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The party politics of the digital transformation: insights from the Italian case

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation has become an increasingly important policy concern for European decision-makers, though its prominence in political debate remains uncertain. Existing literature on the salience of this issue presents conflicting findings, attributing variation either to the peripheral role of political actors or to their ideological orientations. This article contributes to this body of research by offering new insights into the dynamics of issue salience within the Italian party system over the past decade. Drawing on a content analysis of party manifestos from the 2013, 2018, and 2022 elections, we demonstrate that parties' ideological positions play a significant role in shaping the extent to which they highlight digital transformation. Emphasis on this issue is typically associated with principles of cultural progressivism and aligned either with market liberalism or social democratic welfarism. The Five Star Movement was the first to bring digital transformation onto the political agenda, spurring engagement from the Democratic Party and smaller centrist parties. Finally, a complementary qualitative analysis of the manifesto excerpts used in the content analysis reveals distinct framing differences between the centre-right and centre-left. While centre-right parties tend to frame digital transformation primarily as a tool for streamlining public administration, centre-left parties emphasize its potential to expand access to new enabling public services.

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation – also referred to as digital transition – has become increasingly central to public discourse, emerging as a core policy objective across countries. It has evolved into a cross-cutting buzzword in both academic and policy spheres, referring to the widespread use of digital technologies in the organization, delivery, and consumption of public services (Barcevičius et al. 2019; Haug, Sorin, and Mergel 2023; Kawabata and Camargo 2023; Mergel, Edelmann, and Haug 2019; Terlizzi 2021).[1] In the European

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Union (EU), digital transformation stands at the forefront of the reform agenda. The EU adopts a broad definition, encompassing 'production and consumption activities that rely on a significant dimension of data development and data analysis' (European Commission 2019), and treats digitalization as a strategic investment priority for achieving fairer and more sustainable development. In Italy, a substantial share of EU resources from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), along with national funds from the Complementary Fund, have been earmarked for the digital transition. Of the six missions constituting the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), three explicitly target digital transformation objectives (Sgueo 2022). Mission 1 focuses directly on advancing digitalization in public administration, the production sector and the cultural industries (€49.2 billion). In addition, significant investments support digital skills in the education system (Mission 4, €31.9 billion) and the digitalization of healthcare (Mission 6, €18.5 billion). In total, nearly one-third of NRRP funding is allocated to digital transformation. At this advanced stage of RRF implementation, however, growing attention is being paid to the misalignment between digital needs and allocated resources in many EU member states (European Court of Auditors 2025).

Given that the design and formulation of Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) have produced significant spill-over effects in both the political arena and the stability of successive governments (Germano and Lizzi 2024), the Italian case represents a particularly compelling example within the EU for examining the politics of digital transformation. Every government appointed since the drafting and implementation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) has promoted digital transformation as a flagship policy, channelling extraordinary investment into a range of policy domains. The increasing 'party politicisation' of this broad policy area is especially relevant for identifying strategic differences across governing coalitions and for analysing how highly technical issues become the subject of public debate – debates that are likely to be shaped by the interpretive frames offered by political actors (Wu 2021). Although international research on the political dynamics of digital transformation remains limited, two main explanatory approaches emerge. The first draws on issue ownership theory, which holds that parties' positions within the electoral landscape influence their engagement with new issues. In particular, 'challenger' parties are more likely to introduce the digital transformation agenda into political debate as a way of contesting the policy dominance of mainstream or 'core' parties (Beyer et al. 2022; König and Wenzelburger 2019; Siewert and König 2019, 2021). The second explanatory factor is political ideology. The dominant discourse that frames digital transformation as a driver of efficiency and economic modernization tends to resonate more with market-liberal and culturally progressive parties, making them more inclined to prioritize and emphasize the issue (McNeal et al. 2003; Siewert and König 2019; Tolbert and Mossberger 2006; Tolbert, Mossberger, and McNeal 2008).

This article seeks to offer new empirical insights into the politicization of digital transformation by systematically examining the role of the two explanatory factors outlined above within the Italian party system. To our knowledge, no prior studies have specifically addressed the salience of digital transformation in the context of Italian political parties.[2] Our contribution is twofold. First, we shed light on a policy issue of growing importance that has received limited attention in the literature on party politics. Second, we undertake an original content analysis of party manifestos,

complemented by qualitative evidence derived from the same set of sentences related to digital transformation used in the quantitative analysis. This dual approach allows us to trace the evolution of the issue's salience over time and identify variation across parties. In doing so, we assess the prominence of digital transformation both longitudinally and cross-sectionally, using new and original data.

Our findings indicate that digital transformation has gained increasing prominence on the agendas of Italian political parties over time. While its importance should not be overstated, it has become a recurring theme in party manifestos, particularly in the most recent electoral cycle (2022). This rise in salience is driven primarily by specific parties. In the Italian context, digital transformation has been a central issue for the Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s) since its inception and has more recently been 'adopted' by mainstream parties situated at the centre and on the centre-left of the political spectrum, especially the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD). Qualitative evidence confirms that ideological orientations shape how parties frame digital transformation. Centre-right parties tend to emphasize its role in streamlining public spending, while centre-left parties (including the M5s) focus more on its potential to enable the provision of new public services. Overall, the data suggest that the 'challenger' M5s initially brought the issue to the forefront in 2013, encouraging progressive and market-liberal parties – whose ideological profiles are more attuned to social innovation and change – to enter the debate. This finding aligns with the literature identifying the M5s as a party that introduces new issue dimensions into Italian politics (Conti 2014), though in this case, the emphasis on digital transformation appears to reflect the party's organizational identity (Seddone and Valbruzzi 2020) more than its populist roots on the left or right (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2018).

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the extant literature and teases out some empirical propositions. Section 3 presents the data and the research strategy. Section 4 develops the empirical analysis. Section 5 concludes.

