizes NPE. References to shared democratic values, data protection principles, and the establishment of technology standards portray the EU not only as an economic regulator, but also a partner in shaping global norms. Although NPE is not dominant, they often translate into concrete cooperative practices, such as agreements on data privacy, joint AI initiatives and the harmonization of regulatory frameworks. Even though criticism of EU digital regulation does occur, particularly in the context of protecting US businesses, it is typically not accompanied by threatening rhetoric or retaliatory action and most notably, is limited to two occurrences.

As shown in Table 7, six duplications appeared: two duplications from official statements and four from reporting statements. Within these, again, certain narratives appeared repeatedly in media reports of different media outlets, which indicates that they were particularly salient. Two different articles emphasized the criticism of the DSA and DMA to be protectionist and harmful to US companies, including threatening warnings that the US might respond more forcefully. The concern about the DMA's scope to be limited to a small group of major tech firms, also came up two times. Finally, in two fact sheets the strong transatlantic partnership based on shared values and the thematic priorities of the TTC were addressed.

As mentioned above, media statements (four in total) were excluded from the coding process since they do only reflect journalistic comments of opinions. In the analysis of the Biden administration three media statements addressed expectations of closer transatlantic cooperation under Biden and Harris. Particularly in the weeks before the election in November 2024, they referenced potential engagement through the TTC. The fourth media statement highlighted the contrast between Biden and the previous Trump administration and noted that Trump had pursued a more deregulatory approach in EU-US relation within the digital domain.

6. Case Study III: Trump II administration

The third case study examines the second Trump administration. It begins with an overview of the 2024 presidential election and Trump's initial months back in office, before turning to the analysis of statements from various media reports and one official document.

6.1. Political context

In November 2022, Donald J. Trump officially declared his candidacy for the 2024 presidential election, positioning himself for a rematch with President Joe Biden, who announced his re-election campaign in April 2023. The campaign unfolded amid extraordinary circumstances: Trump refused to participate in the Republican primary debates while simultaneously being embroiled in multiple legal proceedings. In October 2023, he was fined more than 350 million US dollars in a civil fraud case. The Colorado Supreme Court even disqualified him from the ballot due to his involvement in the events of January 6, 2021. Nevertheless, when the Republican primaries began in January 2024, Trump entered as the dominant candidate. In May 2024, he was convicted on all counts in a criminal trial, becoming the first former US president and presidential candidate to be convicted of a felony. However, the conviction did not weaken his campaign. Instead, public discourse increasingly focused on President Biden's declining health, particularly after he repeatedly lost his train of thought during the June debate. The election entered a decisive phase after Trump was the victim of an assassination attempt in July 2024, as well as Biden's withdrawal from the presidential race. Vice President Kamala Harris then assumed the Democratic nomination. The final weeks of the campaign were characterized by heightened rhetoric, including Trump's inflammatory comments about Harris' ethnic identity and the ensuing heated public debates (Chávez 2024).

On November 5, 2024, Trump secured a clear victory, defeating Harris with 312 electoral votes to 226, which was even an improvement on his performance in 2020. As previously mentioned, the election had several historic dimensions. At the age of 78, Trump became both the oldest president-elect in US history and the second president ever to reclaim the office after a prior defeat. Furthermore, Trump became the first convicted felon to win a US presidential election (Goldmacher / Lerer 2024).

Following his inauguration in January 2025, Trump set out his ambitious policy plans. Domestically, he announced the largest mass deportation operation in US history, coupled with significant tightening of asylum regulations and expansion of border enforcement. His economic programme emphasized protectionism, with tariffs on imports designed to strengthen domestic industries. Meanwhile, he pledged to reverse Biden's climate initiatives, prioritizing instead expanded oil and gas production and greater reliance on fossil fuels. The administration also signaled a close relationship with the technology sector, most visibly through Trump's ties to Elon Musk. Musk had already played a prominent role during the campaign and was expected to exert considerable influence over economic and technological policy. In terms of foreign affairs, Trump signaled a renewed commitment to 'America First' and stronger support for Israel. He urged Ukraine to accept negotiations and intensified his criticism of NATO. His return to office also renewed concerns about transatlantic relations, particularly because of his longstanding positive remarks for Russian President Vladimir Putin. Despite multiple indictments, a criminal conviction, and accusations of authoritarianism, his comeback was nevertheless welcomed by supporters (Ostry / Bösch 2024).

6.2. US engagement with EU digital policy

In the same way as in the analysis of the first Trump and Biden administration, the following chapter focuses on the analysis of 70 statements for the Trump II administration originating from both media reports and official documents of the White House. Again, those statements were coded according to the predefined categories of Normative Power Europe (NPE), Market Power Europe (MPE), cooperation efforts, and threatening announcements. Statements may appear different articles or across different media outlets, these identical repetitions of statements were included in analysis, as repeated statements point to significant and widely circulated narratives in the media.

