



Do citizens approve of technocrats? Analyzing attitudes toward technocrats in thirty-one European democracies 1999–2021

Elena Semenova¹ · Keith Dowding² · André Kaiser¹ · Alessandro Di Biagio¹

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Abstract

This study examines citizens' attitudes toward technocratic ministers in European democracies. While previous research has focused on either the supply-side factors driving technocratic appointments or individual-level determinants of public support, this paper bridges these disconnected literatures through a multi-method approach. Using a novel dataset on technocratic ministers, we employ latent class analysis to identify two distinct environments: “Low technocratic” (few, sporadic technocratic appointments) and “High technocratic” environments (numerous and persistent technocratic appointments). Analysis of European Value Survey data (1999–2021) reveals that citizens in “High technocratic” environments demonstrate significantly higher support for technocrats. Contrary to prevailing theories, economic conditions and technocrats holding finance portfolios do not affect public perception. However, growing perceptions of executive corruption substantially increase public support for technocrats. These findings challenge existing explanations of technocratic appeal and suggest that institutional familiarity with technocratic governance, rather than economic performance, shapes public attitudes toward expert rule in democratic systems.

Keywords Public opinion · Technocracy · Governance · Technocratic ministers · Economic crisis · Eastern Europe

✉ Elena Semenova
semenova@wiso.uni-koeln.de

Keith Dowding
keith.dowding@anu.edu.au

André Kaiser
andre.kaiser@uni-koeln.de

Alessandro Di Biagio
dibiagio@wiso.uni-koeln.de

¹ University of Cologne, Cologne, Germany

² Australian National University, Canberra, Australia



Introduction

There is a broad theoretical literature on what constitutes a technocratic government (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014). How many cabinet ministers must be technocrats for a government to be a technocratic one? How different does the decision-making process in technocratic government compared to party government need to be? Certainly, technocrats in government are political animals; they need to be (Meynaud 1964: 25). Fortunately, we do not need to answer these questions here. We are analyzing public attitudes to technocratic governance, not government. Governance as we use it here is a broader concept concerned with whether the public appreciate the presence of experts among the cabinet. Second, we are examining public attitudes across a wide variety of European democracies, some of which have had technocratic governments, some of which have not. We do not need to decide which governments are technocratic as such, since the data we use to help explain public attitudes is the number of technocratic ministers in a government at a given time. In other words, we focus on the public's experience of such ministers. How does that experience affect their attitudes?

For the purposes of this paper, given our data is based on that of Vittori et al. (2023b), we consider technocratic ministers to those who are not party members, or elected to office at any level, and excluding those who had run for office just prior to be appointed.¹ Since the 1970s, European democracies have seen an increase in the proportion of technocratic ministers (Blondel and Thiébault 1991; Costa Pinto and Tavares de Almeida 2018; McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014). The literature provides various explanations for the rise in the appointment of technocratic ministers: the weakening of the party government model and the presidentialization of politics (Verzichelli and Cotta 2018), the increasing complexity of governance (Neto and Strøm 2006; Costa Pinto, Cotta, and Tavares de Almeida 2018; Radaelli 2017), presidential (Tavits 2009) and PM preferences (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019), and historical legacies (Semenova 2020). The increase in technocrats appointed to government positions seems to be a supply-side phenomenon—explained by structural features. But what should we make of it from the demand side? Do citizens approve having technocrats in power?

Thus far there is no clear answer to this question. On the one hand, a growing body of literature shows increased public support for participatory democracy, including using referenda and deliberative forms of democracy (Bowler et al. 2007; Neblo et al. 2010; Smith 2009; Vittori et al. 2024). This evidence suggests that citizens do not want rule by technocrats but rather citizen-based rule. On the other hand, some evidence suggests that citizens think it desirable to transfer decision-making from politicians' hands to those of experts (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017; Chiru and Enyedi 2022; Lavezzolo et al. 2021; Heyne and Lobo 2021). However, these viewpoints are not necessarily incompatible. What people might want is a shift from careerist politicians to technocrats with greater direct oversight from citizens.

¹ Also, ministers reappointed subsequently are coded as partisan for their reappointed position if they participated in the election campaign.



Many studies focusing on the reasons for positive attitudes toward experts in democracy examine citizens' negative perception of political conflict, and consequently, the desire for neutral, efficient, expert-based governance (such as the literature dealing with stealth democracy, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Other studies focus on citizens' characteristics that affect their preferences for experts such as their personality type, their ideological orientation, or socio-demographic characteristics, notably gender, age, and socioeconomic standing (Bertsou and Caramani 2022; Webb 2013; Pilet et al. 2024). The literature examining the characteristics of citizens toward technocrats has found many interesting factors. However, while this might explain some underlying propensity to technocratic ministers, it could only explain country-wide divergence in public attitudes if those personality traits and characteristics also differed across countries. That is unlikely. Here, we explain divergent attitudes by the public's exposure to such ministers.