2. Party politics and the issue of digital transformation: the role of status and ideology

'The digital transformation will support the delivery of the EU's strategic priorities, grounded in European values and principles' (European Commission 2022, 2). In 2022, the European Parliament and the Council adopted the 'Digital Decade' policy programme, setting concrete targets and objectives for 2030. This comprehensive initiative is structured around four key pillars, one of which is the digital transformation of public services[3] (European Commission 2023b). The European Commission has identified the digitalization of public administration as a cornerstone of its strategy to strengthen the European Administrative Space. By 2030, it aims to ensure full online access to essential public services, health records and digital identity tools (European Commission 2023b). Furthermore, the 2024–2029 political guidelines of the Commission emphasize the pressing need to mobilize financing for the digital transition, in close collaboration with the European Investment Bank and through the completion of the Capital Markets Union (European Commission 2024).

In response to the growing promotion of digital transformation goals by both national and international institutions, the research agenda has focused heavily on the

individual and organizational drivers of digitalization in the public sector (Barcevičius et al. 2019; Haug, Sorin, and Mergel 2023; Kawabata and Camargo 2023; Mergel, Edelmann, and Haug 2019; Terlizzi 2021). However, in doing so, it has largely overlooked the political factors underpinning this transition. One plausible reason is that digital transformation remains a low-salience issue for the electorate and offers limited electoral benefits for political parties (Siewert and König 2019). From a vote-seeking perspective, parties derive little direct utility from prioritizing such a technically complex and long-term issue (König and Wenzelburger 2019). According to Issue Ownership Theory, parties 'own' issues based on a cost-benefit calculus. They seek to be perceived as the most competent actors on particular issues but must weigh their available resources against the potential 'return on investment', which is shaped by voter interest and issue salience (Green 2007; Green and Hobolt 2008; Green-Pedersen 2007; Kraft 2018; Petrocik 1996). In short, parties must assess whether the effort is worthwhile: investing in a new issue entails significant costs in terms of resources and missed opportunities, especially in a media environment where attention is a zero-sum game (Baumgartner and Jones 1991). As a result, parties tend to prioritize issues that yield short-term electoral benefits over those promising longer-term rewards (Axelrod 1981).

Although digital transformation is not a high-salience issue among voters, several studies have shown that it has nonetheless gained prominence in party manifestos and other forms of political communication. This trend has been particularly evident throughout the 2010s in Western Europe, especially in Germany (König and Wenzelburger 2019; Siewert and König 2019, 2021). The available evidence suggests that parties assign varying degrees of salience and emphasis to digital transformation depending on two main explanatory factors identified in the literature. The first is their position in the electoral arena (Beyer et al. 2022; König and Wenzelburger 2019; Siewert and König 2019, 2021); the second is their ideological orientation and policy preferences (McNeal et al. 2003; Siewert and König 2019; Tolbert and Mossberger 2006; Tolbert, Mossberger, and McNeal 2008).

The first strand of research distinguishes between parties with governing experience and/or substantial electoral support – so-called 'core' parties – and those operating under less favourable political conditions, referred to as 'peripheral' parties (Kraft 2018). Core parties typically possess the resources to establish policy monopolies, meaning they can dominate the public agenda around specific issues for extended periods (True, Jones, and Baumgartner 2007). Peripheral parties, by contrast, may seek to disrupt these monopolies by drawing political attention to emerging or neglected issues such as digital transformation (Beyer et al. 2022). This strategy is particularly advantageous for 'challenger' parties – those that have never held government office (De Vries and Hobolt 2020) – as they are more inclined to make abrupt shifts in their policy agendas (Vis and van Kersbergen 2007). Because they have not yet acquired ownership of dominant issues, they face fewer reputational risks and have more to gain by reshaping the agenda (König and Wenzelburger 2019). In Germany, for example, empirical evidence shows that the Pirate Party (*Piratenpartei*), as a new challenger party, centred its campaigns on digital transformation and successfully pressured established parties – especially ideologically proximate ones like the Free Democratic Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei*) – to engage with the issue (Hartleb 2013; Siewert and König 2019, 2021).

The hypothesis discussed thus far rests on the assumption that political parties are largely fungible actors that adjust their issue priorities strategically based on their position in the party system – whether as core or challenger parties. This perspective tends to overlook the role of ideology in shaping not only whether parties take up an issue, but also how they frame it (Abisso, Terlizzi, and Cusumano 2024; van Hulst et al. 2025). Ideological orientation – such as a party's position on the left – right axis or along the Green – Alternative – Libertarian versus Traditional – Authoritarian – Nationalist (GAL – TAN) spectrum – significantly influences which aspects of an issue are emphasized. Studies show that parties interpret and present the digital transformation in ideologically consistent ways, highlighting different priorities depending on their values (Lambach and Oppermann 2022; Lemke, Trein, and Varone 2024). As such, emphasis on digital transformation is not merely strategic but also ideologically driven. Despite variation in framing, a dominant discourse has emerged within the ideational politics of the digital transition-one that casts it as a vital and inevitable engine of economic modernization and governmental efficiency (Aagaard and Jaeger 2025; Balbi 2022; Morozov 2013). These interpretations tend to align most closely with market-liberal and culturally progressive worldviews, making parties with such ideological leanings more likely to prioritize the issue (Siewert and König 2019).[4]

In Germany, the Liberal Party notably adopted the digital transformation agenda following the emergence of the Pirate Party (Siewert and König 2021). The transformative potential of digitalization, particularly affecting the distributive dimension of the left-right divide, generally resonates more with parties advocating for a reduced role of the state in the economy (Guglielmo 2024). This helps explain why Republican legislatures in the US have often been linked to advanced digital transformation policies (Tolbert and Mossberger 2006; Tolbert, Mossberger, and McNeal 2008). The Republican Party's support for these policies aligns with its preference for smaller government and business-like approaches to public administration (McNeal et al. 2003).[5] Digitally modernizing traditional public administration fits neoliberal priorities such as fostering innovation over regulation, enhancing market competitiveness, and creating economic opportunities (Guglielmo 2024; Sacchi and Scarano 2024). Similarly, recent debates over AI governance portray Democrats as more concerned about the potential economic risks of new technologies, advocating consumer protection measures, while Republicans tend to favour a more laissez-faire approach. Nevertheless, bipartisan consensus exists on the need for some regulatory framework (Parinandi et al. 2024; Schiff, Schiff, and Jacobson 2024). Emerging alignments between segments of the far right and parts of Big Tech – reflected in shifting stances on the regulation and use of new technologies (Haeck 2025; Levitz 2025) – may indicate evolving discourse around digital transformation.

