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Technocratic governments: democracy by other means

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Abstract

In Europe, technocratic governments have become a popular topic of debate. Commentators have been nearly unanimous in condemning them as ‘suspension of democracy’ or even as ‘the end of democracy as we know it’. However, no academic analysis has been provided to assess whether technocratic governments are indeed incompatible with democracy. The present paper intends to fill this gap by assessing technocratic governments’ compatibility with different dimensions of European liberal democracies. The paper will focus on comparing the main dimensions of democracy (including representation, deliberation and partisanship) in ‘standard’ party governments and in technocratic governments. It will also look at whether technocratic governments are constitutionally allowed and democratically legitimate. The paper will conclude that technocratic governments are not incompatible with European democratic political systems but that they are still a worrying phenomenon, in so far as they reveal those democratic shortcomings which remain hidden in normal party governments: loosening of delegation and accountability ties between voters and parties, and parties and governments, increasing external pressures on domestic political actors, and the weakening of ideology-based politics. The paper will add further elements to reinforce the already vast literature on the crisis of – especially party – democracy in Europe.

Technocratic governments, while not a new phenomenon in the political world, seem to have become quite a widespread form of government in European democracies recently. A surprisingly high number of technocratic governments have been appointed since the beginning of the economic and financial crisis - in Hungary and Czech Republic in 2009, in Italy and Greece in 2011, in Greece again in 2012, and most recently in Bulgaria and Czech Republic in 2013. It is

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therefore the right moment to ask a fundamental question concerning such governments: are technocratic governments compatible with democracy, as it is understood in Europe? Common sense, even etymology, would seem to indicate that technocracy is, by definition, opposed to, and not part of, democracy. It generally partners well with autocracy. Together with populism they are the Scylla and Charybdis of democratic ideals. At best it is categorized as a 'political pathology' (Gunnell 1982: 392). In the particular case of the years of the recent Eurocrisis technocratic governments were fingered as the cause of the growing support for extreme, populist or protest parties, such as Golden Dawn in Greece or Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy. Some even mourned the 'end of democracy as we know it' (Brunkhorst 2012). It is not however clear whether such accusations rest on any stable grounds, both in terms of democratic theory and democratic practice. Exploring such matters is important on the one hand to fully understand an underexplored political phenomenon, that of technocratic cabinets, and on the other hand, and more importantly, to gain an additional judgment point on the status of our democracies.

The paper will therefore proceed as follows. Firstly it will indicate and justify what definition of technocratic government² will be used in the chapter. The second section will address major criticisms moved to technocratic governments, touching upon problems related to the rule of law, electoral accountability, interinstitutional accountability, competition, participation, responsiveness. The last section will be dedicated to considerations of legitimacy. In the course of the analysis, it will become clear that, while technocratic governments are not making European democracies any less democratic, they are, by their mere existence, showing that these democracies had many shortcomings to begin with. To put it bluntly, they are not making the situation of European democracies worse, because it has been bad all along. The shortcomings that in normal governments remain somehow hidden, appear in their fullness in technocratic cabinets. This is particularly reinforcing the case of the decline of European party systems (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000, Scarrow 2010, Van Biezen, Mair et al. 2012).

Some definitions: technocratic government, normal government, democracy.

The present article will consider the most 'extreme' theoretical case of technocratic government possible, that is, the 'ideal' technocratic government:

² For a fuller classification of, and debate on definition of, technocratic cabinets, see - McDonnell, D. and M. Valbruzzi (2014). "Defining and classifying technocrat-led and technocratic governments." European Journal of Political Research.

a cabinet composed of all non-partisan, expert ministers and headed by a non-partisan prime minister, which has a sufficiently long period of time in power and sufficiently broad mandate to allow it to change the status quo.

If the accusations of un-democracy do not stand for such type of extreme technocratic government, then necessarily they will stand even less for ‘weaker’ or ‘shorter’ or ‘more partisan’ types of technocratic governments.

