

As A.I. Accelerates, Governments Are Increasingly Being Left Behind

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Credit...Emmanuel Polanco

The gap between technology and policymaking has gotten wider than ever with artificial intelligence, leaving a global policy vacuum as A.I. models rapidly advance.

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Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, gathered senior officials for an exclusive meeting at a 19th-century palace outside Brussels this month.

The goal was to prepare for a speech outlining the 27-nation bloc's priorities for the coming year, with artificial intelligence dominating the agenda. The region's new A.I. czar, Jim Hagemann Snabe, the chairman of German industrial giant Siemens, outlined ways that Europe could use the technology for economic gain. Others raised concerns about A.I. safety and [growing risks](#), two people briefed on the gathering said.

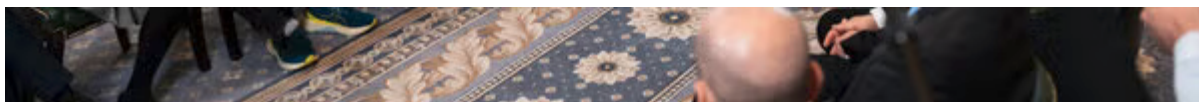
Since the Sept. 4 meeting, Ms. von der Leyen and her commissioners have been left asking what they can do to address the fast-changing technology, one of the people said. Should they ramp up regulation to address A.I.'s emerging dangers? Or would doing so carry economic and geopolitical costs if other countries did not clamp down as well?

They have not landed on any final conclusions, with more discussions among European leaders planned this year.

"A.I. comes with a balance of possibilities and risks," Ms. von der Leyen said at her [State of the Union speech](#) on Sept. 16. "Without addressing these risks, we will never be able to unlock A.I.'s potential."

Image





Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, and President Trump last year in Turnberry, Scotland. Ms. von der Leyen spoke about A.I. this month in her State of the Union speech. Credit...Tierney L. Cross/The New York Times

Versions of the Belgium meeting are playing out nearly everywhere as many governments struggle to get a handle on a technology that has rapidly outpaced their ability to respond. A.I. is evolving so quickly that laws passed two years ago are having limited effect, proposed bills to regulate the technology are stalling without a vote and international summits to discuss what to do are being swiftly forgotten.

A.I. has made the gap between policymaking and technology one of the widest ever, according to more than 20 interviews with lawmakers, technologists and policy experts. Many governments are torn between wanting to harness A.I. and fearing its risks. And they are further mired by national politics, limited technological know-how, geopolitical divisions and reluctance to fall behind in a race that could shape economic power and national security for decades to come.

Many countries are waiting for the two leading A.I. nations — the United States and China — to take a cue from their A.I. policies. Yet in the United States, the Trump administration has been [divided over A.I. safety](#), with President Trump saying regulation would hurt innovation and cede ground to China. China itself has imposed some rules on A.I., especially to censor chatbot content, but also raced ahead with development.

“There’s this assumption that there are adults in the room on this issue, but there are no adults in this room,” said Sean Ó Heigeartaigh, director of the AI: Futures and Responsibility Program at the University of Cambridge, who is a member of a European Union advisory board on A.I. “That is what makes all of this so completely terrifying.”

What’s left is a policy vacuum, with A.I. companies such as Anthropic and [OpenAI](#) largely left to police themselves. While the European Union [passed a law regulating A.I.](#) in 2024, it has taken years to carry out, and some say it already needs to be updated to account for advances. India, Japan, Australia, Canada and Kenya have taken a lighter touch or a wait-and-see approach, while Brazil is debating more comprehensive rules.

Pressure to act is growing, especially after the leaders of Anthropic, OpenAI and Google DeepMind recently called for [slowing development of the most advanced A.I. models](#) and for strengthening government oversight. Researchers have described scenarios in which self-improving A.I. could escape human control and cause catastrophic damage. Public opinion in the United States has turned against A.I., with a recent New York Times poll finding that [61 percent of likely voters](#) opposed the construction of data centers that power A.I.

