

The efficiency-equity trade-off of AI at work: emerging divides over regulation in the public opinion

Gregorio Buzzelli (Politecnico di Torino)

Co-author: Stefano Sacchi (Politecnico di Torino)

AI promises substantial efficiency gains but also generates profound equity concerns, particularly in the labour market, where productivity improvements coexist with risks of job displacement and skill obsolescence. This trade-off situates AI regulation among the quintessential ‘wicked’ policy problems, as policymakers must balance innovation incentives against distributive justice under conditions of rapid and unpredictable technological change. Despite its growing relevance, public attitudes toward the regulation of AI remain underexplored. This paper investigates citizens’ preferences for AI governance using novel survey data (24,493 respondents) collected in eleven advanced industrial democracies in 2024. It examines support for the creation of an independent authority to regulate AI, as well as preferred levels of regulatory stringency for labour-displacing applications under different efficiency equity scenarios involving job creation or profit gains. Findings reveal widespread support for an independent AI authority, alongside more divided opinions on the regulation of workplace AI. Political ideology and general attitudes toward technological change are the strongest predictors of preferences, while objective or perceived exposure to AI-induced labour market risks exerts little influence. Surprisingly, anticipated AI efficiency and equity gains cross-cut traditional sources of political conflict: the public always relaxes its stance towards regulation when job creation offsets displacement, while mere profit gains exert more limited effect. Sizeable cross-country variation emerges, defying structuralist, institutionalist, and trust-based accounts. Notably, Northern Europe exhibits more laissez faire attitudes than Southern Europe and Liberal Market Economies.