



The Lure of Technocrats: A Conjoint Experiment on Preferences for Technocratic Ministers in Six European Countries

S. Panel¹ · E. Paulis² · J.-B. Pilet² · S. Rojon² · D. Vittori²

Accepted: 20 October 2023

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to gauge public support for ministers who did not follow a typical “career politician” pathway prior to their nomination (i.e., those who never held an elected office and are not affiliated to a political party) and to understand what drives this support. We use a web-based conjoint experiment fielded in six European countries, in which respondents are presented with pairs of vignettes describing the profile of hypothetical ministers and must state which of the two candidates they would personally prefer. The task is repeated five times, once for the Prime Minister office and once for four specialized minister positions. We find that attributes associated with technocratic government almost always increase popular support for ministers. These preferences are stable across policy domains and are as prevalent in the case of the PM as in the case of specialized ministries. However, we identify substantial cross-country variations: pro-technocratic attitudes are more prevalent in Italy, Poland and Spain than in the UK and Germany.

Keywords Technocratic government · Conjoint experiment · Political leaders · Public opinion

✉ S. Panel
sophie.panel@iepg.fr

E. Paulis
Emilien.Paulis@ulb.be

J.-B. Pilet
Jean-Benoit.Pilet@ulb.be

S. Rojon
Sebastien.Rojon@ulb.be

D. Vittori
Davide.Vittori@ulb.be

¹ Sciences Po Grenoble, Université Grenoble Alpes, Cesice, France

² Université Libre de Bruxelles, Cevipol, Belgium

Introduction

Across Europe, a significant number of ministers have been appointed into government without having followed the traditional political career path (Alexiadou & Gunaydin, 2019; Pinto et al., 2018; Wratil & Pastorella, 2018): for example, Italy's Prime Minister Mario Draghi was not affiliated to any political party and never ran in elections prior to accessing office. At the same time, there is mounting evidence that public support for awarding a greater role in politics to non-politicians, and especially to nonpartisan experts, is substantial (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Font et al., 2015; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Webb, 2013) and has been increasing in the last decades (Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; Lavezzolo & Ramiro, 2018).

Survey-based research has made substantial progress in identifying the drivers of support for expert-based government at the individual level (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Webb, 2013). A limitation of these works is that, with some exceptions (Bertsou, 2022; Ganuza & Font, 2020; Lavezzolo et al., 2020), they rely on standard survey items,¹ which do not specify who the “experts” should be and in which policy field or at which stage of the decision-making process they should intervene. Yet, some citizens may advocate a mix of representative democracy and technocratic government, in which, for example, technocratic ministers are placed under the authority of an elected chief executive and restricted to some technical policy areas. Additionally, all of the aforementioned studies directly use the word “experts”, which has the drawback of being both abstract and positively connoted. As a result, the prevalence of pro-technocratic attitudes may be overestimated.

This paper uses a conjoint experiment fielded in the six largest European countries. We ask respondents to choose between hypothetical ministers that vary along several dimensions. The first dimension of interest is occupation: we present respondents with five possible occupational backgrounds (including academics, businesspersons, and high-ranking civil servants, as typical profiles for non-elected expert ministers), which allows us to identify the *type* of technocrats that would be most likely to garner support among citizens. We then specify *properties* of technocrats that could explain their popularity among voters: field-specific expertise, independence from party politics, and willingness to take decisions without constraints from either representative institutions or public opinion. We thereby provide concrete examples of (partisan and non-partisan) experts. The task is repeated five times: once for the Prime Minister, and once for four other ministries (Finance, Education, Agriculture and Foreign Affairs). This design allows us to assess whether preferences for technocratic ministers are restricted to some policy areas or whether respondents would also approve of a technocratic chief executive.

Our findings shed some light on the type of technocratic ministers European voters would approve of: academics are generally more popular than career politicians.

¹ A typical example is: “This country would work better if political decisions were left up to experts instead of politicians or citizens” (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Webb, 2013).

With regard to potential drivers of preferences for technocrats, we find that expertise in the relevant policy area increases the probability that a hypothetical minister would gain support from respondents. Taking policy decisions in accordance with the parliamentary majority decreases this probability. These findings are consistent with prior research showing that knowledge-based decision-making, political neutrality, and independence are major appeals of technocrats (Alexiadou & Gunaydin, 2019; Caramani, 2017; Lavezzolo et al., 2020; Vittori et al., 2023b). Adding sociodemographics to the picture, we find that respondents in most surveyed countries tend to endorse profiles that one rarely encounters among actual ministers: the minister that wins the greatest support is young, female, and unaffiliated to a political party, has working-class origins, and has reached her position after a career in academia rather than politics. Again, this is consistent with extant research showing that voters have preferences regarding politicians' sociodemographic traits, and that these preferences often diverge from the characteristics of actual decision-makers (Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Magni-Berton & Panel, 2021; Schwarz & Coppock, 2022).

This paper also produces some new, unexpected findings. First, the bonus associated with being an academic survives even when expertise, policy preferences, and independence from parties and parliament are accounted for. This residual effect of career pathway suggests that voters may have an “intrinsic” preference for individuals with an academic background, independently from their expected decision-making style or policy output.

Second, we find that preferences for traits associated with technocracy are stable across ministries: the popularity of independent, non-partisan experts is not limited to “technical” policy areas such as finance, but extends to all ministries under consideration. This finding is at odds with research showing that voters' preferences for expert involvement in policy-making (Bertsou, 2022)—or process preferences more generally (Wojcieszak, 2014)—are issue-dependent. Strikingly, respondents have similar preferences with regard to the Prime Minister.

Finally, the effect of many attributes associated with technocratic government (in particular, independence from parties, non-responsiveness, and an outsider background) varies depending on the country, which cautions against generalizing findings from single-country analyses. The roots of this country variation remain elusive, but our findings suggest that it is neither due to past experience with actual technocratic ministers nor to voters endorsing any alternative to the existing system.

Literature: What is Technocracy and What are Its Appeals to Voters?

Following McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014)'s definition, technocratic *ministers* are ministers who are unaffiliated to a political party, have never held public office under the banner of a party prior to their appointment, and possess expertise that is relevant to the position they hold in government. Technocratic *government* is a situation in which most or all minister positions are occupied by non-partisan “experts” who take decisions autonomously and are neither nominated by, nor accountable to political parties.