There are no other studies that have examined attitudes across countries by such exposure. Bertsou and Pastorella (2017) and Chiru and Enyedi (2022) use country-level variables as controls in their individual-level analyses. However, both studies do not look at the numbers of ministers as such, nor consider the times at which technocrats are present. Rather they code countries in terms of whether they have had technocrat governments. Both studies use McDonnell and Valbruzzi's (2014) list of technocratic governments abridging it for their purposes. This list is problematic. For example, Chiru and Enyedi (2022) code Germany as "0" because it has had no technocratic governments, and code Brazil as "1" because it has had non-partisan ministers, even though Brazil has had no technocratic governments. While having had technocratic governments might serve as a rough proxy for a country's openness to appoint experts, non-partisans do not necessarily equate to technocrats. Rather, these indicators tell us that the institutional framework allows for independent candidates to be elected and that selectorates—be they parties or presidents – are willing to include non-partisans.

We utilize the actual presence of technocrats in government to see whether this affects citizens' attitudes to technocrats in government. Our multi-method research first maps the presence of technocrats by analyzing a novel dataset on technocratic ministers (Vittori et al. 2023b). We examine different patterns of technocratic presence by considering both the numerical magnitude and the temporality of technocratic appointments. For the first, we examine how many, and not just whether technocrats are appointed to cabinet. For the second, we examine their temporal persistence, conditioned by the country's age of democracy. Using latent class analysis, we discover two latent subpopulations in the data: the "Low technocratic" (few technocrats and sporadic technocratic appointments) and "High technocratic" (many technocrats continually occupying executive positions) environments.

Second, we use these results as an explanatory variable to examine public support for technocrats in three waves of the European Value Survey (from 1999 until 2021). Moreover, we analyze the context in which technocratic appointments are made. How do economic crises and political scandals affect the public perception of technocrat appointments? Our logistic regression results reveal that citizens in the latent class 2 "High technocratic environment" have significantly higher support for technocrats. In contrast, the state of economy and a technocrat holding portfolios



of finance/economy do not affect citizens' perception of technocrats, which goes against the expectations of the literature on technocratic appointments (Emanuele et al. 2023; Semenova 2020; Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019). However, we do find that growing perception of executive corruption has a substantial positive effect on public support for technocrats. This supports expectations in previous studies (Wra-til and Pastorella 2018; Brunclík and Parížek 2019).

The article is structured as follows: first, we will present the state of the art regarding factors affecting the positive perception of experts. Then, we examine the supply side of technocratic presence by mapping it (Study 1), including the presentation of the data and method. In Study 2, we will provide a descriptive analysis of public attitudes toward experts in European democracies and analyze the country-level factors affecting these attitudes. We conclude with a discussion of these results.

Public perceptions of experts in power

Predictors of positive attitudes toward experts: Individual level

Most studies examining public perceptions of experts in power focus on individual-level characteristics, and while various characteristics have been identified few of these findings are robust. The effects of individual-level variables vary with regard to the context in which technocrats are appointed, and the specific time points the data is drawn from.

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) introduced the idea of “stealth democracy” which concerns citizens' desire for a more effective, neutral, less conflictual, and expert-based decision-making process. First shown to be prominent in the USA, the preference for stealth democracy is seen in many European countries (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Lavezzolo and Ramiro 2018; Coffé and Michels 2014; Gherghina and Geissel 2017; Webb 2013). However, in some respects, European citizens' preferences differ from their US counterparts. Specifically, the US public demonstrates a preference for greater involvement of neutral experts, successful businesspeople, and independent commission members in the decision-making process (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, 142). European citizens distinguish between expert-, business-based decision-making and other forms of democracy preferring one, usually the expert-based form, over the others (Fernández-Martínez and Font Fábregas 2018; VanderMolen 2017). In their recent study, Pilet et al. (2024, 370–71) discover that the preferences for experts expressed by European citizens consist of dimensions such as increasing the decision-making power delegated to experts in general and support for scientists and doctors in particular. In other words, what is considered as evidence for the desire for stealth democracy differs across regions.

Other studies focus on identifying specific factors that may make individual citizens more open toward experts and expert-based democracy. For instance, some research shows that ideological orientation matters. Using European samples, studies have shown that stealth democracy is supported more by right-wing citizens (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Webb 2013). Yet Mede (2024) shows that right-wing populists are more suspicious of experts. Other studies provide evidence for the



emergence of so-called “technocratic populism”, where populist citizens combine their anti-politics and anti-establishment attitudes with support for expertise and science (Fernández-Vázquez et al. 2022; Havlík 2019).

Another individual-level characteristic is the personality of citizens. Here again, findings are not robust. Several studies reveal, for instance, that the supporters of stealth democracy have lower political trust and political efficacy, lack of political knowledge, or interest in politics (Coffé and Michels 2014; Webb 2013). Yet Bertso and Caramani (2022) show that supporters of technocracy are more interested in politics, have higher political trust, and are less attracted by ideological extremes than populists. However, technocrat supporters also have lower trust and lower political involvement compared to the supporters of party democracy. In contrast, using more elaborate instruments to examine public perceptions, Pilet et al. (2024, 374) show that political efficacy and interest in politics has no significant effect on the preferences toward scientific experts, while authoritarianism does. Reanalyzing Bertso and Caramani (2022) and Pilet et al. (2024), Del Rio (2024, 11) discovers measurement misspecifications at the level of latent variables and/or at the level of countries. For instance, the variable ‘Elitism’ used in Bertso and Caramani (2022) does not appear to measure what the researchers claim. Such misspecification might explain the contrary findings in individual-level factors across multiple studies.²

