

Exploring the Causes of Technocratic Minister Appointments in Europe

Political Studies

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/00323217231210129

journals.sagepub.com/home/psx

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Abstract

In the last decade, the appointment of technocratic ministers has become more common than ever before in Europe. Yet, scholarly attention has mostly focused on the economic determinants that lead to the appointment of such political outsiders in governments. In contrast, political determinants have not been fully examined. This article aims to investigate the role of economic determinants, as well as institutional factors (e.g. electoral system), party-system characteristics (e.g. volatility, polarization) and cabinet-related factors (e.g. intra-cabinet heterogeneity, the strength of populist parties within the government). Using a novel data set comprising data for more than 7000 ministers, including around 900 technocrats, our analysis shows that the share of populist parties within the cabinets has the strongest effect on the likelihood of appointing technocrats in national government. However, institutional-level variables appear to have no effect on the levels of technocratic appointments.

Keywords

technocracy, Europe, partisan ministers, technocratic ministers, ministers' appointment

Accepted: 10 October 2023

Introduction

Recent studies have pointed to the increasing support among Europeans for being governed by experts rather than elected politicians. Several works have now shown (Bertsou, 2022; Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Chiru and Enyedi, 2022) that in European countries, a significant portion of the citizenry prefers experts, rather than politicians, to make decisions or plan policies. Experts in governments without any partisan affiliation are commonly referred to as 'technocrats' (Costa Pinto et al., 2018). The recent nomination of Mario Draghi (2021–2022), the former president of the European Central Bank, as the new Prime Minister of Italy is a prime example of such a profile

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entering the government. However, numerous other non-partisan experts have come to power in recent decades, not only as prime ministers but also as ministers in governments (Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019; Amorim Neto and Strøm, 2006; Blondel and Thiebault, 1991; Costa Pinto et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, we still have limited knowledge about the causes behind the appointment of technocrats in cabinets. While the literature has focused on descriptive analyses of independent, non-partisan and technocratic ministerial appointments (e.g. Blondel and Thiebault, 1991; Costa Pinto et al., 2018) and the composition of cabinets (Amorim Neto and Samuels, 2010; Amorim Neto and Strøm, 2006), more recently, several authors have made fruitful attempts to evaluate the causes and consequences of technocratic appointments within finance ministries (Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019; Alexiadou et al., 2021; Hallerberg and Wehner, 2018; Kaplan, 2017). Such studies have particularly examined the role of economic determinants in the appointment of technocratic ministers. They have shown that technocratic ministers are often appointed to signal credibility in the government's economic policies, which is especially valuable during economic recessions or when governments are perceived as corrupt or incompetent in managing the country's economy.

Other determinants have been examined less frequently: some authors have explored the differences between political systems (presidential vs parliamentary) in appointing technocratic ministers (Amorim Neto and Samuels, 2010; Amorim Neto and Strøm, 2006), the role of party ideologies (Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019; Kaplan, 2017) and electoral volatility (Emanuele et al., 2022).

However, we argue that the appointment of technocratic ministers is also influenced by political and ideological factors associated with the characteristics of both legislatures and cabinets. We propose that the proliferation of technocratic ministers may be intertwined with the long-standing legitimacy crisis that political parties have been experiencing (Ignazi, 2017). Building on this line of thinking, technocratic appointments could be considered a strategic choice embraced by partisan elites to compensate for their lack of credibility. In this regard, we update and deepen early studies that explore the impact of systemic factors (such as perceived levels of corruption), party system factors (such as electoral volatility and party system polarization) and, most importantly, cabinet-related factors (i.e. ideological positioning of cabinets, their ideological heterogeneity and the presence of populist parties in government) on the appointment of technocratic ministers. Specifically, the role of populist parties in government is an important gap in the literature that we aim to address. Given the potential affinity between populism and technocracy postulated by some authors (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018; Fernández Vázquez et al., 2022), we hypothesize a positive relationship between the strength of populist parties and the technocratic nature of cabinets.

These hypotheses will be tested using an updated version of a previously released data set (Vittori et al., 2023), covering 30 European countries from 2000 to 2022. We adopt a structural approach similar to that of Amorim Neto and Samuels (2010) and Amorim Neto and Strøm (2006), focusing on the percentage of technocratic ministers (rather than just non-partisan ministers).

Our results demonstrate a clear elective affinity between populism and technocracy, as theorized by several authors (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018; Caramani, 2017). Indeed, the strength of populist parties in government is the most significant predictor of technocratic appointments in European countries. Overall, we find that party-system-level variables such as polarization and volatility do not impact the appointment of

technocratic ministers. Similarly, we did not find support for the influence of economic and institutional variables included as controls. However, we find that another performance indicator has a small effect on technocratic appointments: the degree of perceived corruption. Ultimately, the most crucial factor behind technocratic appointments is the presence of populist parties in government, thus supporting our intuition that cabinet-level factors may be critical in determining the appointment of technocratic ministers.

The article is structured as follows: the first part reviews the literature on the presence of non-partisan and non-elected ministers in European governments, commonly known as technocratic ministers. The second part details the approaches and findings in the literature regarding the appointment of technocratic ministers. Then, we present the data set and the methods used. Finally, we present our results and discuss the implications of our study on the development of the appointment of technocratic ministers in Europe.