The policy challenges were on display last week. In Washington on Thursday, President Trump and President Xi Jinping of China stressed the importance of A.I. to their nations but did not agree on safety protocols. The United States and China are the world’s leading A.I. developers, making cooperation between them essential for international safety standards, but are also competitors wary of giving the other a technology advantage.

Image



At a summit in Washington, Mr. Trump and President Xi Jinping of China discussed A.I. but did not arrive at any concrete policies. Credit...Haiyun Jiang/The New York Times

At the annual General Assembly of the United Nations in New York last week, many world leaders agreed on the need to address A.I.'s dangers, while Mr. Trump said the United States would reject "any attempt to construct a globalist scheme to control" the technology.

Safety experts have warned that crucial time is disappearing before oversight becomes harder to impose because A.I. will have spread so widely.

"Governments consider things in time scales of years, not weeks or months," said Darren Jones, a member of Britain's Parliament who worked on A.I. and technology policy under former Prime Minister Keir Starmer. "Institutionally, we're not set up to keep up with the pace of development."

(The Times has [sued OpenAI and Microsoft](#), claiming copyright infringement of news content related to A.I. systems. The two companies have denied those claims.)

The Law That Became a Cautionary Tale

In 2024, Europe adopted the world's first comprehensive law for artificial intelligence. The A.I. Act, which was [designed to impose safeguards](#) on the technology's riskiest uses, was hailed by European leaders as a blueprint for regulation.

Two years later, it has become a cautionary tale.

Implementation has been slowed by shifts in priorities and fears that regulation could weaken Europe's competitiveness against the United States and China. Some of the law's most consequential rules governing

high-risk A.I. uses have been delayed. Staffing and budget constraints have further complicated enforcement.

The A.I. Act was proposed in early 2021, 18 months before OpenAI released ChatGPT. Intended to grapple with issues like facial recognition software, the rules were revised to address powerful new general-purpose A.I. systems like OpenAI's GPT.

But the technology has only accelerated since the law's passage in 2024. Now the bleeding edge of A.I. comes in the form of so-called [agents that can act](#) with little human oversight. Companies are planning for a day when A.I. can create the next versions of itself.

"When we adopted it, we couldn't even conceive of what A.I. is now able to do," Valérie Hayer, a member of the European Parliament, said of the A.I. Act at a recent news conference. The law was ahead of its time, she said, but "we have to adapt."

Europe's challenge is made worse because it trails the United States and China in A.I. Last year, just [six months](#) after the law passed, Emmanuel Macron, the president of France, said Europe risked trying to police a technology it had no role in shaping.

"If we let the Americans and the Chinese have all the champions to themselves, one thing is certain: We may have the best regulations in the world, but we won't be regulating anything," [he said](#).

The law's limits are becoming clear. In July, OpenAI models broke out of a restricted testing environment and [hacked the A.I. start-up Hugging Face](#). But because the breach happened during a testing period, it fell within a murky area for enforcement. The A.I. Act generally exempts research and tests done before a model is released in Europe.

Supporters of the A.I. Act argue it was designed to evolve with the technology. It includes transparency and test requirements that A.I. safety experts said were needed to ensure the technology was deployed responsibly. Regulators have powers to demand information, appoint outside experts to evaluate models and order fixes. Authorities can ultimately block an A.I. model across Europe and impose fines of up to 7 percent of a company's annual revenue.

"Europe has always been clear that A.I. must be developed safely and transparently, and remain under human control," said Thomas Regnier, a European Commission spokesman. "This is why we have the A.I. Act."

Yet enforcement requires technical know-how that is still being built. A 60-member scientific panel established under the A.I. Act to offer expertise on frontier models and risks was [appointed only in June](#). A new office in the European Commission meant to carry out many of the rules has only about [40 people working](#) in an A.I. safety unit, [prompting an amendment](#) to the law to provide more resources.

Gabriele Mazzini, a European Commission official who was a lead author of the A.I. Act and resigned in 2024, said the law's implementation and enforcement was disappointing.

"Their goal was to pass the law and think about implementation later," he said. "There is a disconnect

between the law and the reality of what is being regulated.”

