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Policy interventions for the future of work: do Australians want government compensation, guidance, or investment to manage technological change?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Australian attitudes toward the future of work shape support for policy interventions, drawing on nationally representative survey data ($n = 1{,}035$). We focus on three dimensions of technological change: displacement, deskilling, and de-intensification, and analyse how these expectations map onto preferences for investment, compensation, and steering policies. Our findings show that those concerned about displacement support a broad mix of responses, including compensation through basic income, steering through taxation of technology companies, and investment in education and training, but not limits on working hours. Concerns about deskilling are distinctively associated with fairness-based demands for taxing firms, highlighting expectations that technology developers bear responsibility for labour market disruption. By contrast, those who expect de-intensification, where technology is seen to make work safer and more compatible with private life, favour steering through working-time limits and also support training. Across all groups, investment policies receive the strongest endorsement, reflecting the dominance of skill-focused adaptation strategies in both public opinion and government agendas. These results underscore the importance of incorporating sociotropic perspectives into analyses of public preferences, revealing how collective judgments about fairness, equity, and shared responsibility condition the political feasibility of labour market reforms in response to technological change.

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AI; automation; labour market; policy preferences; steering; basic income

Introduction

We are currently in the middle of a Fourth Industrial Revolution, in which the advent of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics and automation, is disrupting both the economy and society (Schwab 2016). There are two contrasting arguments about how these technological advances will impact the labour market. One argues that

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these new technologies will push people from their jobs or force them to re-skill, while the other posits that technological change has the potential to bring greater work-life balance and a safer workplace (Acemoglu and Restrepo 2018; Gallego and Kurer 2022). In response, global organisations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and the World Economic Forum (WEF) are increasingly guiding the impact of technological change through targeted policy recommendations. These include (1*) investment policies* to retrain new or displaced workers with in-demand skills; (2) *steering policies* that impact the pace and direction of technological innovation; and (3) *compensation policies* that provide financial support for displaced workers (Bürgisser 2023). While these global stakeholders provide policy directions, it is governments who will ultimately have to grapple with which types and combinations of solutions will best redress the challenges associated with technological change.

Yet, a key aspect of the likelihood of these interventions being implemented and their associated success is whether citizens themselves are supportive of these policies. Most existing research on public attitudes towards technological change has taken an egotropic perspective, focusing on how individuals' own job risks shape their preferences. These studies show that an individual's automation and artificial intelligence job-related risks increase their support for investment policies, such as education, retraining, and vocational training (Bicchi, Kuo, and Gallego 2024; Busemeyer and Sahm 2022; Gallego et al. 2021; Weisstanner 2025). The research also finds that an individual's perceptions of automation risk in their own job raise support for steering measures, including shorter working hours and taxation of new technologies (Bicchi, Kuo, and Gallego 2024; Fan, Ding, and He 2024; Gallego et al. 2021). Similarly, compensation policies such as unemployment benefits and redistribution attract stronger backing when automation risks are perceived to be high. However, support for schemes like basic income is more closely tied to political ideology than to the risk of potential job loss to technologies like automation and AI (Busemeyer and Tober 2023; Dermot and Weisstanner 2020; Thewissen and Rueda 2019).

Understanding these perceptions is important because they shape how citizens evaluate government interventions and shape their willingness to support or oppose technological change (Rodriguez-Bustelo, Batista-Foguet, and Serlavós 2020). By contrast, much less attention has been given to sociotropic perspectives or how citizens' broader expectations about technology's impact on society shape their policy preferences. While an egotropic lens focuses on individual risks, a sociotropic approach highlights collective concerns and could help explain why people often support policies whose benefits extend beyond their own risk exposure. Understanding this dimension is critical for policymakers who will need support from a wider range of constituents, including those who will not be directly impacted by technological changes, to support their agendas. Despite its importance, sociotropic approaches remain an under-researched dimension of public attitudes toward automation and technological change. This is one of the main contributions of this research.

Much of the existing commentary on public attitudes emphasises or indeed amplifies fears that automation and artificial intelligence will: (a) *displace* workers, i.e. jobs (and workers) will be replaced by artificial intelligence, automation, digital platforms and robots; or (b) *de-skill* workers, i.e. jobs will be lost because of new technologies or

people with better skill sets. Gallup and Northwestern (2017) found that 73 per cent of US workers thought the adoption of artificial intelligence technology would eliminate more jobs than it would create. These attitudes are also found in Europe: 74 per cent of Europeans expect that more jobs will disappear than will be created. Moreover, 72 per cent of Europeans believe robots will steal some people's jobs (Eurobarometer 2017).

More recent research has sought to identify attitudes that focus on how technology can *de-intensify* work. This stems from the idea of *technological complementarity* in which technologies like automation and artificial intelligence are viewed more favourably because they are seen as more likely to assist rather than replace human labour (Muro, Maxim, and Whitton 2019). Mulas-Granados et al. (2019) found that just over 41 per cent of workers across 11 advanced and emerging countries think that new technologies (automation, AI) will have a positive impact on the workplace. Together, these findings highlight that public attitudes are far from uniform, oscillating between narratives of displacement and opportunity. Importantly, most studies have explained these views through an egotropic lens, but much less is known about how broader, sociotropic expectations about fairness, equity, and the social consequences of technological disruption shape policy preferences. Understanding this dimension is key for governments seeking to design effective labour market policies. What is more, it points to the importance of national contexts to provide insight into case studies, whereby public discussion and policymaking are being actively negotiated.

