

Chapter 7

Digitalization and the welfare state: Citizens' views on who should be in charge

Marius R. Busemeyer

Introduction and motivation

In the last few years, I had the honor and pleasure of working intensely with Kees van Kersbergen on a publication project about the consequences of digitalization for the welfare state, broadly conceived (Busemeyer, Kemmerling et al., 2022a, 2022b). Together with Paul Marx and Achim Kemmerling (and the large number of contributors to this project), we discussed how and whether rapid technological change – a multi-faceted phenomenon often discussed under the broad (and simplified) headings of digitalization and automation – might pose a more significant challenge to contemporary welfare states compared to previous waves of technological change. Kees van Kersbergen's contributions to these debates were not only to discuss and highlight the implications of technological change for the concrete policy area of health care (Jensen and van Kersbergen, 2022) but also to push the rest of us to think more thoroughly about the deeper (and more radical) implications of these changes in conceptual terms.

One example of his keen ability to move the yardstick in terms of thinking outside the box in this regard is his recent work on the implications of the use digital technology in the administration of the welfare state. In the final chapter of the volume (Busemeyer, Kemmerling et al., 2022b: 386), we had discussed the 'public management dilemma' that is associated with the spread of digital technology in welfare state administration. On the one hand, the widespread use of digital innovations such as automated decision-making systems, digital sharing and storage of citizens' information to facilitate information flow, and the use of digital technology in the delivery of services such as education can 'give a tremendous boost of efficiency and can enhance the quality of social services' (Busemeyer, Kemmerling et al., 2022b: 386). On the other hand, the widespread usage

of these innovations might fuel opposition to the concentration of digital power resources (i.e., data) in the hands of the state. Following up on this idea, van Kersbergen and Svendsen (2022) have recently shown that the speed and depth of digital innovation in the welfare state seems to depend not only on the availability of digital resources and technical know-how but also on the broad availability of a non-digital resource, namely social trust. Countries with a high degree of social trust have been able to implement digital innovations faster with positive effects for efficiency and quality of service, which can further enhance citizen trust in the performance of their welfare states. Vice versa, low-trust countries are likely to have a harder time implementing digital innovations.

Against this broad background, the contribution of this short chapter is to delve deeper into one particular aspect of citizens' views on the implications of radical technological change for the welfare state. This is, to some extent, related to Kees van Kersbergen's latest work on this issue, namely the question of which actors citizens trust to deal with the (expected) negative side effects of rapid technological change. In the next section, I briefly discuss the state of research on the broader topic before I present an empirical analysis of data from a cross-national public opinion survey – the OECD's *Risks that Matter 2020* (OECD, 2020) – which includes data on the specific issue mentioned above. In the concluding section, I reflect on the findings.

An emerging research agenda

As I argue more extensively elsewhere (Busemeyer, 2022), existing research on the question of how current rapid technological change affects the welfare state is limited. In contrast, there is a much broader research tradition in labor market economics on the effect of technological change on labor markets, which has produced a number of important findings. For one, there is mounting evidence that technological change is associated with a particular pattern of labor market stratification, namely the 'hollowing out of the middle' effect (Autor, Levy and Murnane, 2003; Autor, 2022; Goos, Manning and Salomons, 2014; Michaels, Natraj and Van Reenen, 2014; Breemersch, Damijan and Konings, 2017). Looking backwards (i.e., analyzing labor force survey and panel data for the past decades),

this research finds that technological change indeed increases demand for (and by extension, the wages of) highly skilled workers in the knowledge economy. However, and somewhat different from the previous effects of globalization, the association between skills, income, and employment prospects is not linearly positive. Instead, researchers have identified increasing demand for low-skilled employment, often in personal services such as hairdressing and table waiting, which are difficult or too expensive to automate and routinize. Different from the high-skilled winners of the transformation towards the knowledge economy, the wages of the low-skilled service workers do not necessarily increase. Those in the middle of the income and skills distribution are then increasingly ‘under pressure’ (OECD, 2019) to either upgrade their skills in order to keep up with the top strata in the knowledge economy or face downward decline in status and economic resources.

A second line of research in labor market economics adopts a more forward-looking perspective by trying to estimate the likely future impact of digitalization and automation on labor markets. A pioneering study in this strand of research was carried out by Frey and Osborne (2017), who developed occupation-specific risk assessments based on experts’ judgements about the likelihood of certain tasks being done by robots, advanced software, or AI in the coming years. Another example is the recent paper by Acemoglu et al. (2021), who extract data on the usage of AI in companies from job vacancy data, identifying measurable replacement effects of AI usage on the hiring of non-AI related staff, even though these effects remain small in the aggregate still. In a related paper, Autor’s (2022) former rather positive perspective on the effects of technological change on labor markets has turned more pessimistic because of the fundamental uncertainties regarding the future potential of AI and machine learning, which could have disruptive consequences for labor markets.

