

Measuring Technocratic Attitudes among Citizens in Nine European Democracies *

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of technocratic attitudes and its measurement among the citizenries of nine European nations. Previous work has focused on the tension between party-based democracy and technocracy at a theoretical level, and in addition on the contested relationship between the two and populism. While populism and the rise of populist attitudes among citizens has received widespread attention in the literature, technocratic attitudes have not yet received systematic analysis. Nevertheless, attitudes towards technocrats and preferences for the role of independent experts in our political systems are joining the public debate. This paper proposes a conceptual map of technocratic attitudes as a latent concept with four key dimensions: Elitism, anti-politics, anti-pluralism and scientific approach. It tests this through a novel battery of survey items that tap on each dimensions and further, addresses the outstanding questions regarding the relationship between technocratic, populist, liberal democratic political preferences. As citizen demands continue to add pressure upon the existing model of representative democracy, it is important to understand the content of dissatisfaction and what political alternatives people are willing to support.

Currently, this novel battery of survey items is being piloted in the UK. The final survey will be fielded in nine European Democracies (UK, Germany, Greece, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania and Sweden) in June 2017.

Keywords *technocracy, technocratic attitudes, citizen preferences, attitude measurement, survey measurement*

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Introduction

The question regarding the role of technocrats and independent experts in our political systems has firmly entered the public debate in many democracies around the world. The prominence of technocratic executive appointments in the height of the European financial crisis in Italy and Greece, or as a response to a domestic crisis in the case of Romania, gave flesh and bones to the theoretical tension between technocracy and democracy and brought it at the forefront of political attention. More recently, the juxtaposition of technocratic and populist discourse during the UK referendum campaign on EU membership, and the US election of 2016 highly politicized the role of expertise and independence (or outsider status). In the aftermath of these political developments and in the face of ongoing crises in the EU offer scholars of political behaviour the challenge of explaining what citizens really want from their democracies.

This paper aims to introduce and outline the goals of a larger project on technocratic attitudes and citizen preference for expert decision-making. Our first aim is to define technocratic attitudes following the existing literature and studies of technocracy (Caramani, 2016; Bickerton and Accetti, 2015). Although most of the work on technocratic politics remains fragmented across area studies and separate fields of political science, scholars increasingly recognise the important role played by independent experts, technocratic agencies and expertise in general in our democracies. Our goal in this paper is to identify the underlying dimensions and indispensable parts of technocratic preferences and offer an operationalization for empirical analysis. Second, in addition to measuring citizen technocratic attitudes we aim to compare these to populist attitudes as these are measured in the existing literature (Agnes Akkerman and Zaslove, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2012; Mudde, 2004). Recent theoretical work has addressed the puzzled relationship between populism and technocracy (Caramani,

2016; Bickerton and Accetti, 2015). These works have identified many difference - but also important overlaps - between the two concepts of political power and representation. Nevertheless, this relationship has never been explored empirically. In this study, we include measures of technocratic and populist attitudes in the same battery of questions and are thus able to compare and contrast citizen preferences for the two challenges to representative party-based democracy.

Finally, a large amount of what is currently included in the discussions and measurement of populist attitudes has to do with specific dissatisfaction and distrust of existing political elites (Silva et al, 2015). Similarly, our earlier work on technocratic preferences shows that citizens who distrust political parties and their governments are more likely to support a bigger role for independent experts in politics (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017). And while disappointment and frustration with the output of current governments (or those of the last few years) are important factors to take into consideration when we try to understand empirical phenomena such as protests or protest voting, it is important to separate citizens' political distrust from genuine populist and technocratic tendencies. In their ideal form technocracy and populism criticize party-governments from two different standpoints Caramani (2016), and could potentially offer two alternatives to party-based representative democracy. For the purposes of scientific clarity it is important to distinguish citizens who are distrustful and disappointed from the existing political system, and therefore happy to support anything that is different from the status quo (populist or technocrat), from those that harbor a technocratic mentality and would demand more expert decision-making in their political system.

Technocratic Attitudes, Populism and Democracy

Populist attitudes have been defined in line with the theory of populism as a thin ideology, which is based on people-centrism, anti-pluralism, anti-elitism and a Manichean view of the world. Populism recognises a homogenous people that voices its will in unison and should be superior to any other political force. It exhorts ordinary people for their wisdom, common sense and moral superiority. In a Manichean view where the world is separated into *good and evil*, any perspective or anyone who does not contradicts the will of the people must be part of an 'evil' and corrupt elite (Agnes Akkerman and Zaslove, 2014; Hawkins et al., 2012; Mudde, 2004).