This research is located in Australia, following the election of the Labour Government, elected in May 2022, which held a Jobs and Skills summit in early September 2022 to focus on post-pandemic economic and industrial challenges. After 11 years of conservative Liberal-National Coalition government, there was a new commitment to a corporatist-style discussion of bringing an evenly distributed group together of unions, civil society groups and experts to discuss the future of work with government and business. The outcomes report mainly focused on individual-level investment policies through skills training, new digital traineeships and vocational education, with some emphasis on the steering role of government and a "renewed tripartism" for industrial relations, and social dialogue between government, business and unions in updating the Fair Work Act.

Reflecting the business-led international discourse, there was no mention of anything approximating compensatory style policies, such as universal basic income, or steering to reduce and redistribute working hours, or taxing technology companies (Australian Government 2022, 12). This narrow framing underscores the importance of examining whether Australian citizens themselves endorse a wider set of interventions, particularly when viewed through a sociotropic lens that captures concerns about fairness, redistribution, and the collective consequences of technological disruption. Certain groups, especially those who perceive technological change as highly disruptive, may be more supportive of compensation or steering measures that extend beyond investment in skills. In this respect, we are capturing a fourth actor – who is critical, yet unrepresented in the Sumit – the Australian citizenry. Understanding their expectations for technological change and support for its associated policy outcomes is critical for governments looking to build policy initiatives.

Drawing on data from a representative sample of Australian citizens ($n = 1{,}035$), we identify levels of support for a range of policy interventions to reskill (investment)

workers, financial support (compensation) workers, and tax technology companies (steering). Using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models, we estimate associations between individuals' perceptions of the impact of technological change on work and support for these policy interventions. We focus on three strands of perceptions identified from the literature above: (1) *displacement* – whether an individual believes that jobs will be replaced by technology; (2) *de-skilling* – whether an individual believes technology will outpace their skill level; and (3) *de-intensification* – whether an individual believes that work will become less intense as a result of technological change. In doing so, this paper makes two contributions: first, it extends research on citizen preferences for labour market policies under technological change by shifting focus to the Australian case; and second, it advances the literature by examining sociotropic as well as egotropic perceptions, connecting competing views of disruption (displacement and deskilling) and opportunity (de-intensification) to distinct policy preferences.

The paper is outlined as follows: the next section situates debates on the future of work within global and national discourses, highlighting how international organisations and consulting firms frame technological disruption and its solutions. We then turn to the theoretical framework, which develops a tripartite typology of policy responses and sets out our hypotheses. This is followed by a discussion of the data and methods, empirical results, and a conclusion that reflects on the implications for future research.

Background

Debates about the future of work have become increasingly prominent as automation, (generative) artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and digital platforms reshape labour markets. These debates are shaped by the interventions from a range of stakeholders: international organisations, governments, consulting firms, academics and business associations. The discourses that emerge from these actors frame technological disruption in specific ways and, in turn, influence which policy responses are deemed viable (Grimshaw 2020; Schlogl, Weiss, and Prainsack 2021). A dominant strand in these debates is a technologically determinist narrative that treats technological change as both inevitable and largely autonomous. Within this framing, the central challenge becomes one of adaptation, such as how workers and institutions can keep pace with transformations, rather than whether and how governments might actively shape technological development (Howcroft and Taylor 2023). This perspective often sidelines more interventionist approaches and instead emphasises individual responsibility for adjustment to shifting labour market conditions (Ainsworth and Knox 2021).

International organisations have played an important role in promoting this adaptation-focused discourse. Reports from the World Economic Forum (WEF), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) consistently highlight rapid skill disruption and call for extensive retraining. For example, the WEF's *Future of Jobs* report (2023), based on data from more than 800 global companies, estimates that 44 per cent of workers' skills will be disrupted within five years, with six in ten workers requiring retraining by 2027. Similarly, the OECD's AI survey of firms across seven advanced economies found that the lack of relevant skills was viewed as a greater barrier to AI adoption than government regulation (Lane, Williams, and Broecke 2023). While the ILO

(2019) has sought to promote a more human-centred agenda that frames technology as an opportunity to advance "decent work," many influential business and policy actors continue to privilege productivity and competitiveness as guiding principles.

The way in which the "future of work" is defined is therefore deeply political. Schlogl, Weiss, and Prainsack (2021), analysing nearly 200 policy documents from governments, international organisations, and consulting firms, show that an overwhelming emphasis is placed on reskilling and upskilling, with little attention to broader institutional or redistributive measures. They argue that this reflects a "skills bias" in policy discourse, which places responsibility on individuals to adapt, reinforcing neoliberal assumptions about labour market adaptability. At the same time, alternative perspectives stress that technological change cannot be reduced to skills shortages or productivity gains. Scholars such as Kalleberg (2018) and Standing (2011) point to rising precarity, the erosion of standard employment relations, and growing economic insecurity potentially exacerbated by technology. Critiques of technological determinism emphasise the limited role governments have assumed in shaping the trajectory of technological adoption, calling instead for closer attention to its distributive consequences and for policies that extend beyond individual adjustment (Howcroft and Taylor 2023).