However, the politicization of digital transformation by parties does not automatically improve the development or implementation of related policies. In fact, it can sometimes hinder progress, as demonstrated by König and Wenzelburger (2021) in their analysis of debates over algorithmic pre-trial risk assessment tools in the criminal justice systems of three US states. Whether an issue becomes politicized may depend on factors such as an implicit consensus to keep it depoliticized (König and Wenzelburger 2021) or the level of government at which the issue is addressed. For example, in Italy, political ideology appears irrelevant to digital policies implemented at the municipal level (Bisogno, Cuadrado-Ballesteros, and Abate 2024). Regardless of political orientation, local

governments generally view digital transformation as a key strategic objective, widely embraced as a means to enhance efficiency, quality, effectiveness, accountability, and trust (Esposito et al. 2024). Ultimately, it is important to recognize that party ownership of the digital transformation issue remains underdeveloped, as it is a relatively new and emerging topic without clearly defined positions or opposing ideological stances (Siewert and König 2019).

The literature is therefore divided on whether the salience of digital transformation depends primarily on a party's status within the political system or on its ideological characteristics. The case of the Pirate Party suggests that a combination of both factors may offer a more comprehensive explanation. However, existing studies rarely examine these drivers together, overlooking their potential interactions. Additionally, most research on this topic provides only short-term perspectives, limiting the ability to track the evolution of national political debates on digital transformation – especially shifts prompted by the post-pandemic acceleration of technological change (Eurofound 2021).

Based on the literature, we thus derive three parsimonious propositions to guide our empirical analysis of Italian party politics:

Proposition 1 (status). The digital transformation issue is more salient for 'challenger' than for established 'core' parties;

Proposition 2 (ideology). The digital transformation issue is more salient for market-liberal and culturally progressive parties than for dirigiste and culturally conservative parties;

Proposition 3 (conditional status). 'Challenger' parties strongly emphasize the digital transformation issue only if they have a market-liberal or culturally progressive profile.

3. Data and research strategy

The empirical strategy relies on descriptive and correlational evidence to demonstrate the significance of digital transformation for Italian political parties. The single-country focus is primarily justified by the emergence, in Italy, of digital transformation as a flagship policy, recently accelerated by substantial investments across various sectors – from health to social policy – within the framework of the NRRP (see above). Specifically, the case selection follows a 'diagnostic' approach (Gerring 2007), aiming to explore in greater depth how parties' emphasis on digital transformation varies according to their characteristics, with particular attention to the underexplored role of ideology and the use of recent data. Italy represents a 'typical' case, providing valuable insights into how a relatively consociational and fragmented party system engages with the increasing importance of digital transformation.

Drawing on a well-established political science tradition (Dolezal et al. 2014; Sigelman and Buell 2004), we assess the emphasis political parties place on public issues by conducting a content analysis of their election manifestos. Our analysis covers the last three Italian general elections (2013, 2018, and 2022), as the debate

on digital transformation gained momentum in the early 2010s – particularly after the launch of the EU Digital Agenda and its subsequent incorporation into national policy strategies.

Although the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (Volkens et al. 2020) offers a comprehensive analysis of party attention across a wide range of issues,[6] it does not code digital transformation as a distinct category.[7] To address this gap, we conducted an independent content analysis of Italian party manifestos, drawing on the coding scheme developed by König and Wenzelburger (2019), which we extended to include the most recent general election in 2022.[8] Their original study covered multiple electoral cycles in eight Western European countries between 2010 and 2018. We consider this update particularly valuable, as it allows us to trace the evolution of political discourse on digital transformation over more than a decade using a consistent analytical framework. Given the increased prominence of the issue in recent years – especially following the widespread adoption of remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic and the emergence of generative AI technologies – this extended time frame offers important insights into the growing politicization of digital transformation.

The coding procedure combines automated and manual steps. First, keywords were selected through a preliminary screening of party manifestos, focusing on sections that explicitly address digital transformation.[9] Sentences containing the selected keywords were then extracted and carefully reviewed to avoid over-inclusion. For example, we manually excluded sentences referring to non-digital 'networks' (e.g. '*rete ferroviaria nazionale*', '*rete dei servizi*'), to 'data' not related to algorithmic training or digitalization (e.g. '*i dati parlano chiaro*'), and other uses of keywords that fell outside the intended semantic scope. In total, we collected 608 relevant sentences, covering a range of topics such as cybersecurity, data privacy, digital infrastructure, e-governance, and other specific policy domains. To measure each party's emphasis on digital transformation, we calculated a salience score by dividing the number of relevant sentences by the total length of the party's manifesto, then multiplying by 100 to align with the Comparative Manifesto Project's (CMP) method of operationalizing issue salience. All major national parties for each election were included in the analysis, while regional parties and minor groups were excluded.[10]

The ideological orientation of political parties is measured using their positions on the economic left – right and GAL – TAN (Green – Alternative – Libertarian vs. Traditional – Authoritarian – Nationalist) scales, as reported in the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys (CHES).[11] We draw on the 2014, 2019, and 2023 waves, which closely correspond to the electoral rounds covered in our analysis. For the classification of parties as either 'core' or 'challenger', we adopt the approach of De Vries and Hobolt (2020), coding as 'challenger' any party that has never held a position in national government in a given year. Once a party enters central government, it is reclassified as a 'core' party.[12]

Finally, the quantitative findings are complemented by a qualitative analysis of the manifesto sections on digital transformation – specifically, the sentences extracted during the content analysis. This qualitative assessment offers deeper insight into the factors motivating party engagement with the issue and the interpretive frames they use, identified inductively.