When the article will mention ‘normal’ government, it will mean party government that broadly reflect Katz’s definition of it (Katz 1987). This is admittedly an arbitrary choice, not in the sense that current European cabinets are not mainly party governments, but because party government is not equivalent to, or synonymous with, democratic government. As Rose rightly points out, party government is ‘potentially central in many different types of political system: a single-party state in Eastern Europe or Africa, a decentralized federal government in North America, or a parliamentary democracy’ (Rose 1969: 415). Technocratic governments are certainly not party government (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014), but this does not necessarily confine technocratic governments by definition in the realm of ‘undemocratic arrangements’, in the same way that being party government does not, per se, raise a government to the position of democratic government. Democratic theorists and party theorists do not often speak to each other (to see why, cf van Biezen and Saward (2008)). It is therefore appropriate that the analysis of a phenomenon that, alternatively, can be seen as a problem of democracy or as a problem of party politics should be dealt with from both perspectives.

From the perspective of democratic theory, one must specify what concept of democracy will be employed to confront technocratic governments with. Instead of limiting the discussion to one understanding of democracy, the article will proceed the other way round, starting from the criticisms themselves. Each of them accuses technocratic governments of being incompatible with different dimensions of democracy. The intention is double-folded: on the one hand show that technocratic governments are *in theory* not incompatible with these different dimensions of democracy, hence taking a normative stance. On the other hand to show that *in practice*, technocratic governments are neither more nor less democratic than actually existing governments.

Let us now turn to the various criticisms moved to technocratic governments, which, because of the scarcity of academic literature on technocratic governments, will be occasionally sourced from outside academia. This does not make the criticism less poignant, but only more immediate and less abstract, which adds to the overall point there technocratic governments do raise concern for

citizens, as well as for academics, and therefore their democratic credentials should be urgently assessed.

What is un-democratic about technocratic governments? Common criticisms refuted.

The (un)democratic nature of technocracy as the empowerment of a technocratic elite has been discussed extensively in the academic literature. Briefly, on the one hand there are those writers that consider technocratic elites as either not posing a danger to democracy (e.g. (Burnham 1970) (Centeno and Wolfson 1997, Schudson 2006, Williams 2006)) or as unable to challenge political leadership anyway (Price 1965, Galbraith 1971, Bell 1973). On the other hand others have warned of the authoritarian consequences of the scientification and juridification of politics. Such debates indicate that there is no agreement on whether bureaucratic empowerment is democratic or undermines democracy. Some scholars have tackled more specifically the issue of technocratic governments during the Eurocrisis, but these views are limited to informal fora for discussion rather than academic journals (Schmidt 2011, Hopkin 2012). There is therefore the need to go through, one by one, the various criticisms.

The rule of law

The first and gravest accusation moved to technocratic governments is that ‘the Constitution does not contemplate them’³. While it might seem the gravest accusation, in terms of democratic theory it is not necessarily destructive. Democracy, and in particular the rule of law does require ‘that the exercise of power...should be exercised in accordance with and through a general system of principles, rules and procedures’ (Tully 2002: 206), i.e. the constitution. However, something that is constitutional is not necessarily democratic and vice-versa. Fulfilling the criteria of democratic constitutionalism, i.e. to be in accordance with the constitution, is only a necessary, but not sufficient condition for a system/government to be democratic. It is still therefore appropriate to check whether technocratic governments infringe any of the rules enshrined in national constitutions or not. If they do not, then they cannot be called fully democratic, but they will be one step closer.

Evidence shows that those constitutions in those countries which had technocratic governments not only allow for them, but sometimes even provide for them explicitly. In Italy, article 64 explicitly

³ - Formica, R. (2011). Governo tecnico? La Costituzione non lo prevede. Stampa Libera. N. Forcheri.

allows for ministers who have not previously been members of parliament to be appointed (Romanelli 1995: 71). The Portuguese constitution also allows for the President to choose the Prime Minister 'taking into account election results' (article 136) but leaving the freedom as to the choice. The same is true in the Czech republic, where 'the President, therefore in practice appoints the person considered to be most capable of forming an acceptable government, which is not necessarily a representative of the most powerful political party' (Kysela and Kuhn 2007: 98). This is, for instance, evident in the recent case of Jiří Rusnok, when president Zeman defied both sides of the political spectrum and 'seized the initiative in the political vacuum by appointing his ex-finance minister to form a so-called "government of experts" (BBC 2013)'. No specific requirements are present in Finland or in Hungary either. The list could go on. Greece is the only special case. The Greek constitution (art. 37.3) dictates that, in case all other options of government formation failed,⁴ 'he [the Head of State] shall entrust the President of the Supreme Administrative Court or of the Supreme Civil and Criminal Court or of the Court of Auditors to form a Cabinet as widely accepted as possible to carry out elections and dissolve Parliament', which is equivalent to prescribing the kind of technocratic cabinet seen under Grivas and Pikrammenos. Far from being unconstitutional, therefore, technocratic governments respect the criteria of democratic constitutionalism in those countries where they occurred.