The theoretical literature has identified several distinctive features of technocratic government that may make it appealing to politically disaffected citizens as an alternative to party government. First, technocracy does not only allow non-partisan experts to bypass political parties, but it is also explicitly rooted in an anti-party ideology that views parties as carrying factional interests and as being exclusively concerned with increasing their electoral support and winning government positions (Caramani, 2017). Second, technocracy is unresponsive toward public opinion: it derives its legitimacy from the fact that decisions are taken based on scientific knowledge and thus require no further justification (Centeno, 1993). This claim is based on the assumption that there exist optimal solutions to political problems but that identifying them requires a certain educational background or certain technical skills that the average citizen lacks, especially when complex policy arenas are concerned (Caramani, 2017). Lastly, technocratic governments are expected to be (or present themselves as) non-ideological and oriented toward quick, efficient decision-making (Centeno, 1993; Pastorella, 2016). This claim derives both from technocrats' status as field experts and from their independence from parties and often goes together with a rejection of democratic deliberation and inter-party bargaining as sources of delays, compromises, and inefficiencies. This view entails a certain ambiguity with regard to the definition of policy goals (as opposed to the means to achieve them): technocrats are not expected to have preferences with regard to policy goals, but technocracy itself is built on a rejection of the idea that politics is the process by which these goals are defined.

All of this implies that public support for technocracy should be higher among citizens who distrust political parties and find democratic decision-making inefficient or its outcomes suboptimal. Public opinion surveys consistently find that citizens are more likely to support technocracy when they are unhappy with the party system (Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017), distrust political institutions and/or elites (Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Webb, 2013), and are unsatisfied with democracy in general (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017; Coffé & Michels, 2014) or with outcomes of parliamentary governance (Beiser-McGrath et al., 2022; Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017). While many of these preferences and beliefs also predict populist attitudes or support for direct democracy, there is evidence that dissatisfied voters are not indifferent between these two alternatives to representative democracy (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; Font et al., 2015; Webb, 2013). An open question is now whether preferences for one alternative over the other are determined by stable traits and attitudes (Ackermann et al., 2019; Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; Webb, 2013), or are purely instrumental and depend on whether a voter's policy preferences are closer to those of experts or those of the majority of citizens (Beiser-McGrath et al., 2022).

Recently, empirical research has begun to move beyond individual-level determinants of support for experts in government and to analyze the scope and the drivers of this support. With regard to the scope of public support for experts, Bertsou (2022) uses a conjoint experiment in six European countries to analyze whether voters' preference for technocracy varies according to 1. the stage (design, decision, and implementation) of the policy process, and 2. the policy area. She finds that public support for independent experts is strongest at the design and implementation

stages, and for technically complex rather than morality-related issues. Likewise, Ganuza and Font (2020), based on a focus group and a survey fielded in Spain, find that most voters support a greater role of experts in decision-making processes but do not advocate replacing elected governments with experts. With regard to the drivers of public support for technocracy, Lavezzolo et al. (2020) use a conjoint experiment fielded in Spain with a focus on the Minister of Finance. They find that respondents' preferences for technocracy is driven by field expertise, which leads to a 30 percentage points increase in the probability that a hypothetical minister is selected within a pair.²

Our research extends the results of these studies. Following Bertou (2022), we specify the stage of intervention (in the sense that respondents know that they are dealing either with the head of government or with specialized ministries) instead of simply asking respondents whether they support greater political involvement of experts in general, but we also vary the profiles of experts and give concrete, realistic examples of who these experts could be. Following Lavezzolo et al. (2020), we use a conjoint experiment with a focus on ministers, but we expand the number of countries as well as the number of policy domains. We also include a broader set of potential drivers of public support for technocratic ministers (including expertise, but also professional background, independence from parties, and willingness to act independently from public opinion), which allow us to put to a test a common assumption in the theoretical literature: that preferences for “experts” are determined by voters' expectations about their future performance and style of decision-making. However, people may attach intrinsic importance to the individual characteristics of the decision-makers independently from their expected behavior.

Methods

The present study relies on five versions of a forced-choice conjoint experiment administered in six countries. Participants were requested to choose between two vignettes, each of which described the profile of a hypothetical minister. This task had to be completed for five ministers: the Prime Minister, and the ministers of Agriculture, Education, Finance, and Foreign Affairs. In each case, the question was phrased as follows: “Which of the following two candidates would you prefer to see as [Prime Minister]?”

² This very large effect may be partly due to the fact that Lavezzolo et al. (2020) do not consider all possible drivers of preferences for technocracy: for example, their design does not include ministers that are unaffiliated to any political party. In addition, “expertise” is described in an abstract and possibly not quite neutral way: the vignettes simply state that the minister either is “a renowned expert in economics” or has “no past professional experience in economics.”

Selection of Ministries

One objective of this study is to assess whether voters' attitudes toward technocratic ministers are uniform across policy domains, and to compare support for technocrats as prime ministers (PMs) and support for technocrats in specialized ministries. To the extent that the Prime Minister is the chief executive in parliamentary and semi-presidential countries, voters could shy away from endorsing a non-partisan expert in this position, while being ready to approve of a technocratic minister placed under the authority of an elected politician. Put differently, we seek to compare the prevalence of "mild" pro-technocratic attitudes (that is, preferences for technocrats in specialized ministries) and "strong" pro-technocratic attitudes (preferences for technocratic chief executives) among European voters.

In addition to the PM, we selected four ministries, namely Finance, Foreign Affairs, Agriculture, and Education. This choice was driven by several considerations. The first objective was to maximize variation in the "technical" character of the policy domain (Bertsou, 2022): voters might be more comfortable with a technocratic minister in the ministry of Finance than in the ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example. There is no clear-cut criterion for defining *a priori* whether a policy domain is technical or not, but the empirical frequency of technocrats in actual governments provides some clues. We rely on data compiled by Vittori et al. (2023a) on technocratic ministers since 2000 in 31 European countries. Looking at the relative frequency of technocratic ministers in each policy area, the ministry of Finance is the second most likely (after Justice) to be run by a technocrat, Education is the fourth most likely, Foreign Affairs the eighth most likely, and Agriculture the thirteenth most likely.

The second consideration is about issue attention: most voters (except, perhaps, those who have strong anti-politics attitudes) might be more open to technocratic government when the policy domain is less salient, because they do not necessarily have strong views they would like to see represented. Using Eurobarometer data, Magni-Berton and Panel (2018) find that foreign affairs and education are on average low-priority issues for European voters, while economic matters in general attract the most attention (the Eurobarometer does not ask questions about agriculture but we suspect that, given the growing salience of environmental issues in the past decade, attention for agricultural affairs has been increasing as well). These patterns are true for both left-wing and right-wing voters.