4. Empirical analysis

Before examining in greater detail the variation in salience of digital transformation across political parties, it is useful to assess the relative importance of this emerging issue compared to other key topics typically featured in political debate. Overall, descriptive evidence confirms that digital transformation holds a notable place in party manifestos. To contextualize its relevance, we compare the average score of our digital transformation salience index (i.e. the proportion of sentences containing selected keywords relative to the total length of each party's manifesto) with the average emphasis Italian parties place on six major issues coded by the CMP – namely, economic growth, the welfare state, European integration, the environment, minority rights and government efficiency[13] (Figure 1). It is important to note that, unlike pre-coded CMP categories, our measure of digital transformation salience relies on quasi-sentences already classified under other issue areas, and is thus treated as a cross-cutting theme. While the categories are not mutually exclusive, comparing digital transformation to other broad public issues – many of which aggregate several sub-categories – helps mitigate potential biases related to category size. The specific meanings associated with digital transformation (e.g. economic modernization, administrative efficiency) are explored in subsequent sections.

In the two most recent Italian elections covered by the CMP (2013 and 2018), digital transformation accounted for approximately 3% of party manifesto content. This level of attention is comparable to that given to European integration (4–6%) and notably higher than the salience of economic growth and minority rights, both of which hover around 1%. Among the selected policy areas, the most prominent issues are social and environmental protection, each comprising about 7–8% of manifesto content. Notably, the salience of digital transformation varies significantly over time, with a sharp rise observed

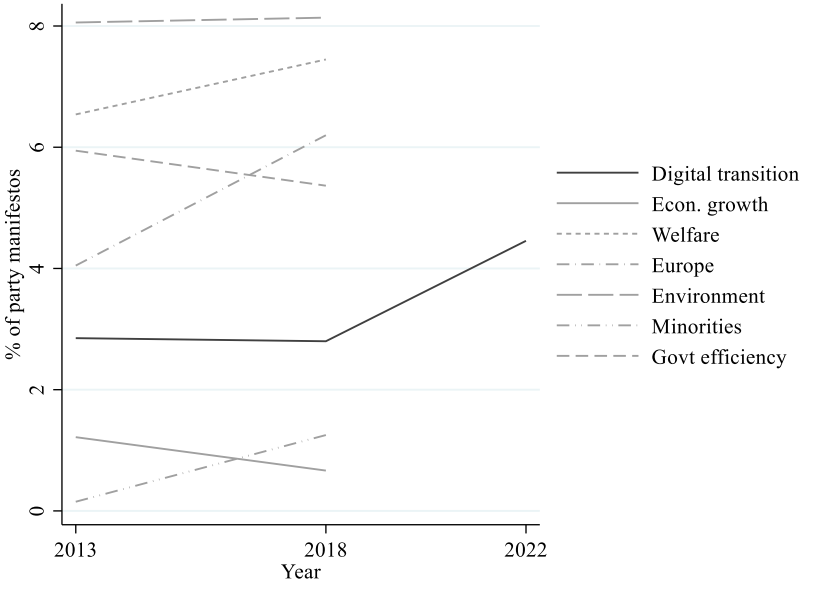


Figure 1. Distribution of average salience of public issues. Italian general elections 2013, 2018, 2022. Source: own elaboration of CMP data.

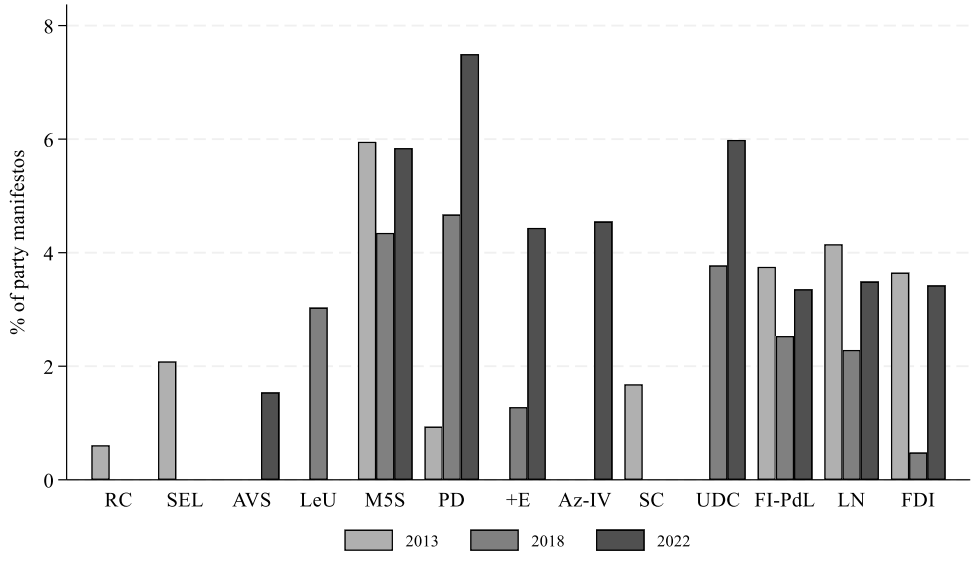


Figure 2. Distribution of salience of the digital transformation across Italian political parties. Italian general elections 2013, 2018, 2022. Source: own elaboration of CMP data.

at the 2022 general election, where its share in party manifestos nearly doubled – from approximately 2.7% to 4.5%.[14]

The prominence of digital transformation in party manifestos varies significantly across parties and elections. In 2013, the issue was particularly salient among centre-right parties, whereas in the subsequent two elections, attention shifted more towards the left side of the political spectrum.[15] Figure 2 shows that in 2013 only centre-right parties devoted more than 3% of their manifesto content to digital transformation – roughly half the salience assigned to environmental issues[16]—regardless of whether they held 'core' or 'challenger' status. In contrast centre-left and radical left parties gave the issue limited attention (e.g. less than 1% in the PD manifesto). The main outlier is the M5s which emerged as the most digitally focused party in 2013 dedicating around 6% of its manifesto to the issue. This strong emphasis persisted across the entire period reaching 4.5% in 2018—its second most salient issue after the environment – and 6% in 2022. This pattern is unsurprising given that one of the party's founders Gianroberto Casaleggio was a vocal advocate of digital democracy and developed the 'Rousseau platform' an online system that allowed party members to select candidates propose legislation and influence key policy decisions.[17] The M5s clearly exemplifies the integration of digital platforms into political organization and policy-making (cf. Gilardi 2022. 33–34). However its use of digital tools – especially for candidate selection – has not been without flaws. Issues such as ballot order effects, already known in traditional paper-based elections (Marolla et al. 2023), as well as concerns over transparency, security and the reliability of results, have sparked ongoing controversy (Sandri and Venturino 2020, 447).