Break of the chain of delegation and less electoral accountability

According to some, technocratic governments are a 'break in the chain of [democratic] delegation' (Neto and Strøm 2006). Representative democracy, rests on such chain of delegation, which maintains the common assumption that, to simplify, the will of the people is translated into a government which broadly reflects its preferences. In the case of technocratic ministers, the argument runs, because parties are not necessarily in control of, or responsible for the appointment of, non-partisan ministers - as they are sometimes appointed by the head of state or by the technocratic prime minister - the delegation chain is broken. From a more electoral perspective, there is a weak, nearly non-existent link to the electoral outcome⁵. Gamson's law, which sees the

⁴ Major party, minor party, national unity

⁵ The indirect link to elections is helpful to distinguish between technocratic governments and governments of 'technicians'. The first is appointed with no direct link to elections' outcomes. The latter, on the contrary, has a direct link to elections in which voters decide to choose a non-politician as their representative. This is for instance the case of Cyprus, where George Vasiliou, an independent businessman, was elected as president in 1988. He formed what by any standards would be called a technocratic government - Solsten, E. (1991). Cyprus: A Country Study. Country Studies/Area Handbook Series. Washington, Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress.. However, because he was normally elected, his cabinet cannot be called a technocratic cabinet.

very high correlation between cabinet portfolio allocation and seats in parliament, does not work in case of technocratic governments. The reason why such aspect should matter is that elections are at the heart of any well-functioning representative democracy.⁶ Technocratic ministers do not compete for votes, their policies do not express the vote or the preferences of the people, and one might even go as far as saying that they take away part of the meaning of ‘the right to vote’ as voters cannot throw the (technocratic) rascals out (Riker 1982). They are moreover not interested in gaining electoral support.

All of the above is true, but there are several counterarguments. First and foremost, the link with voters is indirectly maintained through the vote of confidence that all governments, including technocratic ones, have to obtain to rule. This can be explicit in the vote of investiture, or implicit in those countries where such provision does not exist. The other side of the coin is that, of course, technocratic governments, like party governments, can be voted out of office, or not given the confidence at all. Parties in parliament maintain ultimate control of who will govern the country and what laws are passed, and indirectly therefore voters do too. Secondly, when there is a widespread, cross-partisan support for a technocratic government (which is often the case, as they have cross partisan majorities in parliament), it is obvious that the ‘throwing the rascals out’ is more difficult, but not any more difficult than throwing out a grand coalition, where it is likely that at least one of the parties in the grand coalition will be re-elected. Finally, commentators who object that technocratic ministers are ‘not merely unelected in the Gordon Brown sense of taking up the premiership midterm, but truly unelected in the sense that Mr Brown would only have been if he had entered No 10 without having bothered to stand as an MP’ (Guardian 2011), are misrepresenting what happens in normal circumstances of ministerial appointments. One of the most common terminologies to refer to technocratic cabinets is indeed that of being made of ‘unelected technocratic’, as if the heads of government in parliamentary democracies were empowered by the voters and not by their parties and their coalitions (Pasquino 2013). Ministers in most European democracies are not directly elected, but appointed through a variety of mechanisms, by their parties, in almost complete freedom. The result is a surprisingly number of non-partisan ministers even in those countries which never had a technocratic government in power, such as France (Neto and Strøm 2006). Schleiter and Morgan-Jones have shown indeed that appointment of independents in semi-presidential democracies is no less democratic than appointment of partisan ministers, but it is just a different democratic principal-agent relationship

⁶ Dahl, quoted in - O'kane, R. H. T. (2004). Paths to Democracy: revolution and Totalitarianism, Routledge.

(Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009). Whether this be negative in terms of the qualities of our representatives, it is beyond the scope of the paper, but it does not seem to be intrinsically the case; on the contrary, studies which have had a look at this issue in practice would seem to suggest the opposite (Yong, Hazell et al. 2011).