Finally, the selection of these four ministries was driven by two constraints that are endogenous to our design (specifically, to the selection of attributes: see below). First, we selected only policy areas for which we could identify professional backgrounds (both in the public and the private sector) that could provide hypothetical ministers with a relevant field expertise. Second, since we include a measure of policy positions, we selected only issues for which we were able to define plausible progressive and conservative policy objectives: in other words, we selected only

Table 1 Attributes and attribute values

| Attribute | Values | Attribute | Values |
|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Working background | MP | Gender | Male |
| | Minister | | Female |
| | Research scientist | Age | 45 |
| | High-ranking servant | | 60 |
| | Businessperson | | |
| Field expertise | Yes | Family background | Upper class |
| | No | | Lower class |
| Party member | Yes | Would act according to | Parliamentary majority |
| | No | | Public opinion |
| Policy position | Progressive | | Education |
| | Conservative | PhD | |

“position issues” and excluded “valence issues” (Stokes, 1963).³ Note that voters tend to give greater importance to decision-makers’ technical skills in the case of valence issues (Green & Hobolt, 2008): thus, restricting the analysis to position issues is a conservative strategy, in the sense that it may underestimate support for technocracy.

Attributes

The full list of attributes with their respective values can be seen in Table 1. This list includes four core attributes, the first of which—working background—defines three subtypes of technocrats: academics, business leaders, and high-ranking civil servants. Then, drawing from the literature on technocratic government (Alexiadou & Gunaydin, 2019; Caramani, 2017; Centeno, 1993; McDonnell & Valbruzzi, 2014), we identified three properties of technocrats that may explain their popularity among voters: field-specific expertise, independence from party politics, and unresponsiveness toward elected representatives and voters. In addition to these core attributes, we also included potential confounders.

The first core attribute is *Working background*. We specified five career paths, two of which (Member of Parliament and incumbent minister) correspond to traditional political careers, and the three others (research scientist, high-ranking civil servant, and businessperson) correspond to the three most frequent career paths among actual technocratic ministers in Europe (Vittori et al., 2023a).⁴

³ For example, the environment is a valence issue to the extent that partisan disagreements do not concern the goals to be achieved but are rather about the technical means to achieve these goals or about whether this particular issue should be made a priority or not.

⁴ Note that this list does not exhaust all possibilities, and that we did not include combinations – such as MPs with a prior background in academia – that may be preferred to both MPs and academics. However, such combinations are very rare among real world ministers (Costa Pinto et al., 2018; Winter, 1991)

All of these career backgrounds can be viewed as information about future job effectiveness from the perspective of voters. Incumbent ministers have prior job experience, which is an attribute voters tend to value (Kirkland & Coppock, 2018). MPs benefit from electoral legitimacy and from existing networks within the legislature: both of these characteristics may enhance their ability to get decisions accepted by voters and parliamentarians, and to implement these measures. In addition, MPs can be expected to detain crucial tactical and negotiating skills. With regard to alternative career paths, high-ranking civil servants can be assumed to have managerial experience and practical knowledge about how a ministry works: they have the advantage of being “insiders” without being career politicians. Research scientists can be expected to deal with political issues in an objective, dispassionate fashion, and to bring the technical competence and rational reasoning necessary to identify the most appropriate policy decision. Business leaders, in addition to their managerial competences, can appeal to voters who value real-world experience and advocate a quick, efficient style of decision-making. Additionally, preference for government by businessmen is a standard survey item and is a core component of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002)’s “stealth democracy” index. Our design allows us to assess whether voters advocate businesspersons as an alternative to politicians or because they hold specific expectations about their style of decision-making.

Field expertise is a simple dummy measuring whether or not the hypothetical minister has experience in the field corresponding to each ministry. This attribute was included only for specialized ministries, since the Prime Minister position is by definition a generalist one.

Expertise is somewhat difficult to operationalize. To avoid directly stating that the candidate is an expert in the field or has no experience in the relevant domain, we opted for an alternative approach, which consists in giving specific examples of field expertise. We thus adapted the attribute values to each ministry and each working background: for example, the candidate for a position of Minister of Agriculture can be defined either as a “professor of agronomy in a public university” (research scientist condition), a “high-ranking civil servant in the ministry of Agriculture” (civil servant condition), the “chair of the parliamentary committee on agriculture” (MP condition), or the “CEO of an agri-food company,” if s/he has field expertise.⁵ The list of possible combinations can be seen in Table 2.

In order to maintain informational equivalence across profiles, we specify a “default” profile for the candidates who do not have field expertise. We define the non-experts as having a background in laws: for example, the candidate minister for the ministry of Foreign Affairs with a working background in research is defined as a “professor of international relations” if s/he is a field expert, and a “professor of public laws” otherwise. We thereby rely on previous research showing that a law degree or a career in the field of justice are quite frequent among political

⁵ This means that values of the two first attributes (working background and field expertise) are combined on each vignette. The resulting factor thus takes on 10 possible values: MP with field expertise, MP without field expertise, CEO with field expertise, etc. This strategy allows us to treat the two variables separately and to avoid imposing restrictions on randomization.

Table 2 Field expertise

| Ministry | Occupation | Field expertise |
|-----------------|---------------|---|
| Finance | MP | Chair of the parliamentary committee on financial affairs |
| | Minister | Minister of Finance |
| | CEO | CEO of an accounting firm |
| | Scientist | Professor of economics in a public university |
| | Civil servant | High-ranking civil servant in the ministry of Finance |
| Foreign affairs | MP | Chair of the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs |
| | Minister | Minister of Foreign Affairs |
| | CEO | CEO of a large firm in the defense industry |
| | Scientist | Professor of international relations in a public university |
| | Civil servant | High-ranking civil servant in the ministry of Foreign Affairs |
| Agriculture | MP | Chair of the parliamentary committee on agriculture |
| | Minister | Minister of Agriculture |
| | CEO | CEO of an agri-food company |
| | Scientist | Professor of agronomy in a public university |
| | Civil servant | High-ranking civil servant in the ministry of Agriculture |
| Education | MP | Chair of the parliamentary committee on education |
| | Minister | Minister of Education |
| | CEO | CEO of an online learning company |
| | Scientist | Professor of educational sciences in a public university |
| | Civil servant | High-ranking civil servant in the ministry of Education |
| Default | MP | Chair of the parliamentary committee on legal affairs |
| | Minister | Minister of Justice |
| | CEO | Head of a large law firm |
| | Scientist | Professor of public law in a public university |
| | Civil servant | High-ranking civil servant in the ministry of Justice |

leaders (Baturu, 2016; Gerring et al., 2019). This also allows us to avoid “unlikely” or implausible profiles, such as, for example, a professor of literature under consideration for nomination as a Minister of the Agriculture.

