Who Wants to Accelerate Digitalization?
Evidence from the Next Generation EU Program[*]

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Abstract

Post-industrial governments around the world are increasingly prioritizing policies to accelerate digitalization, but despite the growing literature on technological change and the knowledge economy, we know little about public preferences regarding digitalization policies. We use the case of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) program, an initiative totalling nearly 800,000 million euros with at least 20 percent earmarked to expedite digitalization in Europe, as a substantively and theoretically important case to test theories about the political fault lines such policies generate. We conceptualize digitalization policies as a type of "knowledge economy" policy and develop expectations about policy preferences derived from material self-interest and ideology. We test our hypotheses with new survey data from five EU countries (Germany, France, Sweden, Poland, and Italy) and detailed measures of support for actual digitalization policies, expected economic impact, and perceptions of the main beneficiaries. Our findings suggest that digitalization policies are most strongly supported by voters of mainstream parties and least favored by supporters of radical and populist parties. Preferences are structured more clearly along ideological socio-tropic lines than along socio-structural economic self-interests. Overall, our results imply that if digitalization policies become politicized, mainstream and challenger parties will likely address this issue differently.

Keywords: digitalization, knowledge economy, technological change, social investment, EU

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Introduction

Digitalization policies are government interventions aimed at accelerating technology adoption by investing in digital infrastructures, skills and research, providing subsidies to companies that invest in such technologies, and fostering their adoption in the public sector. Governments across the world are making large investments to accelerate digitalization. For example, Ursula von der Leyen announced in February 2025 an EU initiative to invest €200 billion in AI. In the United States, the 2022 CHIPS act allocated $200 billion for scientific commercialization, technology manufacturing, workforce development, and improvement of technological infrastructure. Globally, public investment in digital technologies increased threefold between 2018 and 2024 (Perrault and Clarke 2024). Moreover, digitalization has evolved from being a niche issue to becoming increasingly prominent in political debate. For example, recent research about Germany finds that attention to digitalization has risen sharply in legislative processes, local governments, and in the media (Beyer et al. 2022), and that this issue now receives similar attention in party manifestos as more established issues such as Europeanization and welfare (Siewert and König 2021).

Despite the rising importance of digitalization policies in government budgets and political debate, we know very little about citizen preferences regarding these initiatives. In contrast to the sizeable and growing literature that examines how automation risk shapes attitudes towards various forms of redistributive policies (e.g., Thewissen and Rueda 2019; Weisstanner 2023; Gallego and Kurer 2022), knowledge about public support for digitalization-*accelerating* initiatives remains limited. This omission is surprising for several reasons. First these policies are actually being implemented, unlike more hypothetical policy responses to automation shocks, such as a universal basic income, or efforts to slow down digitalization through protectionist measures. Second, they entail significant spending, borrowing and commitment of state resources, which may constrain governments' fiscal discretion for extended periods. Third, as technological change produces distributional consequences for different types of workers (Acemoglu and Johnson 2023; Autor 2022), the unequal impact of digitalization policies implies that they may become politically contested. To date, however, the contours of politicization of digitalization policies have received little attention in the literature.

Which segments of the population are more or less likely to support digitalization policies? This paper theorizes citizens' preferences for digitalization policies and tests

expectations using novel survey data from five European countries. Specifically, we propose and test a theoretical perspective that conceptualizes these policies as instruments to promote and accelerate structural economic change towards a "knowledge economy". We argue that this shift is likely to mobilize socio-structural and political constituencies for and against these policies similar to those observed in debates over social investment (Garritzmann et al. 2022), and concordant with predictions over which partisans would resist structural economic and social transformation (Iversen and Soskice 2019; Kurer 2020; Häusermann et al. 2023).

To empirically investigate our expectations, we provide original measurement of support for digitalization policies and their hypothesized correlates in large, representative samples collected in five EU countries (Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, and Poland), which differ in their economic structure and welfare states (Hassel and Palier 2021). We focus on the digitalization policies subsidized by the Next Generation EU (NGEU) spending initiative, a major fiscal intervention that promotes a variety of policies. The NGEU case is relevant for several reasons. It is a concrete policy, which is currently being implemented, allowing us to analyze an actual policy rather than hypothetical ones, in diverse welfare and growth regimes. Many of the NGEU policies (discussed in section 3) have been pursued or are under consideration by other post-industrial governments in an environment of intense competition over economically maximizing AI technology, and thus our results speak to political contexts beyond that of the evidence presented here.

We find that socio-structural determinants have only weak explanatory power of policy preferences. While more high-income citizens tend to show greater support for digitalization policies, educational and occupational profiles and place of residence in particular have very weak effects, and younger citizens are *less* likely to support digitalization policies than older citizens. The evidence is much clearer in terms of partisan attachment and ideological explanations: supporters of mainstream and green parties are much more supportive of digitalization policies than voters of challenger parties (from both the far left and far right). In addition, we find that this partisan divide has strong ideological components; voters of challenger parties hold more negative views about the effects of the digital transformation, both for overall economic growth, as well as regarding their expectations of how such policies will affect various social groups (including e.g. the high- or low skilled, urban or rural, young or old). More specifically, voters tend not to perceive clear patterns of distributive trade-offs, but rather evaluate the

likely effects of digitalization as overall beneficial or detrimental to all groups. We interpret these findings as suggesting that if digitalization becomes politicized, it can be incorporated into the current ideological divide between established mainstream and more extremist challenger parties.

The next section outlines the motivation and theoretical background of the paper. We then discuss the specific features of the NGEU policies and present hypotheses to guide our analyses. This is followed by a discussion of the research design and empirical results regarding both digitalization policy support and expectations of policy consequences. In the final section, we consider the broader implications of our findings in light of the growing importance of AI.

Digitalization policies: concept, motivation, and research question

There is currently little consensus on the precise definition and scope of digitalization policies, with multiple overlapping terms in use, blurring conceptual boundaries (see, for example, König and Wenzelburger 2019; Siewert and König 2021; van Kersbergen and Vis 2022, Angst 2024). We differentiate between *digital policies* and *digitalization policies*, which we see as related but analytically distinct. By *digitalization policies*, we refer to government strategies aimed at promoting the adoption and integration of digital technologies across the economy, society, and the public sector. These policies seek to *accelerate* digital transformation – for example, through investments in digital infrastructure, research, and human capital; subsidies for firms adopting digital technologies; and expansion of digitalization of public administration. In contrast*, digital policies* encompass broader regulatory and governance frameworks that shape the development, use, and societal implications of digital technologies, such as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) or the AI Act.

While both are important dimensions of the broader digital transformation, this paper focuses on the former. As we define them, digitalization policies are part of a broader resurgence of state intervention that gained momentum following the Great Recession. This shift became particularly pronounced in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, when policymakers across the post-industrialized world turned to large-scale public spending programs to stimulate the economy. These initiatives focused on upgrading public infrastructure, addressing climate change, and advancing the

digitalization of public administration and the broader economy. This policy turn marks a clear departure from approaches that had previously dominated (McNamara 2023; Allan and Nahm 2024). Thus, with the "end of the era of liberalization" after the 2000s (Hall 2021), the resurgence of neo-Keynesian crisis management, and the return of more interventionist industrial policies (Di Carlo and Schmitz 2023), debate over the state's role in steering economic activity has shifted.

However, our understanding of the sources of and potential divides over such digitalization policies remains limited. A growing body of work investigates the supply side of digital policy, showing how political parties (Siewert and König 2021), state legislators (Parinandi et al. 2024), and national discourse coalitions (Lemke et al. 2024) have begun to integrate digitalization into mainstream politics. These studies highlight an increasing, though institutionally fragmented politicization of digitalization.