The Rise of Technocracy, Technocratic Ministers and Technocratic Governments in European Countries

There is little doubt that in Western Europe, government is synonymous with party government (Blondel and Cotta, 1996; Mair, 2008). Parties hold a monopoly over political representation (Sartori, 2005 (1976) and appoint the majority of ministers, particularly in parliamentary systems (Strøm, 2000). However, this monopoly has been challenged in various ways. For instance, following Peter Mair's intuition (2013), several studies have focused on the balance between responsibility and responsiveness of political parties (Bardi et al., 2014; Karremans and Lefkofridi, 2020). In essence, responsiveness prioritizes citizens' interests, while responsibility emphasizes long-term national interests. Responsibility prevails when governments' hands are tied due to factors such as international agreements or external shocks. In the dilemma between responsibility and responsiveness, the appointment of specific crucial technocratic ministers, such as finance ministers (Alexiadou et al., 2021), may serve as an ideal solution for political parties. They can be perceived as responsible by international actors, while parties can claim to have depoliticized conflicts and simultaneously use technocratic ministers as political scapegoats when unpopular policies are adopted. As theorized by Caramani (2017), technocratic elites are perceived differently from political elites. Technocrats are associated with a long-term vision during challenging times of decision-making, contrasting with political short-termism. They possess specific competence and merit (Habermas, 2015). One illustrative example is the Monti government in Italy in 2011 (Garzia and Karremans, 2021). While this example, along with other cases across Europe, highlights political or economic crises as explanations for the appointment of technocratic ministers (Alexiadou et al., 2021; Brunclík and Parizek, 2019; Hallerberg and Wehner, 2018; Wratil and Pastorella, 2018), technocratic ministers might also be appointed due to citizens' positive inclination to delegate power to experts rather than politicians (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Chiru and Enyedi, 2022; Ganuza and Font, 2020).¹

Regardless of the reasons behind the appointment, one important caveat when dealing with technocratic ministers is that they represent an exception, while party governments and partisan ministers are the norm. As Andeweg (2000: 123–124) states, 'appointees to the government of "non-party" category are theoretically of great interest, but they are rare. [. . .] There is more evidence of party members, who are relative "outsiders", being nominated to government positions'. This interpretation aligns with Blondel and Thiebault's (1991) seminal analysis of technocratic ministers. The two authors found that

ministers who were not recruited from elected representatives accounted for just over 10% of all ministers. Strøm's findings (2000) were similar: the average non-partisan appointment is below 4% in any semi-decade between 1950 and 1997, although she finds a significant upwards trend in recent years. Regardless of the institutional factors promoting technocracy (Amorim Neto and Strøm, 2006; Cotta, 2018), until recently, the appointment of technocratic ministers was a rather marginal phenomenon in most European polities, with some exceptions (for a review, see Cotta, 2018). The same trend has been observed in the literature when analysing technocratic governments instead of technocratic ministers: these types of governments also became more common in the last decade (McDonnell and Valbruzzi, 2014; Pastorella, 2016), especially due to political stalemates in several European countries. In this regard, several studies have investigated the determinants of technocratic governments by examining the non-partisanship of prime ministers (Brunclík and Parížek, 2019; Wratil and Pastorella, 2018). In our data set, we identified six European countries that had at least one technocratic or caretaker government composed almost exclusively of technocrats over the last 20 years: Austria, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Romania and Poland.

However, technocratic governments represent only one aspect of a more complex picture, as technocrats can also be appointed in partisan governments alongside other ministers recruited from elected politicians. In some countries, the presence of technocratic ministers within partisan governments can be quite significant (Costa Pinto et al., 2018). Looking at the findings of Costa Pinto et al.'s book (2018) and Vittori et al.'s (2023) research, it is evident that technocratic ministers are much more common in Southern and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In Portugal, Spain (particularly during socialist governments) and Italy (from 1992 onwards), technocratic ministers constitute a significant minority on average (37.3%). In Eastern Europe (29.4%), the situation is relatively more similar to Southern Europe than Western Europe.²

Interestingly, there also appears to be around 20% of technocratic ministers in Sweden (19.8%). To explain the causes of technocratic ministers' appointment, Amorim Neto and Samuels (2010), Amorim Neto and Strøm (2006) and Emanuele et al. (2022) examine the 'technocraticness' of cabinets in different political systems by focusing on the number of non-partisan ministers appointed. We believe that this approach is better suited to determine the drivers of technocratic appointments since it does not solely concentrate on the determinants of (technocratic) cabinet appointments, such as political scandals or economic downturns (Brunclík and Parížek, 2019; Wratil and Pastorella, 2018), but also explores the conditions that facilitate the appointment of technocratic ministers in 'normal' times, that is, when the party system is not affected by exogenous or endogenous shocks. As detailed below, there may be theoretically relevant factors that could explain why some cabinets are composed of more technocratic ministers than others.