For the conceptual dimensions of technocratic attitudes we build on existing work from Caramani (2016) and Bertson and Pastorella (2017). Technocracy can be understood literally as the exercise of political power by a technical elite (instead of a democratically elected government) or more loosely as a principle of representation and source of power within the framework of liberal democracies. The first 'absolute' definition of technocracy is seldom championed openly or observed empirically. The technocracy movement of the US in the early 1930s never took off the ground (Akkin, 1977) and the small number of fully technocratic cabinets that have been appointed in post-WW2 Europe have always maintained some form of accountability to the people, through national parliaments (McDonnell and Valbruzzi, 2014; Pastorella, 2015). We believe it is more fruitful to think of technocracy as a form of representation and power which can take various grades, from simple advisory positions for experts, to the appointment of independent technocratic prime-ministers or ministers to the executive (Pastorella, 2015) (Brint, 1990).

With this definition in mind, technocracy envisions a world where knowledge and expertise are the primary sources of power. Competence and merit form the

basis for membership to a *knowledge elite* (as opposed to privilege or popular selection). The knowledge elite derives its legitimacy from political outputs, which aim at maximizing efficiency and welfare for the entire society. Using this expertise, the knowledge elite alone can provide effective solutions to social complex problems with the sole motivation of reaching an optimal outcome. Technocrats are independent from partisan or ideological interests, they do not serve parts of society (special groups, classes, networks etc) and hence they can provide responsible governance with a long-term perspective for the betterment of the entire community.

Technocracy is, therefore, elitist at its core. It identifies an elite group, based on its knowledge, expertise, superior academic credentials, intellect and know-how, and separates it from the ordinary citizens. This elite is considered as the people ‘who know best’, those who can - and should - guide society, and is contrasted to ordinary citizens, who are less equipped or can be susceptible to dubious motives. In terms of representation, it follows the ‘trustee’ over the ‘delegate’ model and emphasizes that only the knowledge elite can guide society responsibly, with the long term goal of prosperity. Crucially, however, the elitism of technocracy is exclusionary of the democratically elected political class. Technocrats also sit in sharp opposition to the existing political class of a community, political parties and any non-strictly meritocratic processes and institutions.

Therefore, although the elitism of technocratic attitudes contrasts to the people-centrism of populist attitudes, the second dimension of technocracy focuses on anti-politics and entails a similar criticism with populism to the existing political elite. The sources of the criticism mounted on the political status-quo however differ. In the case of populism it results from the Manichean view of the world, anti-elitism and the juxtaposition of the good people versus the evil

elites. In the case of technocracy, it stems from the elitist charge that democracy as a popularity contest can never result in responsible governance and on a scientific objective outlook. The anti-political dimension of technocracy is directed at political parties, partisan interests or ideologies and key democratic processes which promote inefficiency, overly responsive and irresponsible governance. Technocracy stands opposite 'politics as usual'. Similarly to the concept of 'stealth democracy' advanced in the early 2000s, it shares the view that the current political system is ineffective and that politicians are unable or unwilling to act in best interest of the country (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002).

Technocracy adheres to a monolithic view of the world and is hence considered to be anti-pluralistic. It heavily criticizes ideological commitments and partisan interests that seek to advance or benefit sections of the community, and not the community as a whole. In the technocratic mindset, what is 'right' is objective and it is 'right and good' for the entire society. Technocracy does not recognize political conflict between societal groups on the basis of sectoral/class/minority status and considers parties and interest groups as damaging to the prospects of societal prosperity. This is another point of conflict with representative party-based democracy, where the best outcomes are believed to result from the competition and struggle between different societal groups. Crucially, technocracy is anti-pluralistic in a political sense; it does not promote societal homogeneity (ethnic, religious, sexual orientation etc). Populism is also anti-pluralistic, as it promotes the idea of a unified people with a homogenous will. Yet, whereas populist ideology separates the world in "good" and "evil", the technocrats opt for a scientifically informed dichotomy of "right/correct" and "wrong/mistaken".

This brings us the fourth dimension of technocratic attitudes, which we

define as the scientific approach (we note that this dimension can be pseudo-scientific in certain cases). Technocratic attitudes entail the belief that there are objective, neutral, non-ideologically committed experts, who are able to enact the best solutions to governance problems after evaluating relevant evidence and facts. Technocracy is essentially positivist; it believes there exists a best solution or truth which can be discovered through careful and objective analysis of evidence. It prioritizes output, efficiency and optimal outcomes and views society as a machine with many moving parts that need to operate effectively. This scientific approach complements the aforementioned elitist, anti-political and anti-pluralist dimensions by emphasizing the role of expert knowledge, political neutrality and problem-solving capacities.

