

Technocracy: An Alternative to Democracy?

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This article by **Ryan Caruana** was previously submitted as part of CVL1024 and is being published with the author's permission. It explores the debate between democracy, where political power lies with the people, and technocracy, which prioritizes governance by experts based on technical knowledge. While democracy allows for representation and public participation, technocracy promises efficiency through expert-led decision-making, especially in complex modern issues. The author advocates for a hybrid model, blending both systems, to balance democratic representation with the benefits of technocratic expertise in addressing contemporary challenges.

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The debate concerning democracy and technocracy as systems of government is longstanding and has become more prominent with the development of the modern state and economy. It centres on the question of whether government should be in the hands of the general people or the technical experts. Whereas democracy empowers the people to elect their representative government and to adopt a participatory role in politics, technocracy prioritises the appointment of a technical expert in government to apply their knowledge in resolving statutory issues. Although presented as exclusive, political scientists have come to hypothesise a hybrid model which draws elements from both systems.

Democracy is based on the principle that political control belongs to the people, who are all equal, as through their right to vote they elect the government to act as their representative in executing their will.¹ Modern democracy has come to be synonymous with a party system characterised by a plurality of political parties competing against each other for the post of government. Each political party aims to secure the vote of the people by designing a policy plan which appeals to the needs and interest of the population. The party which gains the majority of the votes is elected to government. The vote symbolises an authorisation by the people for the government to represent and act on their behalf and, serves as a binding contract between the government and the people that the government will uphold the will of the people that it represents through its policy.² In this regard, the government is accountable to the people. One fundamental democratic principle is that of debate and deliberation. Other politicians, such as those in opposition, as well as the people themselves can participate in discussions about policy making, propose alternatives, and communicate their approval or disapproval. Therefore, democracy allows room for active citizenship and political participation.

The principles of technocracy contrast those of democracy as technocracy is based on logical inquiry and rational choice, whereby a technical expert is assigned to government and is tasked with implementing a policy based on objective scientific data.³ Therefore, emphasis rests on expertise and knowledge and their arguments are based on pragmatic and technical criteria. McDonnell and Valbruzzi define the ideal technocrat as:

¹ Bruce Gilley, 'Technocracy and Democracy as Spheres of Justice in Public Policy' (2017) 50 Policy Sciences 9.

² Giulia Pastorella, 'Technocratic Governments in Europe: Getting the Critique Right' (2016) 64 Political Studies 948.

³ Christina Ribbhagen, *Technocracy within Representative Democracy – Technocratic Reasoning and Justifications among Bureaucratic and Politicians* (University of Gothenburg, 2013).

A prime minister or minister is a technocrat if, at the time of his/her appointment to government, he/she: (1) has never held public office under the banner of a political party; (2) is not a formal member of any party; (3) is said to possess recognised non-party political expertise which is directly relevant to the role occupied in government.⁴

From this, one may conclude that a technocratic government sees politics and a partisan system as being problematic, unlike democracy. Politics is value-laden as different political parties subscribe to their own affiliations; a pure technocratic government avoids these elements of subjectivity and aims for an objective and evidence-based policy which seeks to maximise benefits in addressing a specific issue that society is facing and to maintain the *status quo*.⁵

In some regards technocracy is a stronger alternative system of government to democracy. Democracy has several pitfalls, including lengthy decision-making processes and being controlled by a partisan system which maximises superficial short-term objectives, which can be addressed through technocracy. Technocracy has the potential of resolving complex societal issues through technical expertise and scientific data, as witnessed in the case of economic crises, of providing rapid decision-making processes, and of ensuring a policy which aims towards sustaining the long-term common good of the state.

President Kennedy stated that modern societies are facing ‘technical problems [which] are beyond the comprehension of most men.’⁶ Governments are tasked with governing complex matters which are constantly evolving and becoming more technical. Hence, technocracy in today’s society is reasonable since a government with sufficient technical expertise is better able to help a state progress through complex scenarios such as international economic competitions and global pandemics. This is witnessed in cases of emergency whereby technocratic governments arose, such as Monti during the Italian budgetary crisis of 2011 and Draghi who designed a formidable plan to reform Italy’s judiciary and administrative structures to access the NextGenerationEU’s funds in 2021.⁷ One may argue that technocratic governments’ efficiency to act as emergency governments can be extended such that their technical knowledge can be used to deal with

⁴ Duncan McDonnell and Marco Valbruzzi, ‘Defining and Classifying Technocratic-Led and Technocratic Governments’ (2014) 53 *European Journal of Political Research* 654.

⁵ n. 1.

⁶ Alexander Stern, ‘The Technocrat’s Dilemma’ (2022) 69 *The New Atlantis* 56.