Party membership, the third core attribute, is a dummy that identifies ministers who are affiliated to a political party (the name of the party is left unspecified). It is an indicator of independence. Considering the low level of trust in political parties in many established democracies (Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Ignazi, 2014; Mair, 2008), including this attribute enables us to isolate two possible drivers of support for technocrats, namely aversion to party politics (Caramani, 2017) and preference for technical expertise (Lavezzolo et al., 2020).

The fourth core attribute, *Responsiveness*, is an indicator variable that can take on three possible values: either the minister intends to take decisions in accordance with the position of the majority of elected parliamentarians, or s/he would pursue policies favored by citizens, or s/he would rely on her/his own knowledge and expertise. The aim of this indicator is to capture public support for the idea that policy

decisions should be taken based on scientific knowledge rather than political majorities and that, once optimal solutions have been identified, interparty negotiation in the parliament or public deliberation are at best a waste of time and resources, and at worst impediments to the implementation of these policies (Caramani, 2017; Centeno, 1993). This view is contrasted with support for either representative democracy—in which political authority rests with elected representatives—or a populist view of representation that stresses direct responsiveness toward “the people” (Caramani, 2017).

In addition to core attributes, we include secondary attributes in order to avoid confounding issues. Providing information about a particular attribute can affect respondents’ beliefs about other background features if these are left unspecified (Dafoe et al., 2018): for example, respondents may spontaneously associate “technocrats” with middle-aged men if the age and gender of the ministers are not explicitly stated; in turn, responses may be influenced by such assumptions (if, for example, respondents prefer young or female ministers). We thus add several attributes to the vignettes in order to prevent respondents from drawing such inferences: the selection of these potential confounders is based on extant research on voters’ preferences for personal characteristics of politicians.

Age is a possible confounder, as respondents may implicitly assign an age to a profile (e.g., they may spontaneously assume that incumbent ministers are older than MPs or that university professors are older than businesspersons) and many studies have found evidence of an ageist bias among voters (Magni-Berton & Panel, 2021). Age can take on two values, namely 40 and 65. We start at age 40 because some working backgrounds (e.g., university professor) would hardly be compatible with younger ages.

Gender is another potential confounder: we suspect respondents would assume that technocrats are men in the absence of information on gender, yet past research indicates that voters tend to prefer female decision-makers (Schwarz & Coppock, 2022).

Family background distinguishes between individuals stemming from the upper class versus the working class. Absent information on ministers’ background, respondents may assume that technocrats (who hold high-skilled, “elite” occupations) have upper-class origins⁶ and may penalize them out of prejudice or class affinity bias (Carnes & Lupu, 2016; Vivyan et al., 2020). We operationalize the variable as the parents’ occupations, which can take on four possible values (two upper-class occupations and two lower-class occupations): following Vivyan et al. (2020), we define several pairs of occupations in order to avoid that respondents react to a particular occupation instead of reacting to the minister’s social background. We restrict both parents’ occupation to belong to the same social class. Thus, upper-class parents are defined either as a judge (mother) and a journalist (father), or as a general practitioner (mother) and an architect (father). Working-class parents are

⁶ Focus group participants in Ganuza and Font (2020) indeed thought that most experts “come from the upper classes, from well-off families” (p. 524).

Table 3 Policy positions

| Ministry | Position | Priority |
|-----------------|--------------|--|
| Prime Minister | Progressive | Address socio-economic inequalities between citizens |
| | Conservative | Increase the country's global competitiveness |
| Finance | Progressive | Increase taxes on profits and high incomes |
| | Conservative | Lower public spending to pay off national debt |
| Foreign affairs | Progressive | Increase foreign aid |
| | Conservative | Coordinate with neighboring countries to increase border control |
| Agriculture | Progressive | Restrict the use of herbicide and pesticide |
| | Conservative | Develop GMO crop production |
| Education | Progressive | Increase the number of teachers in underprivileged areas |
| | Conservative | Increase subsidies for private schools |

defined either as a call-center employee (mother) and a plumber (father), or as a home help (mother) and a machine operator in a factory (father).

Education specifies the candidate's educational attainment, and can only take on one value ("PhD"). The attribute is constant because it cannot be randomized (as research scientists necessarily hold a PhD). The alternative (leaving education level unspecified) would raise confounding issues: respondents may assume that research scientists are more educated than (say) MPs or businesspersons, which may influence their support for these profiles. Additionally, preference for more educated decision-makers is very common among voters (Franchino & Zucchini, 2015; Hainmueller et al., 2014) and hardly qualifies as preference for technocracy. Although this design choice may raise external validity issues, it provides a conservative measure of pro-technocratic attitudes among Europeans, since outsiders with field expertise are systematically compared with other PhD holders.

Among potential confounders, the last and most important is the minister's *Policy position*: voters may infer ideological orientation from working background (for example, they may assume that businesspersons are more conservative on finance matters) if the information is not specified and this may affect their final choice. Additionally, although there is strong evidence that voters attach intrinsic importance to several aspects of the decision-making process—such as procedural fairness or descriptive representation—recent research shows that they care much more about the substance of the final decision (Esaiasson et al., 2019; Franchino & Zucchini, 2015; Strelbel et al., 2019; Wrtil & Wäckerle, 2022).⁷ We thus expect that congruence between ministers' and respondents' stances regarding a certain policy issue will play the strongest role in respondents' choices.

⁷ Other studies show that decision-making processes and decision-makers' characteristics may matter only to the extent that they improve the chances of reaching the policy decision voters desire: see, for example, Arnesen et al. (2019) on descriptive representation; Landwehr and Harms (2020) on referendums; Beiser-McGrath et al. (2022) on preferences for representative, direct, and expert-based democracy.

For each policy domain, we specify two policy objectives,⁸ a “progressive” and a “conservative” one (see Table 3). The PM’s priorities are general, while the other ministers’ priorities are specifically related to their own field. The survey questionnaire also asks respondents to state whether they agree with each of these objectives, which allows us to capture congruence of policy stances.