Public opinion research mirrors these tensions. Surveys consistently reveal widespread fears of job loss: Gallup and Northwestern (2017) found that 73 per cent of US workers believed artificial intelligence would eliminate more jobs than it created, while Eurobarometer (2017) reported that 74 per cent of Europeans expected net job losses due to automation. Yet, more optimistic narratives also persist. Muro, Maxim, and Whitton (2019) and Mulas-Granados et al. (2019) document that many workers perceive technologies as potentially complementary, capable of reducing drudgery and improving job quality. These findings suggest that public attitudes are far from uniform, oscillating between narratives of displacement and narratives of opportunity.

Taken together, the international policy discourse and public attitudes reveal both consensus and contestation about the trajectory of technological change. On the one hand, powerful organisations and firms continue to emphasise adaptation through skills development, framing technological disruption as inevitable. On the other hand, critical scholarship and segments of the public stress concerns about precarity, inequality, and fairness, and raise questions about the broader social consequences of technological transformation. Understanding this contested terrain provides an essential backdrop for examining how citizens form preferences about government interventions in the labour market, and why these preferences cannot be explained solely through individual job risks but also reflect broader sociotropic concerns about fairness and the future of work. Building on this insight, the following section develops a theoretical framework that organises potential government responses into an investment, steering, and compensation framework, and sets out hypotheses about how perceptions of displacement, deskilling, and de-intensification shape citizen support for these policies.

Theoretical framework

Research from comparative political economy and policy studies shows that citizens hold differentiated preferences about how governments should respond to the risks and opportunities of technological disruption. These preferences can be usefully organised

around a tripartite typology of investment, steering, and compensation policies (Bürgisser 2023). While risk perceptions are central, existing scholarship also shows that citizen preferences are shaped by ideology, partisanship, and generalised economic insecurity (Rehm 2009; Häusermann, Kurer, and Schwander 2016). These orientations condition whether individuals interpret technological change as a collective risk requiring redistribution or as an opportunity to be managed through individual adaptation. Incorporating these insights situates our framework within the wider literature on policy preference formation.

Investment policies seek to prepare current and future workers through education, training, and active labour market programmes (Bürgisser 2023). Evidence from both cross-national surveys and survey experiments shows that individuals at greater risk of automation displacing them increase demand for education and training policies. For example, Bicchi, Kuo, and Gallego (2024) find that support for retraining policies increases when framed as a way of mitigating automation risk. Similarly, Weisstanner (2025) reports that perceived AI job loss risk in Germany predicts higher retraining demand. In Spain, Gallego et al. (2021) found that individuals at higher risk of automation were more supportive of VET than higher education. This is similar to Busemeyer and Sahm (2022) who found that automation risk increases demand for VET expansion in Germany.

Steering policies aim to influence the pace and distributional consequences of automation through measures such as taxation, employment protection, or working-time reduction. Gallego et al. (2021) find that automation risk increases support for shorter working hours. Moreover, they find that concerns about fairness moderate this support: the effect is significant only among respondents with high fairness orientations. Bicchi, Kuo, and Gallego (2024) provide further evidence, showing that support increases when shorter hours are framed as a matter of fairness across generations rather than efficiency. Fan, Ding, and He (2024) show that perceived robot replacement risk in China increases support for a robot tax.

Compensation policies such as unemployment insurance and universal basic income are the most direct mechanisms to mitigate job loss. The evidence shows that while compensation policies tied to insurance-style protection (unemployment benefits, redistribution) attract consistent backing under automation risk, universal schemes like UBI remain weakly linked to risk perceptions and more strongly tied to ideology. Thewissen and Rueda (2019) find that higher automation risk predicts stronger support for redistribution policies like unemployment benefits, traditional welfare state transfers, but not basic income. Similarly, Busemeyer and Tober (2023) find that subjective automation risk increases support for unemployment benefits but not basic income (the relationship is positive but not significant). Dermont and Weisstanner (2020), analysing 21 European countries, similarly find no association between risk of job automation and basic income. In Germany, Weisstanner (2025) found that perceived AI risks increase support for redistribution but not support for basic income, which is associated with ideological support (e.g. left-leaning voters support basic income).

Much of the earlier work has looked at these preferences through an egotropic lens, emphasising how people's own job risks shape their support for different policy interventions. Lesser known are sociotropic views or broader expectations about how technology will change work and society. Bringing this perspective in helps explain why

citizens often support policies that go beyond their own jobs and occupations, and why debates about automation are as much about fairness and social values as they are about self-protection. Evidence for this sociotropic perspective is growing. Bicchi, Kuo, and Gallego (2024) demonstrate that different sources of concern, such as fears of displacement versus worries about deskilling, map onto distinct policy demands. Gallego et al. (2021) find that fairness orientations moderate whether automation risk leads to support for shorter working hours, highlighting how evaluations of collective justice mediate preferences. Fan, Ding, and He (2024) show that support for robot taxes reflects normative concerns about fairness and adaptation, rather than immediate self-interest. Lauterbach et al. (2023) further underscore that welfare state institutions buffer the stress of technological change even among those not directly threatened, pointing to the collective dimension of risk assessments. Weisstanner (2025) adds that while perceived AI risks heighten redistribution preferences, support for basic income remains primarily ideologically structured. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that people interpret technological change through collective judgments of fairness, deservingness, and institutional trust, not simply through their own exposure to risk.