⁷ Francesco Marangoni and Amie Kreppel, ‘From the ‘Yellow-Red’ to the Technocratic Government in the Pandemic Era. The Formation and Activity of The Draghi Government during its First Nine Months in Charge’ (2022) 14 No. 2 *Contemporary Italian Politics* 133.

these complex scenarios. This ability may go beyond the ability of a democratic government, who is mostly elected on the basis of his values and populist agenda, as the technocrat government is appointed on the basis of his knowledge and skills.

Technocracy is synonymous with objective and rapid decision-making. This contrasts the lengthy process adopted by democratic governments whereby decisions are discussed, deliberated on, and often voted upon in the legislative. However, given that the technocrat is appointed on the basis of their expertise in a particular area, he has a clear mandate with clear-set attainable goals to be achieved by the end of his term in office. Furthermore, the democratic government's policy is based on populism and often aimed at attaining short-term goals to secure renewal of office. This risks undermining the government's integral image if it predominantly seeks to gain the public's favour by responding to immediate requests, primarily during periods of elections. On the contrary, a technocratic government's policy is based on scientific and irrefutable data aimed at securing long-term goals for the state's benefit.⁸ Consequently, the technocratic government's policy is more visible to the citizens, allowing little room for leeway. This may contrast the democratic government's policy, which is less expressly set out, allowing the government sufficient leeway to potentially conceal subjective interests and agendas.⁹

A pure form of technocracy may purge society of the partisan system characteristic of modern democracy. A pure technocratic government is one chosen free of political parties. Public disfavour towards political parties has increased as they have become perceived as electoral machines fixated on maximising short-term policy goals with the intention of gaining an electoral advantage to secure appointment to the role of government as opposed to truly representing the people it harks to represent.¹⁰ These partisan shortcomings may be addressed through technocracy as it eliminates the system of the plurality of political parties and bases the government as the sole proponent and executioner of policy on the basis of scientific data and rational speculation as opposed to appeasing popular consent. Although plurality may be seen as an advantage of democracy, such plurality may itself be harmful as it creates a competition whereby political parties propose an agenda based on fulfilling their self-interest goals, particularly in proximity of elections, as opposed to truly identifying what is fundamentally good for society. On the contrary, technocracy adopts a monolithic approach by identifying one objective common good and refuses the need to have an opposition in government since policy is either efficient or inefficient in achieving the objective common good.¹¹ Hence, technocracy would bypass

⁸ Daniele Carmani, 'Will vs Reason: The Populist and Technocratic Forms of Political Representation and Their Critique to Party Government' (2017) 111 *American Political Science Review* 54.

⁹ n. 2.

¹⁰ n. 8.

¹¹ *ibid.*

such problems as it rejects the idea of political parties and it would safeguard the public's trust in the technocrat government since it proposes a clear and visible policy which is based on objective data that is guaranteed to help the state prosper.

Although such advantages present technocracy as a formidable alternative to democracy, it has been primarily criticised for being undemocratic. Critics have frowned upon placing the power of government in the hands of a selected few, a form of aristocracy of experts. Consequently, the general public is given no opportunity to engage in the political functioning of the state.

The most prominent criticism of technocracy is that in presenting itself as an alternative mode of government to democracy, technocracy is undemocratic and unrepresentative. Technocratic governments are not delegated through traditional internal means of a partisan representative democracy, including general elections. This criticism was voiced during the Eurocrisis where technocratic prime ministers, such as Papademos in Greece and Monti in Italy, were said to be imposed on the state.¹² This democratic deficit can be based on the absence of two fundamental democratic pillars in a technocratic government: representation and deliberation. A democratic government assumes the role of representing the citizens' interests. However, a technocratic government is presumed to adopt a neutral stance in policy and decision-making to ensure a scientific-based policy which represents the state's needs at the state level rather than at the citizen level. Democratic representation is guaranteed by political parties which become a vehicle for accountability since the party in government is held responsible for representing the people which elected it. Technocracy, by rejecting political parties, eliminates this accountability as the government's accountability to the people is none since the people did not elect it and the government is, in a pure technocratic manner, not there to represent the citizens' desires.¹³ Democracy, being based on party plurality and the public's engagement in politics, allows room for deliberation and discussion on policy. However, in technocracy there is no room for political opposition and the engagement of the public in matters of politics is minimal. Therefore, it is only the technocratic government, composed of those with expertise and technical knowledge, which decide upon policy, with no room for deliberation by other politicians or the public. This risks creating a form of elitism where it is only a dominant few, possessing technical expertise, which are governing over a state.¹⁴ Although this lack of deliberation may be justified by arguing that policy is based on scientific data, deliberation can be ensured through indirect means, including obtaining the widest range of scientific data to ensure that the

¹² n. 2.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Martin Shapiro, "Deliberative", "Independent" Technocracy v. Democratic Policies: Will the Globe Echo the E.U.?' (2005) 68 *Law and Contemporary Problems* 341.

policy is truly valid and to have these decisions judicially reviewed by some independent organ from the government.¹⁵ Such strategies may ensure that the technocratic government's decisions are truly aimed to safeguard the state's interests.