Centre-left parties have shown increasing interest in digital transformation over time, led by the PD, which devoted as much as 7.5% of its 2022 manifesto to the issue – up from 4.7% in 2018 and notably higher than the 3.2% allocated to environmental matters. In

contrast, the various radical left parties that have emerged over the past decade – all classified as 'challengers' – have displayed a more cautious approach, consistently allocating less than 2% of their manifesto content to digital transformation, with environmental issues receiving far greater attention. The issue has also attracted significant attention from centrist Christian Democratic parties. Both the UDC in 2018 and the electoral coalition 'Noi Moderati' in 2022 dedicated between 4% and 6% of their manifestos to digital transformation – more than twice the emphasis placed on environmental policy. Liberal-centrist parties have also followed this trend, with +Europa and Azione – Italia Viva each allocating around 4.5% of their 2022 manifestos to the topic.

This evidence suggests that party status played a decisive role primarily in the case of the M5s in 2013, when it stood out as a quintessential 'challenger' party. By contrast, other challenger parties have not prominently featured digital transformation in their platforms. Instead, ideological orientation appears to be a more consistent driver of parties' engagement with the digital transition. Specifically, the data reveal a political shift in the salience of this issue from the right to the centre-left, as confirmed by correlational analyses (Figure 3). In 2013, the salience of digital transformation in party manifestos was weakly and positively correlated with both the economic left-right scale ($r = 0.33$) and the GAL-TAN dimension ($r = 0.44$).[18] However, in subsequent elections, the relationship becomes negative: for the economic left-right axis, $r = -0.59$ in 2018 and -0.29 in 2022; and for the GAL-TAN scale, $r = -0.41$ in 2018 and -0.33 in 2022.[19] These shifts reflect, in large part, the increased attention paid to digital transformation by the PD, as well as a temporary decline in emphasis by Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) in 2018. The leftward repositioning of the M5s – especially on economic issues – also contributes to the changing ideological pattern, as the party has consistently prioritized digital transformation since its emergence. Finally, the growing engagement of centrist parties with digital transformation in 2022 strengthens the correlation with the GAL-TAN dimension, making it a more robust

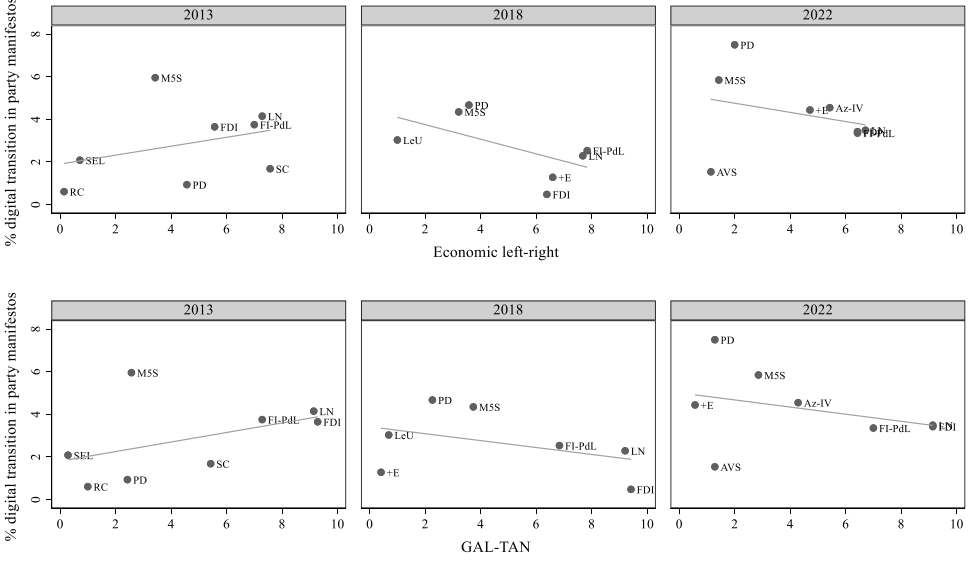


Figure 3. Correlations between digital transformation salience (on the y-axis) and parties' positions on the left-right economic and GAL-TAN dimensions (on the x-axis). Sources: own elaboration from CMP and CHES data.

predictor than the economic left-right scale. However, the absence of data for the UDC in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) may slightly affect the results.

The importance of parties' ideological orientations is further supported by qualitative evidence from the manifestos, which reveal clear differences in the framing of digital transformation by (centre-)right and (centre-)left parties. Right-leaning parties tend to frame digital transformation in relation to institutional reform, using language such as 'bureaucratic simplification' (LN 2018) and '*sburocratizzazione*' (LN 2022), which aligns with centrist calls for public spending cuts (e.g. '*#riduciamolaspesapubblica*', UDC 2018; 'a light and digital State', Az-IV 2022). In addition, right-wing parties highlight the role of the state as a key driver of digital transformation. This is evident in earlier references to national cohesion through digital infrastructure ('national unity has to be guaranteed also through digital infrastructure', FdI 2013) and, more recently, in calls for 'digital sovereignty' (LN 2022).