Finally, how socio-demographic characteristics of citizens affect preferences for experts is also mixed. Some studies show that young, lower-educated, women, and citizens of lower social standing are more inclined to support stealth democracy (Coffé and Michels 2014; Webb 2013). Similar results are reported for supporters of governance by scientific experts (Pilet et al. 2024). Bertso and Caramani (2022) discover that the supporters of technocracy are more educated and urban than those who support either populism or party democracy. Reanalyzing the work by Bertso and Caramani (2022), Del Rio (2024, 11) again finds misspecifications in the variables “ideology”, “political interest”, and “education”, and when corrected they become less relevant in explaining the assignment of citizens to one of the latent classes. Del Rio argues that citizens with positive technocratic attitudes show the most distrust in politicians and least interest in politics, while distrust in parliament loses its significance in most of the sample countries.³

While individual-level factors have been extensively studied the results are inconsistent suggesting there are no robust relationships between individual-level variables and the preferences for experts in power. Perhaps what matters is the context in which technocrats are appointed, and only once context is considered might individual-level characteristics become explanatory. This means that the specific time periods the empirical data is drawn from becomes important. Furthermore, historical factors affecting the context in which the public assess technocrats, only revealed at the country-wide level, are also likely to be important.

² While Del Rio (2024) also identified some misspecifications in Pilet et al.’s study (2024), the major conclusions of that study were confirmed.

³ The country sample in Bertso and Caramani (2022) included Germany, France, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, and Sweden.



Predictors of positive attitudes toward experts: Country level

Country-level factors examining preferences for experts in power have yet to receive substantial scholarly attention. One of the few findings consistently presented in the literature is the strong support of experts in power in post-communist Eastern and Central Europe (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017, 447–48). This finding is supported in studies focusing on purely European (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017) and mixed country samples (Chiru and Enyedi 2022). Two factors might explain the post-communist context. First, the history of authoritarian rule might lead the public to trust non-political experts more. Second, the longer history of such experts in these countries might lead the public to be more amenable to their appointment. Both are path dependencies. Another finding, albeit less discussed in the wider literature, is some variation across Western Europe in support for experts. For instance, Pilet et al. (2024, 372–73) show a higher public support for experts in power in Austria and Belgium compared to the average level of this support across their entire sample.⁴

Some studies do examine whether the presence of experts in government affects public attitudes. Bertsou and Pastorella (2017) use the variable *Technocratic government experience* based on the list of technocratic governments in Europe provided by McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014). They find no effect of this variable on the level of support for experts (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017, 445). Chiru and Enyedi (2022, 102) using the same data develop a 4-point scale:

Countries that never experienced a technocratic government and not even a non-partisan caretaker cabinet are coded as 0: Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, and the UK. Argentina and Brazil have experienced high shares of non-political ministers and are coded as 1. Countries which have experienced cabinets led by technocrats, but no fully technocratic government are coded as 2: Hungary is the only such case in our sample. Finally, countries that spent time under full technocratic cabinets were coded as 3 (Greece and Romania).

They find experience with technocratic government and non-partisan ministers increases positive attitudes toward experts in power; however, the effect size is relatively small. As Chiru and Enyedi point out (2022, 106), the average level of support for experts in power in countries with technocratic governments' experience is some 8% higher than in countries without such experience. Bertsou and Pastorella (2017, 445) also examine the effects of corruption perception and economic development on the public perception of experts. They find minuscule effects of these variables on positive attitudes toward experts.

⁴ Their country sample consists of Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Ireland, and the Netherlands.



Study 1: Mapping technocratic presence

We analyze the supply-side country-level factors in explaining public support for technocrats by utilizing insights from the extant literature. Some research highlights two major features of technocratic appointments in European countries: the variation in the magnitude of such appointments (a quantitative aspect) and the temporal variation of these appointments (a path-dependent aspect).

Starting with the first, studies demonstrate substantial cross-country variation in the number of technocrats in power in Europe. Some countries typically appoint large numbers of technocrats. For instance, every Polish cabinet since 1990 has included a substantial proportion of technocrats (Semenova 2018). Similarly, Cypriot, Hungarian, and Bulgarian cabinets often include a sizable proportion of technocrats (Vittori et al., 2023b, 870). The UK on the other hand never appoints technocrats to cabinet (Vittori et al. 2023b, 870). Although there are no constitutional bars on appointing non-partisan ministers, UK ministers have always served in one of the two houses (Kelly 2023, 13–15). In Malta, there have been no technocrats because of a highly polarized two-party system (Bulmer 2014) (Fig. 1).

