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# Technocratic Ministers and Political Leadership in European Democracies

Edited by António Costa Pinto, Maurizio Cotta, Pedro Tavares de Almeida



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António Costa Pinto • Maurizio Cotta  
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# Technocratic Ministers and Political Leadership in European Democracies

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# Beyond Party Government? Technocratic Trends in Society and in the Executive

*António Costa Pinto, Maurizio Cotta,  
and Pedro Tavares de Almeida*

The election in 2017 to the politically prestigious position of president of the French Republic of Emmanuel Macron, a young man with the typical profile of a French technocrat and no partisan background is just another episode which revives the old question: Who governs in democratic regimes? Or, to be more specific, who are the men and women who occupy the positions of head of government or minister, and from these positions bear the responsibility of driving national policymaking and steering the state machine? A couple of decades ago the answer to these questions would have been straightforward, at least for European democracies: party men and (fewer) party women. The ranks of cabinets were predominantly

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filled by people who not only had an explicit party label but who had moved to this position after a generally long political career spent in the local and national offices of party organizations and in parliament (Blondel and Thiébault 1991). This fact was commonly seen as one of the best established consequences of ‘party government’ (Katz 1986; Blondel and Cotta 1996 and 2000). Today we are much less sure about the dominance of the party mode of governance. In fact, while a prominent ‘parliamentary-*cum*-party’ route to ministerial positions persists in some countries—e.g. Britain (Yong and Hazel 2011; Yong and Bennister 2011), Germany (Kaiser and Fischer 2009; Fleischer and Seyfried 2015) or Belgium (Dumont et al. 2009)—there are also numerous recent examples of non-political ministers (and even, in a few cases, non-political prime ministers), without prior party/parliamentary background.

With few exceptions (a sprinkle of celebrities, sports and entertainment personalities), non-political ministers are characterized by what we may call, in a broad sense, ‘expertise’. Their educational and professional qualifications and their background in high-ranking positions in state administration, international organizations, private enterprises or the academic world are what differentiate them from party professionals, whose main credentials are to have spent their time rising to the top of the governmental ladder from within the ranks of party organizations and parliamentary life (Best and Cotta 2000).

These experts or specialists hold in general, but not always, ministerial portfolios that correspond to their specialized skills and professional training. They are sometimes chosen for their technical and managerial capacities, regardless of the specific policy areas of government, and to some extent precisely because they do not have a ‘party stigma’.

This phenomenon requires, firstly, to be more carefully documented: What is its diffusion? What are the variations across countries and over time? It must then be explained: Which are the factors that affect its diffusion and development? Finally, it should be interpreted: What is its meaning for democratic governance? Is it compatible with, or is it a dangerous challenge to, this form of government?

While a more analytical interest in this topic, supported by empirical studies, is relatively recent, some of the underlying themes are very old. With the concept of technocracy, the discussion about the role of qualified experts in modern social and political life has a long tradition. It was probably with two early French sociologists, Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, that the theme was put forcefully on the agenda for the first time.

With a mix of analytical interest and strong normative accent, the two French authors not only highlighted the growing importance of scientific and ‘engineering’ skills in modern society, they also developed a philosophical and political project that asked for the recognition of a guiding role for technocrats in society. This role was, in their view, justified by the greater legitimacy, based upon the higher competence, of this new social group when compared to traditional aristocracies as well as to parliamentary politicians (Saint Simon 1821; Comte 1851–1854; Fisichella 1965).

Different versions of this theme have resurfaced in twentieth-century America (Akin 1977). Veblen (1921), Galbraith (1967) and Bell (1973) are just some of the authors who have debated in global terms the rise in contemporary society of technocrats and technocracy and have discussed the strengths and problems of this phenomenon. On a more specific level, we must also mention the discussion about ‘planning’ as a crucial instrument of governance which started with the Great Depression and continued after the Second World War, on both sides of the Atlantic. Planning, which obviously required the skills of experts, was seen as a response to the needs of economic reconstruction, to the expanded role of the state in the economy and to a significant extent also as a democratic alternative to the soviet model of economic 5-year plans (Fourquet 1980; Margairaz 1989; Schick 1966; DonVito 1969).

The discussion about the ascendance of technocracy has often gone hand in hand with doubts about the solidity of democracy and its ability to face the problems of the day. Depending on the point of view, technocracy has been alternatively seen as a positive or negative response to a frail democracy (Engelen et al. 2012). The power of technocracy has been many times contrasted to that of elected politicians and its mode of decision considered symptomatic of a pernicious decline in the quality of democracy (Fischer 1990). As J. Habermas underlined, technocratic strategies offer an element of expert-scientific legitimation, not as a complement but as an alternative to open and public political deliberation (1975). An interpretation challenged by Pettit (2004) and Rosanvallon (2008), who on the contrary stress the complementarity and sometimes positive role of technocracy for democratic legitimation. Overall, however, technocracy and democracy have been for many an almost zero-sum game (Bertsou and Pastorella 2015).