Undermining political parties and party government

Blogs and articles, including by academics (Invernizzi Accetti 2013) accused technocratic governments of undermining party democracy as a whole. ‘It is not just the idea of party government which is being damaged, but the very idea of the political party’s role as an indispensable agent of democracy’ (McDonnell 2012) and given that ‘modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties’ (Schattschneider 2004 (1942)), it is a grave accusation. How are they undermining party democracy? They decrease the people’s trust in the political class as a whole, and in traditional political parties in particular, thus increasing the likelihood of people turning their attention – and their votes – to populist parties. Anti-elite voter backlash expresses itself in the rise of new populist parties or breakthroughs by previously marginal radical grouping (Leonard 2011, Skelton 2011, Leonard 2012, McDonnell 2012, Bickerton 2013). Although the link (or absence of link) between populism and technocracy is a topic that would require a whole new paper itself, it is necessary to at least attempt to tackle this criticism. Let us recall the situations in which technocratic governments are appointed. As they are exceptional governments, they are appointed in circumstances that are exceptional too, i.e. ‘crisis circumstances’. It follows that in such moments, it is reasonable to expect that trust and even affection for traditional parties would diminish, either because the parties are in the eye of the storm, or because they are accused of being the causes of that crisis situation (e.g. in moments when scandals explode). Moreover, for voters, technocratic governments are a sign that traditional parties have thrown in their towel. It should come as no surprise that voters will have less confidence in parties that, by their own will, decide to vote into powers ministers outside their ranks. Hanley (2013) seems therefore to have a point in arguing that technocratic governments are a symptom, not a cause, of party malaise and all that comes with it, including the populist turn⁷. This makes technocratic government compatible with a party democracy that is weakened and shaky.

⁷ ‘Fischer and his government, it suggests, enhanced a public appetite for anti-political alternatives to conventional party government. It appears to have been a catalyst for the success of new anti-establishment resort to technocratic government in the Czech Republic appears more a symptom than cause of party malaise.’ - Hanley, S. (2013). Unexpected consequences of an unexpected Prime Minister? The 2009-10 Fischer administration in the Czech Republic. EUSA Thirteen Biennial Conference. Baltimore.

A second way in which technocratic governments undermine party democracy is that they respond more to pressures of external actors rather than of the parties – and indirectly of voters. This, the criticism goes, makes the parties irrelevant in policy making, and gives rise to a democracy which is, for instance in the context of the Eurocrisis, led by the EU/Troika/Germany. The reply to this criticism lies in the fact that this problem, by party scholars' own admission, is widespread in party governments too (Streeck and Schäfer 2013). The demands of governments are trumping the demands of representation. 'Even beyond those directly engaged in the chain of delegation itself, there are therefore many other competing principals that intervene along the way and that might seek to divert the agents in a different direction than that intended by their immediately prior principals in the chain. Indeed, the agents may sometimes even be persuaded that they owe a greater duty of accountability to these 'external' principals than to their own domestic principals' (Mair 2011: 2). In general the literature has complained of a decline in responsiveness, defined as 'congruence between citizens' interests and political outcomes (Eulau and Karps 1977) and that normal party governments have been plagued by ministers' limited commitment to party policy (Rose 1969: 430). Is there any evidence that technocratic governments are more easily influenced by external pressures than normal governments, and that they present a 'present and future lack of *accountability* to voters which remains the sorest point in a democracy' (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2012)? It seems that, if anything, at least in theory, technocratic governments should be less influenced by third parties. The reason is that, by their very nature, technocratic governments will listen less to pressures coming from, for instance, lobbying groups or NGOs, which, as Urbinati and Warren put it, are a multitude of self proclaimed representatives with very minimal accountability (Urbinati and Warren 2008: 403). As far as EU rules are concerned, in the recent Eurocrisis instance, any government, technocratic or not, had to abide to them. The proof is that both countries which had technocratic governments and those who did not, ultimately carried out similar kinds of economic decisions. A further response is to be found in the fact that politicians (be they partisan or technocrats) do not only have to represent the views of constituents, but also should be responsible to that constituency by taking the decisions that they think are best for the constituents. (cf Edmund Burke's 1774 speech to the voters of Bristol' quoted in Rosenthal and et al. (2003)). In fact the concept of party government is mainly an academic one, 'which does not tally rally much public support...after all, it should be the government of the nation, not of a party' (Müller 2000: 311). Once again, at least a priori, there is no reason to think that technocratic governments will be any less responsive than party governments to their immediate principals which, to remind ourselves once more, is ultimately the political parties, like in a normal party government.