Measuring Citizens' Technocratic Attitudes

Technocracy can be seen in many different parts of political systems, such as governments, cabinets, parliaments, independent agencies, but also in citizens. The first attempt at measuring technocratic attitudes was Putnam's ? study on the technocratic mentality of bureaucrats. Though Putnam's typology was specifically created for the civil servants, it shared some of the elements discussed above as it tried to gauge at view about objectivity and political neutrality, scientific approaches to policy making etc. The concept of "stealth-democracy" developed by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) focused on citizen preferences about how politics should be run and has also been associated to technocracy. With a battery of four survey questions ¹ Hibbing and Theiss-Morse found that a large chunk of Americans would rather participate less in political decision-making and would welcome a more detached, stealth, efficient way of governing

¹The items for stealth democracy are: It would be better for the country if politicians stopped talking and concentrated on solving actual problems. Compromise in politics is really selling out one's principles. This country would run better if political decisions were left up to successful business leaders. This country would run better if political decisions were left up to experts instead of politicians and citizens

that can bypass the commotion and disagreement of ordinary politics. In a recent paper we used one of the items considered in the stealth democracy literature and addressing independent experts directly, to offer a first study of technocratic attitudes in European citizenries (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017). The single survey item asked respondents whether they believe "having experts, not government make decisions" is a good way of governing their country, and though it taps on technocratic preferences, it fails to provide an accurate indication of technocratic attitudes as theorized in the preceding section.

We aim to measure technocratic attitudes as a latent construct based on the above conceptualisation. We first create a battery of 24 items to be piloted with a restricted sample of British respondents. The items are phrased as attitude statements with which respondents can agree/disagree on a seven-point scale. The use of seven-point scales for attitude measurement is considered good practice and offers a wide enough number of response categories to gather information on the strength and distribution of respondent attitudes, yet concise enough to avoid a central tendency bias (Miller, 1956; Alwin and Krosnick, 1991; Schwartz, 2003; Petrzelka et al., 2013). All the items are presented in Table 1 below and categorised according to the dimension they aim to capture; elitism, anti-pluralism, anti-politics or scientific approach.

Table 1: Items measuring technocratic attitudes

Item	Phrasing
EL1	Ordinary people don't know what policies are good for them
EL2	All citizens should vote, even if they cannot do so smartly (N)
EL3	People can be trusted to govern themselves (N)
EL4	We need more decisions to be taken in popular referendums (N)
EL5	The leaders of my country should be more educated and skilled than ordinary citizens
EL6	I'd rather put my trust in the wisdom of ordinary people than the opinions of experts (N) ²
EL7	Political leaders should make decisions according to their best judgment, even if it goes against the will of the people
APL1	People have political disagreements because they think about their personal interest rather than the interest of the whole country
APL2	A good political system should find a compromise between conflicting interests, even if it is ineffective (N)
APL3	It is necessary to listen to all different political opinions before making a decision (N)
APL4	If people were knowledgeable enough, everyone would agree on the political decisions that are best for the country
APL5 (APO)	Politicians just want to promote the interests of those who vote for them and not the interest of the whole country
APO1	It is important for politicians to be ideologically committed (N)
APO2	Politicians spend all their time seeking re-election instead of fixing problems
APO3	The best political decisions are taken by experts who are not politicians
APO4	When deciding for which party to vote, programmes and ideology are more important than past results (N)
APO5	Political parties do more harm than good to society
APO6	Elections don't work
SC1	In politics, there is no such thing as an objective fact (N)
SC2	Politicians should be like managers and fix what does not work in society
SC3	The scientific community is politically neutral
SC4	Social problems should be addressed based on scientific evidence, not ideological preferences
SC5 (EL)	The problems facing my country require experts to solve them
SC6	Good policies are designed based on statistics

We also include a series of items used in the populism literature to gauge populist attitudes. Table 2 presents the items used as well as their source.

Table 2: Items measuring populist attitudes

Item	Phrasing	Source
PC1	Politicians need to follow the will of the people	Ackermann et al.
PC2	The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions	Ackermann et al.
PC3	I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician	Ackermann et al.
PC4	I take pride in being an ordinary person	Silva et al.
PC5	It's important for a political leader to be like the people he or she represents	Silva et al.
PC6	Ordinary people are of good and honest character	NCCR Populism
M1	Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil	Ackermann et al.
E1	Our country would be governed better if important decisions were left up to independent experts	Ackermann et al.
E2 (N)	Parliamentarians very quickly lose touch with ordinary people (N)	NCCR Populism

Expectations

We pilot the items presented above using a UK sample of 100 respondents. Our goal is identify 12-16 items that best capture the underlying dimensions of technocratic attitudes and roll out a mass survey to nine European democracies (UK, Germany, Greece, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania and Sweden) in late spring 2017.

We expect to find a valid scale that measures technocratic attitudes and predicts preferences for more expert-based independent decision-making. At the same time we expect to identify an overlap between technocratic and populist attitudes on the dimension of anti-politics and anti-pluralism, and strong differences on the dimensions of elitism and scientific approach. We will use Latent Class Analysis to identify groups of respondents who fall within a democratic, technocratic and populist mindset. With this study we hope to contribute to the growing debate on citizen democratic preferences, populist attitudes and crucially, the paradoxical phenomenon of a simultaneous demand and rejection of independent expertise in government.

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