Building on the wealth of scholarship in labor market economics, welfare state scholars have only recently begun to explore the implications of digitalization for the welfare state. One strand of literature focuses on the political consequences of technological change, highlighting how the above mentioned ‘squeezing’ of the middle class might lead to growing support for radical and right-wing pop-

ulist parties (Anelli, Colantone and Stanig, 2019; Frey, Berger and Chen, 2018; Im et al., 2019; Kurer and Palier, 2019; Kurer, 2020). Relatedly, Culpepper and Thelen (2020) have pointed to the rising political and economic power of leading companies of the platform economy (see also Kenney, Bearson and Zysman, 2021).

A second strand, which is of greater relevance for this particular chapter, is concerned with the association between technological change and welfare state attitudes and preferences. Work in this tradition builds on the recent scholarship emphasizing the centrality of labor market risk in shaping individual-level attitudes towards the welfare state (Häusermann, Kurer and Schwander, 2015; Rehm, 2009). In line with this work, the pioneering paper by Thewissen and Rueda (2019) studied the association between automation risk exposure at the occupational level (measurable, for instance, with indices on the ‘routine task intensity’ of occupations developed in the economics literature discussed above) and support for redistribution, finding a consistent and robust positive association. Related papers in this area adopted a more differentiated perspective on social policy preferences, distinguishing between demand for compensatory social policies such as more generous unemployment benefits on the one hand and more social investment-type policies (i.e., investments in education, further training, and active labor market policies) on the other. In spite of using partly different datasets, various papers in this sub-field have come to similar conclusions, which is that those whose jobs are at risk of automation tend to prioritize compensatory social policies, whereas the ‘winners’ of technological change (i.e., high-skilled and high-income individuals) are more in favor of social investments (Busemeyer and Sahm, 2022; Busemeyer, Gandenberger et al., 2022; Busemeyer and Tober, 2022; Gallego et al., 2022; Im, 2021; Kurer and Häusermann, 2022).

Some theoretical expectations (and descriptive empirical findings)

An issue that has not been addressed so far in existing scholarship is the question of which actors citizens would like to see in charge of managing the digital transformation of welfare states and labor markets. Why is this a relevant question? First, this issue is related to social and political trust, which Kees van Kersbergen identified

in his recent work as an important resource for societies in order to deal successfully with the challenges of technological change. Secondly, it defines the relationship between citizens themselves on the one hand and collective actors such as trade unions, civil society associations, and employers as well as the welfare state on the other. If citizens view individual workers such as themselves to be largely responsible for managing the implications of technological change, there is little legitimacy (or even need) for the state to step in. If, in contrast, citizens primarily look towards the state and other collective actors to support them in dealing with the digital transformation, then this is likely to boost support for continued involvement of the state in this matter.

Before proceeding, I briefly want to introduce the question that I use in order to measure citizens' views on the responsibility for managing the digital revolution. This question was part of the OECD Risks that Matter 2020 survey. This is a quota-based – but in practical terms, representative – survey of public opinion in 25 OECD countries, including about 25,000 respondents.¹ The survey is broadly focused on exploring perceptions of and preferences related to different kinds of social risk. Together with a team of researchers from the University of Lausanne, we had the chance of designing and including a set of questions on social risk perceptions and preferences related to technological change in this survey. For the following analysis, I rely on this question from the survey:

To what extent do you think each of the following should or should not be responsible for dealing with the potential negative side effects of technological change?

- a. The national government
- b. Intergovernmental organisations or political unions, such as the United Nations or, if you live in a European Union member state, the European Union
- c. Trade unions
- d. Firms, businesses, and employers
- e. Civil society groups, such as professional associations, non-profit organisations, and charitable organisations
- f. Individual workers themselves

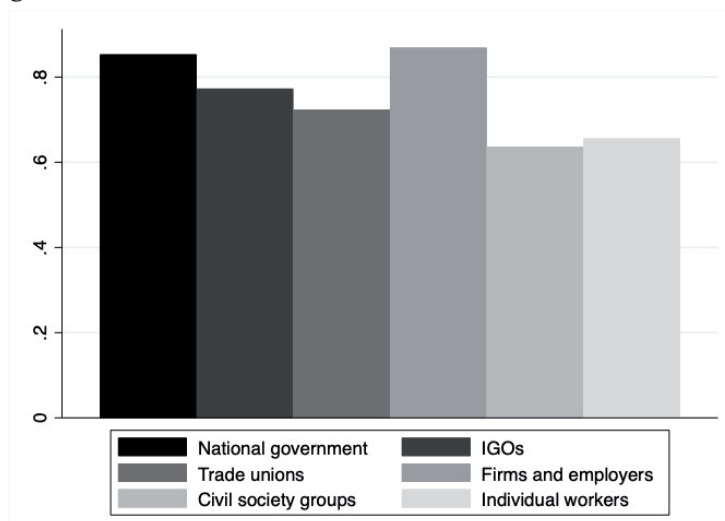
¹ For details, see OECD (2020).

