The political determinants of digital transformation in the public administration: the case of Italian regional administrations.

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"Over the last two decades, digital technologies have been playing an increasingly important role in public administrations (PA), affecting their organizations and procedures. The salience of digital transformations, both among policymakers and in the general public, has been fast-growing in the aftermath of the pandemic crisis, becoming a crucial component of the EU recovery strategy. The Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) has assigned an unprecedented relevance to the this issue, devoting significant resources to foster the digital transition of different administrative bodies, both at the national and regional level. The prominence of the digital challenge in the political debate has prompted the emergence of a stream of research dedicated to the investigation of the enabling conditions that lie behind these technological and organizational shift of PA. Extensive literature has been focusing on the endogenous preconditions of this transformations, particularly emphasizing the role of administrative capabilities (e.g., human capital, technological legacies, type of governance, etc.). Few contributions have investigated the influence of the political salience of digitalization in boosting PA reforms. As digital technologies spread in all domains of everyday life, the issue of digitalization has the potential to become increasingly central in the electoral arena, affecting the priorities of voters and parties' manifestos. Since political science literature shows that political demands, particularly when motivated by growing issue salience, exert a significant effect on policy changes, we propose an innovative research design to test whether the politicization of digital transformation is correlated with an acceleration in PA technological innovation. The selection of Italian regions as the unit of analysis allows to explore the variation in the outcome of interest that is associated with a variegated sociopolitical and economic scenario – particularly diverse due to Italian "regionalized" constitutional setup and the marked socioeconomic cleavages that characterize the country –, reducing the possible heterogeneity in PA organizations and functions linked with radically different institutional regimes. We select both the supply-side and on the demand-side salience of digitalization as independent variables, gathering data from parties manifestos and mass survey data. A particularly innovative empirical contribution concerns our operationalization of the dependent variable, which entails the creation of a new regional version of the well-established Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), based on a large data collection. Overall, we expect growing salience in the public opinion and in the manifestos of parties sitting in the regional councils to boost digitalization. Furthermore, we hypothesize that significant heterogeneity is associated with the party composition of regional governments, as center-right coalitions are expected to be more solicitous in fostering PA digitalization than the center-left counterpart, possibly motivated by efficiency and effectiveness concerns."