On the demand side, the literature on the political consequences of technological change has focused on preferences for compensation, investment, or protection in response to job substitution due to technology (Thewissen and Rueda 2019; Gallego et al. 2022; Busemeyer and Tober 2023; Busemeyer et al. 2023; Kuo, Manzano and Gallego 2024; Magistro et al. 2024) and on the relationship between substitution risk and vote choice (Im et al. 2019; Kurer 2020; Dal Bo, et al 2021; Anelli et al. 2021). Recent studies also measure public attitudes toward AI governance more broadly. These show that support for AI-related policies is shaped not only by socio-demographics, but also by techno-skepticism and risk aversion (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2023). Support for AI development is generally stronger among men, higher-income and more highly educated individuals, and those with technical experience (Zhang and Dafoe 2019).

We are not aware of studies that directly examine citizen support for policies aimed at *accelerating* digitalization. While there is much research on political implications of the knowledge economy, there is a notable lack of assessment of potential cleavages over knowledge economy *policies*; that is, policies that are actually *constitutive* of, or involved in entrenching or solidifying, such an economy. This gap may be partially because such digitalization policies have not previously been highly politicized (König and Wenzelburger 2019). However, as discussed above, there is growing evidence of the growing importance of this as a political issue (Beyer et al. 2022; Siewert and König 2021), a trend likely to continue given the surge in public interest and concern about AI.

Theoretical perspectives: digitalization policies as knowledge economy policies

We draw on the literature on the politics of knowledge economy (KE) to develop baseline hypotheses about the key correlates of support for digitalization policies. From a KE perspective, such policies can be viewed as fundamental to or in fact constitutive of the development of the knowledge economy. Digitalization policies are investments that enable technological change and automation, facilitate upskilling, and drive the broader transition from national industrial economies to globally integrated, knowledge-based production systems (Boix 2019, Hall 2021).

Digitalization thus can be seen as an investment-oriented policy that facilitates the "knowledge economy transition" by investing in growth-enhancing capabilities and enabling societies to adapt to these structural changes (Iversen and Soskice 2019). Several strands of studies on the politics of the knowledge economy aid in the development of hypotheses about who then would support such policies: the literatures on (social) investment, on technological risk exposure, and on the formation of a new partisan "education cleavage."

An active academic debate in comparative political economy on the determinants and consequences of the transition to the "knowledge economy (KE)" identifies *social investment policies* as central policy instruments that promote growth in such an economy (Kraft 2018; Iversen and Soskice 2019; Garritzmann et al. 2022; Häusermann and Kitschelt 2024). This debate builds upon earlier distinctions of redistributive policies into social consumption versus social investment policies (Beramendi et al. 2015), with the latter providing economic opportunities rather than income replacement.

The core political economy arguments on this transition are informed by empirical trends in post-industrial democracies: (e.g., Morel et al. 2012; Hemerijck 2013; Iversen and Soskice 2019): a) The workforce in many of these economies has become increasingly segmented both occupationally and geographically into KE versus non-KE workers, with the former broadly defined as more urban, younger, educated, and employed in skilled, cognitive and creative occupations; b) policies that complement the skills of KE workers, such as social investment policies, have increased in importance in post-industrial welfare states; c) workers are, to some extent, aware of who stands to gain and lose from these policies and form preferences on the welfare state - while middle class voters tend to prefer social investment policies, working class voters support traditional welfare policies (Häusermann et al. 2022).

A wealth of literature on public support for social-investment policies shows that such policies enjoy broad backing from electorates across many countries (e.g., Hemerijck 2013, Busemeyer et al. 2020). Overall, groups who tend to benefit from the KE (educated people, urban dwellers, women, as well as workers in highly skilled cognitive occupations) are more likely to support social investment policies. Conversely, 'working class' or lower educated individuals (defined in various ways), are found to be less supportive of such policies (e.g., Garritzmann et al. 2022; Bremer 2022; Häusermann et al. 2022; Kurer and Häusermann 2022; Bremer and Bürgisser 2023). However, these socio-demographic correlates of policy preferences also often align with partisan affiliation, and it remains unclear to what extent the knowledge economy winner/loser divide is based on self-interest or ideology and supply-side appeals (e.g., Kraft 2018, shows that mainstream parties are most supportive of investments, because they are likely to have more long-run electorally benefits). Precisely measuring the *perceived effects* of digitalization policies on economic growth and on different social groups -- that is the perceptions about their sociotropic and redistributive consequences -- permits more accurate testing of self-interest versus ideology-based explanations: if respondents hold differentiated perceptions of distributive effects, this would suggest an interest-based evaluation of these policies, whereas more sweeping positive or negative evaluation of such policies would more likely indicate ideology-driven attitudes.

A related body of literature on socio-structural interests as drivers of policy preferences has focused on *technological change,* a key component of the KE. This literature investigates how workers at risk of displacement by automation, or exposed to technological change, and digitalization respond politically (for reviews, see Weisstanner 2023; Gallego and Kurer 2022; Bürgisser 2023). Two findings from this literature suggest that workers who are vulnerable to technological displacement – because of routine task employment - may be *less* likely than others to support digitalization policies. First, the best available cross-national evidence from the OECD "Risks that Matter Survey" suggests that workers at both high objective or subjective risk of substitution are, if anything, *less* likely to support active social policies (as opposed to compensatory redistribution) (Busemeyer and Tober 2023, Busemeyer et al. 2023). If workers perceive digitalization as analogous to active social policies to promote investment in skills, then the same correlation may hold. Second, evidence suggests that workers at risk of technological displacement, as well as those generally concerned and pessimistic about the broader impact of technology, tend to increase their support for technological

protectionism, that is policies that slow down or prevent technological change (Bicchi et al. 2025; Gallego et al. 2022). We flag that exposure to new technologies, in contrast to risk/threat, is more difficult to theorize in terms of self-interest, as it can fuel perceptions of both substitutability or augmentation (Haslberger et al. 2025). However, since digitalization policies typically accelerate rather than slow down technology adoption, technologically "at risk" workers should be less supportive of such policies. Taken together, these observations suggest that those facing greater risks from digitalization are likely to be more opposed to digitalization policies.

At the electoral level, i.e. the competition between the constituencies of political parties, the theoretical expectations extend beyond a narrow focus on immediate self-interest towards ideological support for different policies. Policy support for digitalization may have ideological as well as self-interest sources. Voters of mainstream and green parties have been found to be more supportive of social investment policies, whereas supporters of far-right parties are documented to be the most staunchly opposed to these policies (e.g., Garritzmann et al. 2022; Röth and Schwander 2020; Rathgeb 2023; Häusermann et al. forthcoming). Beyond mere composition effects, these partisan divisions reflect a more complex ideological divide. Indeed, recent studies have interpreted this divide as an emerging politicized cleavage between those who perceive the ongoing structural transformations as expanding opportunities for themselves and society as a whole, and those who feel threatened by these same transformations (Bornschier et al. 2021, 2024; Hooghe and Marks 2022). Similarly, Häusermann et al. (2023) find that confidence in future economic and social opportunities for oneself and one's children predicts "aspirational" citizens' preference for mainstream parties in Europe, whereas "apprehensive" voters, who perceive structural change as a threat to themselves and their children, exhibit a stronger preference for both far left and far right challenger parties. These perceptions and partisan leanings are *ideological* in nature, i.e. they go beyond interest-based conflicts, as they are rooted in social milieus and group identities that underly the ideological politicization of the structural knowledge economy transformation more broadly (Hooghe and Marks 2022).