The Causes Behind Technocratic Appointment: Exploring Systemic- and Cabinet-Level Hypotheses

So far, the literature on the individual appointment of technocratic ministers has primarily, but not exclusively (Costa Pinto et al., 2018; Helms, 2022; Semenova, 2020), focused on economic and finance ministers, (Alexiadou et al., 2021; Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019; Hallerberg and Wehner, 2018; Kaplan, 2017). This is unsurprising as ministries of economy and finance occupy a special role within cabinets since their portfolio shapes the activities of all other portfolios (Blondel and Thiebault, 1991). However, other works

have focused on the level of technocratic expertise within cabinets, operationalized as the percentage of non-partisan ministers in each cabinet (Amorim Neto and Samuels, 2010; Amorim Neto and Strøm, 2006; Emanuele et al., 2022; Semenova, 2020). Our discussion focuses on the latter, the percentage of non-partisan ministers in the cabinet, as the literature has already addressed the individual appointment of the most common technocratic ministers. Since our aim is to provide general explanations regarding the appointment of technocratic ministers in Europe, we will review the literature on the individual appointment of technocratic ministers and the composition of the government cabinets to develop three sets of hypotheses.

Systemic Level

While the literature has mainly focused on economic explanations, the role of corruption as a structural driver of technocratic appointments has been overlooked until now. Research on public opinion and technocratic attitudes (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017) has shown that countries with higher rates of corruption are more inclined to prefer technocrats in government instead of politicians. Chiru and Enyedi (2022) demonstrate that considering corruption as one of the three most salient issues in a country is associated with technocratic attitudes at the individual level. The underlying idea is that in corrupt countries, parties are perceived as incapable of implementing effective anti-corruption policies when they themselves are implicated in corrupt practices. For instance, incumbent governments face electoral consequences when the perception of corruption increases (Chiru and Gherghina, 2012). Furthermore, corruption is seen as a crucial factor in the rise of technocratic-populist parties at the local level (Drápalová and Wegrich, 2021) and anti-establishment parties at the national level in CEE countries (Engler, 2020). In this regard, governments may have an incentive to appoint technocratic ministers as a way to demonstrate their commitment to combating corruption.

Hypothesis 1 (H1). The higher the perceived corruption of the country, the higher the share of technocratic ministers.

Party System Levels

In addition to structural factors such as corruption, we propose that certain key features of the national party system may also play a role in influencing the proportion of technocrats in the cabinet. Specifically, we examine to what extent two variables often considered as indicators of political crises (e.g. volatility and polarization) might impact the likelihood of appointing technocratic ministers. Existing literature has already suggested a positive relationship between volatility and the technocratic composition of European cabinets. Amorim Neto and Strøm (2006: 633) found a positive correlation between volatility and technocratic appointments in semi-presidential systems. Similarly, Emanuele et al. (2022) proposed that in a context characterized by high volatility, government elites are more likely to incorporate technocratic elites to dilute their political responsibility, especially in the face of electoral instability. Their analysis largely confirmed this hypothesis, although their geographic focus was limited to Western European countries. In this regard, our data set provides a broader perspective on this phenomenon as it covers Central and Eastern European countries, which have a historical tendency towards higher levels of electoral volatility (and lower levels of party institutionalization). Based on these findings, we anticipate that

Hypothesis 2 (H2). The higher the volatility, the higher the share of technocratic ministers.

Another party system variable that could potentially affect the appointment of technocratic ministers is the polarization of the party system. Polarization, along with political veto institutions, plays a crucial role in shaping cabinet types (Thürk et al., 2021). A recent study by Kopecky et al. (2022) suggests that in cases of extreme polarization, which the authors distinguish from ‘normal’ ideological polarization, party patronage increases, thus limiting the possibility of appointing non-partisan figures to public office. Our perspective is slightly different: as the literature suggests, party system polarization is associated with both uncertainty in cabinet formation and a higher prevalence of non-partisan governments (Strøm, 1984). When polarization is high, it is expected that anti-establishment parties on the extremes of the ideological spectrum become more successful, thereby constraining cabinet options in a multi-party system or leading to the formation of a minority government. When gridlock resulting from the emergence of ‘polarizing’ parties hampers the formation of a partisan coalition government, governing parties may decide to appoint non-partisan experts within the cabinet to both mitigate political conflicts within the party system and facilitate the potential formation of grand coalitions. We acknowledge the exploratory nature of this hypothesis. However, in the absence of further evidence, it is reasonable to investigate whether:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). The higher the party system polarization, the higher the share of technocratic ministers.

Cabinet-Level Variables

The literature on technocratic appointments has primarily focused on left-wing governments. As Hallerberg and Wehner (2018) and Kaplan (2017) postulate, left-wing governments might encounter ‘problems’ with the stock market’s assessment of the country’s economic performance, particularly during times of crises. The evidence so far has been mixed: Alexiadou et al. (2021) did not find a relationship between the party family of prime ministers or the left–right positioning of their parties and the appointment of technocratic finance ministers, while Kaplan (2017) shows that during unfavourable business cycles, left-wing governments in Latin America tend to appoint technocratic ministers more frequently compared with favourable business cycles. However, evidence at the individual level suggests that right-wing individuals are more inclined towards technocracy than left-wing respondents (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017). Given the mixed results, we hypothesize that the more left-wing a government is, the higher the likelihood of appointing technocrats. However, we remain open to the possibility of the opposite trend. Previous studies have employed raw measures to capture government ideology based on the PM’s party family or left/right placement, rather than a more nuanced measure based on the overall ideological location of the government.