On the left side of the political spectrum, the focus is primarily on public investment in enabling services and infrastructure – such as high-speed connectivity and free access to it (e.g. RC 2013) – as well as on strengthening social and labour protections (e.g. flexible work arrangements after maternity leave, PD 2018). The M5s similarly framed the digital transformation as a major opportunity to expand economic prospects for younger generations by promoting distance learning and reducing education costs (e.g. free access to e-books). In 2018, the M5s continued to prioritize digital transformation, though with a broader focus that included new technologies, digital skills, the modernization of the public administration, and support for e-commerce. By 2022, the party's framing had become more closely aligned with left-wing positions, portraying the digital transition as a driver of sustainable economic growth: 'The ecological and digital transformations are profoundly reshaping our economy and, consequently, our jobs'.

Overall, the evidence indicates that the digital transformation is a meaningful topic in political debate, with parties on the left and right framing it in distinct ways. Its salience

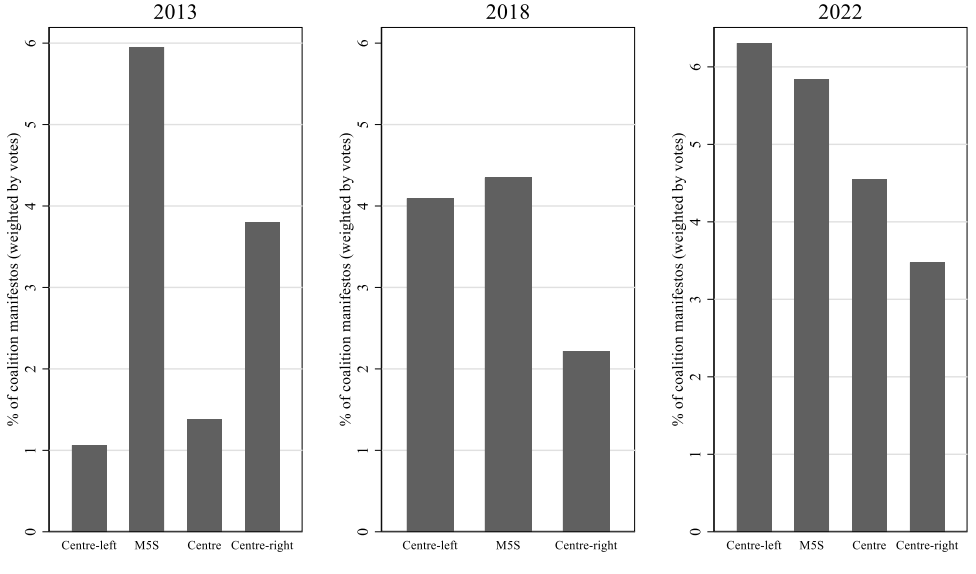


Figure 4. Distribution of salience of digital transformation across political coalitions (weighted by parties' results in the elections to the chamber of deputies). Italian general elections 2013, 2018, 2022. Source: own elaboration from CMP data. Note: LeU included in the centre-left coalition in 2018.

increased notably at the turn of the last decade, particularly among centre-left parties (Figure 4). While centre-right parties were initially more focused on the issue in the early 2010s, centre-left parties – led by the PD – gave it greater prominence in subsequent elections. The M5s, as a political outsider in the 2013 election, played a pioneering role in bringing the digital transformation onto the political agenda. By contrast, the status of other parties – whether in or out of government – does not appear to significantly influence their decision to emphasize the issue in their manifestos.

5. Conclusions

The digital transformation has emerged as a key policy priority for European decision-makers, yet its prominence in political debate remains uncertain. While the issue is often perceived as technical and therefore politically uncontroversial, parties' strategic interests and ideological orientations can elevate it into a significant topic of electoral competition. Existing research on the politicization of digital transformation offers mixed findings, highlighting either the 'challenger' status of political actors or their ideological positioning as the primary drivers of engagement with the issue. Moreover, despite its growing public relevance – especially following the launch of the NRRP – Italy has received relatively limited scholarly attention in this area.

This article, focusing on the Italian party system, shows that the digital transformation has gained increasing prominence in the electoral arena over the past decade. Initially championed by the M5s, the issue was subsequently taken up by centre-left parties, particularly the PD. Through a content analysis of party manifestos from the 2013, 2018 and 2022 elections, we demonstrate that parties' ideological foundations play a significant role in shaping their engagement with this emerging topic. Emphasizing digital transformation tends to require programmatic alignment with culturally progressive values, combined with either market liberalism (as seen among centrist parties) or social democratic welfarism (among the centre-left). This ideological framing appears essential in encouraging 'core' parties to adopt the issue – mirroring the German case, where a challenger party (the Pirate Party) first elevated the topic. Similarly, in Italy, the M5s pioneered the issue, while other challenger parties have shown less consistent interest, and did so even during the early 2010s when no party had yet established issue ownership. Despite recent signs of convergence between the radical right and the tech industry, this has not translated into a notable increase in FdI's or the Lega's focus on digital transformation.

Therefore, contrary to some previous research – particularly that focused on Europe (König and Wenzelburger 2019; Siewert and König 2021) – ideology emerges as the primary driver of party politicization of the digital transformation in Italy. While party status, especially the presence of a 'challenger' party like the M5s, appears to be a necessary condition for initiating the debate, the subsequent evolution is clearly shaped by left – right ideological divides. Engagement with the issue requires alignment with culturally progressive values for both 'core' and 'challenger' parties, whereas support for market-liberal positions on the distributive axis does not constitute a necessary condition (König and Wenzelburger 2019).

Moreover, the accompanying qualitative evidence reveals that political parties employ distinct frames when addressing the digital transformation, preventing the emergence of

a unified or dominant narrative (Balbi 2022; Morozov 2013; Siewert and König 2021). In this respect, parties' positions on the economic left – right spectrum strongly influence how they frame the issue. Centre-right parties – including conservative and liberal actors – typically adopt a neoliberal perspective, portraying the digital transformation as an opportunity to reduce public spending and enhance the efficiency of public administration. By contrast, centre-left parties highlight the economic potential of new technologies to expand social provision, particularly that aimed at protecting vulnerable groups. As the original issue owner, the M5s has expressed a broad interest in the implications of digitalization, ranging from changes in consumer behaviour to e-government and labour market dynamics. However, its ideological shift to the left – especially evident by the most recent election – is reflected in a growing focus on environmental and social sustainability. Further systematic qualitative research is needed to deepen our understanding of how political parties frame the digital transformation.