European countries do not only differ in the magnitude of technocratic appointments, they also differ in their temporal exposure to technocratic rule. For example, many Central and Eastern European countries have continually appointed technocratic ministers since the early 1990s (Semenova 2018, 2020). Similarly, Portuguese and Spanish cabinets have included numerous technocrats since democratization in the 1970s (Costa Pinto and Tavares de Almeida 2018, 120–122; Rodríguez Teruel and Jerez Mir 2018, 144–145). In Italy, in contrast, technocrats only began to be appointed in significant numbers since 1994 while being completely absent in the First Republic (Verzichelli and Cotta 2018, 88–89). Sporadic technocratic appointments are found in Scandinavian countries and Greece (Vittori et al. 2023b).

Researchers do sometimes acknowledge magnitude and temporality in their discussion of results (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017), but no studies explicitly

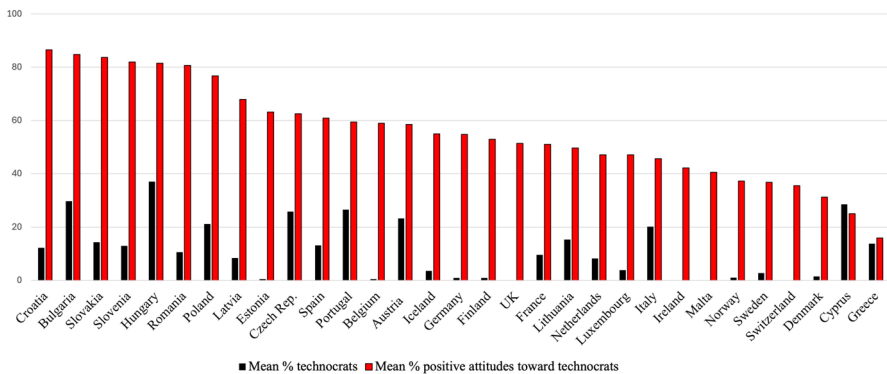


Fig. 1 The average citizens' support for technocrats and the mean proportion of technocratic ministers in European countries, 1999–2021. *Source:* Authors' re-analysis of the Technocratic Ministers Dataset (Vittori et al. 2023b); authors' analysis of three waves of the European Value Survey data (2022)



model them as explanatory factors. We assume that both magnitude and temporality of technocratic appointments create a specific environment which should affect public attitudes. For this purpose, we employ a latent variable modeling approach to map technocratic presence.

Method and data

We use the novel dataset on Technocratic Ministers in Europe (Vittori et al. 2023b), which includes information on technocratic appointments in various cabinets of European democracies from 2000 until 2020. We use this dataset to measure both magnitude and temporal aspects of technocratic appointments. In order to use these variables to determine citizens' support for technocrats using the EVS survey data, we first operationalized magnitude as the proportion of technocrats in the government at the time of each EVS survey and during previous governments (or between two survey waves) in each country. Doing so allows us to measure both the country's temporal presence of technocrats (for example, if there was a caretaker cabinet at the time of the survey) as well as a path-dependent component of the technocratic presence over time. Second, to capture duration, we calculate the number of parliamentary terms in which the country had technocrats in cabinet since 1990. This period was selected to include Central European countries in addition to Western European ones (Neto and Strøm 2006; Tavits 2009).

We expect that all three measurements are not completely independent from each other but rather form a latent construct of a specific technocratic environment. Thus, we employ latent class analysis (LCA). LCA is a categorical latent variable approach that identifies latent subpopulations within a full population based on a set of variables. It assumes that cases can belong with varying degrees of probabilities to categories with different configurational attribute profiles (Collins and Lanza 2013). In our case, we expect to see differences between public support for technocrats depending on the patterns (magnitude and temporality) of technocratic presence.

Moreover, based on previous literature we strongly assume that the membership in each latent class is not random but influenced by the country's age of democracy (Huntington 1991). As the Vittori et al. dataset (2023b) shows, many established democracies (such as the UK, Ireland, or Scandinavian countries) have few or no technocrats, while most third-wave democracies (particularly Eastern and Central European countries) have had a continuing strong technocrat presence. We consider this operationalization (the age of democracy) superior to the operationalization of authoritarian legacies used in previous studies (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017). The latter includes post-communist countries only which ignore other third-wave democracies (most notably, Portugal, and Spain) and some second-wave democracies (such as Austria and Italy) with a high proportion of technocrats in governments (Vittori et al. 2023b).



Results

We identify two latent classes in terms of the magnitude and temporality of technocratic appointments and age of democracy. Class 1 (“Low technocratic environment”) are countries with few technocrats and with, since 1990, a mean duration of technocratic presence of 1.2 legislative terms (Fig. 2, left side). In our population, class 1 makes up around 40% of all cases. Class 2 (“High technocratic environment”) is one where technocrats have been appointed in large numbers, and the average duration of technocratic presence is 4.6 legislative terms. Class 2 contains around 60% of all observations.

Study 2 Explaining public support for technocrats

Descriptive analysis of public support for technocrats

Based on the entire sample of European democracies in the European Value Survey data (1999–2021), 56% of citizens on average think technocrats rather than politicians should make decisions for the country (Fig. 1). We find two major regional patterns. First, all countries with exceptionally high support of experts (above 80%) are post-communist, alongside a high proportion of Southeastern European ones. Second, the support for technocrats is low in Scandinavian countries (except for Finland) and Southern European ones (in particular, Malta, Greece, and Cyprus). Longitudinally, there are few changes in the average proportion of support for technocrats across countries. The average proportion of positive attitudes was around 57% in the 1999–2001 EVS wave and approximately 58% in the 2017–2021 EVS wave.