6.2.1. Data basis and policy reference

First, the underlying EU policies are evaluated. It shows that the majority of statements addressed the EU's flagship regulatory initiatives: the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) were addressed in 37 statements. The Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act also emerges as an important point of reference, featuring in ten statements. In contrast, 23 statements do not make any specific policy references, instead addressing EU digital policy

more generally rather than through concrete regulatory initiatives. Therefore, the analysis of the Trump II administration is rather focused on the three Acts as they constitute the primary regulatory developments of this period, although a smaller number of statements refer to EU digital policy in more general terms.

Additionally, a distinction is made regarding the statement category. As mentioned in the previous chapters, different statement categories are distinguished: original statements by the White House and their repetitions, reporting statements that quote original statements as well as their duplications, and media statements that reflect journalistic evaluations or opinions. Again, the latter were excluded from the coding because of not reflecting US perceptions and are discussed at the end of chapter 6. Table 9 shows the distribution of these different categories in the analysis of the second Trump administration.

Table 9: Distribution of statement categories in the analysis of the Trump II administration (author's own visualization)

Statement categorization Trump II	
Original statement by White House	4
Duplication of original statement by White House	0
Reporting statement	43
Duplication of reporting statement	16
Media statement	7
	70 in total

6.2.2. Perception of EU digital policy: Normative vs. Market Power Europe

The analysis followed the same procedure by coding these statements according to the categories of Normative Power Europe (NPE), Market Power Europe (MPE), and cooperative or threatening actions. After excluding media statements, 63 statements were coded accordingly. The results show that no statement was coded as indicating NPE, whereas all 63 statements were coded as not indicating NPE. In contrast, 62 statements were coded as indicating a MPE perception, while one does not. This reveals the following trend: references to the EU as a normative actor in digital policy are absent, whereas perceptions of the EU as a market regulator appear, with one exception, almost universally.

During the second Trump administration, European digital policies, particularly the DSA and DMA, were portrayed as trade barriers that disproportionately target US companies. While the EU's market power was acknowledged, it was framed negatively: the initiatives were criticized for imposing excessive fines, stifling innovation, and placing American firms at a structural disadvantage in global competition. EU measures were described as protectionist, using trade negotiations to the disadvantage of US economic interests. They were seen less as isolated regulatory initiatives but as part of a broader debate over "unfair trade practices" (Statement 5, FT, 23.05.2025). Trump repeatedly reinforced this framing himself:

"[...] Trump has directly attacked EU penalties on American companies calling them a 'form of taxation', while comparing fines on tech companies with 'overseas extortion'."
(Statement 25, FT, 28.03.2025)

Additionally, official statements from the National Security Council supported this perspective, offering further evidence that this perception was a key part of the discourse during the second Trump administration:

"'This novel form of economic extortion will not be tolerated by the United States [...]. Extraterritorial regulations that specifically target and undermine American companies, stifle innovation and enable censorship will be recognized as barriers to trade and a direct threat to free civil society'." (Statement 8, NYT, 23.04.2025)

Consequently, the EU was portrayed not only as anti-American but also as hindering the growth of US companies and as unfairly targeting the American technology sector. Such statements emphasize the US administration's critical and negative perception of EU's market power in digital policy. Digital regulations were framed as a threat to American economic interests.

A recurring theme in this adversarial discourse, which already became evident in the previous example, is the accusation that EU regulation amounts to censorship and violates core democratic freedoms. In relation to the DSA, Vice President Vance explicitly framed European digital regulation as an attack on political expression, accusing the EU of "digital censorship":

"The [DSA] has become a point of contention in a trans-Atlantic debate about free speech, with Vice President JD Vance in February likening E.U. regulation to digital censorship." (Statement 15, NYT, 03.04.2025)

In this narrative, the EU is portrayed not only as a competitor, but also as a regulator whose policies, due to their restrictive nature, would endanger innovation and the principle of free speech.

Further, the discourse is strongly shaped by arguments that portray EU digital regulation as an adversarial and threatening force in global digital policy. Dissatisfaction was expressed regarding the EU's extraterritorial reach, with many perceiving it as an overextension of regulatory authority into global markets. Not only did the US administration criticize the EU's approach, it also actively sought to pressure the EU into modifying or loosening its regulations. Less regulation was seen as a necessary effort to protect American economic interests. This tension was emphasized in a report from the New York Times in May 2025 on EU-US negotiations over the extent and timing of US tariffs on EU imports:

"The Trump administration has pushed for European nations to change their consumption tax system and key digital regulations, which officials have said they will not do." (Statement 4, NYT, 27.05.2025)

This highlights again that regulatory initiatives of the EU in digital policy became a key point in broader trade discussion between the US and the EU. This tendency is further intensified because high-ranking officials, including the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, also spoke out on behalf of US businesses:

"In a speech during the Mobile World Congress, Chairman of the US Federal Communication Commission (FCC) Brendan Carr, warned that AI cannot be developed with 'ideological bias', and that he will defend American companies if Europe takes 'protectionist regulations'." (Statement 40, Euractiv, 05.03.2025)

These statements emphasized the need to diminish the EU's growing influence in tech governance and digital regulation, thereby reinforcing the perception of MPE.

6.2.3. US responses: cooperative and threatening approaches

Reactions to EU digital policy show the following frequencies: Notably, no statements were coded as indicating cooperation efforts, whereas 43 rejected cooperation and were coded as not indicating it, and 20 remained neutral – meaning they did not address it at all. Regarding threatening actions, 43 statements indicated threatening efforts, and 20, again, remained neutral. None of the statements reflected a non-threatening response.