Another disconnect was with the United States.

An Absence of Urgency

Representative Lori Trahan, Democrat of Massachusetts, said her jaw dropped when she read in April that Anthropic was warning that its [latest A.I. model, Mythos](#), was too dangerous for the public. Anthropic said the model’s extraordinary ability to find software vulnerabilities could cause a cybersecurity “reckoning.”

Image



Representative Lori Trahan, Democrat of Massachusetts, has proposed a bill on A.I. safety. It is on ice. Credit...Tierney L. Cross for The New York Times

During votes that day in the House of Representatives, Ms. Trahan crossed the floor to share her alarm with Representative Jay Obernolte, a California Republican who has a master’s degree in A.I. The two quickly drafted a bill to require safety testing of A.I. models.

Few lawmakers shared their urgency, she said. Some members wanted to wait until after November’s midterm elections to focus on a technically complicated issue. Others were reluctant to put guardrails on an industry that Mr. Trump wanted to keep free of regulations. Amid intense corporate lobbying, members squabbled over details, and the bill was revised multiple times.

Five months later, the bill and dozens of other proposals related to A.I. safety and security are on ice. Even after reports that models from OpenAI, [Google](#) and Anthropic autonomously hacked other organizations, there are no votes in sight.

“It’s hugely disappointing,” Ms. Trahan said. “If Congress doesn’t keep pace with A.I., the dangers are even

worse than with any other technology waves we've experienced.”

Representative Ted Lieu, Democrat of California, has spent years trying to make the same case. Soon after ChatGPT's release in 2022, he wrote an [opinion piece](#) for The Times with the headline “A.I. Freaks Me Out.”

Image



Representative Ted Lieu, Democrat of California, during a House Judiciary Committee hearing in February. He proposed a bill that would require a kill switch for A.I. models if they became too dangerous. Credit...Eric Lee for The New York Times

Mr. Lieu, who has a degree in computer science, later joined Mr. Obernolte to lead a congressional task force to educate lawmakers on A.I., inviting industry leaders like Sam Altman of OpenAI to give technology demonstrations.

But after an initial burst of interest, attendance at the events fizzled.

When OpenAI revealed the Hugging Face breach this summer, Mr. Lieu introduced a bill that would require a kill switch for A.I. models if they became too dangerous. He told colleagues that the moment was a five-alarm fire. Still, he couldn't get enough interest.

“I'm more scared than I was in 2023,” Mr. Lieu said.

Representative Brett Guthrie of Kentucky, the influential Republican chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said Congress probably would not bring a vote on any A.I. legislation until next year.

At a recent conference, Mr. Guthrie said that he did not understand how the models worked and that he did not use A.I. frequently.

“We wouldn't want to do something in a lame-duck session to do it quickly and not get it right,” he said.

Momentum, Maybe?

The recent A.I. hacks have led to a burst of activity, with A.I. leaders calling for more government cooperation and collaborating on safety and monitoring techniques to prevent accidents.

In the United States, lawmakers introduced bills to create a federal agency to police A.I. models, [kill switch](#) requirements and [a ban](#) on the most powerful models that exceed human capabilities. Votes could be held after the midterms, particularly with A.I. becoming a key campaign topic.

Mr. Trump separately proposed an “[A.I. Force](#)” and a new “A.I. czar” for the White House, without providing details.

At the U.N. General Assembly, leaders from more than 20 countries — including Ms. von der Leyen and Mr. Macron — [signed a letter](#) calling for collective actions on A.I. safety. Members of the Security Council spoke in rare harmony on the need for global A.I. safeguards.

“Industry, governments and society must act now,” the letter read.

In Washington, Mr. Trump and Mr. Xi did not strike a deal on A.I., but the two sides established new paths for communication about managing the greatest risks related to the technology.

While Mr. Trump has called A.I. safety risks a “hoax,” Mr. Xi’s views remain less clear. At the White House, the Chinese leader said, “We have both the capability and responsibility to develop and manage A.I. for good and ensure the development of A.I. is always under human control.”

The two countries said they would keep talking about the issue.

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