Lack of political competition and people's participation

The incompatibility of technocracy and political or policy deliberation is a widely accepted position in democratic theory. Technocracy together with populisms are seen, for opposite but complementary reasons, to be preventing deliberation about policies. On the one hand populism, in a nutshell, worsen the tendency of citizens in democracy to avoid deliberation, public consultation and discussion on the common good, by channelling and controlling collective negative passions of hatred and fear (Esposito 2012: 15). On the other hand the *technicisation* of political life imposes solutions that have been determined by 'experts' without deliberative stage. Technocratic governments and their claim to neutrality and 'knowing best' delegitimize the sort of healthy opposition that one would normally find in a party system. During technocratic governments 'all criticism is 'irresponsible'—or 'populist', which has become synonymous' (D'Eramo 2013). Not only the opposition is delegitimized, but the rationale for explaining to voters why they have to endure certain sacrifices also becomes less fundamental, as there is an assumption that technocratic governments are doing what needs to be done, which requires no justification, as it is obvious to any rational agent.

The argument, while attractive, is not so straightforward. Firstly, there are academics that indeed defend the idea that depoliticized institutions might be better placed to deliberate in a purely democratic way (Pettit 2004). In the case of technocratic governments, it might be argued that, if the objective of deliberation of democracy is to determine the common good, then technocratic ministers are equally, or even best placed, to do so, given that they will not be subject to the pressure of the upcoming electoral deadline. So on the one hand excessive politicization might actually result in less deliberation, as the positions of the deliberating agents will be too fixed, and on the other hand deliberation happens equally well in a situation where politicians in power are less tight to partisan and electoral constraints. Moreover, experience has shown that, if anything, because of the 'lack of direct legitimacy', technocratic ministers and prime minister have had to justify their choices even more in the eyes of the public, which, although not equivalent to deliberation, certainly made voters more conscious of the decisions taken for them. This was for instance confirmed in interviews conducted by the author with Italian technocratic minister Elsa Fornero and Greek technocratic Prime Minister Panagiotis Pikrammenos (Fornero 2014, Pikrammenos 2014).

Neo-liberal problem

A related criticism has been particularly strong during the Euro-crisis: there were protests against technocrats as emissaries of right wing, neo-liberal ideologies. The right wing *penchant* of the technocratic governments would not a problem per se, but what critics of technocratic governments have underlined is that technocrats do not admit that ‘lurking in the spread sheets of technocrats, is ideology’ (Odugbemi 2011). So while on the one hand they prevent deliberation by adopting a position that is ‘beyond deliberation’, because it is one of neutral expertise, they in fact enforce a very political ideology through the back door. The affinity between technocracy and neo-liberalism is not a new story. Under the broad umbrella of neo-liberal policies one can include macro economic stabilization and occasionally structural reforms, including privatization and liberalization. Certainly outside Europe⁸, and especially in Latin America, technocrats ‘have been associated with orthodox versions of free-market capitalism. During the past years in Eastern Europe, the new technocrats have been clearly associated with market economics as well’ (Centeno 1993: 311). While the link between technocrats and neo liberal policies has no inherent validity as such (Centeno and Wolfson 1997: 229), reality in Western Europe shows that the two go often hand in hand. Such *entente* has been explained by some commentators as originating in the fact that both phenomena place emphasis on productive efficiency. Others have argued that technocrats are seen as treating the state as an enterprise whose profits one should maximize (idem: 226) and this makes technocratic government and neoliberalism ideal bedfellows. As an Italian economist noted, ‘a technocratic government poses no problem for the neoliberal theory: on the contrary. Policy is not supposed to make choices, but only to clear the ground from obstacles to the free unfolding of market forces, leading to a state that, by definition, represents the best of all possible worlds’ (Saraceno 2012). Understandably, as technocratic governments present themselves as ‘politically neutral’, such bias leads to criticism that they are Trojan horses for a certain economic view. ‘Technocrats impose hard programs of market reform on their developing societies and tend to perceive (and to justify) their policies as the mere passive execution of inexorable economic laws’ (Schedler 1997: 8).