The analysis of these statements shows that cooperation efforts are entirely absent. Instead, the discourse emphasizes threats, retaliation, and confrontational language. President Trump himself openly rejected the idea of compromise or any cooperative efforts (also in connection to failing trade negotiations). When asked if there was anything the EU could do to avoid tariffs, he responded, *“I don’t know, we’re going to see what happens”* (Statement 7, NYT, 23.05.2025).

As already mentioned in chapter 6.2.2., the DSA and DMA are singled out as regulatory measures that trigger responsive measures. In this context, President Trump asserted that, *“what they’re doing to us in other countries is terrible [...]”* (Statement 50, FT, 22.02.2025). Trump openly and directly addressed the subject of scrutinizing EU regulatory efforts in an official white house document (fact sheet) in February. He warned that:

“Regulations that dictate how American companies interact with consumers in the European Union, like the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act, will face scrutiny from the Administration.” (The White House 2025, Statement 54)

This fact sheet announces explicit threats towards the EU. Further, such remarks imply that regulatory scrutiny or other countermeasures would follow as a matter of course. This framing positions US companies as needing protection from what is perceived European overreach, whereby European rules shape the operating conditions of American firms. Even at the beginning of the administration, these statements identified Brussels as a key target of US opposition. However, such implicit threats soon escalated into concrete threats of economic retaliation and tariffs. In fact, these measures were openly introduced in April and May 2025 as a rather unusual direct response to the EU’s tech regulations:

“In a post on Truth Social on Friday, the US president attacked the EU for what he alleged were unfair trade practices and said negotiations over a new deal were failing. ‘Therefore, I am recommending a straight 50% Tariff on the European Union, starting on June 1, 2025.’ “ (Statement 5, FT, 23.05.2025)

Throughout the second Trump administration, the announcement and imposition of tariffs as reactive measures were a frequently used tool to signal the discontent with EU digital regulations.

Notably, the statements indicating a neutral position towards cooperation or threat only reflect criticism of the EU’s digital regulation from an MPE perspective. They do not indicate any explicit threat or expectation of cooperation; they simply express dissatisfaction with the EU’s regulatory measures.

Table 10 illustrates the tendency of Donald Trump’s engagement with EU digital policy in his second administration.

Table 10: Tendency of US engagement with EU digital policy under the second Trump administration (author’s own visualization)

Tendency of Trump II administration	
Perception of EU digital policy	Market-oriented
Actions towards EU digital policy	Announcement of retaliatory measures, threats of tariffs, no cooperation efforts

In sum, the second Trump administration completely rejects the EU’s normative authority in digital policy. Notably absent are references to norms, values, or standards or shared principles in the digital domain. Instead, perceptions of MPE dominate almost exclusively, portraying the EU as a regulatory body imposing market rules. The EU’s digital initiatives are repeatedly interpreted as regulatory instruments directed against US economic and technological interests, marking the strongest MPE framing across all three administrations analyzed in this study. The administration’s reaction is mostly tied to the implementation of the DSA and DMA, which has provoked repeated responses from the US. This framing resulted

in repeated announcements of retaliation, reviews of EU digital policy and threats of tariffs. These gradually escalated into a more concrete articulation of tariffs and other measures against the EU, which was expressed across multiple media outlets. At the same time, cooperation is either explicitly rejected or not mentioned at all. Consequently, the EU is portrayed not as a partner, but as an adversary, with the discourse emphasizing threatening actions. Of particular significance is that this period features the only fact sheet in the dataset that explicitly criticizes EU regulation and announces US action against it. This marks a significant implication, elevating the conflict over digital regulation to the level of official policy articulation. Further, it constitutes the highest level of adversarial framing across administrations, portraying the EU as an active threat to US economic and technological interests.

During the second trump administration, there was notably repetition of certain narratives and key issues related to EU-US tensions related to digital policy. A highly salient theme was the portrayal of EU digital policies as undermining free speech or promoting censorship as it was referenced seven times across six different articles. In four different articles, tariffs on countries that implement digital services taxes against American companies were addressed. Similarly, Trump's criticism of EU regulations and fines on US companies as a "form of taxation" (Statement 66, FT, 04.02.2025) as well as the official document of the White House that announces the protection of American companies from overseas extortion was also mentioned in four different media outlets. The threatening announcement of the DSA and DMA being scrutinized was picked up in three different articles. Additionally, the FCC chairman's commitment to defend US companies against EU regulation appeared twice. The high frequency and repetition of the statements in the second Trump administration underscores their salient nature.

As previously mentioned, media statements were excluded from the initial coding as they do not reflect the administration's perceptions. However, the seven media statements covered the following issues: two pointed to the close relationship between the Trump administration and Silicon Valley as a potential obstacle for EU tech regulation. Another one addressed concern over how President Trump might use technology for political advantage. Three reflected on possible softening of EU tech regulation to avoid more tensions with the US.

Finally, one media statement dealt with the investigations of Apple and Facebook by the EU as being part of the trade conflict between the EU and US.

