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# Technocratic Governments in Europe: Getting the Critique Right

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## ABSTRACT

In Europe, technocratic governments have become a popular topic of debate. Commentators have condemned them as a ‘suspension of democracy’ or even as ‘the end of democracy as we know it’. However, no academic analysis has assessed whether technocratic governments are indeed undemocratic. This article is intended to fill this gap by assessing technocratic governments’ democratic credentials. It compares them to party governments along the main dimensions of party democracy, including representation, deliberation, constitutionality and legitimacy. It concludes that technocratic governments in Europe are not undemocratic per se, but are still a worrying phenomenon insofar as they reveal shortcomings that remain hidden in normal party governments: a loosening of delegation and accountability ties between voters, parties and cabinets; increasing external pressures on domestic political actors; and the weakening of partisan ideology-based politics. The article will add further elements to reinforce the already vast literature on the crisis of – especially party – democracy in Europe.

**Keywords:** democracy; technocracy; Eurocrisis; technocratic government; political party

Technocratic governments, while not a new phenomenon on the European political scene, seem to have become a particularly widespread form of government recently. A comparatively high number of technocratic governments, as defined by Duncan McDonnell and Marco Valbruzzi (2014), have been appointed since the beginning of the Eurocrisis.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore the right moment to ask a fundamental question: Are technocratic governments democratic? More specifically, do technocratic governments meet the standards of democracy as it is understood in Europe – that is, party democracy (Mair, 2008; Van Biezen, 2012; Van Biezen and Borz, 2012)? Common sense, even etymology, would seem to indicate that technocracy is, by definition, incompatible with any democracy. It generally partners well with autocracy. Together with populism they are the Scylla and Charybdis of democratic ideals. Technocratic governments even made some commentator mourn the ‘end of democracy as we know it’ (Brunkhorst, 2012). It is not clear, however, whether such accusations rest on any stable grounds, either in terms of democratic theory or democratic practice. Exploring such matters is important, on the one hand, to fully understand an under-explored political phenomenon – that of technocratic cabinets – and, on the other hand and more importantly, to add an additional perspective to assessing the status of European democracies.

This article will therefore proceed as follows. After clarifying some of the terminology and concepts used, it will address major criticisms aimed at technocratic governments, touching upon problems related to constitutionality, electoral competition, policy choices, accountability and legitimacy. It will show that technocratic governments have been criticised on wrong assumptions or judged against unrealistic democratic standards. In the second part, the article will identify some fair criticisms aimed at technocratic governments, which can be traced back to Peter Mair’s challenges to party government (Mair, 2008). In line with other scholars lamenting the decline of parties and the diminished quality of European democracies, Mair argued that there is a broad reshaping of political systems in non-majoritarian terms, with increasing use of experts and regulatory agencies, decreased policy alternatives due to various national and international constraints, and increased ideological convergence of mainstream parties. These factors have a negative impact on the quality of democracies, and this article will argue that such democratic shortcomings – which in normal governments remain somehow hidden behind the layer of deeply rooted and established partisan alliances and practices – appear in their fullness in technocratic cabinets. In this respect, technocratic governments can be added to the list of the ways in which parties are failing to perform their intended roles within the democratic process (Lawson and Merkl, 1988).

The underlying argument of the article is that the difference between the challenges to the democratic quality of party governments and to the democratic quality of technocratic governments are not differences in kind – as most of the criticisms aimed at technocratic governments seem to imply – but differences in degree. This reinforces the case of the decline of European party systems that has been made convincingly by many eminent scholars (e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Scarrow and Gezgor,

2010; Van Biezen et al., 2012) while defending the position that technocratic governments per se are not to blame for this decline. They are symptoms, rather than causes, of the diminishing quality of European partisan democracies.

### **Some Definitions: ‘Technocratic Government’, ‘Normal Government’, ‘Democracy’**

Definitions and conceptualisations of technocratic governments vary in the academic literature. The most recent and most encompassing work on the topic (McDonnell and Valbruzzi, 2014) classifies technocratic governments according to cabinet remit and composition. Others have seen a government as either technocratic or non-technocratic, independently of remit and composition (Hanley, 2013; Kuusisto, 1958; Tucker et al., 2000). This article will consider a ‘prototype’ technocratic government, similar to what McDonnell and Valbruzzi identify as the ‘full technocratic government’:

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

If accusations of being anti-democratic or non-democratic do not stand for this type of extreme technocratic government, necessarily they will stand even less for weaker, shorter or more partisan types of technocratic government.

When the article mentions ‘normal’ government, it will mean party government that broadly reflects Richard Katz’s (1987) definition of it. This is admittedly an arbitrary choice, not in the sense that current European cabinets are not mainly party governments, but in the sense that party government is not equivalent to, or synonymous with, democratic government. As Richard Rose (1969, p. 415) 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 decentralised federal government in North America, or a parliamentary democracy’. It is, however, reasonable to claim that European democracies are partisan democracies, and that party government is a good benchmark against which, in Europe, to assess whether a technocratic government is democratic.