Furthermore, if ideology plays a role, we expect governments to be more inclined to appoint technocrats when the coalition parties are more heterogeneous. From a speculative viewpoint, government heterogeneity may provide different incentives for parties to appoint technocrats. When parties diverge ideologically, they may find it advantageous to appoint technocrats to defuse conflicts. Rather than risking the credibility of a partisan

minister being questioned by other coalition parties whose position on the specific issue differs, coalition partners may opt to appoint a non-partisan minister. This approach allows them to either (a) avoid confrontation among themselves or (b) have the freedom to criticize the third figure for policy misalignment with party preferences. In essence, technocrats can function as both ‘policy appeasers’ and ‘scapegoats’. So far, the literature has only focused on cabinet fragmentation without considering the ideological divisiveness of the government (Amorim Neto and Strøm, 2006). It has found a seemingly counterintuitive negative relationship between cabinet fragmentation and the appointment of technocratic ministers. In other words, the more cohesive the governments are, the more likely they are to appoint technocrats. This theoretical argument was advanced by Alexiadou, (2015: 1063), who argued that in multi-party coalitions, it is more likely to find more partisan ministers as there are fewer posts to fill for each party and a greater pool of relevant party figures to choose from. In addition, following a trend where the proportion of ministerial appointments parties receive is reflected in the parliamentary strength of parties in the coalition (Dowding and Dumont, 2009), one would expect less availability for external non-partisan figures. While we consider both directions plausible, in our hypothesis, we adhere to the initial claims by Amorim Neto and Strøm (2006), who hypothesized a positive relationship between fragmentation and technocracy. In our analysis, however, we take a step further by investigating the role of ideological divisions within the governments, specifically examining the ideological heterogeneity of the cabinet. Against this backdrop, we hypothesize that

Hypothesis 4.1 (H4.1). The more left-wing governments are, the higher the share of technocratic ministers.

Hypothesis 4.2 (H4.2). The more ideologically heterogeneous governments are, the higher the share of technocratic ministers.

Another variable that has been overlooked in the analysis of technocratic appointments is the presence of populist parties in government. The presence of populist parties in government has increased over the last two decades (Vittori, 2022). Populist parties are no longer viewed as pariahs in European political systems, and in some cases (such as Hungary or Poland), they have established stable and considerable electoral records. The relationship between technocracy and populism has already been explored in the literature, revealing that technocratic and populist forms of political representation share the idea that there is an external common good in society that is not mediated by political parties (Caramani, 2017). Rather than being opposites, technocracy and populism are seen as complementary (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018; Guasti, 2020). At the individual level, populist and technocratic attitudes can be considered as separate, but there are important overlapping features, as highlighted in the theoretical work of Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti (2018) (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020).

Regarding the appointment of technocratic ministers, populist parties may find a technocratic solution appealing, not only due to the ideological affinity between the two concepts but also because they want to appear as credible partners to their allies or reassure international organizations and the stock market about their intentions once in government. In Latin America, for example, patterns of cooperation and cohabitation between technocrats in government and populist presidents have been more common than conflicts (Barrenechea and Dargent, 2020). Technocratic ministers, to be perceived as reliable, can

provide reassurance about the government's commitments. In addition, populist parties are often challenger parties, meaning they do not frequently participate in government (if ever) (Hobolt and Tilley, 2016), which might lead them to lack political personnel for specific portfolios. Consequently, they may be more inclined to appoint technocrats instead of partisans from their own ranks. Therefore, we hypothesize that

Hypothesis 5 (H5). The higher the share of votes of populist parties, the higher the likelihood of appointing technocrats.

Data

The data on technocratic ministers in Europe used in this study are drawn from a newly released data set, collecting information on individual ministers for all the European³ cabinets since 2000 (Vittori et al., 2023). We used this data set as a starting point and updated it to include all cabinets in Europe until 2022. Our data set encompasses all EU and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries, covering 31 countries with different political and economic systems, varying levels of party institutionalization, and diverse traditions in cabinet formation. This broad coverage allows us to enhance the generalizability of our findings and move beyond the traditional focus on Western European countries. The only country excluded from our analysis is Switzerland due to the different logic behind cabinet formation, making comparisons unfeasible. The data set released by Vittori et al. (2023) covers two decades: 2000–2009 and 2010–2020. We added the most recent cabinets that were not included in the original version released by the authors. The two decades covered by the data set enable us to distinguish between a pre-crisis and a post-crisis environment. Since economic crises are significant factors leading to the appointment of technocratic ministers, having one decade marked by stable economic growth across Europe (2000–2009) and a decade that begins with the Great Recession allows us to control for the potential confounding effect of economic downturns.

In the data set, ministers are classified as technocrats when they meet three conditions: (a) they are not and have never been members of a political party, (b) they have never run for elective public offices, and (c) they possess either an occupational background or an educational background aligned with the portfolio to which they were assigned.⁴ While part of the research on technocratic appointment focuses on non-partisanship (Brunclík and Parížek, 2019; Wratil and Pastorella, 2018) as a proxy for technocracy, we adopted the approach which takes into consideration the expertise of the ministers as an essential condition to them as experts (Emanuele et al., 2022; Semenova, 2020; Vittori et al., 2023). As our research explores the causes of technocrats' appointments in political governments, we exclude from our analysis all the caretaker and technocratic cabinets.⁵ The final data set covers 307 cabinets and 7400 coded ministerial positions.