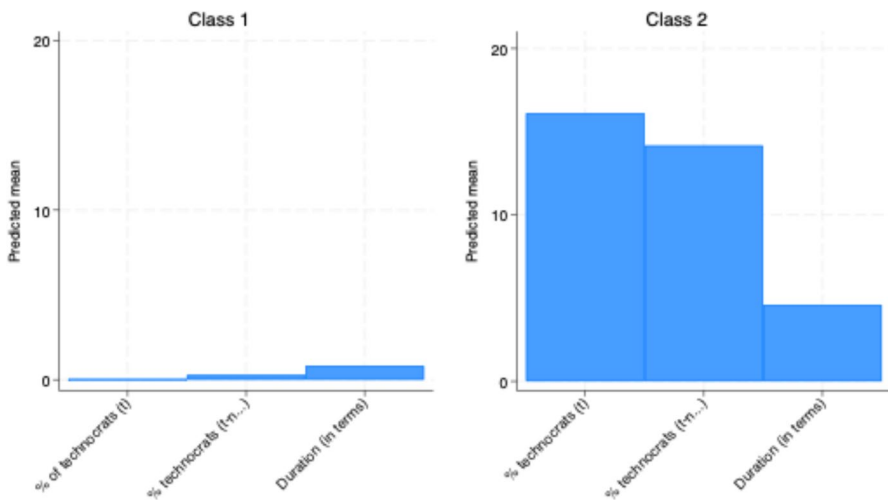


Fig. 2 Latent class profiles of technocratic presence in European countries, 2000–2020. *Source:* Authors’ re-analysis of the Technocratic Ministers in Europe dataset (Vittori et al. 2023b)



Hypotheses We first explore both latent classes of technocratic presence identified in Study 1. The technocratic appointment literature suggests two possible reasons why political parties might relinquish full control of cabinet positions and appoint technocrats. The first is that parties need neutrality and expertise in specific policy areas (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Semenova 2020). The second is that major political actors (often PMs and presidents) want to appoint loyal allies in crucial positions who will help them to realize their policy preferences and these might come from outside the party (Neto and Strøm 2006; Tavits 2009).

Following these two explanations, there are two contrary hypotheses. It could be that in High technocratic environment, citizens tend to support technocrats because they are used to having technocrats in power and consider those in place to be beneficial overall to the running of the country. On the other hand, they might not like them if they consider them cronies of the president or prime minister.

H1a *Citizens who belong to the latent class 2 (High technocratic environment) show higher support for technocrats (H1a).*

H1b *Citizens with membership in the latent class 2 (High technocratic environment) show lower support for technocrats (H1b).*

A second way in which the environment might affect attitudes concerns the timing of appointments. A crisis hypothesis examines whether *the specific context* in which technocrats are appointed affects attitudes toward them. Studies suggest technocratic ministers are more likely to be appointed during economic crises than at other times (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Semenova 2020; Costa Pinto, Cotta, and Tavares de Almeida 2018). Examples for this claim include the mass appointment of technocratic ministers during the post-2008 Great Recession in Italy, the Czech Republic, and Greece (Brunclík and Parížek 2019; McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014; Verzhicelli and Cotta 2018; Papadopoulou 2021).

According to some analyses, technocrats are appointed during tough economic times in order to make electorally unpopular decisions (Garzia and Karremans 2021; Bojar et al. 2022, 195–196; Wratil and Pastorella 2018; Emanuele et al. 2023; Brunclík and Parížek 2019; McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014). However, it is somewhat paradoxical that parties would think they need to appoint technocrats to make decisions that the parties themselves think are the right ones for getting the economy back on track. The most obvious explanation for this apparent paradox is that citizens are myopic. While they might eventually reward a party for tough economic decisions that turn the economy around, the electoral cycle, or at least the next time the parties go to the polls, is too soon for such rewards. We should expect therefore that during an economic crisis, if technocrats have been appointed, then they might be unpopular. However, over the long term, the population might develop more positive attitudes toward technocrats. Hence, we expect to find that in countries where technocrats are appointed during



an economic crisis their popularity will depend upon the state of the economy at the time in which attitudes are measured. We assume that

H2a *Citizens have lower support for technocrats during an economic crisis (H2a).*

Of course, another reason for appointing technocrats is their expertise. So, during economic crisis, economists and financial experts are often appointed. This pattern is present in Western (Alexiadou et al. 2022; Giannetti 2013; Papadopoulou 2021; Brunclík and Parížek 2019) and Eastern European countries (Semenova 2020). If a technocratic minister is appointed to make tough decisions to bring the economy on track based on the above logic, citizens should dislike them for these decisions. We assume that

H2b *Citizens have lower support for technocrats in charge of finance/economy portfolios during an economic crisis (H2b).*