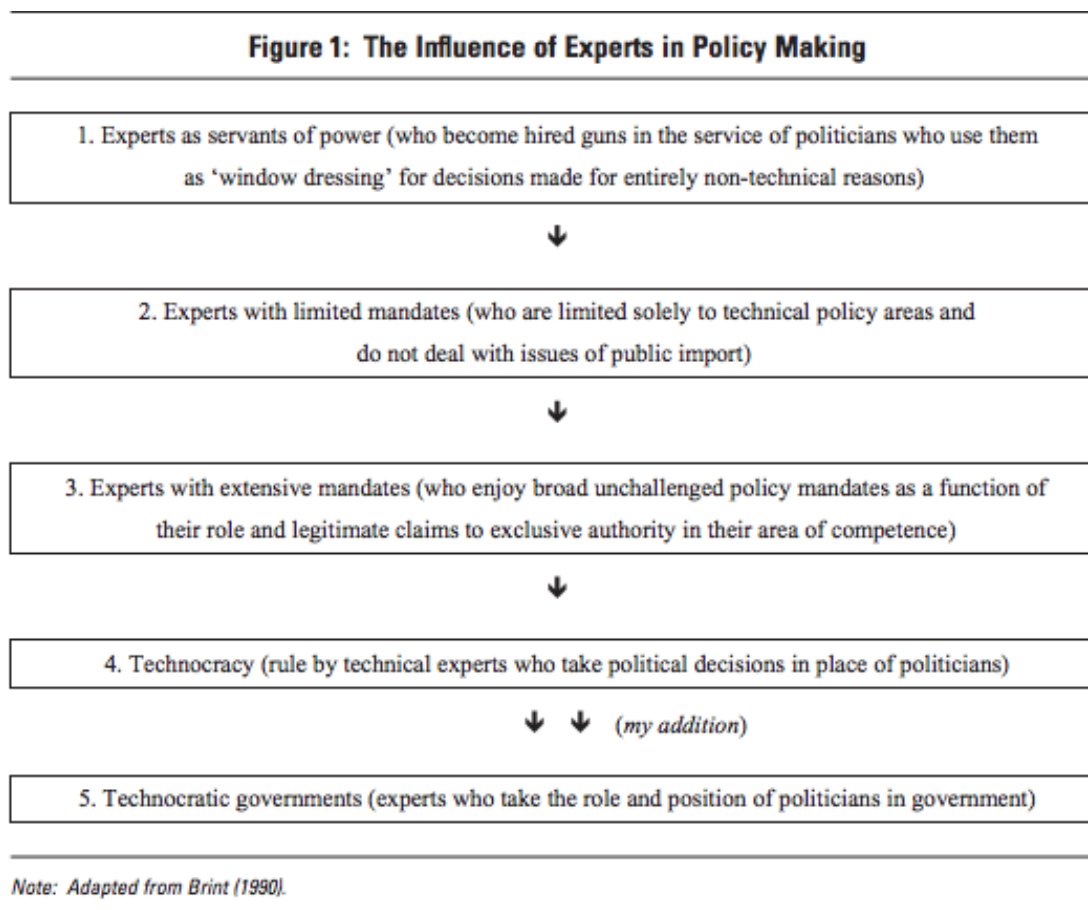
As far as democracy is concerned, the article will judge technocratic governments using the standards of party democracy. It is the case that parties are seen today as ‘procedurally necessary and democratically desirable’ and ‘reflect the fundamental values and principles upon which the policy is based’ (Van Biezen and Borz, 2012, p. 328). In many democratic constitutions democracy’s constitutive principles – such as representation, pluralism, political participation, deliberation and competition – have come to be associated with political parties. For instance, in Central and Eastern Europe (incidentally, where most technocratic governments have been appointed), the transition to democracy coincided with, and was seen as being one with, the establishment of parties as well as free elections. Clearly there are many conceptions of party democracy, even within European democracies, depending on what role is ascribed to parties: instrumental, defenders of democratic values, mechanisms of participation and representation, and so on (Van Biezen and Borz, 2012, pp. 348–51). Equally clear is the fact that party democracy is not equivalent to party government, as a reference to any one-party state illustrates rather directly. Therefore, in order to avoid going through a list of aspects of party democracy against which to benchmark technocratic governments, this article will do the reverse: it will start from the criticisms aimed at technocratic governments and subsequently check them against standards of party democracy. These responses will make reference to how well or how poorly party governments fare, if presented with the same criticisms.