As the research investigates the factors that contribute to the appointment of technocratic ministers, our dependent variable measures the share of technocratic ministers in a cabinet as a ratio between the number of technocrats and the total number of appointed ministers. This continuous variable is then rescaled to range from 0 to 1, where 1 indicates that all appointed ministers are technocrats and 0 indicates that none of the appointed ministers is a technocrat. This choice follows the strategy adopted by Amorim Neto and Samuels (2010), Amorim Neto and Strøm (2006) and Emanuele et al. (2022) in their analysis of cabinet politics.

The independent variables are related to the hypotheses we proposed in the previous section. Regarding the systemic variables, corruption is measured as the (lagged) score of the Corruption Perception Index provided by Transparency International (2022) for the year preceding the appointment of the cabinet. The index has been rescaled between 0 and 1, where higher values indicate a lower degree of perceived corruption. Referring to the two-party system-level hypotheses, polarization was measured using the formula provided by Van der Eijk et al. (2005).⁶ Volatility is calculated by employing the classic index of total volatility (Pedersen, 1979), measured at the general election preceding the government formation. Data are taken from the ‘Dataset of Electoral Volatility and its internal components in Europe’ (Emanuele, 2015; Emanuele et al., 2022).

Moving to the cabinet level predictors, we included the share of seats of populist governing parties, governing parties’ ideological position and ideological heterogeneity in the cabinet.⁷ The share of populist governing parties is calculated as the ratio between the number of parliamentary seats controlled by populist parties supporting the government and the total number of parliamentary seats controlled by government parties. To determine whether a party is populist or not, we used the most recent version of the Popu-List (Rooduijn et al., 2019), and we match it with the data set used for our analysis (Vittori et al., 2023). This measure ranges from 0, indicating the absence of populist parties in the government, to 1, indicating that the cabinet is entirely composed of populist parties. For example, in a coalition government composed of three parties controlling 50 seats, 30 seats and 20 seats, respectively, if the smaller party of the coalition is a populist party, the variable has a value of 0.2.

The ideological position of governing parties is calculated as the weighted mean of the ideological positions of the parties in government. The weights are constructed based on the ratio of parliamentary seats controlled by a governing party over the total seats controlled by the entire governing coalition. Data on the number of seats controlled by each governing party are taken from the ParlGov database (Döring and Manow, 2019). The parties’ ideological positions are measured using data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Jolly et al. 2022). Specifically, each party in government is associated with its score on the left/right scale indicated by the CHES wave that is most proximate to the government appointment.⁸

To strengthen the robustness of our results, we included several controls derived from existing literature, measured at both the systemic and cabinet-level. Previous literature, albeit with some nuances (Hallerberg and Wehner, 2018), suggested a positive relationship between economic crises and technocratic appointments. The rationale is that during a crisis, a government might select an independent expert to signal a commitment to reform or increase the country’s credibility in the market (Alexiadou et al., 2021; Kaplan, 2017). Therefore, we included economic performance predictors measured as lagged unemployment and gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates (the year before the cabinet’s appointment). Both indicators are taken from the World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2021) and refer to the year prior to the government’s appointment.

At the party system level, we included several controls. We added a dummy variable distinguishing between parliamentary systems and presidential or semi-presidential systems in the party-system-level hypotheses. The literature on political systems has provided several indexes to measure presidential power (Doyle and Elgie, 2016; Siaroff, 2003), but these indexes do not include constitutional monarchies. In the models presented here we opted to keep all countries in our data set and using a dummy variable

(parliamentary vs presidential/semi-presidential systems) to distinguish the different political systems. However, as a robustness check, we included the more fine-grained measure of presidential powers (*prespow1*) developed by Doyle and Elgie (2016) and re-run our models (but it also meant excluding constitutional monarchies for which the variable does not apply). These additional tests indicate that our results are robust as both the sign and the significance of our variables of interest do not change (Table A9 of the Supplemental Appendix), while the variable capturing presidential powers is not significant. As a control, we also included a variable indicating proportional and non-proportional electoral systems.

Furthermore, we introduced a dummy variable to control for different forms of government support (coalition vs single-party government). Specifically, we aggregated single-party minority and majority governments into the single-party category, while the coalition category includes minority, minimal winning and oversized coalitions. The idea behind including this control is that, similar to a fragmented parliament (Amorim Neto and Samuel, 2010), it is politically more problematic to divide the spoils across all coalition partners. In single-party governments, the prime minister is less constrained by allies and potentially freer to appoint non-partisan ministers. As a further robustness check, we included non-partisan cabinets in the data set (see Table A6 of the Supplemental Appendix), and the results are robust. In addition, we included a variable indicating the share of parties within the governing coalition that have never been involved in government before the cabinet was formed. The idea is that inexperienced parties may lack qualified political personnel and thus be more likely to appoint ministers from outside the partisan realm. The rate of parties that have never been involved in government is calculated using the variable ‘access’ from the data set ‘Who governs Europe?’ (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2022). The variable assumes a value of 0 when the government is formed exclusively by parties that have never been involved in government before the new cabinet was composed, and a value of 1 when the cabinet is composed exclusively of parties that have been involved in previous governments.