We distinguish three ways in which individuals anticipate technological change: *displacement*, *de-skilling*, and *de-intensification*. Displacement refers to expectations that jobs will be directly replaced by robots, algorithms, or digital platforms. De-skilling captures the belief that workers will be left behind because others possess superior technological skills. De-intensification refers to expectations that technology will improve working conditions by making work less dangerous, less monotonous, and more compatible with private life. Each maps onto different sociotropic concerns that the literature suggests should structure preferences for investment, steering, and compensation policies. Although displacement and deskilling are empirically correlated, they capture distinct mechanisms. Displacement emphasises the direct substitution of labour by technology, raising concerns about structural unemployment. Deskilling highlights relative disadvantage, whereby some workers are left behind because others possess superior technological skills. The former invokes collective risk of job loss, while the latter invokes distributive competition and fairness. As Bicchi, Kuo, and Gallego (2024) demonstrate, fears of displacement and worries about deskilling map onto different policy demands: displacement relates to expectations of outright job substitution, while deskilling is closer to technostress and anxieties about keeping pace with technological change. Similarly, Gallego et al. (2021) show that objective measures of automation risk capture displacement threats, whereas subjective concerns often reflect anxieties about skill obsolescence, underscoring the value of distinguishing between these two perceptions of technological change.

Against this backdrop, we put forward a number of hypotheses:

H1 (Displacement = Compensation and Investment): Individuals who believe that technology will displace workers should be more supportive of both compensation and investment policies, with investment (training and education) expected to receive stronger support in light of the skills push by governments and international organisations. This follows Busemeyer and Tober (2023), who show that automation risk increases support for unemployment benefits, and Thewissen and Rueda (2019), who argue that redistribution preferences rise when workers perceive collective

labour market risks. Displacement thus aligns with demand for compensating those "left behind" (e.g. basic income) and preparing society through education and training.

H2 (De-intensification = Steering for Work – Life Balance): Individuals who expect technology to reduce the intensity of work should be more supportive of steering policies that reorganise working time. Gallego et al. (2021) demonstrate that fairness orientations condition support for reduced working hours, while Bicchi, Kuo, and Gallego (2024) show that expectations of "better jobs" channel preferences into work – life balance policies rather than compensation. De-intensification, therefore, links to demands for steering that ensures collective gains in job quality, such as working-time reduction.

H3 (Deskilling = Steering Through Taxation): Individuals who anticipate deskilling should be more supportive of steering policies aimed at regulating firms, such as robot taxes. Fan, Ding, and He (2024) find that support for robot taxation reflects fairness-based concerns with technological disruption, while Bicchi, Kuo, and Gallego (2024) show that skill-based anxieties channel into demands for stronger institutional steering. Deskilling thus leads individuals to prefer policies that make firms shoulder responsibility for technological change.

Data and method

Data

We draw on data from a module about the impact of automation and artificial intelligence from the Australia Comparative Electoral Survey (ACES), a nationally representative dataset that was administered by YouGov in May 2022 in the lead-up to the Australian federal election, which was held on 22 May 2022. The sample for this module comprised 1,035 respondents over the age of 18. We purposely adapted key dependent and independent variables from the OECD Risks that Matter Survey 2020 (OECD 2021), because it did not include Australia in the 25 countries it surveyed.

Key dependent measures

Our key dependent measures are derived from the following unique question:

"Governments can introduce measures to help workers cope with the challenges created by technological change To what extent would you agree or disagree that the government should be taking the following actions as a response to technological change?"

(1) Introducing a basic income for workers facing possible job loss
(2) Introducing a limit on working hours to share work across more workers
(3) Introducing a tax on robots and/or technology companies
(4) Expanding access to university education for young people
(5) Expanding access to VET for young people
(6) Investing more in re-training opportunities for older age people

Each statement was asked along a Likert-scale from 1 to 5 where 1 indicated strongly disagree and 5 indicated strongly agree.

We collapsed items #4, #5 and #6 into a single item measuring support for expanding and investing in training for young and older people because of the high similarity. All three items were loaded onto one measure with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.8.

Key independent measure(s)

We derived three variables: (1) displacement; (2) de-skilling; and (3) de-intensification from the following question: "Now thinking towards the future, how likely do you think it is that the following will happen to jobs over the next five years?" Each statement was asked along a Likert-scale from 1 to 5 where 1 indicated strongly disagree and 5 indicated strongly agree.

The first variable *displacement* measures attitudes towards the idea that jobs will be lost to technology – robots, algorithms, artificial intelligence and digital platforms. This variable was derived from three attitudinal statements in response to the question:

(1) Some jobs will be replaced by a robot, computer software, algorithm, or artificial intelligence
(2) Some jobs will be replaced by a person providing a similar service on a digital platform

The two measures loaded highly onto one composite index (a = .82) with higher scores indicating that respondents believed jobs would be displaced by technology.

The second variable is de-skilling which was operationalised by the following measure:

(1) Some jobs will be lost because people are not good enough with new technology or there will be someone with better technological skills

The third measure *de-intensification* captures attitudes towards the idea that jobs will become less intense, less dangerous, less boring and demanding and more compatible with non-work life. This measure was derived from three attitudinal statements in response to the question:

(1) Technology will help some people's jobs and working hours become more compatible with their private/home life
(2) Technology will help some people's jobs become less dangerous or physically demanding
(3) Technology will help some people's jobs become less boring, repetitive, stressful or mentally demanding

The three measures loaded highly onto one composite index (a = .82) with higher scores indicating that respondents believed jobs would be less intense because of technology.