Technocracy has been criticised for establishing 'a barrier between scientists and politicians on the one hand and the general population on the other.'¹⁶ Critics argue that public technocratic political debates lack clarity since certain expertise knowledge may not be publicly shared. This establishes a misbalance in power as the experts' knowledge on policy and governance exceeds that of the general public, unlike in democracy where transparency in matters of policy decisions is valued. Consequently, the citizen is forced to act as a bystander and to accept, or passively reject, the government's decision by placing their blind faith in that government. This negates democratic participation and renders the citizen voiceless as he lacks representation and an appropriate medium to express his opinion. This argument may also be applied to democracy as politicians may selectively choose to disclose their agenda to the people who elected them. Nonetheless, in such a scenario, the citizen would not be a bystander as much as he would be in a technocracy since democracy allows for the possibility of the public to engage in politics, such as through the right to vote.

Technocracy has been regarded as the 'tyranny of experts' as it creates distance between the expert politician and the citizen, and it bases its policy on scientific literature.¹⁷ Technocrats have come to be criticised for basing their policy purely on science, including Swedish Minister of Finance Anders Borg who was publicly scrutinised for attempting to base economic policy solely on scientific data.¹⁸ The technocrat's justification for basing policy on science rests on the principle that there is one objective policy plan which best ensures the common good of the state. However, authors have suggested that any policy may be justified by scientific data since there is vast scientific literature with different studies providing contrasting evidence. Inevitably, this undermines the principle of one objective policy plan since there exists more than one possibility of achieving the same end result.¹⁹ Therefore, whilst technocratic policy ought to be informed by scientific literature, as this ensures higher validity, such decisions must also take into consideration values, moral commitments, and political realities. Basing policy solely on science risks turning science into a tool to legitimise governmental decisions, including those which may conceal some other subjective political motive.²⁰ Furthermore, the scientification of politics risks giving politicians sufficient leeway to take risky decisions by using science

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ n. 6 56.

¹⁷ n. 2 950.

¹⁸ n. 3.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ n. 6 55.

as a justification and as a mode of blame-avoidance should such decisions fail. Therefore, policy is too complex to be purely based on science as it must also take into consideration current political affairs, judicial review, deliberation, and moral attitudes and values, as is the case in democratic policy.

On the basis of the above arguments, one may conclude that both systems need not be exclusive since the deficits of one system are compensated for by the other, and vice versa. Different authors have suggested different possibilities for a hybrid model. Shapiro proposes that the institutes of the European Union (EU) may serve as a hybrid framework.²¹ The Council, which acts as the EU's legislative body, is composed of technocratic experts. However, it is not directly elected by the EU. Rather, its members are member state delegates which have been directly elected by the member states' electorate for their own legislature. Therefore, the Council, to an extent, ensures democratic representation through technocrats. On the other hand, Ribbagen suggests that representative democracy may serve as a basis upon which a hybrid model can be based since it allows for the possibility of having elected technical experts occupying ministerial roles which require them to take well-informed decisions.²² However, both authors acknowledge that such a hybrid model is simply an ideal scenario and that this can only be conceptualised following several institutional changes.

The author of this paper advocates for a hybrid model based on McDonnell and Valbruzzi's concept of a technocrat-led partisan government.²³ This mode of government has a technocrat in the role of the prime minister and a majority of democratically elected party representatives in the cabinet. Such a hybrid government is that of Draghi as 38% of his ministers in cabinet were technocrats, including himself, with the remaining 62% being members of the Italian Parliament and therefore elected by the people.²⁴ This model would merge expertise and representation together, ensuring that the will of the people is still represented whilst having an expert, who is best able to move the state through the complex situations which modern societies are facing, as the head of that government. This would ensure a balance between the representation of the needs of the citizens on the one hand and the representation of the state's needs in national and international frameworks on the other.

The conflict between representation and expertise is still present in contemporary politics, especially with expertise becoming more favourable given the increase in complex situations that modern states are facing. Consequently, technocracy has been advocated as a better alternative to

²¹ n. 14.

²² n. 3.

²³ n. 4.

²⁴ n. 7.

democracy; yet, this mode of government comes with its own limitations. As stated by Ribbhagen, 'it is neither desirable that knowledge replaces politics nor that politics disguises itself as knowledge.'²⁵ Hence, the possibility of a hybrid model should be considered as this merges the notion of having an elected representative government, there to ensure that the will of the general people is heard and safeguarded, headed by a technical expert, who is best likely to device a policy plan which is most likely to succeed in helping the state prosper. Nonetheless, it requires numerous institutional changes to be made in order for this ideal to be conceptualised into reality.

²⁵ n. 3 29.



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