Furthermore, in all models, we also included a variable labelled ‘Decade’ to distinguish between governments formed before 2010 and those installed from 2010 onwards. This choice is motivated by the fact that the percentage of technocratic ministers in governments formed after 2010 is 5% higher than in the previous decade. Finally, as a robustness check, we also interacted our main independent variables with a binary predictor distinguishing between Western European and Central and Eastern European countries. However, no interaction term resulted significant in our analysis (see Tables A7 and A8 of the Supplemental Appendix). The descriptive statistics of our variables of interest are presented in the Tables A1 and A2 of the Supplemental Appendix. All independent variables are generally weakly correlated (see correlation matrices in Tables A3–A5 of the Supplemental Appendix).

To assess the likelihood of technocratic ministers' appointment, we conducted multivariate Ordinary Least Squares regressions with clustered standard errors at the country level. All models were calculated with Huber-White robust standard errors clustered by country. These standard errors are robust to both serial correlation and heteroscedasticity (Wooldridge, 2002: 57). The choice to include clustered standard errors instead of country fixed effects is influenced by the presence of several country-level variables, which makes fixed effects problematic in terms of multicollinearity.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of a series of multivariate ordinary least squares regressions. The first three models test the four sets of independent variables separately, while the last model incorporates all independent variables. First, the analysis of systemic variables provides interesting results. The corruption index is significant and negative, indicating that higher perceived corruption is associated with a higher inclusion of technocratic ministers in the cabinet. However, the effect size is notably small. When using an alternative index (V-Dem), the significance further decreases to $p > 0.1$ (see Table A6 of the Supplemental Appendix). Thus, while we find confirmation of H1, we should exercise caution regarding the magnitude of the effect, especially because the significance of the corruption index disappears in the full model.

Regarding economic factors, we do not find evidence that harder economic times lead to the appointment of more technocratic ministers. The two economic controls – GDP growth and unemployment – show effects in the expected direction but do not reach statistical significance.

In the second model, we test H2 and H3. H2 predicts that a higher level of volatility would be associated with a higher number of technocrats in governments, while H3 tests whether higher party system polarization increases the number of technocrats in governments. However, we do not find any evidence to support the impact of volatility on technocratic appointments. Our results differ from Emanuele et al. (2022), possibly due to our limited longitudinal scope with fewer elections within countries and our wider geographical scope, including Eastern European countries that are traditionally characterized by higher volatility and lower party system institutionalization. These results are robust even when removing the ‘access’ variable and including the variable for different forms of government.⁹ Furthermore, we find that neither the type of government nor the electoral law has a statistically significant impact on the share of technocratic ministers in a cabinet. H3 is not confirmed either: party system polarization does not affect technocratic appointments. As a matter of fact, Model 2, which includes party-system-level predictors only, has the lowest explanatory power (R^2). Finally, we find that neither the type of government nor the electoral law significantly affect the share of technocratic ministers in a cabinet.

The third model is related to cabinet level variables. Here, we test the hypotheses related to the cabinet ideological position (H4.1), to the cabinet ideological heterogeneity (H4.2) and to the share of populist parties in government (H5). First, we find no confirmation for H4.1: left-wing parties are not more prone to appoint technocrats compared with right-wing parties, nor does heterogeneity at the cabinet level influence their appointment. Both variables are not significant in our model. As for cabinet-level heterogeneity, we find that the sign is negative and against our expectations: despite not being significant, less polarized governments appoint more technocrats. Leaving aside the relevance of institutional arrangements in cabinets formation in Europe (Lipsmeyer and Pierce, 2011; Müller and Strøm, 2000), our interpretation is based on the assumption that parties want to maximize their preferred outcome when in coalitions (Theis, 2001). When governments are less polarized, there is more flexibility in appointing non-partisan figures. However, the presence of non-partisan figures can be problematic when coalition partners are more ideologically distant. In such cases, parties may be more inclined to appoint their own members to safeguard the balance of power between partners. Conversely, in more cohesive alliances or single-party governments, which are less

Table 1. OLS Regression for the Factors Affecting the Share of Technocratic Ministers Appointed in a Cabinet.

	Systemic level	Party system level	Cabinet level	Full model
(Intercept)	-2.96 (3.03)	-2.74 (2.78)	0.19 (3.10)	-0.37 (2.63)
Decade	0.0001 (0.00)	0.0001 (0.00)	-0.0001 (0.00)	0.0002 (0.00)
Unemployment (lagged)	-0.05 (0.30)			-0.12 (0.26)
GDP growth (lagged)	-0.25 (0.24)			-0.25 (0.19)
Perception of corruption (CPI)	-0.002* (0.00)			-0.001 (0.00)
System: Semi-presidential (baseline: Parliamentary)		0.06 (0.04)		0.05 (0.04)
Electoral law: Proportional (baseline: other formulas)		-0.001 (0.05)		0.005 (0.03)
Volatility		0.0003 (0.00)		-0.0003 (0.00)
Access		-0.0008 (0.00)		-0.0001 (0.00)
Polarization, system level		0.13 (0.13)		0.18 (0.10)
Coalition Type: single-party (baseline: coalition government)			-0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)
Left-right (cabinet)			-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Ideological heterogeneity (cabinet)			-0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)
Weight of populist parties in government (cabinet)			0.32*** (0.05)	0.27*** (0.06)
R ²	0.12	0.09	0.17	0.28
Adj. R ²	0.11	0.07	0.15	0.24
Num. obs.	277	277	276	276
RMSE	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.10
N Clusters	30	30	30	30

GDP: gross domestic product; CPI: Corruption Perception Index; RMSE: root mean square error. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

constrained by ideological divisions, there is greater freedom to appoint sympathetic external figures. This is because technocratic figures can be more easily controlled by the party in government (Theis, 2001: 582). As the number of parties in coalitions increases, the need for monitoring through junior (partisan) ministers also increases (Lipsmeyer and Pierce, 2011; Theis, 2001). As a result, technocratic ministers become more difficult to control by all parties in the coalition, leading to reduced incentive for parties to appoint technocrats.