Due to the scarcity of academic literature on the topic, the criticisms aimed at technocratic governments are sourced from outside academia. This does not make the criticisms less poignant, but only more immediate and less abstract, which adds to the overall point that technocratic governments raise concern for citizens, as well as academics, and therefore their democratic credentials should be urgently assessed.

### **Common Criticisms Refuted**

The (non-)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 who consider technocratic elites as either not posing a danger to democracy (Burnham, 1970; Centeno and Wolfson, 1997; Schudson, 2006; Williams, 2006) or as unable to challenge political leadership anyway (Bell, 1973; Galbraith, 1971; Price, 1965). On the other hand, and maybe more intuitively, others have warned of the authoritarian consequences of the scientification of politics, where increased reliance on

scientific evidence by policy makers moves democracy from being the tyranny of the majority to being the tyranny of experts. Such debates indicate that there is no agreement on whether bureaucratic empowerment is democratic or undermines democracy. This literature, however, can help place technocratic governments in the broader context of the evolution of the relationship between technocracy and democracy in terms of the increasingly central role of experts in European democracies, which is one of the challenges identified by Mair (2008).



Adapting the scale designed by Steven Brint (1990) about the policy influence of experts as articulated along four main positions, technocratic governments are to be placed at the extreme end of the scale (Figure 1). While there is ample literature on situations 1–4 in Figure 1, less has been written on situation 5 – that of technocratic governments. 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 (Hopkin, 2012; McDonnell, 2012b; Schmidt, 2011), and democratic theorists have yet to consider the question in depth. There is therefore the need to consider the various criticisms aimed at technocratic governments in a rigorous manner to understand whether they really are a political pathology, and in what sense, if any, they are detrimental to party democracy.

### ***Unconstitutional***

The first and gravest accusation, albeit rather rare, aimed at technocratic governments is, as one commentator put it, that 'the Constitution does not contemplate them' (Formica, 2011). 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, p. 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. being in accordance with the constitution) is only a necessary, but not sufficient condition for a system/government to be democratic. Therefore, it is still appropriate to check whether technocratic governments infringe any of

the rules enshrined in national constitutions. Evidence shows that constitutions in those countries which have had technocratic governments<sup>2</sup> not only allow for them, but sometimes even provide for them explicitly. In Italy, Article 64 of the constitution explicitly allows for ministers who have not previously been members of parliament to be appointed (Romanelli, 1995, p. 71). The Portuguese constitution also allows for the president to choose the prime minister ‘taking into account election results’ (Article 136) but leaving his choice otherwise free. 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, p. 98). No specific requirements are present in Finland or in Hungary either. Greece is an even more telling case, as its constitution (Article 37.3) dictates that, in case all other options of government formation failed, ‘[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’. Far from being unconstitutional, therefore, technocratic governments respect the criteria of democratic constitutionalism in those countries where they occur.

### *A Break in the Chain of Delegation*

According to some scholars, technocratic governments, or even the presence of technocratic ministers, are a ‘break in the chain of [democratic] delegation’ (Neto and Strøm, 2006) on which representative democracy rests: the chain which goes from voters to elected representative to government. In the case of technocratic ministers, Gamson’s Law, which sees the very high correlation between cabinet portfolio allocation and seats in parliament, does not apply. The argument runs that as elected representatives of parties are not necessarily in control of, or responsible for, the appointment and the working of non-partisan ministers because they are sometimes appointed by the head of state or by the technocratic prime minister, the delegation chain between the government and voters is broken. From a purely electoral perspective, there is a weak link between cabinet composition and electoral outcome<sup>3</sup>: technocratic ministers do not compete for votes, and they take away part of the meaning of ‘the right to vote’ as voters cannot throw the – technocratic – rascals out (Riker, 1982). Clearly the reason why such criticisms should matter is that elections are at the heart of any well-functioning representative democracy.

While all of the above is intuitively correct, there are several counter-arguments. 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, and it implies that elected representatives in the legislative chambers agree on a mandate and a programme adopted by the technocratic cabinet. Democratic control is furthermore maintained, similarly to the case of party governments, by the fact that technocratic governments can be voted out of office, or not given parliamentary confidence in the first place. Parties in parliament maintain ultimate control and therefore indirectly voters do, too. Second, technocratic governments could have, and indeed often do have, widespread, cross-partisan support as they are seen as a government of national unity. This not only legitimises them further, but it addresses the problem of the supposed impossibility of throwing the ‘technocratic’ rascals out. If there is similar support between grand coalition governments and technocratic governments, ‘throwing the rascals out’ would be equally difficult in both situations. In both cases it is likely that at least one of the parties in the grand coalition will be re-elected. Admittedly, voters might feel differently about this: when giving their vote to a party, they did not anticipate the delegation of decision making to someone with different – or allegedly no – political orientation. Although no overall evidence has been gathered in this respect, it seems to be the case that voters do punish those parties that support technocratic governments, often by turning their votes to other minor or new parties.<sup>4</sup> This indicates that voters still identify well the chain of delegation, despite the smoke screen of technocratic governments, and act upon it as they would do with normal party governments. This also addresses in part the criticism of diminished accountability, of which more below. If voters are ready to punish parties that support technocratic governments, it means that they hold them accountable for the policies implemented by those governments.