Hence, this discussion of the different strands of recent theoretical and empirical studies from the KE perspective implies two mechanisms through which the knowledge economy can shape divides over attitudes on digitalization, one based on structural self-interest and one based on ideology and politicization. Our data allows us to empirically assess both; we articulate them via the following hypotheses.

Regarding self-interest based explanations based on socio-demographic factors or alignments, we expect the following:

H1: Members of social groups theorized as winners of the knowledge economy – highly educated and/or high-income workers in cognitive and creative occupations, urban, younger citizens, and workers with low risk of technological displacement – are more likely to support digitalization policies.

Regarding political and ideological explanations based on partisanship and egotropic perceptions, we hypothesize:

H2a: Supporters of populist and challenger parties are less likely to support digitalization policies than supporters of mainstream parties.

H2b: This mainstream-challenger party divide also structures sociotropic perceptions of growth and distributive group effects of digitalization policies.

Background and relevance of the NGEU program

The NGEU program provides an important testing ground for our hypotheses on individual-level support for digitalization policies. Introduced in 2021 in response to the economic and social disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it represents a major intervention with substantial financial commitments. Its simultaneous implementation across member states also enhances realism and external validity and allows us to examine public attitudes in diverse institutional contexts.

At the core of the NGEU is the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), which provides funds to member states for reforms and investments. The NGEU's approximately 800 billion euros are raised through joint bond issuance by the European Commission, a significant departure from the EU's traditional reluctance toward common debt. This expansionary fiscal initiative (Armingeon et al., 2022; Schramm & Wessels, 2023) has been variously interpreted as a "Hamiltonian moment" (de la Porte & Jensen, 2021), a "paradigm change" (Buti & Fabbrini, 2022), an "unprecedented integrative step for the EU" (Ferrera et al., 2021), and a "new indirect instrument of EU industrial policy" (Di Carlo & Schmitz, 2023).

To access funds, governments submit national plans outlining reforms and investment to be completed by 2026. These plans must allocate at least 37 percent of resources to the green transition and at least 20 percent to the digital transition (Schramm

et al., 2022). The program thus created an opportunity for the Commission to advance member states' digitalization agendas (de la Porte & Jensen, 2021).

The Commission justified the prominence of digitalization by highlighting the need to strengthen EU innovation capacity, stimulate growth, and reduce external dependencies through supply chain diversification (European Commission, 2023). The digitalization pillar covers six policy areas: deployment of high-capacity networks (connectivity), digitalization of public services, digitalization of businesses, development of basic and advanced digital skills, research and development in the digital domain, and adoption of cutting-edge digital technologies. Figure 1 summarizes the expected spending across these policy areas.

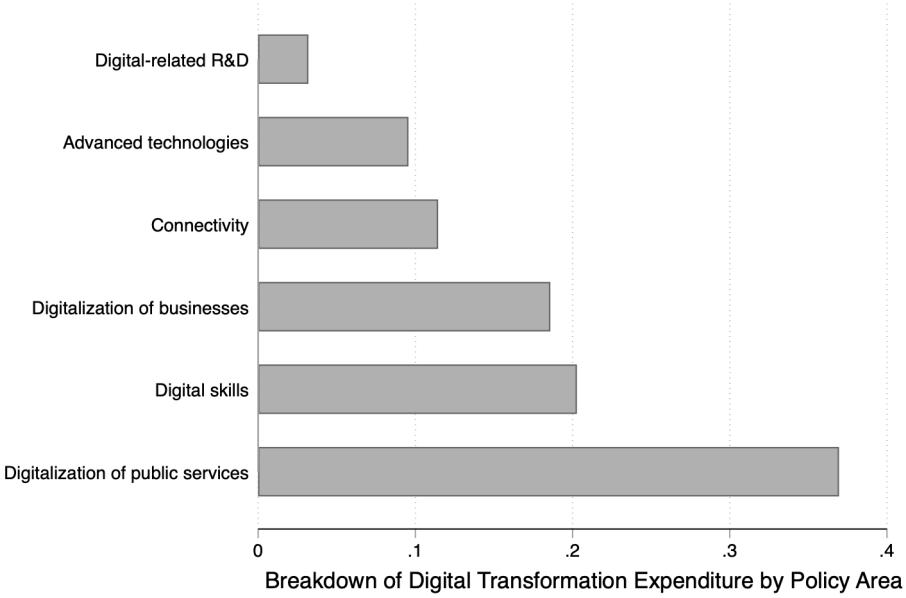

Figure 1: Breakdown of RRF digital transformation expenditure by policy area
Notes: Authors' calculations based on the RRF scoreboard of the European Commission (2023).

Data, design, measurement

We test our hypotheses using original survey data from Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, and Poland, fielded between February and April 2023, with samples of 3,500 respondents per country. We chose the three largest European economies and two smaller ones to capture variation in welfare state regimes and recent economic trajectories. The countries also differ in their position on the Frontier Technology Index (UNCTAD 2025) and the

Knowledge Economy Index (Diessner et al. 2025): Sweden ranks highest, France and Germany occupy mid-level positions, while Italy and Poland trail among advanced capitalist democracies. This rich data and case selection allows for robust evidence of sources of preferences across diverse contexts. Samples were stratified by gender, age (five groups), education (university attendance versus not), and NUTS-1 or broad geographic region.[1]

Knowledge, support and evaluation of digitalization policies.

We first measured respondent's baseline knowledge of the NGEU with a yes/no item: "The European Union has approved the 'Next Generation' program to invest around 800,000 million euros over the next 5 years to help countries in the EU recover from the pandemic. Have you heard about this program?"

Following this, all respondents read a brief informative text explaining that digitalization is a core objective of the NGEU and highlighting specific goals of digitalization consistent with our conceptualization: "One of the goals of this program is to digitalize the economy, that is, to move more business and public administration activity online, help companies automate work, and teach workers digital skills."

Measuring support of digitalization policies

Respondents were then asked whether they supported or opposed a set of digitalization policies, explicitly noting that these measures would be financed through government borrowing:[2] digitalize public administration and services; offer digital skills courses to workers and unemployed people; help companies purchase new digital services and equipment; install fast-speed "5G" mobile networks, especially to rural areas; support technological start-ups; and develop algorithms to use in social services (such as healthcare). These items reflect the major NGEU spending priorities discussed while remaining concrete and accessible to respondents. They capture interventions that advance the knowledge economy while also having redistributive elements (e.g., support for unemployed workers and rural areas). The response options were: "strongly oppose,

[1] The research protocol regarding subject consent were approved by the human-subjects review board at the University of Oxford. The surveys were fielded by the company Bilend-Respondi.

[2] The question text read: "Do you support or oppose the following policies if they need to be paid for by governments borrowing money?"

oppose, neither oppose nor support, support, strongly support", with greater support coded as higher values.[3]

Measuring evaluation of digitalization policies

To measure mechanisms underlying ideological divides over digitalization policies (cf. H2b), we also measured perceptions of the overall and distributive effects of such policies. For *overall effects,* respondents indicated whether digitalization policies would have an overall positive or a negative effect on economic growth. For *distributive effects*, they evaluated whether these policies would have positive, negative, or neutral effects for seven theoretically relevant socio-structural groups that might be favored or threatened by the digitalization of the economy: people doing physically tiring and manual work, middle-aged people (36-55), people in the countryside, individuals doing cognitive and creative work, university-educated people, young people, and people in cities. The first three groups (manual workers, middle-aged individuals, and rural residents) are generally expected to benefit less from digitalization policies. The latter four groups (cognitive workers, university-educated, younger individuals, and urban residents) are typically theorized as likely winners from the expansion of the knowledge economy.