This resonates with the theoretical and empirical contribution of Dowding and Dumont (2009), who argue that coalitions face more difficulties than single-party governments in forming a cohesive cabinet. This is because there are fewer positions available for party high ranks, and parties and prime ministers often have different strategies regarding cabinet composition (see also Alexiadou, 2015). These constraints on parties make it more challenging for the prime minister to assemble the best possible cabinet (Dowding and Dumont, 2009: 8–10).

As a robustness check, we replicated our models by including the GAL-TAN dimension for both cabinet-level heterogeneity and cabinet ideological positions. However, neither the left–right nor GAL-TAN variables were significantly correlated with the share of technocratic ministers in the government (see Table A6 of the Supplemental Appendix).

Interestingly, the strongest effect we observed was related to the strength of populist parties in government, corroborating H5. The higher the share of seats controlled by populist parties within the government, the greater the share of technocratic ministers appointed. Our data do not allow us to explain why populist parties prefer technocrats over partisans. However, we can speculate that it may be due to an elective ideological affinity between populism and technocracy (Caramani, 2017) or the lack of experienced and competent personnel, as populist parties have traditionally maintained the role of ‘challengers’ in several European systems for decades. It is also possible that populist parties, precisely because of their ‘challenger’ status, aim to appear as reliable governing partners in the eyes of the public opinion and other coalitionable parties. Therefore, they opt for non-partisan experts to defuse scepticism regarding their governing capabilities.

The fourth model, which includes all the predictors from the previous models, aligns with the findings of the previous models. Even in this last model, the strength of populist parties in the government is positively and significantly associated with technocratic appointments.

Conclusions

Appointing technocratic ministers may be attractive in contemporary European politics for several reasons. First, party legitimacy has eroded significantly over the last decades (Ignazi, 2017), party linkages is shrinking (van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014), and the traditional model of ‘party government’ (Mair, 2008) is increasingly under scrutiny (Bohle, 2014). Recruiting ministers outside partisan circles could therefore be tempting for parties to respond to this legitimacy crisis. However, so far, there has been only limited research trying to explain what factors appear to facilitate the appointment of technocratic ministers. And the most recent studies tend to concentrate on the role of economic crises – arguing that unfavourable business cycles lead to the appointment of technocrats (Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019; Kaplan, 2017), while institutional explanations have been only marginally touched upon in the literature in the last years (Amorim Neto and Samuels, 2010; Amorim Neto and Strøm, 2006). In this article, we have tried to examine a wider set of factors that might lead to appointing more technocratic ministers in national governments, focusing first on an untested systemic-level variable and then adding party system and cabinet-level features to the picture.

We have relied on a recent data set that is providing detailed information on the presence of technocratic ministers in cabinets across 30 European democracies between 2000 and 2020. Our findings add important explanations to the factors leading to the appointment of technocratic ministers and, at the same time, allow us to put previous findings of the literature in a broader context.

We first find that corruption matters, but the effect is rather negligible. At the individual level, higher levels of corruption lead citizens to prefer technocrats in government (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017). Furthermore, earlier research has shown how corruption affects political and institutional trust (Choi, 2014), nurturing the rise of radical right (Ziller and Schubel, 2015) and anti-establishment parties (Engler, 2020). In such contexts, political parties might be more inclined to select technocratic ministers as an attempt to deal with their legitimacy. In our analysis, the relationship between corruption levels and the technocratic nature of the cabinet is weak, albeit not absent. Further research in this regard should examine whether this association is still present when restricting the analysis to the appointment of specific ministers, such as Justice or Economy, which are the most common portfolios when it comes to technocratic appointments.

Second, party system factors such as electoral volatility or party system polarization are not robustly associated with having more technocratic ministers. Our findings do not support these hypotheses. However, we acknowledge that our broad geographical scope within Europe, coupled with a limited timeframe, may attenuate the significance of certain factors (e.g. volatility) that have been identified as relevant in longitudinal research focusing on Western Europe (Emanuele et al., 2022). In this regard, populist governments in CEE have clearly influenced our results, exemplified, for instance, by the significant presence of technocratic ministers (> 20%) in countries such as Hungary (Orban I, II and IV governments), Bulgaria (Saxe-Coburg-Gotha I, Borisov I and III governments), the Czech Republic (Babiš I), Poland (Marcinkiewicz I, II and Kaczyński governments), and Slovakia (Fico I and II governments). However, as our models demonstrated, the impact of populist government participation cannot be dismissed as merely a regional characteristic, as evidenced, for example, by the substantial technocratic presence (> 10%) in Austria (Schüssel II and Kurz I cabinets), Greece (Tsipras II cabinet), Italy (Berlusconi II, III, and Conte I, II cabinets) and Spain (Sanchez III cabinet). Previous studies have suggested that technocratic ministers were more commonly selected by left-wing governments to reassure financial markets and international institutions (Alexiadou et al., 2021; Kaplan, 2017), especially in the finance or economy portfolios. However, our findings do not confirm this hypothesis. The irrelevance of the ideology is also corroborated by our findings on cabinet heterogeneity: while on a general ground, and using a different point of departure, we can confirm Amorim Neto and Strøm (2006)'s intuition, for which it was cabinet unity, rather than its fragmentation that pushes technocratic appointment, the relation between cabinet ideological heterogeneity and technocratic appointment is not significant. However, it is worth noting that when governments are more cohesive and less constrained by ideological divisions, they tend to appoint more technocrat. This suggests that when there is less partisan conflict within the coalition, parties are more likely to agree on appointing an external non-partisan figure for their expertise and credibility.