Controls

A series of social and demographic controls was included to adjust the models. *Gender* was included as a binary variable with 0 indicating men and 1 indicating women. *Holds a tertiary qualification* was included as a binary variable with 0 indicating that the respondent does not hold a tertiary qualificatiason (bachelor's degree, Masters, PhD) and 1 indicating

that the respondent does. *Employment status* was a categorical variable measuring whether the respondent was in full-time employment (1), part-time employment (2), unemployment (3) or that the respondent was not in the labour force (4). *Country of birth* was a binary variable with 0 indicating the respondent was born in Australia and 1 indicating the respondent was born overseas. *Indigeneity* captured whether the respondent was non-Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (0) or identified as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (1). *Relationship status* was a categorical variable measuring whether the respondent was (1) married; (2) cohabiting; (3) separated, divorced or widowed; or single and had never been married (4). *Region* captured whether the respondent lived in an urban area (1), remote area (2) or rural area (3). Household income was a continuous variable. *Age* and *Age squared* were also included. We do not comment on statistical controls due to word limits. Full models reporting controls are available on request.

Plan of analysis

Descriptive statistics of the key independent and dependent variables are presented, followed by OLS regressions to identify relationships between our key independent variables net of the full range of sociodemographic controls.

Results

Descriptive analysis

Full descriptives are found in Table 1. In Figure 1, the level of likelihood that jobs will be replaced or changed in the next five years because of technology is presented. Overall, there was a strong belief amongst the sample that technological change will result in both positive and negative changes for work, workplaces and workers. Over three-quarters of the sample believed that some jobs would be replaced by some kind of technology or technological device. A similar proportion believed that some jobs would be lost because technology would result in de-skilling (71%). At the same time, there was a strong belief amongst the sample that technology will improve working conditions, for example, it will result in jobs becoming less dangerous (74%) and that work will become more compatible with home life (72%). However, there was considerably less agreement with the idea that technology will make jobs less boring, stressful or repetitive (56%).

Figure 2 presents the level of agreement with government-initiated policy interventions to help workers cope with the challenges created by technological change. Overwhelmingly, there was strong support for the expansion of education and training for younger people at university (83%) and in VET (74%). There were similar levels of support for retraining older workers (78%). There was also strong support for a basic income for workers (70%). However, a minority supported limiting work hours to share across workers (47%) and introducing a tax on robots (43%).

In summary, the descriptive findings suggest that most workers felt that technological changes were going to result in the displacement and deskilling of workers and to some extent a de-intensification of work, although there was some scepticism about whether jobs would become less boring, stressful and repetitive. The descriptive findings also highlight the strong support for investment policies that seek to expand tertiary

Table 1. Descriptives.

Variable	Mean (SD) or Proportion	Range
Some jobs will be replaced by a robot, computer software, algorithm, or artificial intelligence.	4.04 (0.2)	1–7
Some jobs will be replaced by a person providing a similar service on a digital platform.	3.99 (0.2)	
Some jobs will be lost because people are not good enough with new technology or there will be someone with better technological skills	3.90 (0.2)	
Technology will help some people's jobs and working hours become more compatible with their private/home life	3.86 (0.2)	
Technology will help some people's jobs become less dangerous or physically demanding	3.87 (0.2)	
Technology will help some people's jobs become less boring, repetitive, stressful or mentally demanding	3.56 (0.3)	
Introducing a basic income for workers facing possible job loss	3.46 (0.3)	
Introducing a limit on working hours to share work across more workers	3.27 (0.3)	
Introducing a tax on robots and/or technology companies	3.46 (0.3)	
Expanding access to university education for young people	4.00 (0.2)	
Expanding access to VET for young people	4.18 (0.2)	
Investing more in re-training opportunities for older age people		
Gender		
Male	48.26	
Female	51.74	
Highest level of education		
Bachelor's degree, Masters or PhD	25.63	
Graduate certificate or diploma	14.25	
Certificate or diploma	32.18	
Senior high school	16.73	
Below high school-level	11.21	
Relationship status		
Married	47.08	
Cohabiting	18.82	
Widowed, separated or divorced	14.23	
Single, never married	19.87	
Country of birth		
Born in Australia	83.53	
Born overseas	16.47	
Has a disability or chronic illness		
No	69.19	
Yes	30.81	
Age	48.62 (0.2)	18–92
Region		
Inner Metropolitan	27.97	
Outer Metropolitan	27.74	
Provincial	18.95	
Rural	25.33	
Household income		
<$20,000	5.19	
$20 –$29,999	9.62	
$30–$39,999	6.63	
$40–$49,999	7.28	
$50–$59,999	6.41	
$60–$69,999	6.40	
$70–$79,999	5.91	
$80–$89,999	5.46	
$90–$99,999	6.21	
$100–$119,999	9.99	
$120–$149,999	10.59	
$150–$199,999	7.55	
> $200,000	4.56	

Source: Australia Comparative Electoral Survey (ACES) (2022).

