The losers of digitalization: A reservoir of votes for the Far-Right?

Zhen Jie Im, University of Helsinki
Nonna Mayer, Sciences Po
Bruno Palier, Sciences Po
Jan Rovny, Sciences Po

While there is significant debate among labor economists on the extent to which jobs would be replaced by automation, most researchers agree that future employment growth will be unevenly distributed. This is because job growth would be greatest in jobs least threatened by automation, and vice versa. The jobs with stronger job growth and better economic prospects tend to be concentrated at both ends of the earnings and education distribution, while mid-skilled routine jobs are in strong decline. Consequently, parts of the mid-skilled workforce face poorer economic prospects in times of automation and are confronted with a potential decline in social status. As radical right parties increasingly appeal to voters who are anxious about their social status, could the threat of being replaced by automation translate to a higher likelihood of voting for these parties? Or could economic insecurity drive voters to abstain from voting altogether?

To study the electoral consequences of potential automation in the labor market, we test two prominent indices of threat of automation developed by Frey and Osborne (2012) and Arntz et al. (2016). Using data drawn from the European Social Survey and the Arntz et al. operationalization, we find that (1) at higher levels of income, higher levels of threat has a positive and statistically significant relationship with voting for radical right parties, (2) and at lower levels of income, higher levels of threat has a positive and statistically relationship with vote abstention. Using the Frey and Osborne operationalization, we find that the associated effect of threat of automation on vote abstention is greater than on the radical right vote across all income levels.