Beyond economic crises, Brunclík and Parížek (2019) suggest that technocrats are appointed more often when there are political scandals and/or the overall level of corruption in the political system is high. Previous studies suggest political corruption negatively affects citizens' attitudes toward the government (Anderson and Tverdova 2003). Research on technocratic appointments suggests that in corrupt systems, political parties may appoint technocrats to reboot the government and shift attention from the government and ministers who are not (directly) involved in scandals to other issues (Dewan and Dowding 2005; Kumlin and Esaiasson 2012; Wrátil and Pastorella 2018). If it is indeed the case that technocrats are considered untarnished outsiders compared to their fellow politicians, this should positively affect public perception of them. We expect, therefore, that

H3 *Citizens show higher support for technocrats if the level of executive corruption is high (H3).*

Data and method

We use three waves of the European Value Survey, which include 85 country-wave observations from 1999 until 2021 (EVS 2022). The maximum number of countries included in the sample was during the 2008–2010 wave, with 31 European countries, while 28 countries were in the 1999–2001 wave, and 25 countries were in the 2017–2021 wave.

There is a comparability problem in the data. The year of the survey differs slightly across countries during the 2017–2021 wave. In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the pandemic because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Some surveys conducted during the coronavirus pandemic show a substantial increase in trust in experts' opinions at this time (3M State of Science Index 2020, 10–11). Because of this unique situation, we exclude Latvia's survey



wave of 2017–2021 because the data was gathered in 2021, and therefore, during the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, Portugal’s survey wave of 2017–2021 was used because it took place in January 2020, when the WHO had not yet declared a pandemic. Therefore, out of 85 country waves available for the analysis, we exclude one.

Our dependent variable, “Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country,” is taken from the EVS.⁵ Originally, there were four possible responses: 1 “very good,” 2 “fairly good,” 3 “fairly bad,” and 4 “very bad.” For this analysis, this variable was recoded as binary (very good and fairly good equals 1; fairly bad and very bad equals 0).

To measure the effect of technocratic presence, we use our latent classes identified in study 1. To measure the effects of an economic crisis on the public perception of technocrats, we used the data from the World Bank (2023) and calculated the Change in economic growth (t-3) indicator by subtracting GDP growth (annual, in %) at the year of the survey from the growth three years prior. This was done to account for possible time-dependent effects of the economic crisis cycle on public perception.

When looking at the effects of scandals, previous research used the list of scandals in various countries mentioned in *West European Politics* and *Electoral Studies* (see Kumlin and Esaiasson 2012; Wratil and Pastorella 2018). We consider the counting of scandals, which vary in extent and seriousness, as less informative than the overall level of corruption at the executive level. So, we use the executive corruption index from V-Dem (2024), which measures “how routinely members of the executive or their agents grant favors in exchange for bribes, kickbacks, or other material inducements, and how often do they steal, embezzle, or misappropriate public funds or other state resources for personal or family use.” To account for any time-dependent effects of this corruption index, we calculated the indicator change in corruption between the year of the survey and three years prior.

As our dependent variable is binary, we used a binary logistic regression for survey data (Roberts et al. 1987). The logit function is

$$\text{Ln}\left(\frac{P}{1-P}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_k X_k$$

Here, vector $X_i = (X_{i1}, X_{i2}, \dots, X_{ik})$ are the independent/predictor variables in the model, and $\beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \dots, \beta_k$ are the coefficients of these predictors, with β_0 being the intercept term. To consider country-specific factors, we use the results of latent class analysis as country-level predictors.

⁵ The data based on this question is not optimal for our purposes. The question might be interpreted as referring to experts from non-majoritarian institutions (such as constitutional courts; see Thatcher and Sweet 2002) in contrast to government ministers. It is, however, unlikely that survey participants know about the political science concept of non-majoritarian institutions. More importantly, we are mainly interested in variation between countries and there is no reason to assume that survey participants from different countries systematically interpret the question differently. Finally, there are no alternative data available (compare, Bertson and Pastorella 2017). Still, we acknowledge that basing our analysis on this data is clearly a limitation and a source of uncertainty.



Control variables

Following previous studies, we select several individual-level variables that we expect to lead to a more positive attitude toward experts in power. Studies show that citizens' attitudes toward experts are influenced by attitudes toward democracy and representative institutions (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017; Chiru and Enyedi 2022; Pilet et al. 2024). Those unhappy with representative institutions (government, parliament, or political parties) are more likely to support an alternative form of democracy, including expert democracy (Pilet et al. 2024). Such disengagement with democracy and representative institutions can be reinforced by lower trust toward other people in general, not just politicians (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017). We use the data from the EVS to measure generalized trust and confidence in representative institutions. To measure generalized trust, we use the respective variable from the surveys, coded as 1 if the person thinks that all people can be trusted and 2 if otherwise. To measure confidence in representative institutions, we produced an additive index out of three EVS variables: confidence in government, political parties, and parliament, each originally coded as a scale with 1 as "very high confidence", 2 "fairly high", 3 "fairly low", 4 "very low". We reversed the scale to make it more intuitive so higher values now represent a higher level of confidence. We centered this variable at the country mean.