7. Comparison and Discussion

Building on the previous analyses, this chapter provides a comparative analysis of the Trump I, Trump II, and Biden administrations. First, an overview over the coding results is given, reflecting the perceptions of EU digital policy by the three administrations as well as the consequent actions towards it. Chapters 7.1. to 7.3. then provide a more detailed comparison and discussion by highlighting similarities and differences between the administrations.

Table 11 presents a quantitative overview of all coded statements in the analysis of this thesis. It is structured across the three administrations and different statement categories. It lists the coding results and therefore helps summarizing them for the following comparison and discussion. As outlined in chapter 2.3., the full dataset of the analysis consisted of 178 statement across three different statement categories: original statements by the White House and their duplications, reporting statements in media reports and their duplications, and media statements by journalists. Duplications were relevant for the analysis since they undermine which statements were particularly salient in the material. In the Table below, these duplications are included in the counts of original and reporting statements to provide a simplified representation. Media statements (16 in total) are listed in the Table for completeness but were excluded from the coding process. because they do not represent the administration's perceptions, but rather the interpretation or opinions of journalists. Therefore, the subtotal sections per administration include only the original and reporting statements coded. The Table also displays the four coding categories applied in the analysis: Normative Power Europe (NPE), Market Power Europe (MPE), cooperation and threat. This provides an overview of how each administration's statements were distributed across these dimensions.

Table 11: Quantitative overview of coding results by administration and statement category (author's own visualization)

Administration	Statement category	Number of Statements	NPE	MPE	Cooperation	Threat
Trump I	Original	7	0	3	5	0
	Reporting	37	1	29	9	15
	Media*	5	-	-	-	-
Subtotal (coded)		44	1	32	14	15
Biden	Original	19	15	14	19	0
	Reporting	36	10	27	21	2
	Media*	4	-	-	-	-
Subtotal (coded)		55	25	41	40	2
Trump II	Original	4	0	4	0	4
	Reporting	59	0	58	0	39
	Media*	7	-	-	-	-
Subtotal (coded)		63	0	62	0	43
Total (coded)		162	26	135	54	60

*media statements excluded from coding

First, the comparison addresses the first research question by examining how each administration perceives the EU in the context of digital policy, either as a normative actor (NPE) or a market-oriented actor (MPE). Perception of NPE refers to instances in which US actors portray the EU as promoting or upholding values and principles such as data protection, democratic governance, and the establishment of ethical technology standards in digital policy. In the analysis, overall, perceptions of NPE remain comparatively limited as only 26 of 162 statements were coded as indicating NPE. However, there is strong concentration of NPE references in the Biden administration that counts for the majority of NPE references. Both Trump administrations, with one exceptional statement, do not perceive EU as NPE. Conversely, MPE perception involves portraying the EU as pursuing its economic or regulatory interests through digital policy, leveraging its market size and standard-setting capacity to influence global digital governance. MPE perceptions dominate the analysis – with 135 of 162 statements being coded as indicating MPE. This is the most frequent perception of EU digital

policy across all three administrations. Although MPE perceptions are predominant in all administrations, they are most pronounced under of MPE under Trump II in relation to the overall number of coded statements.

Table 12 summarizes perceptions of EU digital power (NPE vs. MPE) across the three administrations. A direct comparison of these administrations reveals an overall tendency: none of them strongly emphasized the EU as a normative actor in the digital domain. Instead, all three administrations generally tended to frame the EU as a market-oriented actor.

Table 12: Overview of tendencies in perceptions of digital policy across administrations (author's own visualization)

	EU as NPE (normative actor)	EU as MPE (market-oriented actor)
Trump I	Rather No	Rather Yes
Biden	Rather No	Rather Yes
Trump II	Rather No	Rather Yes

Secondly, the comparison focuses on the second research question by analyzing whether the administrations responded to EU digital policy with either threatening actions or signaling cooperation. The threat dimension captures instances where US actors portrayed EU digital policy as a source of strategic rivalry and therefore express criticism over regulatory dominance or announce threatening actions against it. Looking at the results from Table 11, threatening responses are concentrated in the two Trump administrations with 15 of 44 statements coded as threat in the first Trump administration and 43 of 63 statements coded as threat in the second Trump administration. Most threatening announcements appear in reporting statements, however the second Trump administration included the only case in which such announcements occurred in original statements as well. The cooperation dimension, conversely, encompasses cases in which US actors expressed support for EU digital initiatives or a willingness to collaborate. The analysis resulted in cooperation responses being most frequent under Biden with 40 of 55 statements being coded as indicating cooperation efforts. In both Trump administrations, there were only limited cooperative actions towards the EU and rather no focus on partnership.

Table 13 summarizes the typical responses from the three administrations. The Trump administrations (I and II) tended to respond to EU digital policy with more threatening actions and showed limited interest in cooperation. In contrast, the Biden administration generally emphasized cooperative measures and avoided threatening announcements.

