

Attitudes in established democracies show there is still a place for independent experts in politics

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While recent political developments may paint a bleak picture of the role of unelected experts in democratic politics, [Eri Bertsou](#) and [Giulia Pastorella](#) argue that positive attitudes toward 'technocrats' remain prevalent in many established democracies. They explain that what drives citizen preferences for political decision-making by independent experts is distrust of representative political institutions and a belief in the merits of democracy as a system. This highlights the appeal of 'non-political politics', which has enjoyed a surge in the past decade.



The announcement of “post-truth” as word of the year for 2016 by the Oxford dictionary was only the latest evidence of the changes currently sweeping across the politics of many established democracies. The recognition of a world where appeals to emotion and personal perspectives prevail over objective scientific facts in public debates was also exemplified by Michael Gove’s astonishing claim that “this country has had enough of experts” prior to the UK’s vote to leave the EU. At first glance, it seems that expertise, experience and independent credentials are failing to guide political debates in democracies and are routinely dismissed by many citizens.



Nevertheless, we would argue that public attitudes toward experts are a far more complicated affair than this picture would suggest. Establishing a better understanding of why some citizens find independent experts more appealing than elected representatives can shed additional light on current political developments, and even the recent populist surge.

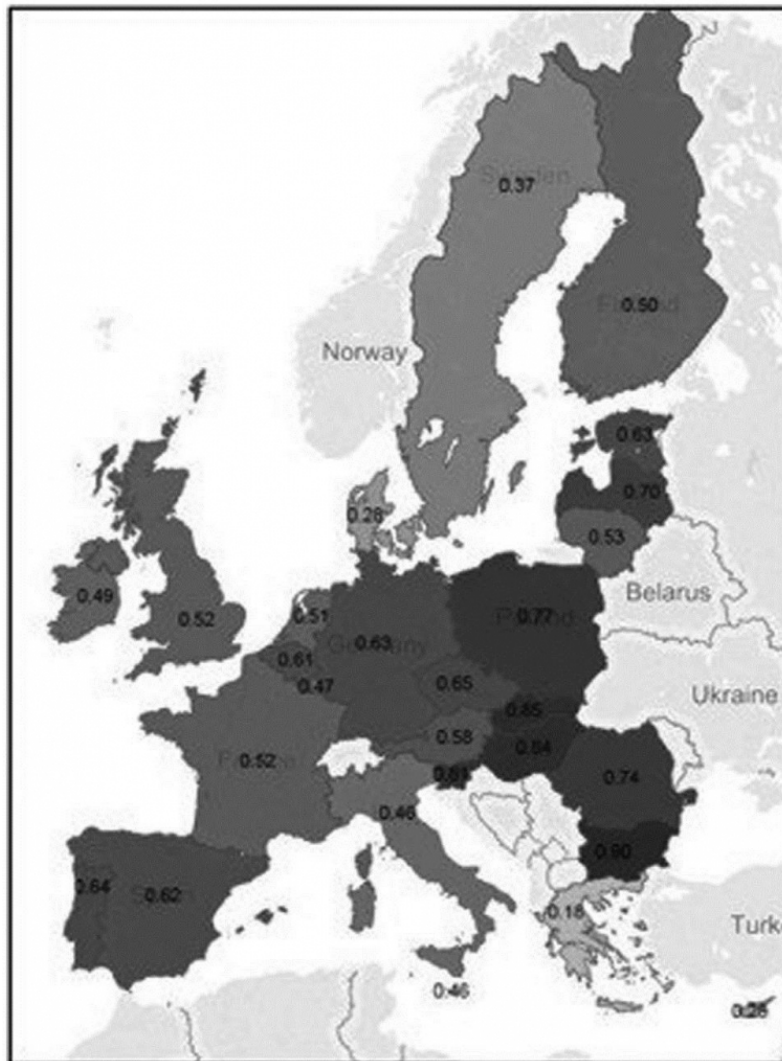
In fact, it was not long ago that technocrats were being placed at the helm of governments and in charge of key ministries across many European states in an effort to deal with national and international crises (Monti and Papademos in Italy and Greece, Fischer and Bajnai in the Czech Republic and Hungary, Ciolos in Romania). Some of these developments were welcomed by citizens, some were fiercely criticised and opposed, while others were first welcomed and subsequently opposed. We argue that citizen views of technocrats, of the existing political establishment and the increasing appeal of certain populist actors demand a closer look, as they all point to an increasing challenge to democratic politics.

What are technocratic attitudes and where do they come from?

In a recent study, we address this issue by exploring technocratic attitudes and investigating what leads citizens to prefer delegating political decision-making powers to unelected experts, as opposed to elected political representatives. We were motivated, on the one hand, by the different levels of approval technocratic solutions appeared to enjoy in different European countries, and on the other hand, by the apparent tension between democracy, technocracy and populism, which hadn’t been explored at the level of citizen preferences despite increasing trends of populist attitudes.