Even assuming that evidence were found that technocratic governments act mostly as actors for neoliberal reforms, it simply brings out is that, as many critics of technocracy have already expressed at length, that there is no such thing as neutral knowledge, or, to bring this to Foucaultian extremes, there is no such a thing as ‘genuine technical knowledge’ (Foucault and Gordon 1980: 131). Technocrats are, after all, called to cabinet positions on the basis of their known ideology which tallies with the direction of the reform agenda set up by political parties. This makes technocratic governments more compatible with deliberative democracy. This is so for two reasons.

⁸ the ‘Berkeley Mafia’ in Indonesia, the ‘Chicago Boys’ in Chile, and Marcos’s ‘Pillars’ in the Philippines

On the one hand indeed the setting up of value-loaded governmental economic objectives, with its deliberative process in parliament and beyond, remains, once again, in the hands of the political parties. As Saraceno rightly pointed out ‘The need to choose [economic policies] does not admit the vacancy of the political sphere. To carry on choices, the government needs the legitimacy and the list of priorities that stem from a democratic process of delegation’ (Saraceno 2012).

Also, and most importantly, technocrats are also chosen for their ‘ideology of method’, Centeno and Wolfson (1997), which can be applied with equal success to democratic, neoliberal, communist or simply autocratic regimes⁹. This also rebuts a related criticism, which concerns the time of political debates and ultimately democracy. The argument runs, that deliberation and democratic decisions take time, but technocratic decision-making is all for efficiency and rapidity (White 2014). The reason why such decisions may be achieved more rapidly in times of technocratic governments is due to the fact that the mandate they have is clearer (or the decisions taken are less significant in case of short-lived caretaker governments) and there is less debate in parliament as the support for the government tends to be broader, so that measures can be passed in parliament more quickly.

Considerations of legitimacy

In all, the above discussion has shown that technocratic governments, while *prima facie* undemocratic, do not display any more flaws than normal party governments. On the contrary, together with populism, they are the effect, and not the cause, of the declining role of parties in some European democracies. But, one might still argue, populism is much more democratically legitimate than technocracy, as for technocratic governments, ‘democratic legitimacy is clearly regarded as an unaffordable luxury’¹⁰. This is a criticism that weaves in all dimensions of democracy discussed above, depending on the understanding of legitimacy that one takes. Precisely because of its encompassing nature it is one that needs to be addressed, as well as unpacked further. A *caveat* should be, however, that proving that technocratic governments are legitimate, does not prove that they are democratic. Central banks and regulatory agencies are legitimate, but not democratic. In the same way as for democratic constitutionalism, therefore, legitimacy is a necessary but not sufficient condition for technocratic governments to be democratic.

⁹ Centeno gives the example of the Soviet Union’s policies, which were technocratic but obviously not neo-liberal, and of Argentina’s keynesian technocracy

¹⁰ - Skelton, D. (2011). Government of the technocrats, by the technocrats, for the technocrats. New Statesman.

There are multiple answers to this criticism. The first one is to argue that technocratic governments might lack ‘the political legitimacy that elected, party politicians can bring to government’ (BBC 2011), but enjoy a different kind of legitimacy from party governments. In situations where parties have lost that legitimacy, technocratic legitimacy is the next best thing, and one that actually helps parties regain credibility. Adapting Shapiro’s argument on the EU’s legitimacy for the current purposes, (Shapiro 2005) we can argue that technocratic legitimacy and democratic legitimacy operate on a zero sum game basis. This tallies with the evidence that technocratic governments happen not only when there is an economic crisis, but also when the democratic legitimacy of ‘normal’ party government becomes shaky, such as in cases of scandals. As Ian Begg put in in an interview in the New York Times, “The mere fact that they have been asked in such difficult circumstances means that they have a mandate. Granted, it’s not a democratic one, but it flows from disaffection with the bickering political class.”¹¹ Clearly, similarly to technocracy in other forms, such as the EU’s technocracy, ‘for efficiency to deliver legitimacy, an actor must be effective in delivering outcomes deemed appropriate’ (Reus-Smit 2007: 165), where efficiency in this most straightforward sense is ‘technical’ efficiency, in so far as complex tasks should be delegated as politicians do not have the time or skills to deal with them, especially in times of economic crisis. Given the supposed high level of expertise of the technocrats of the ideal technocratic government defined above, there is no a priori reason why such outcomes should not be achieved. And whether these outcomes are appropriate or not, is easily assessed: those outcomes are established by the legitimate representative of the people, i.e. MPs or the directly elected Head of State in semi-parliamentary democracies. Technocratic governments have also been appointed in the wake of political crisis where demands of political efficiency mean that politicians delegate to maximize the chance of reelection, rather than improving the quality and speed of policy making decisions (Moe 1984, Epstein and O’Halloran 1999). Governments are more likely to delegate if they are at risk of being replaced by a coalition with different preferences (Braun and Gilardi 2006: 138) so it is possible that a political party in power would prefer to appoint a technocratic government rather than heading to elections with the risk of losing power. Hence the logic is: technocratic governments are legitimate in the eyes of the political parties, which consider them an efficient way to ensure a good outcome, and hence fit in the democratic framework of electoral competitiveness.