Measuring individual demographic correlates

Socio-demographic variables. To test hypothesis 1 about the individual-level demographic correlates of policy support in terms of self-interest (i.e. younger, educated, higher income respondents in urban areas and cognitive occupations are expected to support digitalization policies more strongly), we include the following common indicators: *Place of residence* is measured through a variable that distinguishes between five groups: respondents who report that they live in the countryside, in a country village, in a town or small city, in the outskirts of a big city or in a big city; For *age*, we collect respondent data on age and aggregate responses in four groups (18 to 34, 35 to 49, 50 to 64 and 65 or higher). We measure *occupation in knowledge economy jobs* in a parsimonious manner, as a simple combination of occupation and education. We code individuals in highly educated cognitive and creative jobs are most likely to be among the winners of the knowledge economy transformation. Highly educated people in non-cognitive occupations are an intermediary category, whereas we recode respondents with

[3] Because our survey items do not distinguish support for national versus EU-level initiatives, we control for trust in the EU to account for potential confounding.

lower (low and vocational) education levels as least favored by the knowledge economy transformation, irrespective of whether they are in cognitive or non-cognitive occupations. In addition, we asked about *income* in fine-grained country-specific brackets and then we aggregated results into country-specific quartiles. We also asked about employment in the public or private sector without strong expectations about directions.

Measures of technology exposure. We assigned respondents objective automation risk scores based on their 4-digit ISCO occupation code, using several indicators of *displacement risk and/or technology exposure*. These scores of objective occupational exposure to AI, software, and robots include the standard Webb measure (Webb 2019) and an alternative measure of AI occupational exposure (Felten et al. 2021).[4] We also code the older risk indicator of routine-task intensity (RTI) (Autor 2003).

Partisanship. To measure partisan affiliation and test hypotheses 2a and 2b, we asked respondents about their vote intention in the next national election (77 percent of all respondents indicate a party vote intention). We categorized political parties into five major party families: Green, Far Left, Mainstream Left, Mainstream Right, and Far Right, following standard categorization. Our main interest is in the distinction between radical left and right challengers on the one hand and mainstream parties on the other hand, which is why we do not distinguish mainstream right parties further (e.g. into liberal, conservative or Christian-democratic parties). Green parties have become programmatically close to mainstream left parties (Häusermann and Kitschelt 2024), but they mobilize a distinctive, younger and more educated electorate. For this reason, we distinguish it from the mainstream left category and use it as a reference category in the estimations[5].

Further controls. We included several controls in all specifications, unless otherwise noted. First, we accounted for employment status, coding respondents employed on permanent or temporary contracts, unemployed, retired or pensioners, students, and in other situations. Given the context of this study, we also controlled for trust in the EU. Finally, we included country dummies in all analyses.

[4] These measures estimate risk based on the vulnerability to automation of tasks performed within occupations, based on O*NET data from the US about current tasks performed in jobs. We construct a crosswalk to match SOC and ISCO codes.
[5] See Appendix D for recoding of parties.

Results

We first present descriptive evidence across the five countries, and then turn to regression results that test our hypotheses. Unless otherwise noted, all models are based on OLS estimations with the lowest category of the variable of interest set as the baseline.

Figure 2 presents the average support for each of the six policies separately for the five countries. The 5-point response options are rescaled to range between 0 and 1 (with higher values indicating treater support). The findings show that levels of support for digitalization policies across all countries are moderate to high. This is the case for some policies such as digital skills training and for some countries, such as Italy, where support for policies tends to be higher than in other countries (except in the case of spending on 5G infrastructure). However, certain policies receive less widespread support. In particular, support for direct funding for startups and companies is lower in most countries; France also stands out with overall less support for digitalization policies.

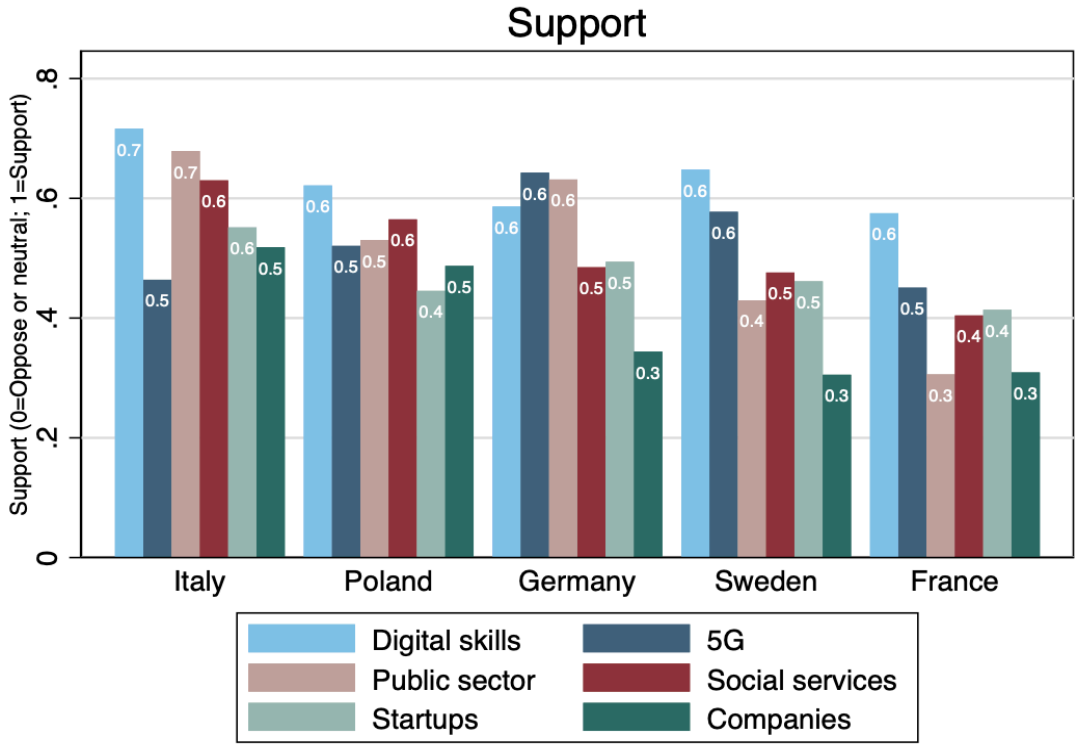

Figure 2: Support for digitalization policies by country and policy

Note: The figure presents the average support for six digitalization policies asked on a 5-point scale rescaled to range between 0 and 1 separately for five countries.

Despite some variation both across country and among policy instruments, a factor analysis of support for the six individual policy instruments indicates that they consistently load onto a single factor representing digitalization policy support. Appendix A shows factor loadings ranging from 0.58 to 0.69 for all items. For clarity and simplicity, however, we constructed the main dependent variable as an additive index of responses to the six digitalization policies. We rescale it to range from 0 to 1, where higher values indicate greater support. The distribution of this variable is shown in Appendix A.

Correlates of digitalization support and relation to hypotheses

We now turn to baseline regressions to test our hypotheses. Figure 3 displays OLS regressions where the dependent variable is the additive index of support for digitalization policy, and includes all socio-structural variables theorized to matter to test hypotheses 1 and 3: place of residence, gender, age, knowledge economy occupations, income**,** and risk of exposure to automation as indicators of knowledge economy advantage/disadvantage (to test hypothesis 1), as well as public sector employment. We also control for employment situation, being born in the country, and include country fixed effects.