As part of the European Values Survey (EVS) and World Values Survey (WVS), citizens were asked whether “having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country, is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?” Variation was evident already in 2008, before the Euro-crisis and the appointment of the latest six technocratic governments across Europe. As seen in the map below, the most positive attitudes are found in Central and Eastern European states, while the most negative technocratic attitudes are registered in Greece, Cyprus, Netherlands and Sweden.

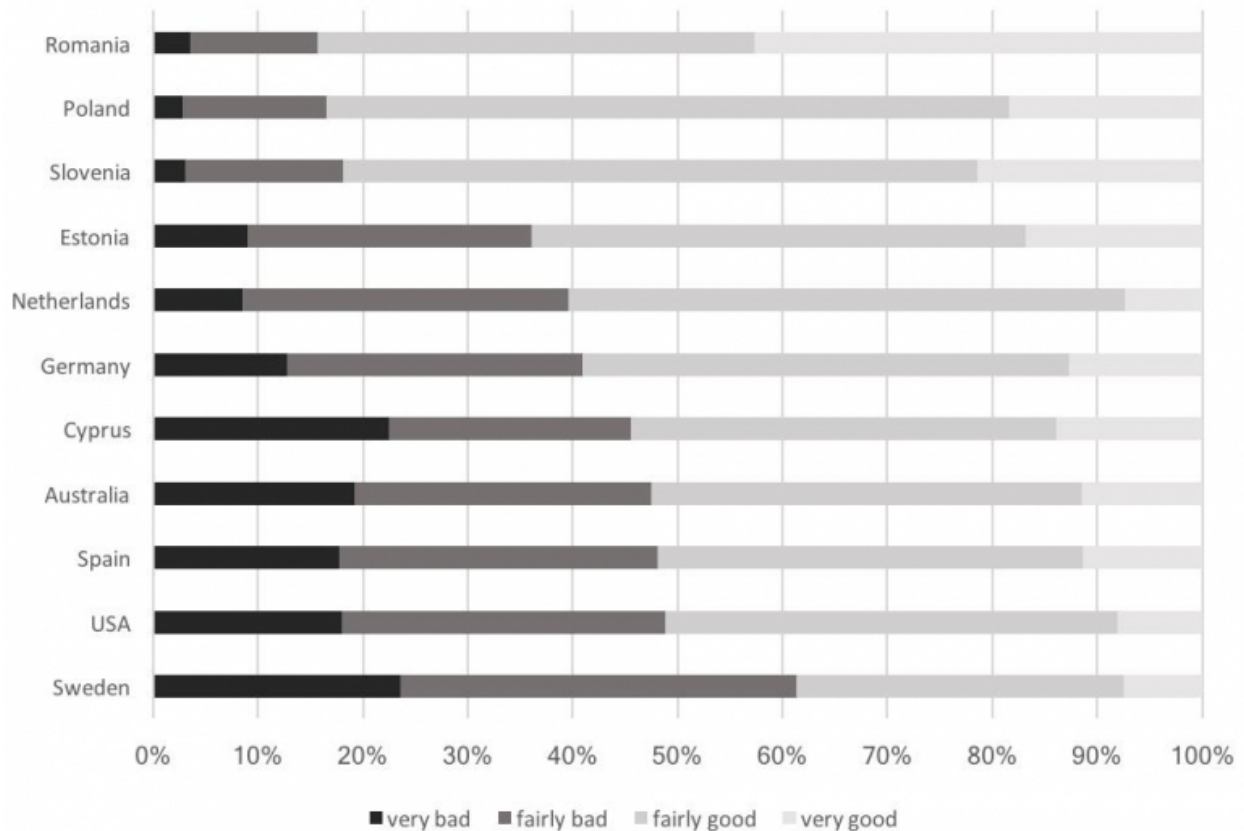
Figure: Country averages for favourable attitudes toward technocracy (2008)



Note: Countries that exhibit the most positive attitudes toward democracy are shaded darker in the figure. **Source:** European Values Survey (2008)

Surprisingly, more recent EVS data (unfortunately, not available for all European countries) do not show major differences from 2008. If anything, we can witness a positive trend: Poland and Romania score even stronger technocratic attitudes (83% and 84% of the population are positive in 2015) and approximately 54% of Cypriot citizens are positive, compared to less than 30% in 2008. Across the Atlantic, over half of US citizens thought that this was a 'fairly or very good' system of political decision-making.

Table: Country averages for favourable attitudes toward technocracy (2015)



Source: European Values Survey (2015)

So how can we understand these quite widespread technocratic attitudes among citizens of established democracies? Technocratic attitudes refer to citizens’ beliefs about the benefits of political decision-making that is carried out by unelected experts. It is possible that not all citizens have the same thing in mind when asked about unelected experts; some people might think of technocratic governments and appointments of experts to key cabinet posts, some might use central banks as a reference point, while still others may think of European Union officials – often labelled ‘Eurocrats’ – or even national civil service bureaucracies with policy-making powers. Nevertheless, despite this diversity, we believe there is an underlying orientation directed at political power, which does not derive from popular elections and the political processes of party competition, but from technical expertise.