Table 13: Overview of typical responses to digital policy across administrations (author's own visualization)

	Predominance of threatening actions	Predominance of cooperative actions
Trump I	Yes	No
Biden	No	Yes
Trump II	Yes	No

7.1. Continuities and shifts between Trump I and Biden

The comparison of US perceptions of EU digital policy across the first Trump administration and the Biden administration reveals few similarities but several notable differences in tone, framing, and engagement.

During the first Trump administration, a significant proportion of statements (24 of 44 coded statements) lacked direct policy references and instead relied on general remarks on digital policy. By contrast, during the Biden administration, references and evaluations were explicitly tied to concrete EU digital policies, particularly in official documents. This indicates that Biden's administration actively translated perceptions into institutionalized responses, whereas under Trump I, the statements tended to appear more as isolated responses without a broader strategic background.

In terms of the perceptions of EU digital policy, neither administration exhibited a dominant perception of NPE. Under Trump, NPE references were marginal, with only one statement coded as indicating NPE, whereas Biden made more frequent, though still limited, references with a total of 25 statements indicating NPE. Even when remaining secondary, Biden used references to NPE more strategically, mainly to underscore shared democratic values and joint leadership. By contrast, under Trump these linkages were largely absent, and normative references played virtually no role in the perception of EU digital policy.

However, MPE remained the dominant perception in both administrations with 32 statements coded as indicating MPE under Trump I and 41 during Biden. Although they shared a dominant MPE perception, their interpretation diverged. During the Trump administration, the EU's economic and regulatory influence in digital policy was largely portrayed in negative terms, as adversarial and discriminatory towards US companies as well as harmful to American business interests. This framing often linked EU digital policy to broader trade disputes and accusations of unfair trade practices. In contrast, the Biden administration acknowledged MPE as a basis for partnership, joint leadership, and value-based economic regulation. Nevertheless, moments of criticism appeared, and Biden's administration occasionally employed arguments similar to those of the Trump administration, particularly when suggesting that EU regulations disproportionately targeted large US technology firms.

Cooperation and threat arguments further highlight differences between the administrations. During the first Trump administration, 15 of 44 statements were coded as threat, and 14 statements coded as indicating cooperative actions. However, cooperation was rather mentioned in official documents and even when it was addressed, it included implicit threats when no agreement was reached. By contrast, Biden emphasized cooperation with the EU, presenting the EU as a central partner, regardless of whether the framing emphasized NPE or MPE. 40 of 55 statements were coded as indicating cooperative efforts towards the EU. Therefore, Biden tended to try to manage the interdependencies in digital policy between the EU and US through cooperation and strategic partnership.

Another shift is found in the relation of reporting and official statements. Under Trump, perceptions in media reports and official fact sheets diverged significantly: while original statements occasionally emphasized cooperation, reporting statements tended to focus more on threats and adversarial language. Under Biden, however, original and reporting statements were more closely aligned, with cooperation and positive references to MPE as central themes. These findings highlight that EU regulatory power in digital policy can be interpreted as a threat or as a basis for partnership depending on the administration's style and political orientation.

In sum, while perceptions of EU digital policy were similar across both administrations, the way these perceptions translated into responses diverged. With regard to the concept of Weaponized Interdependence by Farrell and Newman (2019), the first Trump administration offers evidence of a strategic approach to use the interdependence of the EU and US in the field of digital policy. It issued several threat announcements suggesting potential measures against EU tech regulation, such as a warning that “‘severe economic consequences’ could be in store for the future of digital trade between Europe and the US” (Statement 131, Euractiv, 06.11.2020) or that EU actions relate to an “unfair trade practice that could be punished with retaliatory tariffs” (Statement 154, NYT, 10.07.2019). However, these threats functioned rather as rhetorical signals. While these announcements did not articulate clearly through which economic or regulatory mechanisms the US would imply, it can be seen as an attempt to exert pressure and therefore secure advantages of the EU. Consequently, the actions of the first Trump administration align with core mechanisms of Weaponized Interdependence. In the Biden administration, however, weaponization of the global economic network can be understood as using the existing interdependencies for cooperation – joint initiatives as strategic and institutionalized partnership.

7.2. Continuities and shifts between Biden and Trump II

A comparison between the Biden administration and the early months of Trump’s second term reveals more similarities than might initially be expected. However, there are also significant differences in the reaction towards EU digital policy and the prominence of policies in general.

Both administrations engaged with the EU’s flagship digital initiatives, the DSA and DMA, which functioned as recurring points of reference. However, und Trump II, the discourse centered on the DSA and DMA, with additional focus on the EU’s AI Act. By contrast, the Biden administration also highlighted other frameworks such as the DPF and the TTC, reflecting an emphasis on cooperative instruments. In both cases, concrete policy references dominate with only a minority of statements without policy reference: 14 of 55 coded statements for the Biden administrations and 23 of 63 statements for the second Trump administration.