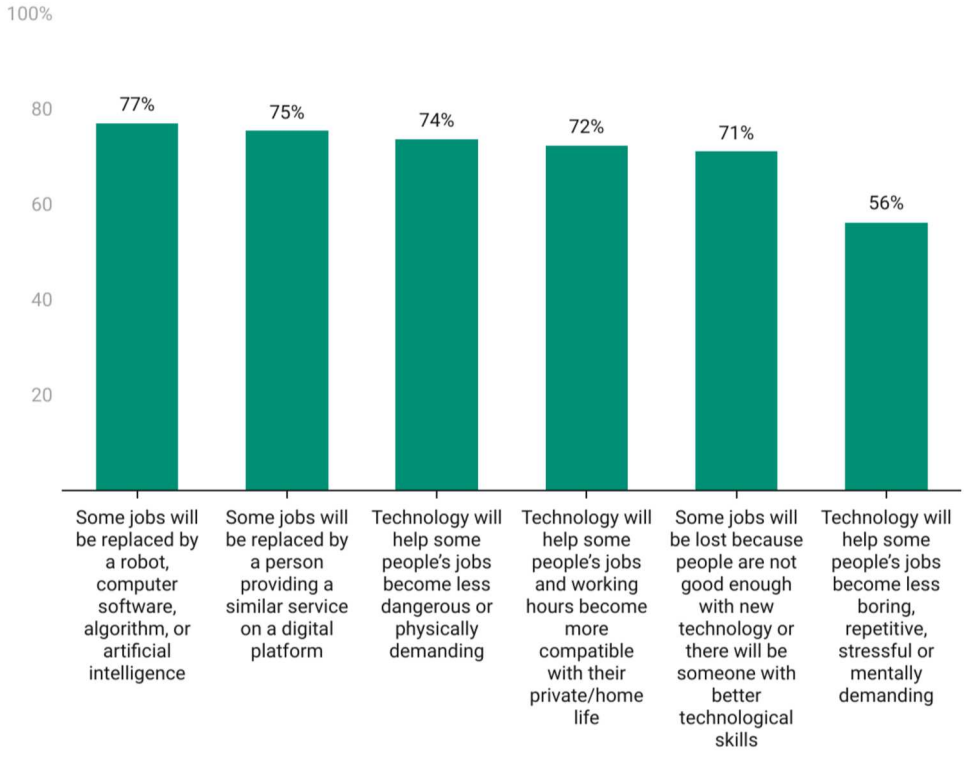

Figure 1. Attitudes towards technological change. Source: Australia Comparative Electoral Survey (ACES) (2022).

education and training opportunities for younger and mature workers in Australia. There was strong support for compensatory policies, which is measured in this paper by support for a basic income. However, there was much less support for interventionist

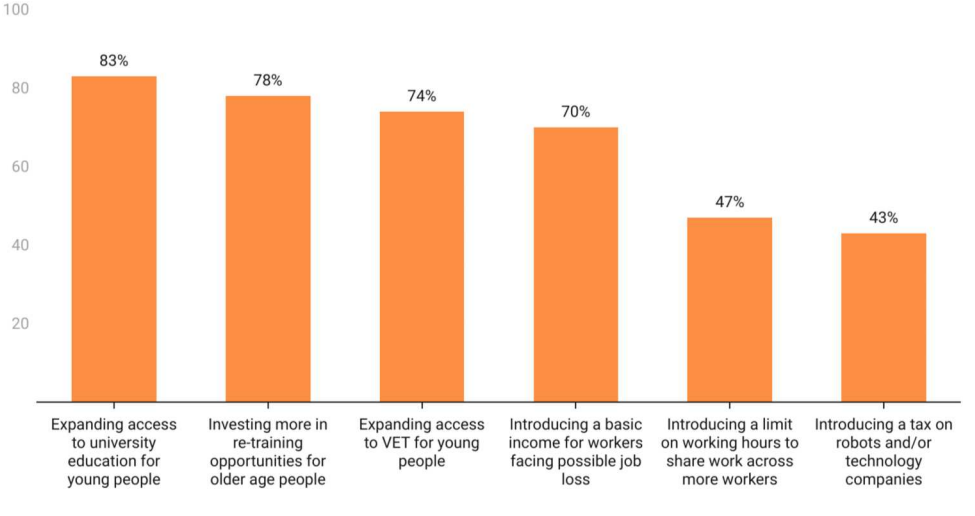

Figure 2. Attitudes towards policies to address technological change. Source: Australia Comparative Electoral Survey (ACES) (2022).

and structural steering policies, with less than half of the sample supporting the introduction of limits on working hours or taxing robots and technology companies.

Regression results

Of course, support for policies may be structured by expectations about the future of work changes and sociodemographic controls. To assess whether these patterns are robust, Tables 2–4 present the OLS regression analyses net of sociodemographic controls. We explored attitudes towards the future of work (a) displacement, (b) de-intensification, and (c) de-skilling – separately to reduce endogeneity in the models. Specifically, Australians who see technology as displacing the workforce (e.g. job loss) were also highly likely to see it as deskilling the workforce ($r(1035) = 0.81$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, displacement and deskilling were highly correlated in the minds of the Australians. Yet, they are distinct workplace outcomes and thus we explore them separately below. However, these issues of endogeneity are why we do not estimate models including all three key independent variables.

In Table 2, the association between beliefs in technological change resulting in the displacement of workers and four possible policy interventions: (1) a basic income; (2) a limit on working hours; (3) a tax on robots and technology companies; and (4) expansion of training, were estimated. Individuals who see workers at greater risk of displacement are more likely to support a wider range of policy interventions. Specifically, a one-unit increase in the belief that technology will lead to the displacement of workers was associated with greater support for *compensating workers* through a basic income (β 0.23, $p. < 0.001$), *steering employers* through a tax on robots and technology companies (β 0.22, $p. < 0.001$) and *investing in workers* through an expansion of training for younger and older workers (β 0.23, $p. < 0.001$). There was no statistically significant association between displacement and a limit on working hours, demonstrating that this remains a less palatable *steering policy intervention* compared to taxing robots.