Other individual-level factors found to be important are low interest in politics (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017) and strong authoritarian attitudes (Pilet et al. 2024). To measure interest in politics, we use the respective variable from the EVS, recoding it as a binary (with 1 if the person has a very or somewhat strong interest, and 0 if the person has not very strong or no interest in politics). To measure authoritarian attitudes, the EVS variable "Having a strong leader" was used and recoded as a binary, with "very good" and "fairly good" as 1, and "fairly bad" and "very bad" as 0.

We also control for the basic socio-demographic characteristics. For measuring the respondent's gender, age, income, and education, we used the EVS original variables: sex, age groups (15–29 years, 30–49 years, and 50 and more years), education (Lower, middle, and upper level), and monthly household income (corrected for purchasing power parity in Euro).

Results

Table 1 shows the results of a logistic regression for survey data. We calculated models with our country-level explanatory factors only (Model I), that with country-level factors and individual-level controls (Model II), and that with all types of controls (Model III).

Model I shows that citizens belonging to the latent class 2 "High technocratic environment" have significantly more positive attitudes toward technocrats than those belonging to the latent class 1 "Low technocratic environment".

Our crisis hypotheses are partially confirmed. First, public preferences for technocrats appear not to be affected by the state of the economy at the time of the survey.



Table 1 The country-level determinants of public support for technocrats (in odds ratios)

	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV Latent classes	
				Class 1	Class 2
				Low technocratic	High technocratic
Latent class 2 (High technocratic environment) (H1)	1.53** (0.24)	1.51* (0.23)	1.50* (0.23)		
Δ Economic growth (t-3) (H2a)	0.98* (0.01)	0.99 (0.01)	0.99 (0.01)	0.98 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)
Δ Executive corruption index (H3)	8.73*** (4.11)	5.52*** (2.53)	5.28*** (2.40)	0.11 (0.18)	7.83*** (3.36)
Technocratic minister of finance/economy (H2b)	1.09 (0.25)	1.04 (0.26)	1.03 (0.25)	–	1.09 (0.26)
Δ Economic growth (t-3)*					1.08* (0.04)
Technocratic minister of finance/economy					
<i>Individual-level control variables</i>					
Low generalized trust		1.17** (0.06)	1.15** (0.05)	1.19** (0.07)	1.15* (0.07)
Confidence in representative institutions		0.98 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)	0.96* (0.02)	0.97 (0.03)
Interest in politics		0.82*** (0.03)	0.85*** (0.02)	0.81 *** (0.04)	0.91* (0.04)
Preference for a strong leader		2.88*** (0.21)	2.89*** (0.21)	3.41 *** (0.32)	2.62*** (0.25)
<i>Socio-demographic control factors</i>					
Gender (female)			1.09*** (0.02)	1.10** (0.03)	1.10** (0.03)
Age group					
30–49 years			0.94 (0.05)	0.80*** (0.04)	1.06 (0.07)
50 or more years			0.83* (0.06)	0.63*** (0.07)	1.00 (0.09)
Education					
Middle			1.10 (0.06)	0.96 (0.07)	1.10 (0.07)
Upper			1.04 (0.07)	1.02 (0.06)	0.99 (0.10)
Income level			0.98 (0.01)	1.00 (0.02)	0.96* (0.02)
Observations	107464	92763	91688	36521	55167

*** < 0.001; ** < 0.01; * < 0.1; linearized standard errors are in parentheses

In latent class 1, there have been no technocratic ministers holding finance/economy portfolios (Model IV)



Moreover, holding a portfolio of finance/economy by a technocrat does not affect public support for technocrats. However, if citizens perceive growing executive corruption, this strongly increases people's preferences for technocrats (Model I).

As we show, citizens' support for technocrats is affected by latent class membership (Model I). Based on our assumption that the effects of the state of economy and corruption have distinct effects in each latent class, we test this by conducting a stratified logistic regression for survey data (Model IV). In the latent class 1 "Low technocratic environment", neither the level of executive corruption nor the state of the economy has any significant effect on the citizens' support for technocrats. In contrast, in the latent class 2 "High technocratic environment", citizens have strongly positive attitudes toward technocrats in power if the level of perceived executive corruption increases. The state of the economy remains insignificant. However, citizens in latent class 2 show higher support for technocrats if the state of the economy is improving under the guidance of a technocratic finance/economy minister (Table 1, Model IV).

Discussion

We examine the country-level determinants of attitudes toward technocrats. Our specific focus is on the effect of technocratic presence (that is a continuing presence of technocrats in cabinets) on public attitudes toward technocrats. For this purpose, we connect two bodies of literature—on the causes and circumstances of technocratic appointments and on public attitudes toward technocrats. Our first study analyzes technocratic presence in European democracies through employing latent class analysis of a novel dataset on technocratic ministers in Europe (Vittori et al. 2023b). The second study combines the findings on technocratic presence with the analysis of the European Value Survey data from in 31 European democracies from 1999 until 2021.

The descriptive analysis of the EVS data shows that people like technocrats. Even in countries with no technocrats in power at all (the UK; Fig. 1), we find relatively high support for technocrats in power. There is a positive connotation of expertise and technocrats as experts among the general population in Europe.