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 Number 10 without having bothered to stand as an MP’ (Guardian, 2011) are misrepresenting what happens in normal circumstances of ministerial appointments. This is also reflected in the most common terminology used to refer to technocratic ministers: ‘unelected technocrats’. Ministers in most European democracies are not directly elected, but

appointed through a variety of mechanisms, in almost complete freedom from voters' preferences. They are not empowered by the voters directly, but by parties (Pasquino et al., 2013). The result is a surprising number of non-partisan ministers even in those countries that have never had a technocratic government in power, such as France (Neto and Strøm, 2006). So it seems in line with partisan democratic practice to appoint independent ministers, when deemed appropriate for the functioning of governments, and there are no grounds to suppose that the quality of democracy is diminished because of this or that the chain of delegation is less solid (see e.g. Schleiter and Morgan-Jones, 2009). Whether this is negative in terms of the quality of policy-making performance is beyond the scope of this article to determine, but it does not seem to be necessarily the case. On the contrary, studies that have looked at this issue in practice would seem to suggest the opposite (Yong and Hazell, 2011).

A related criticism is that the alleged break in the chain of delegation means that technocratic governments are not the result of the internal, normal working of partisan representative democracies, but of some other mechanism. In the recent Eurocrisis, technocratic governments were, for instance, accused of being imposed from 'above' (e.g. from the EU or the International Monetary Fund) or from outside national borders (e.g. from Germany). This criticism is refuted in two ways. First, the present analysis is meant to consider any technocratic government, and not in particular those that happened during the Eurocrisis. Technocratic governments appointed in the past have been of the presidential kind (De Almeida and Pinto, 2002; Kuusisto, 1958; Lobo, 2001; Neto and Lobo, 2009; Nousiainen, 1988) – namely those whose appointment can be easily traced back to the head of state. Therefore the 'imposition' – if one can still call it an imposition – is coming from within the democratic system, and not from without. They have also been appointed before countries were members of the EU, once again underlining that external impositions were not easily identifiable, assuming that there were any. As for the recent events, in particular with reference to Greece and Italy in 2011, the perception of the imposition of these governments from outside is refuted by the fact that other countries, put under the same kind of pressures from the EU and other actors, did not resort to the option of technocratic governments.<sup>5</sup> This does not imply that EU pressures have not increased the likelihood of the appointment of technocratic governments, but such pressures are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for their appointment. So in response to the criticism of imposition of technocratic governments against voters' and parties' preferences as an undemocratic procedure, there is no clear evidence of such imposition, and indeed the evidence that does exist points out, if anything, the fact that they are national solutions to national problems.

### ***Preventing Political Deliberation***

Technocracy, together with populism, is seen to be preventing deliberation about policies (Wolkenstein, 2015). On the one hand, populism worsens the tendency of citizens in a democracy to avoid deliberation, public consultation and discussion on the common good by 'channelling and controlling collective negative passions of hatred and fear in rather monolithic positions' (Esposito et al., 2012, p. 15). On the other hand, the technicisation of political life imposes solutions that have been determined by experts bypassing the deliberative stage. Technocratic governments and their claim to neutrality and 'knowing best' delegitimise any sort of healthy opposition and make 'all criticism "irresponsible" – or "populist", which has become synonymous' (D'Eramo, 2013). Not only is the opposition delegitimised, 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 according to scientific evidence, which requires no further democratic justification. In other words, party democracy in its deliberative form is undermined by the appointment of technocratic governments.

This argument against technocratic governments, while attractive, is not straightforward. In the first place, there are academics who indeed defend the idea that depoliticised institutions might be better placed to deliberate in a purely democratic way (Pettit, 2004) and that technocracy might even trigger democratic externalities (Schudson, 2006). It is a longstanding debate whether parties are actually harmful and/or incompatible with deliberative democracy (see e.g. Muirhead, 2010), or on the contrary absolutely central (White and Ypi, 2011). In the case of technocratic governments, it might be argued that if the objective of deliberation within a democratic policy is to determine the common good, then technocratic ministers are equally well placed to do so. This is because they will not be subject to the pressure of the forthcoming electoral deadline and are free from excessive politicisation that often accompanies partisan politics. In other words, what are seen from one perspective as shortcomings in terms of electoral democracy might be seen equally rightfully as positive aspects when it comes to policy decisions. Technocratic governments might, in other words, increase the quality of deliberation by their very nature, which is non-partisan. Finally, and in a non-negligible way, because of their

perceived inferior direct legitimacy, they will have to justify their choices even more in the eyes of the public. This last point is particularly key, and underlines that the absence of a well-established basis of partisan support in the case of technocratic ministers exposes them even more to public criticism of their policies, and compels them to adopt evidence-based decisions. In sum, there is no compelling evidence for assuming that political deliberation – indeed, a key aspect of democracy – is not happening under technocratic governments. At most, what can be argued is that it might not happen along partisan lines, but this is not necessarily a democratic deficiency, even by party democracy's standards.