In Table 3, associations between beliefs of technological change resulting in the de-intensification of jobs (e.g. technology will make work safer and bring work-life balance) and the four possible policy interventions are presented. We find that individuals who expect technology to improve working conditions were more likely to support *steering the government* to reduce work time. Specifically, a one-unit increase in the belief that technology will lead to the de-intensification of work was associated with increased support for the *steering policy* of limiting working hours (β 0.28, p. < 0.001) and training

Table 2. OLS regression models for beliefs about displacement policy intervention on support for basic income, limit on working hours, robot tax and training.

	Compensation policy		Steering policy				Investment policy	
	Basic income		Limit on hours		Robot tax		Training	
	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.
Intercept	2.73	***	3.04	***	3.74	***	2.78	***`
Displacement	0.31	***	0.11		0.22	***	0.23	***
R2	0.24		0.22		0.24		0.24	
N	1035		1035		1035		1035	

Source: Australia Comparative Electoral Survey (ACES) (2022).

Notes: Models adjusted for gender, highest level of education, employment status, relationship status, remoteness, Indigeneity, country of birth, household income, age and age squared.

Table 3. OLS regression estimates for beliefs de-intensification policy intervention on support for basic income, limit on working hours, robot tax and training.

	Compensation policy		Steering policy				Investment policy	
	Basic income		Limit on hours		Robot tax		Training	
	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.
Intercept	3.66	***	3.36	***	4.38	***	3.47	***
Deintensification	0.14		0.28	***	−0.04		0.23	***
R2	0.18		0.18		0.24		0.22	
N	1035		1035		1035		1035	

Source: Australia Comparative Electoral Survey (ACES) (2022).
Notes: Models adjusted for gender, highest level of education, employment status, relationship status, remoteness, Indigeneity, country of birth, household income, age and age squared.

Table 4. OLS regression models for beliefs de-skilling policy intervention on support for basic income, limit on working hours, robot tax and training.

	Compensation policy		Steering policy				Investment policy	
	Basic income		Limit on hours		Robot tax		Training	
	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.	β	Sig.
Intercept	4.26	***	3.30	***	3.83	***	3.18	***
Deskilling	0.16		0.08		0.16	***	0.13	
R2	0.20		0.18		0.24		0.24	
N	1035		1035		1035		1035	

Source: Australia Comparative Electoral Survey (ACES) (2022).
Notes: Models adjusted for gender, highest level of education, employment status, relationship status, remoteness, Indigeneity, country of birth, household income, age and age squared.

(β 0.23, p. < 0.001). Those who viewed technology as improving work conditions were not significantly more or less supportive of the other three policy interventions.

In Table 4, the association between beliefs in technological change resulting in the de-skilling of workers is presented. Individuals who view technological changes as more likely to de-skill the workforce are more supportive of the *steering policy* of taxing robots. Specifically, a one-unit increase in the belief that technology will lead to the de-skilling of work was associated with increased support for a tax on robots (β 0.16, $p. < 0.001$). Again, those who saw technology as leading workers to need to reskill were no more likely to support the other policy outcomes.

Discussion

Drawing on a unique dataset of Australian citizens, this research sought to contrast support for investment, compensatory or steering labour market interventions to address technological change. We operationalised these as (1) investment: expansion of training for older and younger people; (2) compensation: a basic income to support those susceptible to technology-related job loss; (3) steering: limiting and redistributing work hours; and (4) steering: a tax on robots and technology companies. These policy solutions map onto dominant policy approaches at the national and supranational levels (Bürgisser 2023). A central contribution of our analysis was its sociotropic focus, rather than only examining how individuals' own job risks shape preferences, by focusing on societal-level impacts of technological change. Our analysis examined

how support for these policy proposals differed amongst those who thought technology would *displace* or *de-skill* workers or lead to a *de-intensification* of work.

Australians are generally pessimistic about the future of work. Most expect displacement and deskilling, with fewer believing technology will significantly improve safety or reduce monotony. In line with these concerns, investment policies, such as education and training for both younger and older workers, have overwhelming support. This reflects a broader international pattern in which citizens prefer individualised adaptation strategies to structural reforms (Busemeyer and Tober 2023; Gallego et al. 2021). Our results, however, also reveal relatively strong support for compensation through basic income, suggesting Australians may be more open to redistributive measures than is often assumed in liberal welfare states.

The regression results add nuance to these findings by linking attitudes about the future of work, specifically, the impact of automation and artificial intelligence on work and workers, with their preferred policy interventions for addressing broader technological change. We find those who see technological change as displacing workers are more supportive of all three types of interventionist policies: compensatory policies in the form of a basic income; steering policies in the form of a tax on robots and technology companies; and investment policies in the form of training for older and younger workers. However, they are *not* in support of limiting the number of hours individuals can work, such as through the introduction of a four-day working week. In short, they support a mixture of individual and structural solutions as a way to ameliorate technologically-driven unemployment. It is likely that they oppose government-imposed limits on working hours, viewing them as constraints on rights to work and the ability to earn a living. Given that most Australians view the future of work through this lens, it seems that this policy combination would garner the most support. These findings have clear implications for policy development and implementation. Training policies may be easier to pursue because they align with both citizen preferences and government agendas, while steering policies face greater resistance. Yet, support for compensation suggests that governments could build coalitions around redistributive measures if framed as fair adjustment mechanisms rather than constraints on growth. In this sense, public opinion both constrains and enables reform, signalling the need for careful framing of labour market policy.