Figure 3 shows only weak evidence of a structuration of preferences for digitalization policies based on interest-based socio-demographic variables; while income indeed correlates positively with support for digitalization policies, we find mostly null effects for urban place of residence and employment in a KE occupation once control variables are included (in additional estimations, the null effects also hold when correlating policy support with education directly). Strikingly, while on average, women and younger people are often viewed as winners of the knowledge economy, they are less likely to support digitalization than men and older people. Individuals in older age groups (50-64 and 65+) are actually *more* supportive of digitalization policies than young individuals (18-34), as indicated by the precisely estimated positive coefficients. This is surprising given that older workers are often considered as 'losers' of digital transformation. One possible interpretation is that these respondents do not perceive digitalization policies as threatening, but instead as general economic or societal progress from which they, or their families, might benefit indirectly. Another possibility is that older individuals, especially retirees or late-career workers, are somewhat insulated from direct occupational threats and may favor modernization efforts that improve public service delivery or national competitiveness. Finally, this could reflect ideological or civic considerations—such as trust in state-led modernization or exposure to positive

discourse around digitalization in national media—which may offset individual risk perceptions.

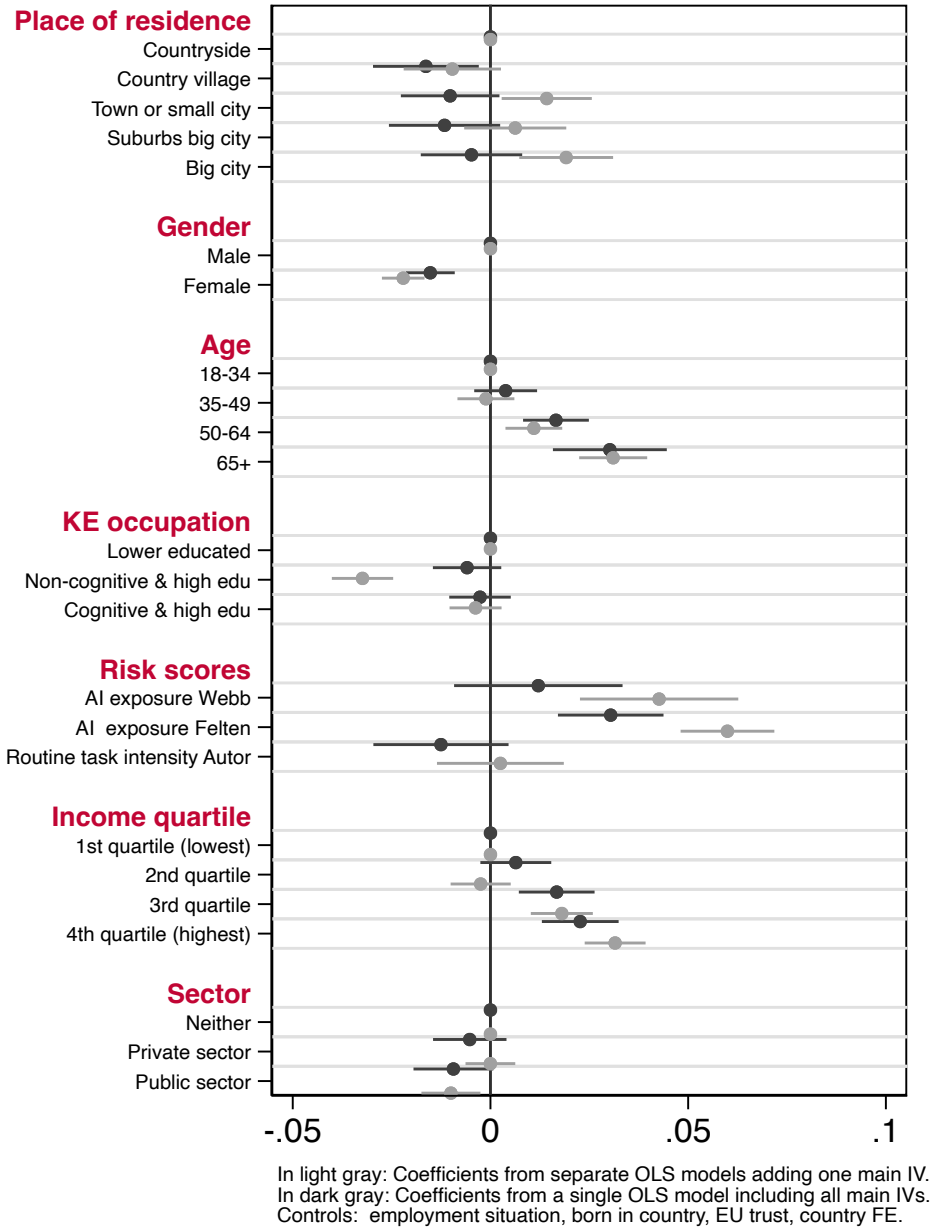

Figure 3: Socio-structural correlates of support for digitalization policies

Note: The figure shows the coefficients of OLS models regressing support for digitalization policies on the correlates predicted by KE theories (place of residence, gender, knowledge economy occupation, and automation exposure), and socio-structural drivers of benefitting from market correction (income, sector of employment). We also control for income, employment sector, employment situation, country of birth, and country fixed effects. The dependent variable is the sum of answers on six separate items about digitalization policies rescaled to range between 0 and 1. All independent variables are coded as dummies with separate coefficients for each category, except for the risk exposure measures which are recoded to range from 0 to 1. The fit of the full model (R squared) is 0.096. The full regression tables are in the Appendix.

Interestingly, exposure to technology shows differentiated effects. While routine workers express lower support for digitalization policies, those directly exposed to AI (Webb/Felten indicators) appear as actually *more* supportive of such policies. These findings can be interpreted on the basis of self-interest in the sense that routine-workers may incur the highest risk of substitution, while the Webb- and Felten-measures of technology exposure may grasp complementarity with AI rather than risk, but the effects remain weak.[6]

Overall, we interpret Figure 3 as providing weak and inconsistent evidence for policy preferences being rooted in socio-structural patterns of self-interest. We view this as evidence that the politics of digitalization support is not (yet) strongly driven by citizens' evaluation of whether they individually are likely to win or lose from these policies based on their socio-demographic characteristics. Instead, ideological considerations may play a stronger role, which we examine next.

Partisan correlates

Next, we examine how support for digitalization correlates with support for different party families, focusing on how this issue may align with the main lines of political conflict in advanced industrial democracies. Specifically, we start by testing hypothesis 2a, which posits that voters of mainstream parties are more favorable to these policies than voters of challenger parties of the populist and/or radical left or right. Figure 4 presents the results of regressing support for digitalization on which party family the individual supports, with far left voters as the reference category. We present three sets of results: bivariate regressions including only party support as the key independent variable; multivariate regressions including socio-demographic controls; and multivariate regressions including socio-demographic controls and an attitudinal control for trust in the EU. The last model is included to assess if results are driven by supporters of challenger parties being more opposed to these policies because they are EU-related.

[6] Country-fixed effect coefficients, though not shown, mirror the descriptive patterns: Italy and Germany show higher support than Sweden, while France shows lower support.