### ***A Pretence of a Neutral, Ideology-Free Agenda***

Technocratic governments are in the broad sense crisis governments – that is, governments that are appointed when there is a political or economic crisis needing solutions that cannot be provided by political parties. So technocratic governments present their agenda as solving the 'here and now' problems (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb, 2002) of a crisis which, as Leonardo Morlino defines it, is 'the process of decline in institutional efficacy as well as divorce and change in relations among civil society, parties and government institutions' (Morlino, 1998, p. 11). Understandably, as technocratic governments present themselves as 'politically neutral', such bias leads to criticism that they are Trojan horses for a certain economic view and that 'lurking in the spread sheets of technocrats, is ideology' (Odugbemi, 2011). This criticism is difficult to refute if what it is aiming at is to bring out the fact that there is no such thing as neutral knowledge, or – to bring this to Foucauldian extremes – there is no such a thing as 'genuine technical knowledge' (Foucault and Gordon, 1980, p. 131). It is the case that technocrats are, after all, called to cabinet positions as willing implementers of the broad direction set up by political parties. So while technocratic ministers might be experts and non-partisan, as per definition, they will clearly have a preference for a certain set of policies. The other aspect of the criticism this point brings out is that while neutrality is in practice impossible to achieve, technocrats try to keep up the pretence that non-neutrality is possible to escape: technocrats avoid value claims, disavow party labels and often achieve cross-party support. So if, on the one hand, it would seem excessive, maybe even unreasonable, to expect them to be completely neutral policy-making machines, it is reasonable to expect them to admit that non-neutral positions are there.

The criticism can only be refuted if interpreted in a narrower way. It could be seen as a critique of the link between technocratic government and so-called 'neoliberalism' (Stiglitz, 2003). To this the technocrats could respond that their driving principle is neutrality insofar as it is an 'ideology of method' (Centeno and Wolfson, 1997, p. 230). Such ideology can be applied with equal success to democratic, neoliberal, communist or simply autocratic regimes.<sup>6</sup> Its link with neoliberal policies is contingent at best and non-justifiable at worst. Moreover, this ideology implies that the burden of responsibility of the redistributive implications of economic policies – neoliberal or otherwise – lies not with the technocrats, who are carrying out the mandate given to them by their appointees. In simple terms, the ideology of method, which can be re-labelled 'technocratic ideology', is to achieve a given outcome efficiently, rapidly, effectively, without regard for the redistributive consequences. This, in empirical terms, is confirmed by the fact that technocratic governments have often clearly defined mandates which were established beforehand by the parties (Marangoni, 2012). Moreover, literature has found that partisan effects on policy choices are modest, if budgetary and economic statistics are controlled for (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000, Chapter 10). This, in theoretical terms, has been identified by Mair. He has seen the signs that public policy is often not decided by parties, and not even under their direct control, in the rise of the regulatory state (Mair, 2008, p. 227). Partisan control is weakly related to output, so that, in normal or technocratic governments, most of the policies chosen will be chosen because of broad international conditions rather than because of a party in government.

### ***Illegitimate and Unaccountable***

The underlying and encompassing criticism that captures all the previous aspects is that for technocratic governments, 'democratic legitimacy is clearly regarded as an unaffordable luxury' (Skelton, 2011). A caveat should, however, be 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 a majoritarian sense. Legitimacy is a necessary but not sufficient condition for technocratic governments to be democratic.

There are multiple answers to the criticism that technocratic governments are not legitimate. The first is to argue that while technocratic governments might lack 'the political legitimacy that elected, party politicians can bring to government' (BBC, 2011), they enjoy a different kind of legitimacy which one

could label 'technocratic legitimacy'. It would be similar to the legitimacy of non-majoritarian institutions, or 'legitimacy as impartiality', as Pierre Rosanvallon (2011) calls it. And precisely as Rosanvallon argues, this legitimacy is compatible with party democracy because it stems from the convergence of '[t]he technical requirements of certain types of regulation' with the 'democratic aspirations for ... greater impartiality' (Rosanvallon, 2011, p. 82). Indeed, these institutions have multiplied in recent years, confirming the tendency of European democracies to move away from a purely electoral understanding of legitimacy and a monolithic vision of popular sovereignty. Technocratic governments could in this sense be seen as yet another manifestation of this ambition for a less partisan, more effective and transparent European governance.