Respondents were then asked to indicate their response on a four-point scale: '1. Definitely should not be responsible; 2. Probably should not be responsible; 3. Probably should be responsible; 4. Definitely should be responsible.'

The question wording did not force respondents to prioritize between these different actors nor did it force them to pick and choose. Hence, it is possible for respondents to attribute (joint) responsibility to different actors. Furthermore, the wording of the question emphasizes the 'potential negative side effects' of technological change. This is not to downplay to potential *positive* consequences of digitalization and automation for work, such as improvements in the quality of work, expanded options for new and different forms of work organization, and – in the case of robots in particular – the prospect of having machines take over the physically strenuous aspects of jobs. However, in designing the question, we were more interested in how individuals would react to the real and perceived automation risks entailed in rapid technological change. Empirically, we find that large shares of the workforces in OECD countries are indeed worried about these risks (Busemeyer, Gandenberger et al., 2022). This share reaches from a low of about 20-25% in countries like Austria, Finland, and Norway thinking it is likely or very likely that their jobs will be 'replaced by a robot, computer software, an algorithm, or artificial intelligence' in the coming five years to close to or even more than 50% in Chile, Mexico, Turkey, or South Korea.

Regarding the responsibility question, I also find varied response patterns. Figure 1 depicts the share of respondents across all countries in the sample who state that the respective actor(s) should 'probably' or 'definitely' be in charge of managing the negative side effects of technological change. Relatively speaking, most respondents (almost 87%) regard firms and employers as the actors who should be primarily responsible. This is likely because firms are immediately in charge of managing the implementation of digital technology at the workplace. In second place and close behind, however, respondents regard the state ('the national government') as being responsible for managing technological change (85%). Notably, responsibility is attributed to national governments rather than to international or supranational organizations (77%). Collective actors that represent the interests of employees and workers are also ap-

Figure 1: Citizens' views on who should be in charge of managing the potentially negative side effects of technological change

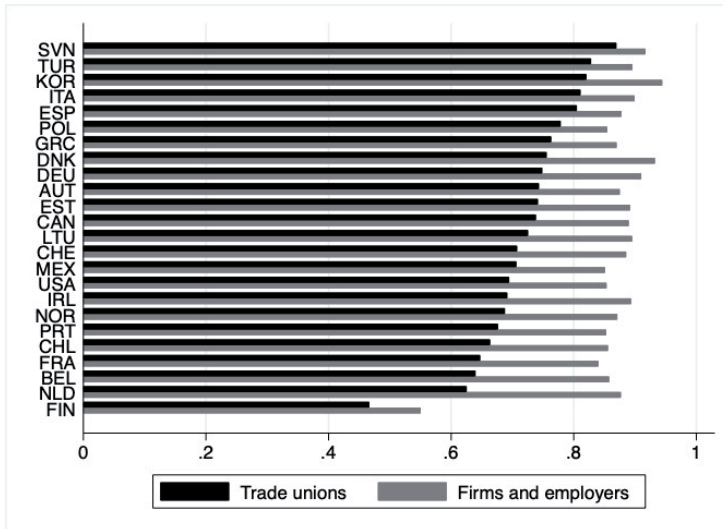


Note: Bars indicate the share of respondents stating that the respective actor(s) should probably or definitely be in charge. Source: OECD (2020).

preciated as influential actors that hold responsibility for managing the negative side effects of technological change, but on a decidedly lower level compared to business and government, namely 72% in the case of trade unions and 64% in the case of other civil society organizations. Comparatively few respondents also think that individual workers themselves should be responsible for managing the negative side effects of digitalization (66%).

Figures 2 and 3 display how the shares of respondents perceiving different actors to be responsible varies across countries. In the case of Figure 2, I plot the share of respondents who believe that individual workers themselves are responsible against the share who thinks that the state (i.e., the national government) should be responsible. Interestingly, there is more variation regarding the share who holds individuals responsible across countries, while the share holding the government responsible remains rather stable and high. Thus, national institutional contexts seem to have a stronger effect in the case of popular perceptions of the role of individuals in dealing with technological change, whereas the central role of the state is relatively uncontested.