We identify two key aspects of such attitudes that merit consideration. The first relates to views on the political process of elections, party selection and political career experience. The second aspect is non-politics related (or ‘objective’, if you will) technical expertise in a given field. As a result of the first aspect, technocracy stands at odds with our understanding of representative democracy; it does not allow representation through elections and leaves little room for accountability. As a result of the latter factor, it can be perceived as an elitist approach to political decision-making.

Current populist political discourse had targeted the “elites” and “experts” as part of the political problem in modern democracies. In fact, populism is widely understood as the opposite of ‘elitism’. Although ‘elites’ are not explicitly defined, they include apparently ‘evil’ business elites, the political establishment and independent experts, who are then contrasted with the ‘good’ people. However, there are in fact a number of similarities between populism and elitism.

One similarity is the emphasis on charismatic and strong leadership and a non-pluralistic view of politics that divides the world into a force of ‘right/good’ and ‘wrong/evil’. More importantly, they share a position that opposes the current party-centred political establishment. In fact, [many studies](#) of populist attitudes among citizens have found a positive

– not negative – relationship between populism and elitism (as attitudes towards experts), suggesting that citizens who are attracted to populist claims also tend to be positively inclined toward independent experts, precisely because of their contrast to the political establishment.

This exposes a misapprehension of citizen attitudes towards technocrats in the current public debate. Placing independent technocratic expertise in the same category as the existing establishment of a political system goes against the aforementioned tension between technocrats and a system's representative democratic machine. Technocratic attitudes capture support for people who have not been chosen by voters and are not part of the existing political parties and political establishment. For many citizens, technocrats stand in contrast to the current political elite, political parties, the legislature and their ways of 'politics as usual'. Even more so, a preference for unelected experts entails the belief that citizens are unable to select worthy decision-makers through the democratic processes currently in place.

Seeing the US presidential candidates in this light, Trump's populist discourse and appeal as a party outsider was supplemented by what some voters perceived as 'expertise' in business management and a man that 'gets things done'. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, despite being one of the most qualified presidential candidates in US history, is synonymous with a political establishment that so many citizens in the US and beyond are rejecting.

The role of beliefs about democracy, political trust and historical legacies

We have developed a series of hypotheses about the drivers of technocratic attitudes among European publics based on the conceptualisation above and tested these using the European Value Survey data from 2008. We find that overall beliefs about the merits of democracy as a system of government predict negative attitudes towards technocrats, but that citizens' levels of trust in the national government, parliament and – crucially – political parties have an additional and equally strong effect. Therefore, the appeal of technocracy depends on one's view of democracy as a regime, but also on perceptions of the political class and of the institutions it currently populates.

On the country level, we find effects of economic development and corruption, but more surprisingly, we find that the experience of communist historical legacies explains most of the variance of technocratic attitude levels among European countries. Further, our analysis suggests that in those countries, technocratic preferences are most likely motivated by the negative experience of party-based authoritarian rule and the difficulties in establishing credible political parties in its aftermath, rather than a nostalgia for the communist regime.

In conclusion, technocracy is primarily evaluated in relation to the current political system experienced by citizens – in this case, representative democracy – and therefore preferences for unelected, non-partisan politics are motivated by the perception that party democracy fails to fulfil its function. Even if at this point it is not entirely clear what precise failings of democracy influence citizens' attitudes towards technocrats (whether these are performance-based or policy congruence-based or following other criteria), we believe that technocrats are perceived as outsiders of the established political class and as potential solutions to state problems. We want to highlight the role of trust in political institutions, which has been shown once again to be an important feature of democratic life, with distrustful citizens being more likely to turn away from representative democracy. Of course, this is not the only direction to which dissatisfied citizens have turned to. Populist politicians and extreme parties have also capitalised on citizen dissatisfaction.

The place of technocrats in a 'post-truth' political world is uncertain, and as economic and social crises continue, the experience of technocratic appointments in many European nations and their successes or failures will likely increase polarisation between positions of complete support and complete rejection of experts. We believe that the incorporation of independent expertise in a pluralistic polity would provide the best avenue for democracies to address societal divisions and the populist challenges observed in strained party systems across established democracies, though at this point in time such a solution appears elusive.

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[Giulia Pastorella](#) recently defended her PhD thesis in European Studies at the London School of Economics. Her work researched the conditions leading to the appointment of technocratic governments in Europe. She has also considered the implications of the very existence of these technocratic cabinets for normative debates about the future of party democracy. She is currently working in the private sector.

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