Country Selection, Questionnaire Administration and Sample Characteristics

The survey was fielded in July 2021 in France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom (questionnaires in each language are displayed in Online Appendix B). The goal of this country selection was to obtain variation in terms of location and experience with technocratic ministers. In the last 20 years, technocratic ministers have been relatively frequent in Italy and Poland, less so in Spain and France, extremely rare in Germany, and completely non-existent in the UK (Vitori et al., 2023a).

The data was collected through a CAWI survey (fielded by Qualtrics) using quota sampling based on age, gender, education, and region (see Online Appendix C.1 for details). The total number of respondents is about 9700 (around 1500 by country). Quality checks were implemented in order to deal with inattentive respondents (see Online Appendix F.2).

Estimator

We estimate average marginal component effects, or AMCEs (Hainmueller et al., 2014). AMCEs represent the average difference in the probability of being chosen as a minister when comparing two attribute values (e.g., a candidate with or without field expertise), where the average is computed over all possible combinations of other attribute values. Hainmueller et al. (2014) show that, as long as attributes are independently randomized, the AMCE can be estimated by regressing the binary outcome (whether a profile is selected or not) on a set of indicator variables representing the attribute values. We thus use OLS regression with each minister profile as the unit of analysis, a dummy variable indicating whether each profile was selected by respondents as dependent variable, and minister attributes as independent variables. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level.

⁸ The phrasing of policy positions as general objectives—and not as concrete policy measures, e.g., decrease business taxes to fight unemployment—is deliberate: this is to avoid that some respondents become more willing endorse these measures simply because they are proposed by individuals who are presented as experts.

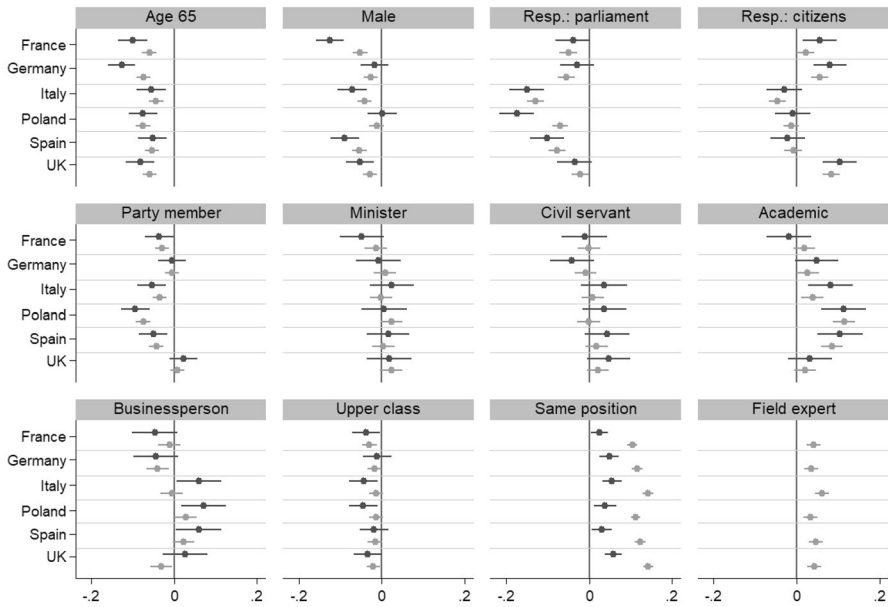


Fig. 1 Effects of attributes by country (point estimates with 95% CI). Note: OLS regression (standard errors clustered at the respondent level). One model was run for each country and each category of ministries (Prime Minister office versus other ministries). The dark grey coefficients stand for the Prime Minister, the light grey coefficients stand for the other ministries. Horizontal bars represent 95% CI. Reference categories are, respectively: age 40; female candidate; willingness to act on the basis of own expertise; unaffiliated to a party; MP; working-class origins; different policy positions; no field expertise

Results

Main Results

We ran separate regression models for each country. Results are displayed in Fig. 1 (see Online Appendix D for the regression tables). In order to ease comparisons, the coefficients are organized by attribute value. We uncover few variations in attribute effects depending on the ministry: we thus display estimates for the PM (dark grey coefficients) and pooled estimates for the four specialized ministries (light grey coefficients). Detailed estimates by ministry can be found in Online Appendix E.

Some attributes have similar effects across countries. In line with Lavezzolo et al. (2020), we find that, in all six countries, expertise significantly increases the probability that a candidate is endorsed for a specialized ministry (recall that expertise is not included in the PM’s attributes). However, the effect is modest in size, with expertise increasing the probability of winning the contest by an average of about 4 percentage points. Voters from all countries also prefer ministers who share their

own policy stances⁹: this attribute has the strongest effect on the popularity of specialized ministers (although its effect is weaker in the PM case), which is also in line with extant research (Franchino & Zucchini, 2015). With regard to sociodemographics, respondents from all countries are more likely to endorse the younger minister, and the effect of being a man is always negative, although it is insignificant in Poland and in the case of the PM in Germany (note that, at the time the questionnaire was administered, Germany was the only country with an actual female PM). The effect of a lower-class background is always positive, although its size and significance varies depending on the country and the ministry. Again, these results are consistent with previous findings.¹⁰

Attributes associated with occupation are mostly insignificant in all surveyed countries, with the partial exception of academics and businesspersons. Incumbent ministers (who, by definition, have prior job experience) do not enjoy any advantage compared to MPs¹¹: this finding is at odds with prior research showing that voters generally reward past experience in office (Kirkland & Coppock, 2018). In terms of relative popularity, civil servants are close to ministers. This finding may simply suggest that citizens are not always able to operate a clear-cut distinction between types of public officials. This interpretation is consistent with prior research: at the aggregate level, trust in the civil service and trust in government are highly correlated (Sanabria-Pulido & Bello-Gómez, 2020). At the individual level, determinants of trust in national government, parliament, and administration are very similar (Camões & Mendes, 2019). The conflation of high-ranking civil servants and elected officials may be further compounded by the fact that public administrations are sometimes politicized, in the sense that appointments are decided on the basis of political connections rather than merit (Cooper, 2021).