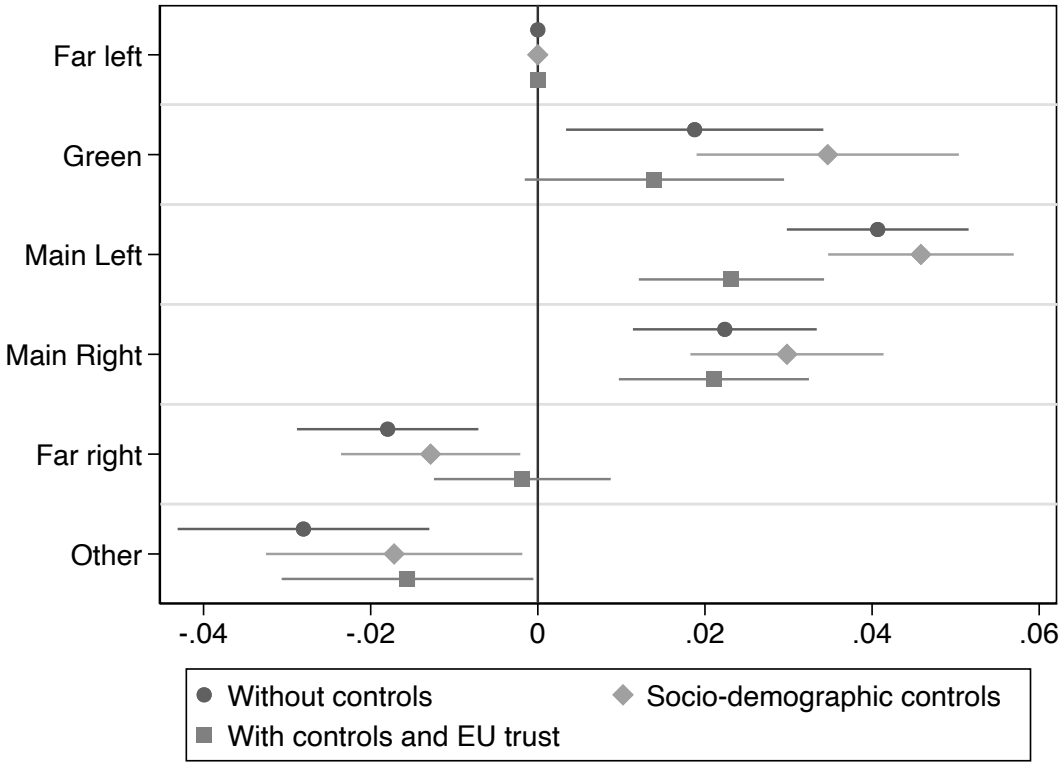

Figure 4: Party Preference and Support for Digitalization Policies

Note: The figure shows the coefficients of OLS models regressing support for digitalization policies on vote intention. The first set of coefficients (in dark circles) includes no controls. The second set of coefficients (in gray rhombus) controls for place of residence, gender, age, knowledge economy occupation, income quartile, employment situation, being born in the country, and includes country fixed effects. The dependent variable is the sum of answers on six separate items about digitalization policies rescaled to range between 0 and 1. All independent variables are coded as dummies with separate coefficients for each category. Vote intention is a variable with six categories introduced as dummies for each party family. The model fit (R squared) is 0.068. The third set of coefficients (in gray squares) are estimates from a model that also controls for trust in the EU. Here, the R squared is 0.101. The full regression tables can be found in the Appendix.

The coefficients for party support are clearly consistent with H2a. Supporters of far-right parties and far left parties are less supportive of digitalization policies than supporters of mainstream left parties, green parties, and mainstream right parties. By contrast, the grouping of parties along the left-right divide does not correspond to support for digitalization; mainstream left versus right-wing party supporters do not differ in their support for digitalization policies. The magnitude of the coefficients decreases slightly when controlling for trust in the EU, yet they remain distinctly negative. This suggests that supporters of challenger parties oppose digitalization policies for reasons beyond their attitudes toward the EU. However, our analyses cannot distinguish between general support for digitalization policies or specific support for EU-digitalization policies.

Overall, while attitudes toward digitalization policies are not correlated with socio-structural variables as expected, this latter set of findings is consistent with the pattern of party realignment observed in the literature on social investment, technological-structural change, and the emergence of a new education cleavage. This divergence in preferences suggests that if digitalization policies become more politicized, they could overlap with existing lines of conflict where far-left and far-right parties represent those who feel threatened by structural change while mainstream parties represent those who expect structural change to enhance societal outcomes.[7]

It is important to note that the substantive magnitudes of the coefficients presented in this analysis are modest. This is common in survey-based public opinion research, where effect sizes are often constrained by measurement limitations and attitudinal complexity. For instance, being a supporter of a right-wing populist parties is associated with a decrease of approximately 0.1 standard deviations in support for digitalization policies. Being in a knowledge economy occupation is associated with an increase of 0.05 standard deviations; having a higher income is associated with an increase of 0.05 standard deviations; and being a woman is associated with a decrease of 0.04 standard deviations in support for digitalization policies.

Exploring mechanisms: perceptions of the impact of digitalization policies

Having established a pattern of partisan cleavage that suggests a more knowledge-economy based division, in this section we turn to the question of why voters of green and mainstream parties support digitalization policies more strongly than voters of radical or populist challenger parties.

To demarcate the ideological partisan divides from self-interest based effects, we use survey items about perceived effects of digitalization policies: we asked about beliefs regarding the impact of digitalization policies on economic growth; and we asked which social groups would mostly benefit or be harmed by digitalization policies.[8] Appendix C shows average descriptive levels of expectations for both the socio-tropic and group-specific consequences.

[7] Appendix B shows these findings are robust to controlling for redistribution attitudes and the use of an alternative dependent variable (factor scores).

[8] In the design, we randomly assigned the order of these questions (expectations about growth and beneficiaries) for some respondents prior to the policy questions, but there is no effect of ordering of these modules on policy preferences nor on expectations.

Predicting these expectations of digitalization effects allows us to test the ideological nature of the partisan divide (H2b) in two ways. First, we predict expectations while holding socio-demographic variables constant. Second, we predict socio-tropic beliefs regarding the impact of digitalization on growth and group welfare. Both outcomes are distant from the respondents' own benefit, asking about the impact of these policies on "others". On average, these estimations are indeed very comparable across countries and quite consistent: a majority of respondents believe such policies are somewhat or very positive for economic growth overall. Only for France and Sweden, the plurality category is a neutral view, but only a minority in all countries believes that such policies would be detrimental for economic growth (see Figure C1 in the Appendix). Also, respondents across all countries on average perceive the policy beneficiaries to be the highly educated workers and cognitive workers, who are viewed to benefit more from digitalization compared to manual workers. Younger individuals are consistently viewed as benefiting more from digitalization compared to older individuals across all countries. Also, urban residents are seen as benefiting more from digitalization policies than rural residents in every country surveyed.

Given this overall strong agreement on the economic and group-specific effects of digitalization policies, we argue that if these evaluations vary significantly by party affiliation – being consistently more favorable among voters of green and mainstream parties than among voters of challenger parties (controlling for the main socio-structural variables) – this constitutes evidence that the partisan ideological divide reflects broader evaluations of the ongoing social and economic transformation and its implication for society as a whole. To study the correlates of these evaluations, we dichotomize the perceptions into binary outcome variables of positive versus non-positive evaluations.

Figures 5 and 6 show the findings of models predicting the socio-tropic evaluation of the effect of overall digitalization policies on economic growth by party preference and socio-demographic controls. These are coefficients and plotted probabilities based on an OLS regression model as in previous figures, respectively.