Again, across both administrations, NPE did not play the dominant role in perceptions of EU digital policy. However, its role differed notably between Biden and Trump II. As mentioned in the previous chapter, under Biden, 25 of 55 statements were coded as reflecting NPE and emphasizing shared values and standards. In contrast, under Trump II, NPE was entirely absent from the discourse, with zero coded statements for NPE. Instead, MPE dominated across both administrations, but with different framings. Regarding the Biden administration, 41 statements coded as indicating MPE, acknowledged it in a positive context and as a foundation for joint leadership and value-based economic regulation. In this framing, EU market power was perceived as an opportunity for partnership. In contrast, during Trump's second term in office, MPE became even more central. Within 62 of 63 statements coded as indicating MPE, it constantly portrayed in negative and highly adversarial terms. EU market power was presented as a threat to US business interests, characterized as discriminatory, linked to trade practices targeting the technology sector, and associated with censorship. Unlike Biden, who adopted a more constructive approach, Trump II treated MPE as a source of conflict by default.

These perceptions of MPE directly impacted the consequent actions. Under Biden, discourse emphasized collaboration and the EU was seen as a partner, regardless of whether NPE or MPE was highlighted. Even when original statements criticized EU measures – for instance, when EU legislation was criticized to be “unfairly targeting US companies” and Brussels would push for “protectionist technology policies” (Statement 107, FT, 18.12.2021) – these references were framed as critical observations rather than triggers for policy action. Again, interdependencies in digital policy between the EU and US were used for institutionalized partnership and cooperation. This was emphasized above all in official statements, where references to shared values and joint standards presented cooperation as a key aspect of transatlantic digital policy. It also suggests that normative considerations gained political weight primarily in formal, institutional contexts, which in turn underpinned a more constructive, partnership-oriented stance by the US towards the EU under Biden. Although NPE did not dominate under either administration, its presence under Biden, combined with a positive framing of MPE, seemed to facilitate a cooperative approach.

By contrast, under Trump II, cooperation was entirely absent from the discourse. Instead, the administration actively 'weaponized' the relationship towards the EU through imposing confrontational measures, such as tariffs on imports or retaliatory announcements. These occurred particularly in response to the DSA and DMA. Whether through the announcement of threats or the implementation of such in the form of import tariffs, these actions can be understood as an attempt to exert pressure on the EU to influence its digital policy choices. This pattern aligns with the core arguments of Farrell and Newman's (2019) framework: exploiting economic ties to shape the outcome for the own benefit.

Overall, while the dominant perceptions of EU digital policy were similar across the two administrations, the extent of the consequent actions differed. Under Biden, the market-oriented perception of EU digital policy was portrayed in a largely positive light and used as an instrument for cooperation. In contrast, under Trump II, it was framed negatively and adversarial. Compared to Biden's cooperative approach, Trump II relied on more confrontational language in his negative perceptions of EU digital policy and translated into concrete measures and retaliatory announcements. Therefore, weaponizing the interdependence between the EU and US in digital policy took different forms under Trump II and Biden. Trump II used economic pressure with threat announcements and tariff implementation, while Biden focused on institutionalized partnership.

7.3. Continuities and shifts between Trump I and Trump II

A comparison of US perceptions of EU digital policy and subsequent actions across the first and second Trump administrations reveals several similarities.

First, there is a difference in the references of EU digital policies. While concrete policy references were largely absent under Trump I, Trump II framed its evaluation of the EU through direct reference to specific policies, such as the DSA and DMA or the AI Act. This suggests that EU digital regulation evolved to a central point of conflict over time. The increased salience of specific policy references under Trump II indicates that EU digital policies were no longer viewed as mere regulatory tendencies, but rather as instruments with direct implications for US businesses as well as trade relations.

In terms of perceptions, NPE was absent in both administrations. The analysis of Trump I resulted in only a one NPE reference, while Trump II lacked any reference at all. Instead, MPE dominated in both administrations. Under Trump I, 32 out of 44 statements framed the EU through the lens of MPE and under Trump II, this perception became almost universal with 62 out of 63 statements. However, the arguments surrounding MPE were similar: EU regulation was portrayed as an attack on US companies and as unfairly targeting technology firms. It was also said to stifle innovation and reflect a protectionist agenda designed particularly to harm US interests. Both administrations portrayed the EU as exploiting the US. Further, both of their references to EU digital policy were linked to ongoing trade negotiations and disputes. Under Trump II, however, the trade dimension became far more central. EU digital rules were increasingly portrayed not only as regulatory barriers, but as overall trade barriers: “The Trump administration’s 2025 annual report on trade barriers highlights the EU’s Digital Markets Act (DMA) fines on US companies, just ahead of a much-expected announcement of reciprocal tariffs [...]” (Statement 19, Euractiv, 02.04.2025). This reinforced an adversarial stance and justified retaliatory measures.

Despite the strong continuities, the second Trump administration saw an escalation. The most significant difference concerns the level of threats and their enforcement. Arguments in favor of cooperation were marginal the first Trump administration with 14 of 44 statements mentioning cooperation. Under Trump II, this willingness to cooperate disappeared entirely, leaving no room for partnership in the discourse and therefore zero statements coded as indicating cooperative efforts.

Threatening actions, in the first Trump administration, remained rhetorical, meaning they were often framed as announcements or warnings rather than concrete measures towards EU digital policy. Although these actions did not specify economic mechanisms, they still can be understood as attempts to exert pressure on the EU and therefore secure advantages between the EU and US. By contrast, the second Trump administration moved from rhetoric to enforcement, with threats no longer limited to announcements. Trump extended these threats to particular actions, such as tariffs on imports and investigations aimed at targeting EU digital regulation, such as the DSA, DMA and AI Act.