In study 1, we reveal two latent classes of technocratic presence in Europe: a "Low technocratic" and "High technocratic" environment. In Study 2, we show that citizens in the "High technocratic environment" have a higher level of support for technocrats in power than citizens in the "Low technocratic environment". Based on prior claims we suggested above that the relationship might go in either direction: an intense dislike of or support for technocrats. The second appears to be the case.

We propose two explanations for this finding. As previous studies have shown, citizens like technocrats because they ascribe them a higher capacity to lead their respective policy area than someone without expert knowledge of this area (Garzia and Karremans 2021; Ganuza and Font 2020, 350). For instance, citizens were very positive about the appointment of Mario Monti as a technocratic PM of Italy amid economic crisis because he is a renowned economist with experience as minister of finance (Giannetti 2013). Experimental studies have revealed that citizens are more



inclined to accept decisions proposed by technocrats rather than decisions proposed by politicians (Vittori et al. 2023a).

What distinguishes citizens in latent class 1 from those in latent class 2 is that the latter are familiar with technocratic governance and not merely see it as desirable. Citizens in the latent class “Low technocratic environment” are socialized into the party government model world, in which parties distribute cabinet portfolios among themselves, and, where citizens are dissatisfied with a party’s policy, they vote for other parties (Müller 2000). In contrast, citizens in the latent class “High technocratic environment” have experience of two models of governance—a party government and a technocratic one. Having experience of technocrats in power they can see advantages and disadvantages (Garzia and Karremans 2021). Experience of another governance model provides citizens in this latent class with greater flexibility in expressing their political preferences, one of which is to signal to parties their desire for more experts in power (Garzia and Karremans 2021; Ganuza and Font 2020).

The second explanation related to the strategies of political parties concerns the way citizens get information about technocratic appointments. Of course, political parties may explicitly inform people about their technocrats’ occupational expertise, as was the case with Mario Monti in Italy (Giannetti 2013). A simpler type of signaling is to appoint a minister with an academic title (PhD or a professor). Previous studies show that in the countries with many technocrats, technocrats attain higher academic qualifications than non-technocrats, including some professors. This pattern is seen in Central and Eastern European countries (Semenova 2018, 184–185; Ilonszki and Stefan 2018, 226–227), Spain (Rodríguez Teruel and Jerez Mir 2018, 159–160), and Portugal (Costa Pinto and Tavares de Almeida 2018, 129). In contrast, in countries with few technocrats and sporadic technocratic appointments, such signaling is less present. For instance, the academic credentials of technocrats in Sweden are not substantially higher than those of their non-technocratic counterparts (Bäck and Persson 2018, 70–71). Therefore, another explanation could be that citizens in the latent class 2 show higher support for technocrats because they recognize their expertise more easily.

Our analysis does not confirm our hypothesis about the effect of the state of economy on public support for technocrats. Taking the long-term economic development as an explanatory factor alone (Table 1, Model I), public support for technocrats declines if the economy is growing. However, this effect disappears once we control for individual-level factors. This finding challenges the ideas presented in the literature on technocratic appointments during economic crisis, which consider technocratic appointments during economic recessions as an instrument used by political parties to shift the blame for unpopular austerity measures (Wrtil and Pastorella 2018; Emanuele et al. 2023; Brunclík and Parížek 2019). One reason for this negative finding is simple. If parties think austerity measures are justified, then so might the electorate. There is no need to shift blame and so it does not affect public support for technocrats especially if the public trust them more for difficult decisions since it recognizes their expertise.

We partially test this possibility by examining the effect of technocratic ministers holding finance/economy portfolios on public support for technocrats, finding



this factor has no effect on its own. However, in the latent class 2 (High technocratic environment), the positive effect of a technocratic minister holding portfolios of finance and/or economy on public support is associated with economic growth. This finding modifies previous results from the literature on technocratic appointments (Alexiadou et al. 2022; Brunclík and Parížek 2019) and experimental studies on public attitudes toward technocrats (Lavezzolo et al. 2021). Citizens indeed like technocrats to oversee the economy but only if there is a (perceived) economic improvement.

Confirming the expectations derived from the literature, citizens give higher support for technocrats where they perceive growing executive corruption. If parties appoint technocrats to reboot their government and distract the public from scandals (Wrátil and Pastorella 2018; Emanuele et al. 2023), this strategy appears to work. However, disentangling this effect via the stratified regression analysis reveals that the bulk of the effect is associated with the citizens in the latent class 2 “High technocratic environment”, who not only prefer technocrats in general but like them even more when they see executive corruption. So, it is not simply executive corruption that leads a preference for technocrats but familiarity with technocrat rule.

Finally, we need to mention a significant shortcoming of our study, which is based on the nature of the EVS data. Its cross-sectional design does not allow us to test changes in public preferences toward technocrats over time which would be important for estimating the effects of economic development and political crises in more detail. Nonetheless, our findings modify and expand previous work on public attitudes to technocrats in government.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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Elena Semanova is a senior researcher at the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics, Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences, University of Cologne.

Keith Dowding is Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Political Philosophy at the Australian National University.

André Kaiser is a full professor of comparative politics at the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics, Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences, University of Cologne.

Alessandro Di Biagio is a PhD student at the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics, Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences, University of Cologne.