Overall, one factor appears to have a significant impact on the appointment of technocratic ministers: the strength of populist parties. Our findings suggest that when populist parties are stronger in government, there is an increase in the number of technocratic ministers in cabinets. This relationship between populism and technocracy warrants further investigation in future research. Our data demonstrate an elective affinity between these two concepts (see Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2018; Caramani, 2017), as evidenced by the appointment of more technocrats when populist parties hold greater power. However, the exact reasons for this affinity are not clear. It remains uncertain whether populists appoint technocrats to enhance their credibility and reputation as problem-solvers, whether they have a disdain for partisanship itself, or if they lack qualified personnel

within their ranks. Nevertheless, it is evident that populists have a preference for technocrats. We also acknowledge that our article has some limitations: we have investigated a limited set of institutional factors pulling technocratic appointments, based on the main findings in the literature. Further research is nonetheless needed to explore more in-depth other potential explanatory variables, such as the constitutional provisions on ministers' appointment in each country. Due to the wide range of countries covered in this article, we did not explore this issue, which nonetheless deserves further attention in the future. We also did not dig into micro-level explanations related to the coalition bargaining among parties: this is another important aspect that we hope can be explored in the future, along with our cabinet-level variables to corroborate or disconfirm our findings.

These findings emphasize that the appointment of technocratic ministers is influenced by a broader range of factors beyond economic conditions or the desire of presidents to control non-partisan ministers more easily. They highlight the need for further research not only on other continents but also through case-based qualitative studies on government formation, ministerial selection and the political impact of specific technocratic governments. Such studies can provide valuable insights into the underlying processes that lead to the appointment of technocratic ministers instead of traditional partisan ministers. By employing these approaches, we can gain a better understanding of the transformations in party and government politics that are manifested in the growing number of technocratic ministers appointed in recent years across many democracies (Costa Pinto et al., 2018).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no.: 773023).

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Supplemental Material

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive Statistics – Continuous Variables.

Table A2. Descriptive Statistics – Categorical Variables.

Table A3. Correlation Matrix of the Continuous Variables.

Table A4. Polychoric Correlation Coefficient Between Continuous Variables and Discrete Variables.

Table A5. Polychoric Correlation Coefficient of the Discrete Variables.

Table A6. Causes of Technocratic Ministers' Appointment (Robustness Checks).

Table A7. Causes of Technocratic Ministers' Appointment – Interactions Between Main Independent Variables and West/East Dummy.

Table A8. Causes of Technocratic Ministers' Appointment – Interactions Between Main Independent Variables and West/East Dummy – Robustness Checks.

Table A9. Causes of Technocratic Ministers' Appointment (Robustness Checks with Presidential Power). The Sample Does Not Include Constitutional Monarchies.

Notes

1. For example, the appointment of Mario Draghi as Italian PM in 2021 was due to a political crisis within the incumbent coalition government, but also related to the high-level profile of Draghi as a technocrat (Garzia and Karremans, 2021).
2. The data are elaborated from Costa Pinto et al.'s chapters in the book.
3. The data set includes all the EU and EFTA countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.
4. As a matter of fact, only a handful of cases meet the first two criteria, but not the third. This is understandable, as outsiders should be theoretically appointed precisely for their expertise or their experience in their sector. We run our analyses with and without those cases and the results do not change.
5. Technocratic-led governments, defined as government with a technocrat as prime minister but with both partisan and technocratic ministers, are also included (see McDonnell and Valbruzzi, 2014). For a robustness check, we also tested our models including technocratic governments (see Table A6 of the Supplemental Appendix).
6. Polarization = $\frac{\sum_{i=1}^n |C - x_i| w_i}{\text{Polarization Max}}$ where C represents the weighted mean of the ideological positions on L-R within each party system; x_i measures the L-R position of each party; w is the party's importance weight (expressed in vote-share); and *Polarization max* indicates the theoretical maximum that the index can reach to standardize the measurement on a 0–1 scale.
7. Ideological position & polarization are calculated both on the L-R and on the GAL/TAN dimensions.
8. We include in Table A6 of the Supplemental Appendix – a series of robustness checks for H4 and H5 on ideological position and ideological heterogeneity of the cabinets, in which we replace the left–right scores with GAL-TAN scores. The results are robust.
9. This variable has been transformed into a categorical variable, with three levels (instead of two): single-party government, coalition government and technocratic government. This way we include also governments that are likely to be appointed after a crisis. The results do not change.

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