Overall, throughout both periods, the US viewed EU regulation primarily through the lens of market power, and focused their criticism on conflicting interests instead of common norms or values. In this sense, the two Trump administrations shared a rather negative perception of the EU as exploiting the US through discriminatory and protectionist regulation. Similarities appeared also in the articulation of Weaponized Interdependence occurred. In first Trump administration, the threatening announcements without concrete economic mechanisms can be understood as verbal signal to exert pressure on the EU. Cooperation was mentioned occasionally but did not dominate the discourse. In the second one, cooperation was entirely absent, and threats were articulated more confrontational and action-oriented by announcing retaliatory measures and imposing import tariffs on the EU. Both approaches toward EU digital policy align with the use of economic interdependence as a tool for influence.

8. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate how the EU's aspiration to achieve digital leadership is perceived internationally, particularly in the US. Furthermore, it sought to examine how the US reacts upon EU digital policy considering these perceptions.

To conduct this research project, the analysis was structured across three time periods according to three US administration periods. The first period covers the first Trump administration, lasting from January 21, 2017, until January 20, 2021. The second period includes the Biden administration, which lasted from January 21, 2021, until January 20, 2025. The third period encompasses the early months of the second Trump administration, starting on January 21, 2025, and ending on June 30, 2025. These administration periods were examined to allow a comparison between the Trump and Biden administrations. Including the early months of the second Trump administration is particularly relevant, as this period provides valuable insights into whether Trump's return to office presented a continuation, modification or radicalization of the patterns established during his first term and further allowed for comparison with the Biden administration.

The thesis was guided by two central research questions. The first sought to examine how the Trump (I and II) and Biden administrations differ in their perceptions of the EU's digital policy, while the second wanted to explore how these administrations act towards the EU in relation to its digital policies. To answer these questions, the analysis drew on three complementary theoretical concepts: NPE by Ian Manners (2002), MPE by Chad Damro (2012), and Weaponized Interdependence by Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman (2019). Manners' (2002) concept of NPE argues that the EU derives its international influence from its ability to shape global norms and values. Damro's (2012) concept of MPE, by contrast, conceptualizes the EU as an actor that projects influence externally by pursuing its economic interests through market-based governance. Together, these two perspectives form the theoretical foundation for the first research question, as they help assess whether US administrations primarily perceived the EU as a normative or market-oriented actor in digital policy. The concept of Weaponized Interdependence by Farrell and Newman (2019) complements this thesis by highlighting how states occupying central positions in global economic networks can exploit

this interdependence to their advantage. This concept is particularly relevant for understanding how the US may translate its perceptions of the EU into strategic actions.

Empirically, the thesis relied on two main sources of data: official US government documents and media reports. Official documents, primarily White House fact sheets, were used as formal policy statements that reflect the administrations' official positions. To complement this, media reports from Euractiv, the Financial Times, and the New York Times were examined across three time periods and filtered using specific, digital policy-related keywords. The material was then analyzed by using a qualitative content analysis relying on the principle of Mayring's (2015) qualitative approach. Statements were coded according to Saldaña's (2021) approach of cyclical, interpretive coding. Although including media reports carried the risk of capturing journalists' interpretations rather than genuine government positions, this limitation was carefully mitigated. Journalists' comments and opinions were treated as media statements and not included in the coding process. This ensured that the conclusions accurately reflected the administrations' perceptions and policy orientations regarding the EU's digital initiatives.

Building on the comparative discussion presented in Chapter 7, the following section provides direct answers to the two research questions of this thesis. The first one asked for how the perceptions of EU digital policy differed in the administrations. The analysis revealed that across the three administrations the EU was predominantly perceived as a market-oriented actor and no dominant perception of the EU as a normative actor emerged. References to NPE, in case they appeared, were marginal and limited to the Biden administration. There, they were embedded in the discourse of shared democratic values such as data protection and ethical technology standards. In contrast, both Trump administrations largely ignored or dismissed the EU's normative claims. However, the MPE framing was prevailing throughout all three periods of administration. During the first Trump administration, the EU's market and regulatory influence was portrayed negatively as discriminatory and protectionist, and as harmful to US business interests. EU digital policy was frequently associated with trade disputes and presented as a tool of economic self-interest intended to put American firms at a disadvantage. The Biden administration, however, reinterpreted MPE positively. It recognized it as a legitimate form of influence, providing a basis for cooperation on trade,

competition, and data flows. Notably, the Biden administration was the only one to integrate normative considerations into the market-oriented framework, presenting the EU's market power as compatible with shared democratic and economic objectives. Although there was occasional criticism (especially when US firms were perceived as being unfairly targeted), these negative statements remained secondary. By contrast, the second Trump administration adopted the most antagonistic MPE perception. The EU's digital regulations, particularly the DSA, DMA, and AI Act, were almost exclusively portrayed as threats to US economic and strategic interests. The discourse became increasingly confrontational, emphasizing overregulation, discrimination, and the unfair targeting of US technology firms.