Second, adapting Martin Shapiro's (2005) argument, technocratic legitimacy and democratic legitimacy operate on a zero-sum basis, so when the democratic legitimacy of normal party government becomes shaky, such as in cases of scandals, technocratic governments are often appointed. Broadly, this is also how Rosanvallon sees the increasing role for institutions with 'impartial legitimacy': a compensatory mechanism for the legitimacy deficit of traditional legislative processes and representative bodies. As Professor Ian Begg put it in an interview in the New York Times, 'the mere fact that they have been asked [to govern] 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' (Begg, 2011).

Third, there is an argument for comparing technocratic governments' legitimacy to the well-known output legitimacy (Scharpf, 1999), which, in brief, consists of achieving effective outcomes. Clearly this rests on the notion that 'for efficiency to deliver legitimacy, an actor must be effective in delivering outcomes deemed appropriate' (Reus-Smit, 2007, p. 165). Given the supposedly 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: the outcomes are established by the legitimate representative of the people who are appointing technocratic governments (i.e. members of parliament or the directly elected head of state in semi-parliamentary democracies). This argument is reinforced by empirical evidence that consistently shows high popular support for technocratic governments at the beginning of their mandate (Granitsas, 2011) – and a sharp decrease as soon as there is the perception that the outcome of their policies is not as successful as intended. The initial support is based on the promise of results, and the waning of support is the consequence of the lack of those results. Technocratic governments can, and often do, enjoy high support in parliament. Mario Monti's (2011) cabinet, which has all the characteristics of the ideal type of technocratic government, had the highest support in both parliament and senate in the history of the Italian Republic (Marangoni, 2012, p. 138), followed closely by Lamberto Dini's (1995) cabinet – another fully technocratic one. Of course not all technocratic governments have had high popular support, but theoretically there is nothing that prevents them from achieving that level of support, both within and outside parliament. And parliamentary support is one of the signs of input legitimacy insofar as it involves representation of the people (Schmidt, 2013).

Finally, in some cases, because of culturally specific attitudes, technocratic governments' 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 of – or limited to – party politics, and there is a sense in which a non-partisan government is more legitimate (Hanley, 2013; Protsyk, 2005; Tucker et al., 2000). As scholars have used support as a proxy, if not quite equivalent, to legitimacy (Gibson et al., 2005), we could similarly argue that this is so in the present case too. To sum up, 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, under certain circumstances, must indeed be the best regime that would still command legitimacy.

The above discussion, which has explored criticisms aimed at technocratic governments and refuted them, might aptly be summarised by adapting Andrew Moravcsik's famous stance on the EU's democratic deficit: '[I]f 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, p. 605). Criticisms aimed at technocratic governments rest on either 'unreasonable' criteria, such as the necessity of complete neutrality, or on wrong premises, such as that ministers should be elected representatives, and are generally not supported by evidence, such as in the accusation of unconstitutionality.



## **Technocratic Governments and the Challenges to Party Government**

The above has illustrated how the major criticisms aimed at technocratic governments are ineffective. In this second part of the article, further criticisms will be addressed which can be traced back to what Peter Mair has identified as the challenges to party government (Mair, 2008). The choice is dictated first of all by the comparison that the article is making. If technocratic governments are comparable to party governments, then criticisms of party governments might apply to technocratic governments as well. More importantly, criticisms of party governments bring out the shortcomings of party democracy, so they can be used as guiding principles to explore technocratic governments in relation to party democracy. Some of Mair's challenges have already been covered above, such as the rise of the regulatory state which diminishes the decision-making capacity of parties in power. The following discussions will concentrate on criticisms against which technocratic governments cannot be defended – yet, neither can normal party government. This will reinforce the case that there is a general trend of erosion of the quality of party democracies, and while this erosion is more evident when technocratic governments are in power, it is nonetheless independent of them at present.

### ***Representation and Responsiveness***

The first challenge to party government that can be found in its extreme form in technocratic governments is that governments are increasingly becoming just neutral executors of policies. This corresponds to what Mair (2009, p. 6) has identified thus: 'the parties have moved from representing interests of citizens to the state, to representing interests of the state to the citizens'. The representation of citizens, then – to the extent that it occurs at all – is increasingly left to other, non-governing organisations (Van Biezen, 2014). Similarly, Michael Saward (2008, p. 283) has argued that parties, including when they achieve governing positions, are increasingly speaking as trustees of depoliticised and flexible issue-based positions. Technocratic governments, in this respect, bring this new mode of representation, which Saward calls the *statal* mode, to its excess. The challenge lies in the fact that, as Giovanni Sartori (1976, p. 27) reminds us, 'parties belong, first and foremost, to the means of representation: They are an instrument, or an agency, for representing the people by expressing their demands'. If they do not carry out this mission when in government, then they have failed on the democratic standard of representation. It is debatable whether such a demand of representation can really be translated as the obligation for politicians – be they partisan or technocrats – to only represent the views of constituents. It seems the case, on the contrary, that they should also be responsible to that constituency by making the decisions that they think are best for all constituents.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the concept of party government is mainly an academic one, 'which does not rally much public support behind it in its fully fledged version ... after all, it should be the government of the nation, not of a party' (Müller, 2000, p. 311). Assuming, however, for present purposes that a democratic government – partisan or technocratic – aims at representing demands of the electorate in order to be accountable to it, both technocratic governments and party governments have been faring poorly in this respect. This is also due to the many mechanisms – such as supranational rules and EU law – which need to be implemented by all governments, technocratic or not, and which decrease governments' accountability to voters. Governments are being called to account for their actions to actors other than voters. The 'present and future lack of accountability to voters which remains the sorest point in a democracy' (Pasquino and Valbruzzi, 2012) is thus a plague that affects both technocratic governments and partisan governments.