Academics constitute the only “outsider” profile that consistently increases public support, although the size and magnitude of the effect varies by country: it is relatively strong in Spain, Poland, and—to a lesser extent—in Italy, but weak in Germany, and insignificant in France and in the UK. The popularity of academics is not a surprising finding considering the generally positive feelings toward the profession. The IPSOS Global Trustworthiness Index consistently ranks research scientists among the most trusted professions: in 2021, they were ranked second after doctors, with 61% of respondents worldwide viewing them as trustworthy. By contrast, less than 25% of respondents reported trust in civil servants and business leaders, and trust in politicians only reached 10%. However, in the context of this study, the reasons behind support for academics remain elusive. The effect is not driven by respondents’ assumptions about academics’ technical competences: the effect of expertise does not absorb the effect of being an academic, which remains significant

⁹ The attribute “Priority” (same/different) is a dummy that takes on the value of 1 if the respondent agrees with the hypothetical ministers’ stated objectives, 0 otherwise.

¹⁰ On gender, see Schwarz and Coppock (2022); on age, see Magni-Berton and Panel (2021); on social class, see Vivyan et al. (2020).

¹¹ The positive effect in Poland and the UK is not robust (see section “Robustness Checks and Diagnostics” below).

in the specialized ministries samples. An alternative explanation may be that research scientists are the only profession that is not associated with leadership—in contrast to politicians, high-ranking civil servants and business leaders. Therefore, respondents might expect that individuals who self-selected into an academic career are less likely to value political power per se, or display less ambition and strategic behavior. However, this explanation remains tentative and would require more systematic analyses.

We now turn to some noteworthy cross-country differences. First, for both types of ministries, the effect of partisan affiliation is negative and significant in France, Italy, Spain, and Poland, but is virtually null in Germany and slightly positive but insignificant in the UK. Since non-partisan ministers are non-existent in Germany and the UK, this suggests that endorsement of technocratic government cannot simply be interpreted as a rejection of the existing political system.

Second, the effect of responsiveness toward the parliament varies strongly by country. Compared to hypothetical ministers who would decide based on their own expertise (the baseline), those who would follow the parliamentary majority are significantly less likely to be selected by respondents of all nationalities, with the exception of the PM in Germany. However, the magnitude of the loss ranges from small (around 5 pp or less in France, Germany and the UK) to relatively large (more than 15 pp in Italy and Poland in the case of the PM).

Third, responsiveness toward citizens significantly increases the probability of winning the contest in France, Germany, and the UK; yet, this attribute value has a negative effect in Italy, Poland and Spain, although it is mostly insignificant (except for specialized ministers in Italy).

Finally, the relative popularity of businesspersons depends on the country: Italians, Poles, and Spaniards are more likely to select a businessperson over a MP. By contrast, the effect of this attribute value is negative and significant in the case of the PM in France, and in the case of specialized ministers in Germany and the UK.

To summarize, we identified two country clusters and an outlier¹²:

- The first cluster includes countries with mild pro-technocratic attitudes, that is, Germany and the UK: respondents give a premium to field expertise, but they do not display any aversion toward party members. In addition, British and German respondents do not systematically prefer “outsider” profiles over politicians. They prefer ministers who would be responsive toward citizens and are relatively indifferent between those who would follow the parliamentary majority and those who would act on the basis of their own expertise.
- The second cluster includes countries with strong pro-technocratic attitudes, that is, Italy, Poland, and Spain. Respondents not only exhibit a preference for experts but also an aversion toward typical politician profiles: they prefer non-partisan ministers over party members, and tend to prefer outsiders (either academics or

¹² These results are consistent with findings from Bertou and Caramani (2022), who find that technocratic attitudes are more frequent among Polish and Italian respondents than among British and German respondents, with French respondents lying in the middle.

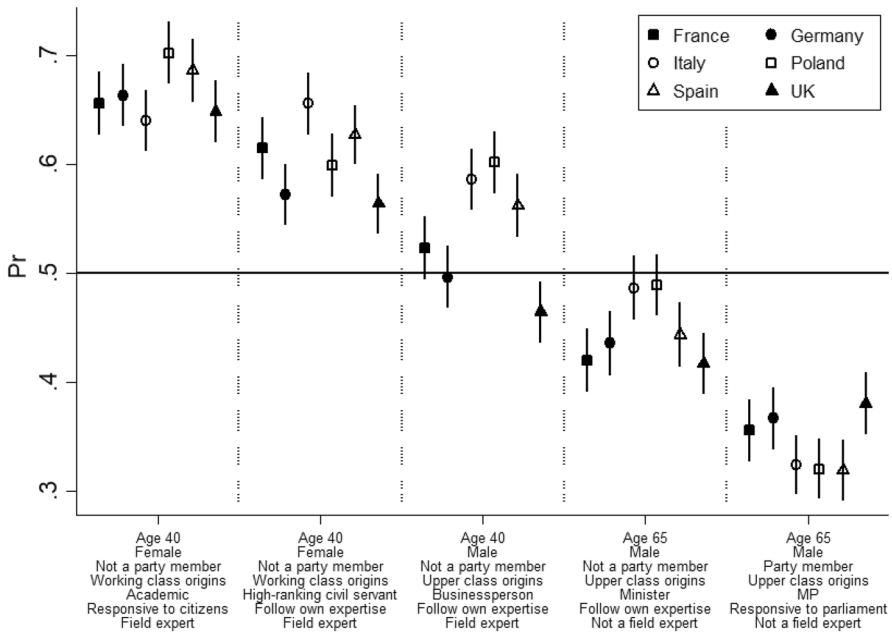


Fig. 2 Probability of winning the contest for selected profiles (with 95% CI). Predicted probabilities by country for the subsample of specialized ministries (PM excluded)

CEOs or both). They are indifferent between ministers who would take decisions according to their own expertise and those who would follow public opinion, as long as the prospective minister does *not* follow the parliamentary majority.

- French respondents share common attitudes with respondents from both clusters. Like the Italians, Poles and Spaniards, they prefer non-partisan ministers who would not act in accordance with the parliament’s position. However, like German and British respondents—and unlike respondents from the pro-technocratic cluster—they do not display a systematic preference for any of the “outsider” profiles, and they are slightly more likely to prefer ministers who would be responsive toward citizens over those who would act on the basis of their own expertise.

Figure 2 displays the probability that a hypothetical minister is selected for several possible attribute combinations. Cumulative effects are important: the most popular profile—a 40 years old female academic without party affiliation who stems from the working class, is an expert in her field and would take decisions following citizens’ preferences—would have on average a 66.5% probability of being selected, compared to a 34.5% probability for a 65 years old male MP with an upper class background who is affiliated to a party, is not a field expert, and would decide following the parliamentary majority. Interestingly, the least popular profile combines all attributes commonly found among real-world decision-makers. The figure also illustrates some cross-country differences: disagreements are most marked in the case of the purely “technocratic” profile in the middle of the graph (that is, a

businessman with field expertise and unaffiliated to a party who would act on the basis of his own knowledge). This profile would be more popular among Spanish, Polish and Italian respondents than among French, German or British respondents.