In sum, although all three administrations viewed the EU primarily through the lens of MPE, their interpretations diverged. While both Trump administrations viewed the EU's economic and regulatory power negatively, the Biden administration regarded it as a potential foundation for shared values and cooperation. Consequently, the MPE perception of the EU's role in digital policy remained dominant.

The second research question asked how the Trump and Biden administrations acted towards the EU in relation to its digital policies. In this context, actions encompassed both announced and implemented measures, as well as broader response patterns and tendencies towards key EU digital initiatives.

The approach of the first Trump administration to EU digital policy was characterized by situational and isolated responses. While official documents occasionally referenced cooperation, these references remained vague and were often linked to threats in case an agreement could not be reached. Frequent criticism of EU digital regulation and threatening rhetoric emerged, often in the context of trade disputes, but without a specific reference to EU policy. By contrast, the Biden administration represented a shift towards institutionalized cooperation. Its engagement with the EU focused on joint initiatives and regulatory alignment, including data privacy agreements, AI collaboration, and TTC discussions. Biden's approach emphasized partnership and framed cooperation as mutually beneficial and central to a shared democratic digital agenda. However, the early months of the second Trump administration were characterized by explicitly adversarial actions and rhetoric.

The administration announced, and even implemented, retaliatory measures such as tariffs and investigations in response to EU digital regulation. Unlike the first Trump administration, where threats were largely rhetorical, the second administration translated criticism into concrete enforcement, marking a clear radicalization. Cooperation was entirely absent, and the EU was portrayed not as a partner, but as an adversary. This was reflected in both official documents and media coverage, showing the highest level of confrontational framing across all administrations.

Overall, the US' response to EU digital policy varied across administrations, particularly how Weaponized Interdependence was employed. Under Trump's first term, cooperation remained limited and threatening announcements predominated with rhetorical signals that were understood as attempts to exert pressure on the EU. In his second term, the approach shifted to more concrete actions by imposing import tariffs and investigations on EU regulation. This reflects an attempt to impose costs on the EU and secure US economic interests in digital policy. By contrast, Biden focused on cooperative efforts, using interdependencies between the EU and US to build partnerships that result in joint initiatives with the EU.

The analysis reveals distinct relationships between the perception of EU digital policy and the corresponding responses from the US. There is no evidence of a link between perceptions of the EU as a NPE and conflictual or threatening attitudes. Instead, perceptions of the EU as an NPE appeared in contexts of cooperation, such as shared democratic values and joint initiatives on data protection and technology standards. This suggests that recognizing the EU as a normative actor is associated with cooperation rather than rivalry. By contrast, a clear connection emerged between perceptions of the EU as MPE and threatening actions, particularly under both Trump administrations, when EU regulatory initiatives were viewed as protectionist and harmful to US interests. However, the Biden administration showed that the same MPE perception could promote cooperation, viewing the EU's market influence as legitimate and complementary to shared leadership in global digital governance. Instances where both NPE and MPE appeared simultaneously were rare. This reinforces that US perceptions predominantly emphasize one dimension depending on the administration's broader strategic orientation.

Having summarized the main findings of the analysis, some limitations of this research project are reflected. A primary limitation of this study is its temporal scope regarding the second Trump administration. Although the analysis covers the first months of his second term, it does not encompass the entire period. This is especially important to reflect regarding the criticism of the DSA and DMA, which were potentially highly salient at that time as sanctions were imposed. This means that the findings potentially cannot be generalized to the whole administration. Nevertheless, the data from this period provides meaningful insights into US perceptions of EU digital policy in comparison to the Biden and first Trump administrations. Another limitation lies in the data sources: while the study draws on official documents and selected media outlets, a broader range of media reports and additional government documents could offer a fuller picture of US positions. A further limitation relates to the subjectivity of qualitative content analysis. Despite efforts to apply systematic coding rules and cross-check interpretations, coding decisions and interpretations are inevitably influenced by the author's judgment, which may introduce bias. Potential bias in media reporting were mitigated through careful consideration of the journalists' own opinions or comments, which were not included in the coding process.

Overall, this thesis tried to make meaningful progress in researching perceptions of the EU, particularly regarding digital policy. However, future research could address topics beyond the scope of this thesis. First, further research could expand the temporal scope of this analysis to provide a more complete understanding of US responses to EU digital policy. This could include analyzing earlier US administrations and the full second term of the Trump presidency, exploring which leaderships emphasized norms and values most prominently. Secondly, beyond the frameworks of NPE and MPE, additional factors may shape US perceptions and could be incorporated into future studies. This could provide a broader analysis of US responses to EU digital policy. Additionally, examining how other global actors, such as China, Japan and Russia, perceive and respond to EU digital policy could also offer insights into the EU's global positioning and influence in the digital domain. Such approaches could significantly deepen the understanding of international reactions to the EU's digital agenda. Complementary research could also focus on the EU perspective, exploring how European actors perceive US digital policy initiatives, thereby providing a two-way perspective on transatlantic digital relations.

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10. Software and Tools Used

DeepL Write was used for grammar correction. URL: <https://www.deepl.com/en/write> (last access: 04.12.2025)