Tightly linked to the point on representation is that of responsiveness. Recalling the standard and increasingly debated dichotomy responsive/responsible government (for recent debates, see Bardi et al., 2014; Mair, 2014), technocratic governments would be placed more on the responsible side than on the responsive one. They are often accused of responding more to pressures of external actors than to those of parties – and indirectly of voters. In particular, international systemic constraints are increasingly tight. As discussed above, there are no data to prove that this is the case, but even if there were, by party scholars' own admission the problem of lack of responsiveness to voters is widespread in party governments too (Streeck and Schäfer 2013). For some decades now, the literature has complained about a decline in responsiveness, defined as congruence between citizens' interests and political outcomes (Eulau and Karpis, 1977) and the fact that normal party governments have been plagued by their ministers' limited commitment to party policy (Rose, 1969, p. 430). Mair expressed it thus:

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, p. 2).

Once again, in technocratic governments in their most severe form, but in party governments too, demands of government are trumping the demands of representation. The difference, if a small defence is to be offered for technocratic governments, is that they are appointed at a time of crisis, where responsible politics are preferred to responsive ones anyway (Bardi, 2014).

This brings to light a related criticism concerning the time needed for political debate to achieve policy solutions, and links back to the criticisms expressed by deliberative democratic theorists. Democratic deliberation and democratic decisions take time, but technocratic decision-making is all for efficiency and rapidity. Technocratic governments are particularly prone to this kind of accelerated policy-making because their mandate is clear from the start, and often relatively restricted. Moreover, the supporting coalition in parliament is often broad and cross-party, which leads to more compromise and less blockage of legislative proposals. Technocratic governments, in other words, take decisions in a sort of modern, non-dictatorial 'state of exception' (Hloušek and Kopec̣ek, 2014). This seems to be a problem that applies not only to technocratic governments, but is increasingly afflicting party governments too (White, 2014). So both the tendency to adopt a responsible over a responsive kind of policy choice, as well as a crisis-mode policymaking, are problematic characteristics of technocratic governments and party governments alike. Once again, by their very nature technocratic governments cannot conceal this from voters, while party governments still have the means to do so.

### *Ideological Convergence and Its Consequences*

Recalling from the discussion above, technocratic governments put forward a supposedly neutral agenda in the best general interest. This appeal to as broad a constituency as possible is not just a characteristic of technocratic governments, but one that is increasingly manifest in party governments too, in the form of ideological convergence. Indeed, as Mair has convincingly argued, 'parties might still compete with one another for votes, sometimes even intensively, but they came to find themselves sharing the same broad commitments in government and being bound to the same ever-narrowing parameters of policy-making' (Mair, 2008, p. 216) and coalition-making has hence become more promiscuous than ever. Populist or protest parties intuitively know that technocratic governments are at one with traditional party politics, and play exactly on this technocratic consensus as a target of their criticism of the connivance of traditional parties. To give an example from recent years, mainstream political parties have converged on a pro-EU agenda, and so have technocratic governments, while populist parties on the right and left converge on an anti-EU agenda. Ideological convergence, therefore, whether under the 'banner' of a technocratic prime minister or whether under normal party government, is a problem that, according to Mair (2008, p. 230), makes it impossible to maintain full legitimacy. This challenge has not been met convincingly by either type of government, but if anything, technocratic governments have more right to claim that ideological convergence is not a problem. They can refer to the technocratic ideology, which has been discussed above, while political parties have no excuse for becoming, as it were, less partisan.