A second counterargument to the accusation of not being legitimate is that technocratic governments can, and often did, enjoy high support in Parliament. Monti’s cabinet, which has all the characteristics of our ideal type of technocratic government, had the highest support in both

¹¹ Ian Begg New York Times 11/11/2011 in - Donadio, R. (2011). Greece and Italy Seek a Solution From Technocrats. The New York Times.

Parliament and Senate in all the history of the Italian republic (Marangoni 2012: 138), followed closely by Dini's cabinet, another technocratic one. Of course not all technocratic governments had high popular support, but theoretically there is nothing that prevents them to achieve that level of support, both within and outside parliament. And parliamentary support is the sign of input legitimacy in so far as it involves representation of the people (Schmidt 2013). In several cases, as shown in previous chapters, popular support was also quite marked (e.g. even Papademos, so often criticized, had 79% of popular support when he was nominated PM (Granitsas 2011)).

Thirdly, in some cases, because of culturally specific attitudes, their popular legitimacy comes precisely because of their neutrality and lack of partisan ideology. The most interesting case in this respect is the Czech attitude to non-political politics. At least until quite recently, democracy was for the Czech voters not necessarily an emanation or limited to party politics, and there is a sense in which a non-partisan government is more legitimate (Tucker and et al. 2000, Protsyk 2005, Hanley 2013). As scholars have used support as a proxy, if not quite equivalent, to legitimacy (Gibson, Caldeira et al. 2005), we could similarly argue that this is so in our case too.

This leads to the final point. Whether democratic or not, technocratic governments are clearly deemed the safest way to successfully pursue certain goals. The reason why that is so, is that in fact they entail very high costs for the parties that support them. Trust in parties which are seen as giving up their task will diminish, the game of blame shifting will not go unnoticed by the electorate, therefore parties must have a very strong incentive to risk so much and delegate to technocrats. If 'democratic legitimacy is based on the belief that for a particular country at that particular juncture no other type of regime could assure a more successful pursuit of collective goals' (Linz 1978), then technocratic governments, in certain circumstances, are indeed the *least-worse* possible regime that would still command legitimacy. In sum, to adapt Moravcsik's famous stance on the EU democratic deficit, 'if we adopt reasonable criteria for judging democratic governance, the widespread criticism of [technocratic governments] as democratically illegitimate is unsupported by existing empirical evidence. At the very least, this critique must be heavily qualified' (Moravcsik 2002: 605)¹².

Technocratic governments as efficient flexibility mechanisms for democracies in crisis.

The discussion above has shown that, contrary to what has been said and written publicly in the past few years, technocratic governments are not incompatible with the main aspects of our