We also find that those who see technological change as deskilling workers are more supportive of steering policies in the form of a tax on robots and technology companies. This finding strengthens Fan, Ding, and He's (2024) argument that support for taxation reflects citizens' concerns about fairness and equity. Those who see technology as outpacing workers' skills prefer to place limits on firms, rather than individuals. Anxieties about deskilling, thus, are channelled into steering policies that make technology developers take greater responsibility for labour market effects. As noted previously, these individuals are also more likely to see the future of work as leading to worker displacement. However, if they also view deskilling as a feature of the future of work, they want governments to slow down this competition from technology by taxing technology companies and robots that are deskilling their jobs. This connection underscores that deskilling is not only an individual fear but also a collective judgment about fairness in the distribution of technological risks and benefits. Citizens expect firms to shoulder part of the burden, reflecting a sociotropic demand to renegotiate the social contract in the face of technological advancements, such as automation. Rather than seeing workers alone as responsible for

adaptation, attitudes toward deskilling highlight expectations of shared responsibility across business, government, and society. This resonates with Australia's long-standing "fair go" ethos, where fairness is institutionalised through collective safeguards rather than left to individual adjustment. Recent developments in industrial relations, including the adaptive reuse of awards and tribunals and expanded protections for gig and employee-like workers, illustrate a preference for coordinated solutions that place Australia closer to the social partnership traditions of Germany and Spain than to the more individualised U.S. model (Buchanan et al. 2024; Jerrard, Bamber, and McKeown 2024).

Finally, de-intensification is associated with support for work-time limits and training-related policies. We find individuals with a more positive view of the future of work, in which it has the potential to de-intensify life, i.e. that technology will improve safety and work-life balance, are more supportive of policies to reduce work. Ultimately, these results indicate that individuals are mapping their policy preferences to their worldviews, i.e. those who see the future of work as disruptive want governments to step in to limit technology's reach and retrain workers. Those who see the future of work as being able to foster a range of benefits, by contrast, want the government to reinforce work-hour limits, that might lead to a greater work-life balance. Simply, individuals want governments to map their policies to maximise self-actualisation. The comparatively weaker support for steering policies such as reduced working hours or robot taxes may also reflect existing features of Australia's labour market, e.g. long working hours and high levels of casualisation. In this context, structural steering measures may appear less legitimate or realistic to citizens, even if they are supported in more corporatist European settings.

Ultimately, our study shows that Australian attitudes towards technological change at work largely reproduce the dominant priorities of government and global stakeholders. Investment-oriented solutions – expanding university and VET access for young people and retraining opportunities for older workers – attract strong support, echoing the OECD, WEF, and Australian government agenda. Employers, too, emphasise skill shortages as the main barrier to technology adoption (OECD 2023; WEF 2023), reinforcing a policy narrative that places responsibility on workers to continuously adapt. In this framing, technological disruption is treated less as a collective challenge than as an individual deficit, with workers responsibilized to cultivate their human capital (Schlogl, Weiss, and Prainsack 2021). While this helps explain the popularity of investment policies, it also risks narrowing debate by sidelining compensation and steering measures that would distribute the costs and risks of automation more broadly. In liberal welfare states such as Australia, this emphasis on training dovetails with longer-standing discourses that encourage young people, in particular, to pursue endless credentialism to enhance "employability" and meet business needs (Churchill and Khan 2021; Sukarieh and Tannock 2015). Yet, such strategies may do little to address the structural inequalities or collective risks posed by technological change. Thus, a combination of solutions will likely be the most effective strategy to fairly integrate technological change, and our study here provides insight into support for a range of policy interventions.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, we sampled at a single time point and given the rapid dispersion of technology (e.g. ChatGPT), there is a need for longitudinal data to

better capture attitudes over time. As with any cross-sectional survey, causal direction cannot be firmly established. We cannot rule out reverse causality, whereby pre-existing support for redistribution may lead individuals to interpret technology as more threatening**.** Second, and relatedly, this survey includes all individuals, including those who may be unemployed or out of the labour force. Thus, some views, particularly amongst the latter, may be biased in estimating how technological changes will impact workers. Among workers, attitudes may not shift unless they experience technological change, and it is possible that some may not yet have experienced disruption, deskilling and de-intensification in their workplace. This points to the need for additional analyses as technology is introduced in workplaces to document shifts in attitudes towards the technologies themselves and the policies to regulate them. Finally, it may be that workers are following government directives and attitudes that influence individuals. Or, individuals and the public may influence government attitudes and policies, a bidirectional policy discussion. Unpacking these mechanisms is beyond the scope of this paper, but a ripe area for future research as technology and work change.

Conclusion

This study shows that Australian attitudes toward the future of work are structured by competing sociotropic expectations about technological change: displacement drives support for retraining, regulation, and income support; deskilling fuels fairness-based demands such as taxing firms; and de-intensification encourages backing for working-time reforms, with skills investment remaining the most widely supported solution. These findings highlight the importance of focusing on sociotropic perspectives that emphasise the broader societal impacts of technological change, not only individual job risks, in shaping citizen preferences and the political feasibility of labour market reform. Future research should build on these insights with longitudinal and cross-national designs to trace how public attitudes evolve and how institutional settings condition support for different policy responses.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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