Overall, our findings confirm the increasing attention Italian political parties are giving to digital transformation. Significant differences emerge between the centre-right and centre-left coalitions, both in the issue's salience and the perspectives they adopt, pointing to the emergence of a potential new axis of electoral competition. As public interest in technological change continues to grow (Dreksler et al. 2025), we can anticipate a widening political divide: a progressive platform that integrates digital technologies across multiple policy goals focused on social inclusion and equality, versus a conservative platform that frames digital transformation primarily as a means to improve governmental efficiency. This dynamic may lead centrist parties to align with the traditional centre-right coalition, while strengthening cooperation between the PD and M5s.

Although the single-case design limits the generalizability of our conclusions, the similarities observed with early-stage findings from Germany – the most extensively studied case – especially regarding the role and characteristics of the 'challenger' initiator, suggest that our results provide a strong foundation for examining similar developments in other European countries. We would expect comparable left-right divides to emerge in countries where left-leaning challenger parties have become established forces (e.g. Podemos in Spain), while issue spill-over across the divide may occur if the original 'owner' of the topic fails to secure a central political role (e.g. *Piratenpartei* in Germany). A comparative study would also allow for refinement of the empirical approach used here, incorporating more sophisticated model specifications and panel regression techniques to better track the evolving influence of party status and ideology over time.

Finally, the notable heterogeneity observed in both the salience and framing of digital transformation highlights the need for further research, particularly in policy analysis and public opinion. First, the absence of a clear policy consensus calls for an examination of the relationship between parties' positions on digital transformation and the policies they implement – whether through governing coalitions or through pressure exerted by issue-owning opposition parties. Drawing on the policy attention literature, we would expect greater emphasis on the positive aspects of digital transformation to correlate with increased innovation in that policy area (Fan, Christensen, and Ma 2023). It is well established that parties use policy statements to mobilize voters, especially within their core constituencies (De Sio and Weber 2014), so it is important to distinguish the impact of parties' goals on government

digital agendas from their signalling function. Nonetheless, this signalling role is equally important for public policy research, as such cues tend to be particularly influential in highly technical domains (Wu 2021), shaping policy demands in turn. Therefore, future studies on public attitudes towards digital transformation – which so far remain fragmented across different technological subfields (Busemeyer et al. 2023; European Commission 2021; König 2023) – should investigate the causal relationships between demand-side public opinion and supply-side political strategies on this emerging issue.

Notes

1. We use digital transformation as a comprehensive concept, one that encompasses other definitions of the phenomenon, such as digitization, digitalization, and e-government.
2. It is important to emphasize that we are not interested in the digital transformation of political parties or, otherwise put, in digitalization of party *organisations*, but in digitalization as an issue for political parties. On the former see, for instance, Gerbaudo (2019), or, more specifically on the Italian case, Cepernich and Fubini (2020).
3. The other three are: digital skills; secure and sustainable digital infrastructure; and digital transformation of businesses (European Commission 2023a).
4. On the contrary, ethno-nationalist parties are often seen as more adept at leveraging the distributional consequences of technological change for electoral gains (Anelli, Colantone, and Stanig 2019; Kurer 2020). However, recent evidence undermines their exclusive claim to this issue (Borwein et al. 2024, 2025).
5. The second Trump administration in the US, with its Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) headed by tech tycoon Elon Musk, provides further validity to this claim.
6. The Manifesto Project analyses election manifestos in order to study parties' policy preferences. The Manifesto Project Dataset covers over 1,000 parties from 1945 until the present in over 50 countries. The dataset contains information on the emphasis parties place on various issues, measured by the share of quasi-sentences in each category coded. For more information: https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/.
7. CMP data includes one variable on 'Technology and Infrastructure' ('per411'), but its content mainly refers to instances of industrial modernization rather than a more general reference to technological innovation in different societal domains.
8. We are grateful to Federico Trastulli and Laura Mastroianni for providing the 2022 manifestos of Italian parties in txt format, which, at the time of writing, had not been made available on the CMP website (see Trastulli and Mastroianni 2024).
9. We rely on the keywords list generously provided by Pascal König, to which are added some new keywords selected in the 2022 (Italian) manifestos. The complete list is in the APPENDIX (A1).
10. The list of the parties' manifestos included in our sample is as follows (ordered from left to right). Civic Revolution (RC, only 2013), Left Ecology and Freedom (SEL, only 2013), Green-Left Alliance (AVS, only 2022), Free and Equal (LeU, only 2018), Five-star Movement (M5S), Democratic Party (PD), +Europe (+E, only 2018 and 2022), Azione-Italia Viva (Az-IV, only 2022), Civic Choice (SC, only 2013), Union of the Centre/'We Moderates' (UDC), Forza Italia – People of Freedom (FI-PdL), Brothers of Italy (FdI), Northern League-the League (LN).
11. The scores for UDC in the years 2018 and 2022 are not available.
12. 'Challenger' parties: FdI, M5s (2013, 2018), RC (2013), SEL (2013), LeU (2018), AVS (2022). 'Core' parties: FI-PdL, LN, UDC, M5s (2022), SC (2013), Az-IV (2022), +E (2018, 2022), PD.
13. Concerning the issues 'welfare state' and 'European integration', we merged the variables operationalizing the positive and negative connotations of the related topics, as we are only interested in the (overall) emphasis (salience) of these issues.

14. The limited time coverage of the CMP (at the time of writing) prevents comparisons across issues for the most recent election.
15. See Figure A1 – in the APPENDIX – on the salience of different public issues for the 2013 and the 2018 elections.
16. We only compare the salience of the digital transformation with environmental issues, as they are frequently intertwined in discussions about the 'twin transition'.
17. Even before the 'Rousseau platform' had been set up, key decisions were taken by the members of the M5s via Beppe Grillo's blog (which, incidentally, had also been created by Casaleggio). For instance, votes were cast through the blog to decide which political group the M5s delegation would join in the European Parliament (Bressanelli and de Candia 2019).
18. The socio-liberal dimension captures the position of Green, Alternative and Libertarian (GAL) parties *vis-à-vis* Traditionalist, Authoritarian and Nationalist (TAN) parties.
19. Replication using the economic left-right scale provided by the CMP confirms a similar correlation for 2018 (r_{econ} (2018) = −0.51), while showing a negative association – albeit much weaker – for 2013 (r_{econ} (2013) = −0.22). See Figure A2 in the APPENDIX.