¹² My adaptation

democracies, nor ‘undemocratic’ per se. The majority of criticisms rest either on unrealistic expectations that not even ‘normal’ governments can meet, or on wrong premises. However, the points above also brought out that technocratic governments are different from that which has become the normal shape of Western European cabinets, that is, party government, and hence *differently democratic*. What this means, in democratic terms, is that technocratic governments are a useful flexibility scheme in case normal party-democracy fails, while managing to avoid further collapse or a regression to dictatorship. As Kouvelakis put it, crises in European democracies are not going to result in authoritarian solutions, but are going to ‘free itself from representative structures and the rules of parliamentary alternation of power [...] taking the form of grand coalition’ (Kouvelakis 2011: 24), often headed by a technocrat. Technocratic governments can therefore see as a feature of a democratic system that allows for flexibility when the situation requires it, in the same way that strong presidential powers that allows for the appointment of technocratic ministers can be seen as a good flexibility mechanism which allows decisions to be taken where parties fail to find a consensus on ministerial candidates (Neto and Strøm 2006). The advantage of appointing technocratic governments is that the appointment provides a solution to a variety of problematic situation while not entailing substituting the norms with exceptional powers, as in classical Schmittian sense of emergency rule. The fact that technocratic governments are neutral actors in the political scene give parties time to recover from scandals, reorganize themselves in case of government collapses, and in general be given extra time for preparation for the next elections.

Nonetheless, the analysis above has also brought to the fore familiar deficiencies of the *status quo* of our democracies. Technocratic governments, in this respect, are the tip of the iceberg that hides a much wider and diffuse series of problems, mainly related to the behaviour of political parties. Populist or protest parties intuitively know that technocratic governments are one with traditional party politics, and play exactly on this *technocratic consensus* as a target of their criticism of the connivance of traditional parties. This is in line with theories of cartel parties (Katz and Mair 1995). Mainstream political parties converge on a pro-EU agenda, and so do technocratic governments, while populist parties on the right and left converge on an against-EU agenda. Opposition is not dismissed, but polarization of positions happens along the extremes of the dichotomy populist-technocratic because the middle grounds, i.e. the traditional political parties, disappear behind the technocratic cabinets. Indeed, when appointing them, they show ‘intelligent democratic use of expertise’ (Schudson 2006: 496) in cases of economic crises. Prof Tucker, put it rather simply: ‘no major party is going to want to pay the costs of instituting painful policies alone. [...] one way around this predicament is to appoint a technocratic government that is not "of" any party but is

supported by all the parties. In this way, blame can essentially be shared, and government can do the right thing, whatever that may be'.¹³ So while paradoxically in line with parties' interest in certain circumstances, it is also an alarm bell for those who care about the quality of our democracy. Far from solving the problem of party disaffection, the appointment of technocratic governments is increasing the 'suspicion of intermediary structures' (Van Biezen, Mair et al. 2012: 27), see also (Dryzek 2000).

Conclusions and further research

The present article set out to enquire on whether the heavy political rhetoric and criticism against technocratic governments can be confirmed or dismissed. It is thoughtful exercise, rather than a definitive assessment, as it has only covered the main criticisms without pretence to completeness, and it should be considered, therefore, as a starting point for further research grounded on more specific empirical instances of technocratic governments. Despite appearances, it has not been a defense of technocratic governments, and even less so a defense of the status quo of 'normal' governments and 'normal' democracies, in the vein of the school of empirical democracy (Skinner 1973). On the contrary, it has been a reappraisal of the role of technocratic governments, and one which can be pursued further by democratic theorist of all 'schools of thoughts'. The article suggests that 'democratic theory has not yet caught up with democratic practice' (Lakoff 1971: 10) as technocratic governments are a democratic practice that has not yet been coded or studied by democratic theorists. As ex-technocratic Italian Prime Minister Lamberto Dini said in an interview to the author, 'technocratic governments are part of the normal evolution of politics in those situations where other kinds of governments cannot be formed' (Dini 2014).

The normative conclusion of the present assessment of technocratic governments is that the democratic problem lies not with technocratic governments *per se*, which are just the symptom, but with those politicians and parliaments that appoint them, and that ultimately show, with such appointments, their weakness. They reveal those democratic shortcomings which remain hidden in normal party governments: loosening of delegation and accountability ties between voters and parties, and parties and governments, increasing external pressures on domestic political actors, and the weakening of ideology-based politics. Technocratic governments, are one of the many symptoms of their malfunctioning, which might confirm the inadequacy of current settings of party functioning for a healthy performance of democracy (van Biezen 2004). The hope is that, like

¹³ - Tucker, J. (2011). So what exactly is a technocrat anyway? [AlJazeera](#).

Honig (2009) suggests in a period of crisis unusual solutions, such as technocratic ones, will be productive for democracies, as they will show the people the flaws of the system spurring the desire for change

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