Two findings are notable. First, despite a large battery of controls, and although perceptions of growth effects are positively correlated with income and urban residency, the mainstream-challenger partisan divide stands out most clearly. In particular, far right voters, but also far left voters, are significantly less likely to think that digitalization policies will be beneficial for economic growth. To compare substantive effects, Figure 6 plots the predicted probabilities of positive evaluations by party preference (based on

the coefficients displayed in Figure 5). It shows that the likelihood of far-right party voters to perceive positive effects on economic growth is actually below 50 percent. Moreover, Figure 6 shows a large substantive difference of up to 20 percentage points in the evaluation of these policies between mainstream and green party voters versus challenger party voters. Simply put, more extreme challenger-party voters are much less likely to think that digitalization policies will be good for aggregate growth.

Figure 5: Correlates of perceiving digitalization policies as positive for growth

Note: The figure shows the coefficients of OLS models regressing the perception that digitalization enhances economic growth on socio-demographic and party family variables. All variables are dummies with separate coefficients for each category. The model includes country fixed effects. The R squared is 0.100. The full regression tables can be found in the Appendix.

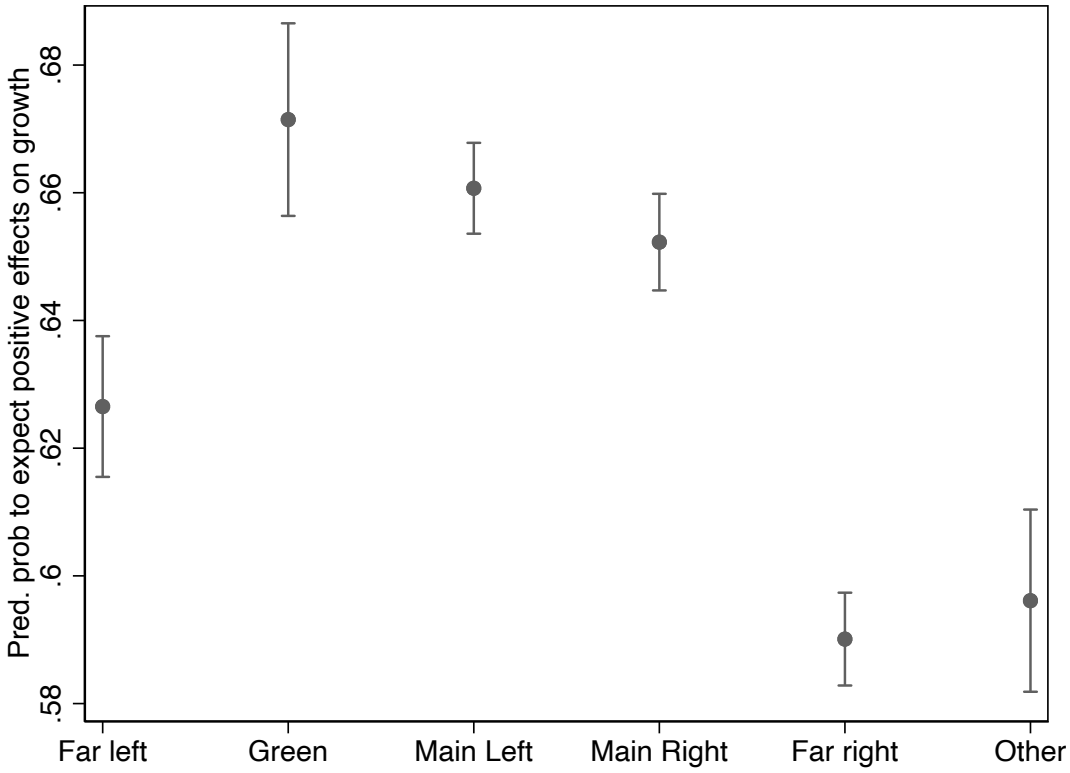

Figure 6: Predicted probabilities of perceiving positive growth effects of digitalization policies, by party-family preference

Note: The figure shows the predicted probability to believe that digitalization is good for economic growth by intention to vote for different party families, estimated using the same OLS model as in Figure 5.

We find a similar party-family based divergence regarding sociotropic expectations of which groups would benefit from digitalization policies. We regress the dependent variable of positive expectations for theoretically relevant groups on partisan orientation, controlling for the same independent variables as above. We examine and contrast expectations of the groups of university graduates vs. manual workers, urban vs. rural people, and younger vs. older people, which are conventional characterizations of knowledge economy "winners" and "losers." To some extent, these groups can also be interpreted as in-groups and out-groups of knowledge economy winners and losers, respectively. As illustrative of the pattern, Figures 7 and 8 show the findings for expectations for university graduates and manual workers, while the predicted expectations for the other groups are shown in Appendix C.

Figure 7 shows that even after controlling for socio-demographic variables, evaluations of the effects of digitalization policies for *both* manual workers and university graduates are more negative among far-right voters and, to a lesser extent, far left voters. We find similar patterns when studying the perceived effects on younger vs. older, and on urban vs. rural voters (Appendix C).

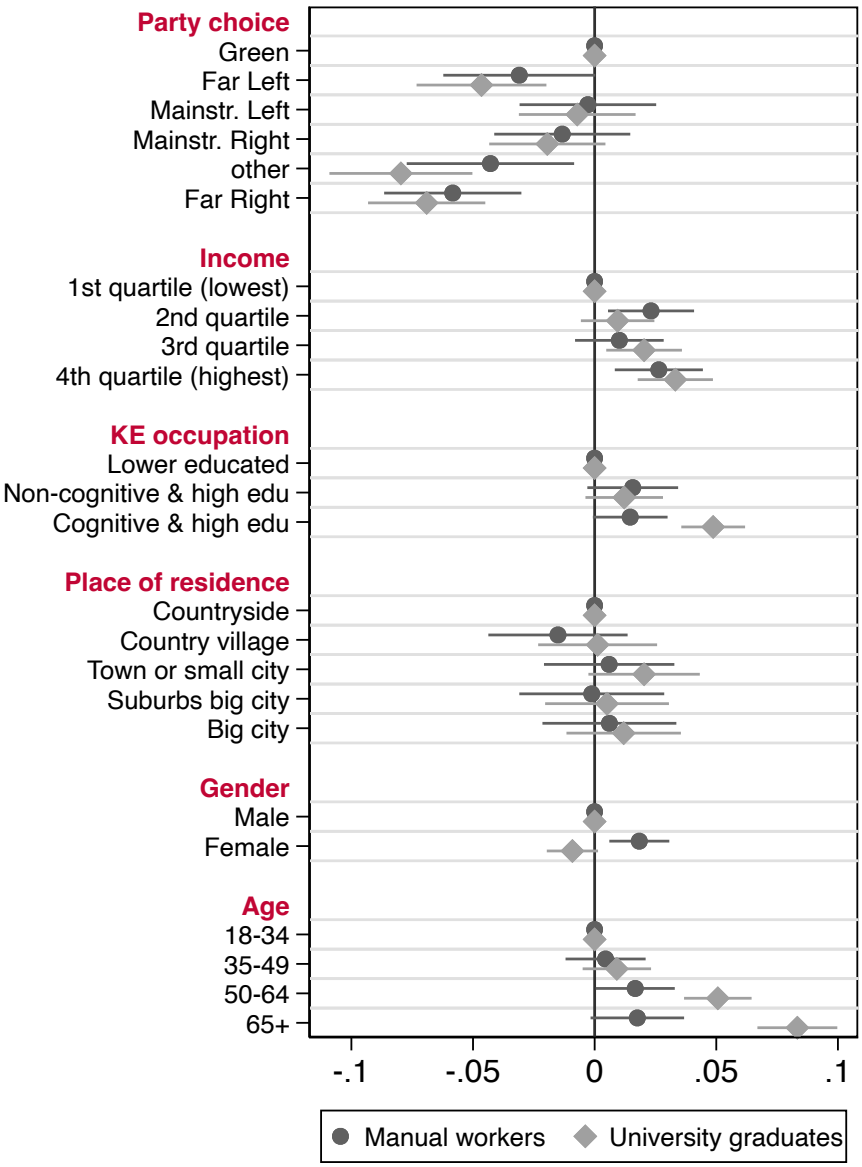

Figure 7: Determinants of perceiving positive effects of digitalization policies for manual workers vs. university graduates

Note: The figure shows the coefficients of OLS models regressing the perception that digitalization has positive effects for manual workers and university graduates on various determinants. All variables are dummies with separate coefficients for each category. The model includes country fixed effects. The fit ((R squared) for the model of effects for manual workers is 0.027 and for the model of effects for university graduates 0.046. The full regression tables can be found in the Appendix.