Figure 2: Perceived responsibility to manage negative side effects of technological change: individual workers vs. the state

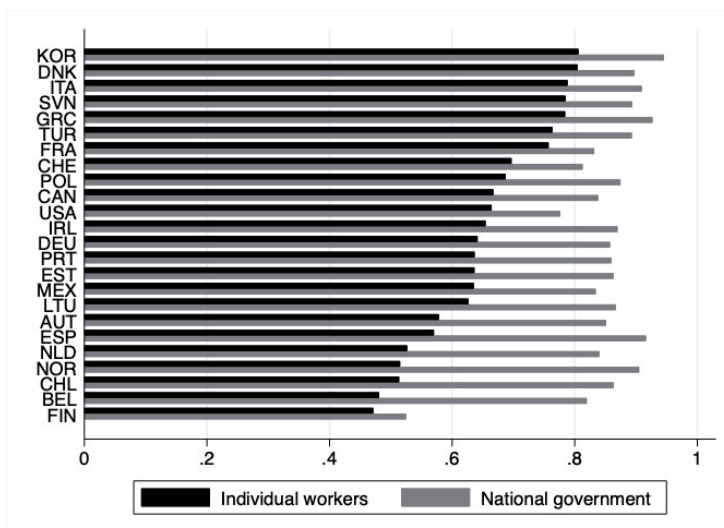


Note: Bars indicate the share of respondents stating that the respective actor(s) should probably or definitely be in charge. Source: OECD (2020).

Furthermore, the figure clearly shows that these perceptions do not simply mirror existing welfare state regimes, supporting van Kersbergen's (2013) critical position on the empirical usefulness of these typologies. For instance, the Scandinavian countries are distributed across the whole scale, with Danish respondents expressing very high support for holding individual workers responsible, while this share is lowest in Finland and similarly low in Norway. The supposedly individualist liberal welfare states of Canada, the US, and Ireland are in a middling position, whereas conservative/corporatist welfare states are also distributed across the scale.

Figure 3 depicts the shares of respondents who hold trade unions or firms/employers responsible. Again, the share of respondents assigning responsibility to employers is high and varies less across countries, whereas the share who see unions in a responsible position varies more. There is a certain, but not clear-cut, tendency that support for trade unions being responsible is higher in countries where the power resources of trade unions are somewhat less developed, for instance in Slovenia, Turkey, and Korea as well as – to some extent – in the Southern European countries of Italy, Spain,

Figure 3: Perceived responsibility to manage negative side effects of technological change: trade unions vs. firms and employers



Note: Bars indicate the share of respondents stating that the respective actor(s) should probably or definitely be in charge. Source: OECD (2020).

and Greece (plus Poland). Support for trade unions to play a responsible role in managing the negative side effects of digitalization is somewhat lower in corporatist countries where unions traditionally play a strong role (Belgium, the Netherlands, and again Finland). It goes beyond the scope of this short contribution to explain fully this variation – I merely note its existence here and encourage researchers to delve deeper into this issue.

Individual-level determinants

In the next step, I move from the country level down to the individual level. As in the previous section, I directly combine the discussion of theoretical considerations with empirical analysis for reasons of space. Table 1 displays the results of a multi-level regression analysis (with robust standard errors) of the above-introduced dependent variables, which have been dichotomized for ease of interpretation.² I start the discussion with variables capturing socio-economic status, namely income and education. In this case, it could be expect-

² More specifically, the top two and the lower two categories are collapsed, respectively.

Table 1: Individual-level determinants of responsibility attributions for managing the negative side effects of technological change

Who should be responsible?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	National government	International organizations	Trade unions	Firms/ employers	Civil society groups	Individual workers
Education	0.00765 (0.0504)	0.00894 (0.0417)	-0.0544 (0.0376)	0.191*** (0.0485)	0.0449 (0.0381)	0.143*** (0.0387)
Disposable income (log)	0.00704 (0.0243)	0.000404 (0.0163)	-0.0237 (0.0182)	0.0460** (0.0216)	-0.0229 (0.0159)	0.0111 (0.0196)
Age	0.0112*** (0.00299)	0.00882*** (0.00285)	0.00555*** (0.00189)	0.0179*** (0.00234)	0.0105*** (0.00202)	0.00696*** (0.00209)
Gender (female = 1)	0.150** (0.0589)	0.118** (0.0602)	0.125*** (0.0356)	0.225*** (0.0610)	0.00272 (0.0441)	-0.176*** (0.0352)
Not employed	0.0399 (0.0425)	-0.0201 (0.0428)	-0.0380 (0.0281)	0.218*** (0.0420)	-0.140*** (0.0367)	-0.176*** (0.0334)