An indirect consequence of the changes in the supply of party politics as exemplified by the ideological convergence and the progressive blurring of the left-right divide is, on the demand side, increasing disaffection with traditional party politics, as exemplified by a decrease in party membership (Van Biezen et al., 2012). Could this decrease be at least partly imputed to technocratic governments which – by their very appointment – decrease people's trust in the political class as a whole, and in traditional political parties in particular, which are seen as incapable of governing? Do they increase the likelihood of people turning their attention – and their votes – to populist parties, causing an anti-elite voter backlash that expresses itself in the rise of new populist parties or breakthroughs by previously marginal radical groupings (Bickerton and Invernizzi, 2013; Leonard, 2011; 2012; McDonnell, 2012a; Skelton, 2011)? Although the link (or absence of link) between populism and technocracy is a topic that would require a whole article in itself, this criticism can be turned around into a criticism of party governments, and reinforce the mainstream argument that, by their own fault, mainstream parties are losing supporters. Once again, it is useful to recall the critical situations in which technocratic governments are appointed. In such moments, it is reasonable to expect that trust in, and even loyalty to, traditional parties would diminish. This can be so either because the parties are in the eye of the storm (e.g. in episodes of scandals) or because they are accused of being the causes of that very critical

situation (e.g. as in cases of economic crisis). It should come as no surprise that voters will have less confidence in representatives who – of their own volition – have decided to vote into power ministers from outside their ranks. Disaffection with politics, manifested in decreased engagement in the internal workings of parties, is therefore a cause, and not a consequence, of technocratic governments, but an attitude that will grow more evident during their mandate, when traditional politics and traditional parties step aside.

### **Conclusion: Technocratic Governments as a Symptom of Party Democracy's Problems**

This article set out to enquire whether political rhetoric against, and criticism of, technocratic governments should be confirmed or dismissed. It has done so in a positive, rather than normative way, starting from the neutral standpoint that technocratic governments are a reality of European democracies and should be assessed as such. It has concluded that, compared to party governments, technocratic governments meet the standards of party democracy only because those standards have been getting eroded over time. Indeed technocratic governments display in full the faults of party governments, but they are not per se a detrimental political solution. They are symptoms in the medical sense of the word – that is, something caused by, or indicative of, a disease. That disease is the decline of party systems and the erosion of party democracy, of which they are the extreme manifestation. Aspects of such erosion include a 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.

As the title of the article implies, the analysis has aimed at getting the critique of technocratic governments within European democracies right. It has dispelled some of the ungrounded doubts surrounding these non-partisan political arrangements, while reappraising their role within European democracies. Technocratic governments are not, contrary to what Ingrid van Biezen (2014) and others argue, part of the 'technocratic challenge' to democratically elected politicians. It is not the advent of technocratic governments that constrains the policy autonomy and therefore democratic legitimacy of political parties, but vice versa: parties which have chosen to support technocratic governments have undermined their own democratic legitimacy and role within the polity. They have allowed problems with party democracy to come to the surface and be visible to all voters.

Technocratic governments remain an under-studied political phenomenon. Given that their appointment is in line with parties' interests in certain circumstances (Tucker, 2011) and that they are even becoming part of some countries' political repertoire as a normal evolution of politics (Dini, 2014), they should be further explored by democratic theorists, party scholars and political scientists alike. Indeed, the main thrust of the article is to suggest that 'democratic theory has not yet caught up with democratic practice' (Lakoff, 1971, p. 10), so there is scope for further academic enquiry. This article aims to be the starting point for further research, as it has set out the argument that technocratic governments confirm the inadequacy of current settings of party functioning for a healthy performance of democracy. The hope is, as Bonnie Honig (2009) suggests, that in a period of crisis unusual solutions – such as the technocratic one – will uncover the flaws of the system and thus spur desire for change.

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### **Notes**

1 The technocratic governments alluded to are the following: Bajnai (Hungary 2009), Fischer (Czech Republic 2009), Monti (Italy 2011), Papademos (Greece 2011), Pikrammenos (Greece 2012), Raykov (Bulgaria 2013), Rusnok (Czech Republic 2013) and Bliznashki (Bulgaria 2014).

2 For a full list, see McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014).

3 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 the outcomes of elections. 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 in Cyprus, where George Vasiliou, an independent businessman, was elected president in 1988. He formed what by any standards would be

called a technocratic government (Solsten, 1991). However, because he was normally elected, his cabinet cannot be called a technocratic cabinet.

4 This has recently been the case, for instance, in the earthquake 2012 elections in Greece – after the two technocratic governments of Papademos and Pikirammenos – and in Italy – after the Monti technocratic government. In both cases, the two major parties had to get into a grand coalition because of their diminished vote shares, and new or protest parties acquired many of those votes.

5 For example, Portugal, where, after Prime Minister Socrates' cabinet resignation in 2011 and in a situation of deep economic trouble, despite the support of the head of state for the option of a technocratic government, parties decided to hold new elections.

6 Centeno (1993) gives the example of the Soviet Union, where technocratic politics were obviously not neoliberal, and of Argentina's Keynesian technocrats.

7 See Edmund Burke's 1774 speech to the voters of Bristol quoted in Rosenthal et al. (2003).

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