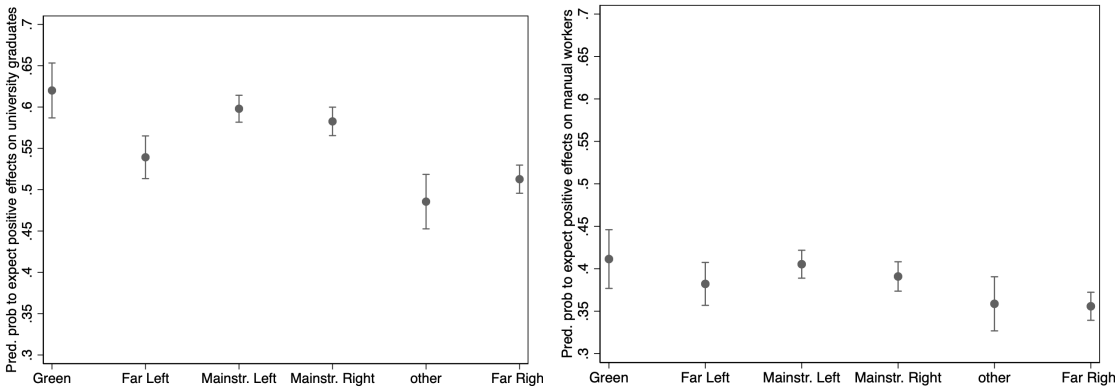

Figure 8: Predicted probabilities of perceiving positive effects for manual workers (left) and for university graduates (right) by party preference

Note (Figure 8): The figure shows the predicted probabilities of believing that digitalization policies are good for manual workers (left panel) and university graduates (right panel) by vote intention to different party families. The model uses the same specification as in Figures 5 and 7 and includes country fixed effects. The full regression tables can be found in the Appendix.

In Figure 8 we see that across the party spectrum respondents tend to think that university graduates are relatively more likely to reap benefits from digitalization policies (left panel) than manual workers (right panel). Similarities in evaluation are particularly striking regarding manual workers, where the predicted probability of perceiving positive effects from digitalization policies does not exceed 35 to 40 percent across all party constituencies. However, the left side of Figure 8 shows that, while on average stronger throughout, evaluations differ more when it comes to university graduates. It shows that green and mainstream party voters are significantly more likely to expect beneficial returns from digitalization policies for this group. Overall, then such voters have both more positive sociotropic expectations, and more positive expectations that certain types of groups of society are more likely to benefit. By contrast, voters of challenger parties evaluate digitalization policies more negatively, not only for their likely in-groups, but throughout the socio-structural comparison groups and also in the aggregate. We interpret this evidence as suggesting that the political divide over digitalization policies between mainstream and challenger party voters reflects a deeper ideological evaluation of social and economic transformations and their implications for society.

Conclusion and discussion

To our knowledge this is the first investigation of the correlates of support for substantively important digitalization policies that have actually begun to be implemented, along with rich individual-level data to arbitrate among competing hypotheses. We find stronger evidence that there are partisan bases of division regarding such policies, consistent with recent literature on how the distributional winners and losers from the advent and acceleration of the knowledge economy can fall into party-group clusters. While socio-structural variables, such as education, age, place of residence, and occupational risk, show limited correlation with digitalization-policy support, partisan affiliation plays a much stronger role in differentiating voters' views on such policies. Mainstream party voters, particularly of green and left-wing parties, show stronger support for digitalization, whereas voters of populist and radical parties—both on the far right and far left—are significantly less supportive. Moreover, this partisan cleavage is noticeable in both the expectations about the economic growth effects of digitalization policies and their distributional consequences for winners and losers of the KE. Mainstream and green-party voters are more likely to think that these policies will generate economic growth overall, as well as benefit social groups across the board. On the other hand, voters of radical and challenger parties are skeptical regarding benefits in terms of both growth and group-specific rewards. This skepticism extends not only to their relative in-groups, but rather reflects an overall – we think ideologically driven – evaluation of these policies and the economic transition towards the knowledge economy they represent. In other words: even though digitalization policies may objectively have clear economic winners and losers, the political alignment appears to be driven more by ideological perceptions of structural change and its societal implications, than by individuals' economic self-interest. The divide reflects the broader ideological split

between the new left and the radical right, similar to what has been observed in the context of social investment policies aimed at knowledge economy transitions.

Our results should generate further research and discussion that examines support for different forms of digitalization policies as an agenda, and we propose two natural ways of extending the results. First, our results indicate that even though individuals largely have "correct" expectations about the likely beneficiaries of who benefits from digitalization policies, partisan affiliation structures preferences more so than the theorized socio-demographic correlates. Further probing the determinants of why individuals believe some policies are growth-enhancing (versus have distributional gains or losses) could be a fruitful agenda.

Second, related, the expectations of who gains from digitalization policies may vary based on the specific policy in question (such as policies more designed to help upskilling workers versus public-infrastructure digitalization). While we found general support on a single dimension of digitalization expansion, more nuanced measurement of expected beneficiaries from different digitalization policies could lead to greater support of self-interested economic theories as a basis of the partisan differences found here.

One particularly counter-intuitive finding deserving further reflection is the unexpectedly lower support for digitalization among younger respondents. While our theoretical framework anticipates that these groups would support such policies more than older citizens due to material self-interest, this does not appear to hold empirically. Several interpretations are possible. First, older individuals may not anticipate being directly impacted. Second, digitalization policies may be interpreted more broadly as modernization initiatives rather than narrowly as labor-substituting technologies. In this light, older or more risk-exposed respondents might see digitalization as a state-led initiative that benefits society overall, particularly if it is framed as improving

infrastructure, public services, or competitiveness. Third, it is possible that with advancements in AI, younger workers may view expanded digitalization as synonymous with AI-oriented labor-substitution of entry-level jobs.

While our evidence is from the European NG context, the implications are far-reaching for post-industrial societies. In an era of continuous innovation in AI and further prioritization of digitalization by many governments, seeking to entrench and expand many aspects of the knowledge economy, our findings suggest that digitalization policies may become a battleground for political contestation; there is little doubt that many governments share the urgency of accelerating digitalization. Aspects of the politicization over the knowledge economy and corresponding policies are seen in debates over the returns to government funding of universities, support for technological companies, and digitalization of public services. Consequently, as digital transformation accelerates, the partisan and ideological divides observed here may deepen. Mainstream and green parties are likely to champion digitalization as tools for progress and innovation, while populist and radical parties may increasingly frame it as a threat to traditional ways of life and economic stability. This evolving political landscape could influence the future direction and success of digitalization efforts.

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