As stated above, attribute effects are relatively similar in all specialized ministries (see Online Appendix E for detailed results). The only exception is the ministry of Foreign Affairs, for which preferences for technocratic government seem to be less pronounced: for example, field expertise is insignificant in Germany, Italy, Poland, and the UK; responsiveness toward the parliament loses its negative effect in Germany, Poland, and Spain; and academic background is insignificant in Italy. However, this exception is only partial: overall, we do not find any sign that respondents from any country would prefer a career politician in the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Robustness Checks and Diagnostics

We conducted several robustness checks. We replicated our main analysis using logistic regression (Online Appendix F.1). We reran the main estimates after excluding low-quality responses (Online Appendix F.2) and using sampling weights (Online Appendix F.3). We checked for a possible design effect, i.e., whether respondents are more likely to pick the first profile displayed to them regardless of the attributes associated to this profile¹³ (Online Appendix F.4). Finally, we checked the results' sensitivity to the exclusion of atypical minister profiles (Online Appendix F.5).

To summarize the outcome of these tests (see Appendices F.1 to F.5 for a detailed discussion), none of our main conclusions are overturned, but there are some changes in the results. First, the effects of occupational backgrounds (ministers, high-ranking civil servants, and businesspersons) are not robust in most surveyed countries. In particular, the coefficient associated with businessperson only survives all robustness checks in two cases: in Germany, where it is negative in the specialized ministry sample, and in Poland, where it is positive in the case of the PM. Academic background still increases support among Polish, Italian and Spanish respondents; yet, the weak positive effect of this attribute value is not robust in Germany—which confirms that countries from the first cluster are distinct from countries from the second cluster.

Second, the apparent dislike for Prime Ministers responsive to the parliament among French and British respondents does not survive all robustness checks.

Finally, the preference for experts as Ministers of Foreign Affairs is only stable in France, which again suggests that preferences for technocracy may be less pronounced in this policy domain.

¹³ Since we have a between-subject design and respondents completed five different tasks—and not repeated versions of the same task—we did not test for stability and carry-over effects.

Are Preferences for Technocratic Ministers Moderated by Their Policy Positions?

As discussed above, attributes associated with technocratic ministers—expertise, independence from the parliament, and, in some countries, non-partisanship and prior academic career—increase respondents' support. Support for a minister's profile also increases when respondents approve of her policy objectives. However, technocratic ministers' attributes and congruence of policy positions may interact in more complex ways. We attempt to put to a test three contrasting views.

According to the first view, preferences for technocratic ministers are driven by voters' expectations about their future policies (Beiser-McGrath et al., 2022): voters only support technocrats to the extent that they expect them to make certain policy choices. However, this interpretation is not supported by our main results, since field expertise, partisanship, and career background influence respondents' choices independently from ministers' policy objectives.

According to the second view, the appeal of technocrats lies in their supposed ability to carry out the mandate given to them by elected representatives in a rapid and effective manner (Bertsou, 2022; Pastorella, 2016). In this perspective, effectiveness comes from technocrats' expertise but also from their impartiality, that is, their independence from political parties and their absence of ideological positions. Empirically, the implication is that support for technocratic ministers should be mediated by policy stances. Specifically, support for experts, nonpartisans and outsiders (especially academics) should increase whenever they share the same policy stance as respondents, because these three attributes may be perceived as signaling a ministers' ability to achieve her stated objective (Franchino & Zucchini, 2015). By contrast, respondents should punish a technocrat more strongly than a typical politician if he or she proposes objectives they disagree with—because, after all, technocrats are not supposed to have policy objectives at all.

Finally, according to the third view, voters attach intrinsic values to expertise, academic background and non-partisanship, independently from their expectations about technocrats' future policy choices. This implies that the effect of attributes associated with technocratic ministers should have an unconditional effect on respondents' choices, regardless of their policy priorities.

We thus investigated potential interaction effects between policy positions on the one hand and attributes associated with technocratic government on the other hand: detailed results are presented in Online Appendix G.1.¹⁴ To summarize, we do not find any evidence that preferences for technocratic ministers are moderated by their policy positions. For specialized ministers, the interaction term of expertise and congruence of policy positions is insignificant while constituent terms retain their original sign and significance level, which suggests that the effects of both attributes simply add up and do not interact. In contrast to Franchino and Zucchini (2015), we do not find evidence that the (positive) effect of common policy positions increases if the candidate has expertise, or that expertise becomes a liability for hypothetical ministers who adopt disliked policy positions.

¹⁴ We test for other potential moderating effects in Online Appendices G.3 and G.4.

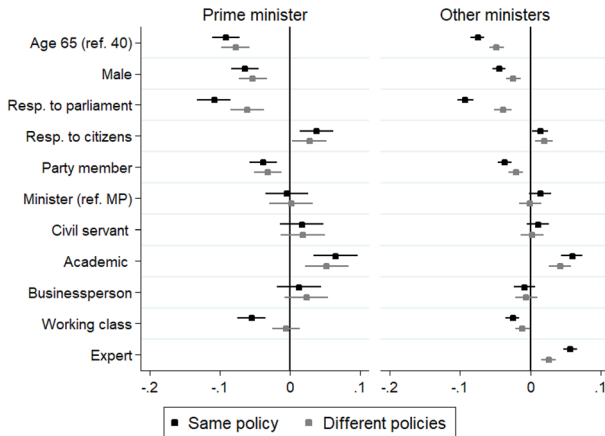


Fig. 3 Effect of ministers' attributes when policy positions are identical or different within each task (95% CI). Note: OLS regression with country fixed effects and standard errors clustered by respondent. The model was run twice for the PM and twice for the remaining ministries, with each subsample distinguishing situations in which the two ministers of each pair of vignettes had different or similar policy positions

On the contrary, our results suggest that respondents who disagree with a minister's position are more willing to tolerate him/her if this minister is an expert.

We obtain similar results when we interact congruence of policy positions with prior occupation or with party affiliation: none of the interaction terms reaches significance, either in the case of the PM or in the case of specialized ministers. In other words, voters do not punish “outsiders” or non-partisan ministers more strongly when they hold positions they dislike, even though these ministers cannot claim to represent the views of a particular constituency (like fellow party members or their voters).