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Appendix

A1. List of keywords used to run the screening of party manifestos

"dati", "dati.", "digital", "cyber", "ciber", "internet", "online", "on-line", "tic", "tic-", "it-", "tecnologia dell'informazione", "cloud", "crowd", "e-government", "industria 4.0", "impresa 4.0", "e-government", "egovernment", "open government", "opengovernment", "software", "banda larga", "fibra ottica", "smart city", "hardware", "la rete", "4 g", "5 g", "telefonia mobile", "gigabit", "larghezza di banda", "intelligenza artificiale", "algoritm", "e-voting", "partecipazione elettronica", "informatica", "code", "open-", "open ', "smart", "wifi", "computer", "robot", "crowd", "centro di calcolo", "blockchain", "games", "e-sport", "esport", "hackathon", "e-health", "upload", "plattaforma", "e-commerce", "commercio elettronico", "e-learning", "fintech", "fin-tech", "home-office", "homeoffice", "telelavoro","govtech", "website", "pagina web", "stream", "facebook", "google", "apple", "microsoft", "amazon", "civic tech", "app ", "-app ", "fibra", "satellitare", "satellitari", "banda ultralarga", "chatgpt", "web", "spid", "metaverso", "profilazione".

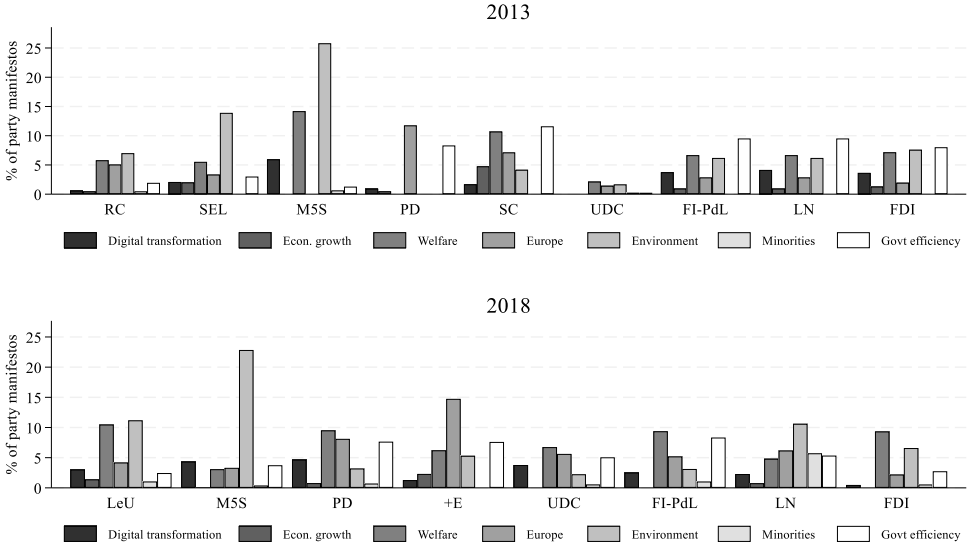


Figure A1. Distribution of salience of public issues across Italian political parties. Italian general elections 2013, 2018. Source: Own elaboration of CMP data.

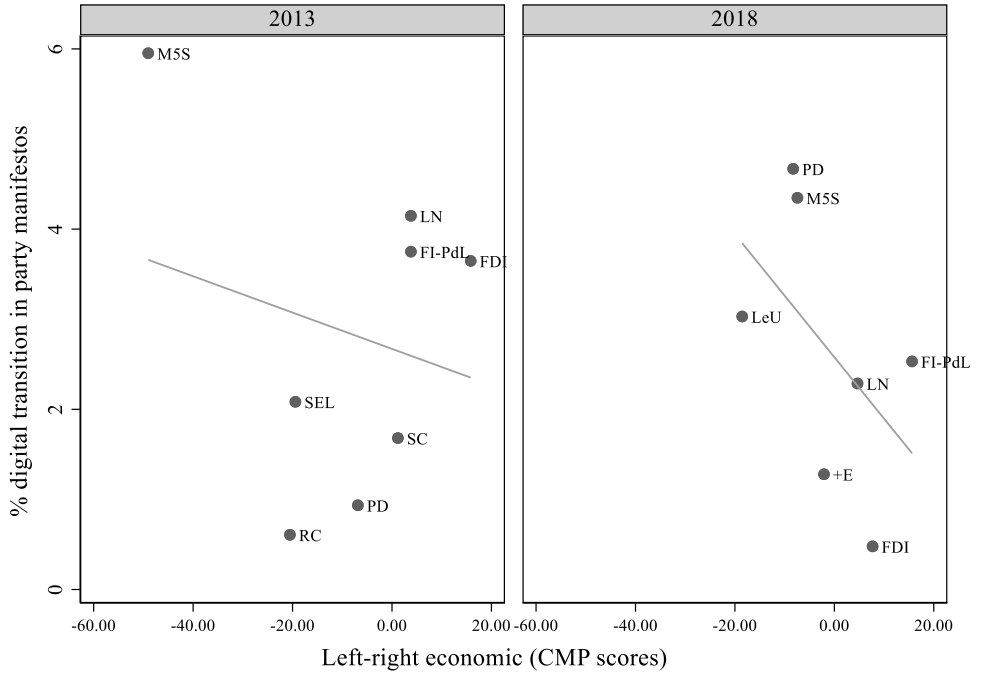


Figure A2. Correlations between digital transformation salience (on the y-axis) and parties' positions on the left-right economic and the GAL-TAN dimensions (on the x-axis). Sources: Own elaboration of CMP data.