Using digital tech at work	-0.0148 (0.0192)	-0.0116 (0.0129)	-0.0277** (0.0111)	0.0484*** (0.0142)	-0.0107 (0.0124)	-0.00507 (0.0120)
Subjective tech risk	0.241*** (0.0266)	0.280*** (0.0368)	0.377*** (0.0255)	0.141*** (0.0399)	0.441*** (0.0308)	0.349*** (0.0300)
General tech attitude	0.0289 (0.0457)	-0.0129 (0.0509)	0.0309 (0.0359)	0.0674* (0.0395)	-0.0278 (0.0438)	0.0414 (0.0361)
Constant	1.121*** (0.327)	0.765*** (0.189)	1.049*** (0.220)	-0.162 (0.279)	0.380** (0.167)	0.414** (0.209)
Observations	19,156	18,386	18,587	19,289	18,291	18,896
Number of countries	24	24	24	24	24	24

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1

ed that high-status individuals should be more in favor of supporting individual responsibility to manage the fallout of technological stress because these individuals also have the necessary resources to be able to deal with the associated labor market transformation. It turns out that this expectation only holds in the case of highly educated individuals (model 6). Furthermore, high-status individuals could be more likely to express support for attributing responsibility to employers given their generally more positive attitudes towards business interests vis-à-vis support for the state or trade unions. This expectation is confirmed in model 4.

Labor market and occupational status also matter to some extent: Those who are currently not employed³ are more likely to hold employers accountable and less likely to attribute responsibility to civil society groups and individual workers. Somewhat surprisingly and against plausible expectations, trade unions do not seem to matter in this case. Regarding occupational variables, the survey includes an item on whether respondents regularly use digital technology at their workplace. This aspect captures at least some characteristics of the occupations of respondents. Interestingly, heavy technology users are more likely to attribute responsibility to firms and employers but less to trade unions.

Finally, I include a number of attitudinal variables that might be correlated with responsibility attributions. The first captures subjective perceptions of technological risk, i.e., how likely it is from the perspective of respondents themselves that their job will be replaced by a robot, advanced software algorithm, or artificial intelligence in the next five weeks (this variable was already mentioned above). Previous analyses by us have shown that subjective automation risk is strongly related to social policy preferences related to tech change (Busemeyer, Ganderberger et al., 2022). Table 1 shows that subjective perceptions of automation risk are strongly related to responsibility attributions as well: Higher perceived risk is associated with higher levels of responsibility attributions. This could express a general perception that ‘something needs to be done’ about the expected negative side effects of technological change, independent of which (type of) actors should be responsible for ‘do-

3 Note that the survey questionnaire does not distinguish between unemployed and voluntary non-employment here.

ing something.' Secondly, I include a general measure of whether technological change is perceived as a positive or negative force of change. This variable does not have a strong effect. It is only in the case of responsibility attribution to employers where a weak positive association can be observed.

Concluding remarks

Rapid technological change is currently transforming labor markets of advanced post-industrial democracies, and it is likely to have even stronger effects in the coming decade. Generally speaking, there is still little research on the implications of this digital transformation for the welfare state. While there is at least growing attention to this issue – also thanks to Kees van Kersbergen's contributions (Busemeyer, Kemmerling et al., 2022a, 2022b; Jensen and van Kersbergen, 2022; van Kersbergen and Svendsen, 2022) – this short contribution brought attention to a hitherto neglected facet in this debate, namely the question of which actors are held responsible by citizens in managing potential negative side effects related to digitalization and automation. My analysis has shown that most responsibility is attributed to business and government actors, while individuals tend to attribute less responsibility to trade unions or individual workers.

On the one hand, this might indicate that individuals associate the responsibility to fix things with a perceived responsibility for breaking things, to paraphrase a common saying of the digital economy. Business and government are held responsible for managing the negative side effects of technological change because they are perceived as the actors to blame in promoting radical change in the first place. On the other hand, the attitudinal patterns identified in this chapter might also reflect a certain skepticism regarding the ability of unions, civil society groups, or individuals themselves in managing these side effects, as workers are perceived to be victim to socio-economic forces that they can hardly influence or control. The latter interpretation receives support from the fact that subjective perceptions of automation risk are strongly (and positively) associated with attributions of responsibility. However, for obvious reasons, this short chapter could only scratch the surface of these issues, and further research is always needed, particularly from lead-

ing scholars in the field of welfare state research (van Kersbergen and Vis, 2013).

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