However, we do find some evidence that the effect of ministers' characteristics is partly conditional on policy positions. Figure 3 compares situations in which respondents were shown hypothetical ministers with the same vs. different policy priorities in the same task. We display results for the pooled sample, but detailed results by country can be seen in Online Appendix G.2.

When the two ministers hold identical positions, the effects of expertise, party affiliation, and responsiveness increase, as well as the effect of sociodemographics; these patterns generally hold in all surveyed countries. One possible interpretation is that support for experts in government partly results from the convergence of parties' positions: if parties propose programs that are similar in the eyes of voters, the latter might be inclined to prefer the candidates they perceive as the most competent to implement these programs. This may explain why increasing support for “experts” among European voters is congruent with the growing convergence of party programs in European democracies, which can be attributed to constraints stemming from European integration (Dorussen & Nanou, 2006; Le Gall, 2017) or economic globalization (Steiner & Martin, 2012).

Summary and Discussion

This study's objective was to identify the characteristics of technocratic ministers that would appeal to voters, as it appears in various studies (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bertsoy & Caramani, 2022; Font et al., 2015) that a great share of citizens across Europe claim to prefer being governed by independent experts rather than by politicians. Our findings indicate that technocracy-related characteristics boost public support, even if they do not trump the effect of other factors such as policy congruence.

Specifically, we find that some attributes associated with technocratic ministers, like relevant professional experience in the policy domain and (to a lesser extent) independence from parliament, systematically increase popular support. Other characteristics of technocrats—being an academic, unaffiliated to a political party, or willing to take decisions according to one's own expertise without consideration for citizens' preferences—have a heterogeneous effect, that depends on the surveyed country. However, none of the characteristics associated with career politicians (MP or minister background, party membership and responsiveness toward the parliament) increases popular support in any of the surveyed countries.

In contrast to prior research (Bertsoy, 2022), we do not find strong evidence that preferences for technocratic government are dependent on the policy domain (with the partial exception of Foreign Affairs). Strikingly, these preferences are not limited to specialized ministries: determinants of public support are similar in the case of the Prime Minister. In other words, many European voters seem perfectly willing to endorse a chief executive without ties to a political party, who would decide without regard for the parliamentary majority's position. This result suggests that support for technocracy is a preference about the political system as a whole and not about specific policies (Beiser-McGrath et al., 2022). It also suggests that the comparatively low prevalence of technocratic PMs (compared to specialized ministers) cannot be traced back to the public's preferences but rather to party politics, or constitutional requirements that mandate that the PM is an elected parliamentarian. On the upside, congruence of policy positions remains the most important determinant of support, which somewhat contradicts our respondents' willingness to delegate their sovereignty to an unaccountable expert.

Our results also show that preferences for technocracy take different forms depending on the country. German and British respondents prefer experts like all other respondents, but do not systematically endorse outsiders such as academics or reject party members. Italian, Polish, and Spanish respondents, by contrast, tend to reject all career politician profiles and to endorse all attributes associated with technocratic government. Finally, French respondents are generally hostile toward party politics but lukewarm to unaccountable outsiders. The causes underlying these patterns remain unclear at this point, but our findings suggest that support for technocratic government is not a function of past experience with actual technocratic ministers—a point already made by Bertsoy and Pastorella (2017). Neither does supporting technocracy amount to endorsing any “atypical” profile out of dissatisfaction with existing politicians: overall support for technocratic

ministers is the lowest in Germany and the UK, where such profiles are nonexistent among actual ministers.

Our results are broadly consistent with prior works showing that technocrats' appeal lies in their expertise (Lavezzolo et al., 2020) and political independence (Caramani, 2017; Pastorella, 2016), but also point toward two other potential explanations. First, voters' preference for academics cannot be entirely explained by expectations about their technical skills, decision-making style, or policy stances, since these attributes are accounted for in our design: this suggests that this preference is intrinsic, not instrumental. For similar reasons, the negative effect of party membership cannot be solely explained by a perceived lack of competence or independence, but suggests that many voters dislike politicians who reached their position after climbing the party ladder. Minister positions are associated with a certain prestige and salary: perhaps individuals with a certain background are viewed not only as more competent to occupy these positions, but also as more deserving. In other words, preferences for experts are perhaps not solely pro-technocratic but also "meritocratic."

Second, we find that the importance respondents attach to expertise and independence (and to ministers' individual characteristics more generally) increases when the two hypothetical ministers defend the same policy position as each other. Thus, the fact that the convergence of party programs and public support for experts in government both increased during the last decades is perhaps not a coincidence: if parties appear to pursue similar policy goals, whoever looks the most able to attain these goals will enjoy an advantage in the political competition (Green, 2007). Of course, this interpretation is only tentative and must be subject to further investigations.

This study represents a first step toward understanding the prevalence of public support for political outsiders in Europe. However, it has some limitations. First, it leaves aside variations in support for technocrats at the individual level. Second, the relatively low number of surveyed countries does not allow us to investigate the (institutional, economic...) determinants of cross-country differences. Third, we acknowledge some external validity issues: the experiment was not intended to mimic the way in which voters evaluate ministers in the real world, because they do not directly choose ministers in pairwise contests, and because it is uncertain whether they have (or even need) the type and amount of information we provided respondents in the experiment. Note also that preferences for technocracy are measured in a conservative way in the current study: we compared technocratic ministers with other PhD holders, and we only selected "position issues" (although we attempted to maximize variation in salience and technicality of policy areas). These design choices may partly explain why the effects of attributes associated with technocratic government are overall modest. Finally, although the present study provides some insights on preferences for technocratic *ministers*, it does not directly tackle preferences for technocratic *government*: since minister profiles were displayed one by one, it is unclear whether respondents would have preferred a hypothetical government entirely made up of technocrats or some combination of technocrats and politicians. We leave these tasks to future research.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-023-09904-8>.

Acknowledgements We thank Eri Bertsou, seminar participants at the Economics & Politics workshop (2020) and the State of the Federation conference (2020), as well as the journal's Editors and three anonymous reviewers.

Funding This research has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 772695) for the project CURE OR CURSE.

Data Availability Replication data and codes are available on the Harvard Dataverse repository at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/RZTIOY>. The design of this study is publicly available as a pre-analysis plan on the EGAP (Evidence in Politics and Governance) registry with the ID number [20210507AC](https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/RZTIOY). Deviations from the PAP are reported in the online appendix.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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