Progressively, with the consolidation of democratic regimes and the rise (and scientific ‘discovery’) of party government in most European countries and elsewhere (Katz 1986), political scientists had predominantly

sidelined the topic when discussing the central mechanisms of governance. From time to time, however, particularly when analysing some of the shortcomings of democratic processes, for instance, the ‘short-termism’ of elected politicians, the role of experts and technocrats in policymaking was posited as a potential antidote (Alesina and Tabellini 2008).

In two more specialized fields of research, however, greater attention has been paid to the role of experts in contemporary politics. Policy studies have long recognized the importance of experts, working side by side with politicians, in the decision-making process. With metaphors such as ‘iron triangles’, ‘policy (or epistemic) communities’, ‘issue networks’, scholars of this field have developed the conceptual tools for incorporating this type of actors in their analyses. In a similar way, the study of independent authorities, a growing phenomenon which has spread from the United States to Europe towards the end of the twentieth century, has recognized the crucial role of expertise (Majone 1994). When important policy sectors are delegated to independent authorities, such as central banks or regulatory bodies, it is more or less explicitly acknowledged that experts are better suited to administer certain domains than representative politicians.

More recently the discussion has also focused on the recruitment of ministers and has paid increasing attention to the proliferation of non-partisan ministers. This has happened in connection, on the one hand, with a broader debate about the presumed weakening of the party government model and, on the other hand, with the discussion about ongoing changes in the parliamentary form of government and with an emerging interest in non-parliamentary forms of government such as presidentialism and semi-presidentialism and their consequences. It must be added that the two themes have often been seen as interdependent.

The weakening of party organizations and of their social roots has been extensively documented and analysed (Whiteley 2011; Van Biezen et al. 2012). In fact both the old proliferation of paid employment and appointed party functionaries, and the professionalization of party activists and officials are declining (Pakulski and Tranter 2015). Additionally, a number of recent studies have focused their attention on the changing role of the heads of government, suggesting a trend of increased authority of prime ministers over other ministers and the party organization (Foley 1993;

Helms 1996 and 2005; Poguntke and Webb 2005). The phenomenon, christened ‘presidentialization’—a term strongly rejected by others who would prefer ‘prime-ministerialization’ or personalization (Dowding 2013)—is by some authors considered relevant also to the themes discussed here, particularly in the selection of ministers. At the same time, the strong diffusion among recent democracies of the constitutional form generally defined as ‘semi-presidentialism’ (Duverger 1980; Elgie 1999 and 2011), has stimulated a new wave of studies devoted to analysing the differences between parliamentary, presidential and semi-presidential forms of government as well as within each of them. These studies have also raised questions about the consequences of the different forms of government upon the recruitment of ministers and the relations between the head of the executive and the members of the cabinet.

Recently two other themes have been suggested as being connected with the role of experts in politics: the occurrence of deep economic crises and the growing constraints originating from forms of multi-level governance, as is noted in the EU. Both phenomena have been proposed as potential factors favouring the rise of expert ministers in cabinets, to respond to the special challenges of these situations.

This book proposes to analyse, in a sample of European countries, the weight of non-partisan, technocratic recruitment in governments with the ambition of providing, in the first place, an accurate mapping of the phenomenon and, secondly, to explore some of the potential explanatory factors. Our study concentrates its attention on Europe for three main reasons: First, this is the region of the world where party government has found its fullest development, but also where the party systems generated by the recent waves of democratization have been considered as substantially weaker (Blondel and Muller-Rommel 1993; Blondel, Muller-Rommel and Malóva 2007). Secondly, Europe is the region where the parliamentary form of government is the most diffuse, but also where, in recent times, semi-presidential forms of governments have proliferated. Thirdly, Europe has seen with the EU, the development of a particularly strong form of multi-level governance. There are thus good reasons for an in-depth exploration of cabinet recruiting patterns in this area of the world.

In the next section, we will provide a more systematic overview of the existing literature, before, in the final section, describing our research strategy, the selection of cases and the operationalization of the variables.

## PATTERNS OF RECRUITMENT AND CAREER PATHS OF MINISTERIAL ELITES: THE ONGOING DEBATE

Parliamentarism and party government have long been seen as the defining features of post-1945 European democracies. With political parties virtually monopolizing elections, parliamentary assemblies and government formation, a partisan and a representative background were the indispensable pre-requisites in the career paths of ministerial aspirants. This predominant recruitment pattern was congruent with the higher systemic professionalization of modern polities (Borchert and Zeiss 2003) and with the rise of party-based professionalism among MPs (Allum 1995; Best and Cotta 2000; Tavares de Almeida et al. 2003; Cotta and Best 2007).

With a few significant exceptions, the presence of individuals appointed as mere experts, and without effective political experience, was seen as a rare occurrence in most executives. Country studies provided abundant empirical evidence in this direction (Dogan 1979; Headey 1974; King 1981; Calise and Mannheimer 1982). A seminal comparative work analysing 13 European countries between 1945 and 1984 (Blondel and Thiébault 1991) could establish that ‘outsiders’—defined as ministers without a parliamentary career and also without previously holding a leading party position (a definition quite similar to the one adopted in this book)—comprised, on average, fewer than 12.3% of all ministers (De Winter 1991). Variations of some significance were indeed to be found (the Netherlands with 36% and Luxembourg with 33% of outsiders were the outliers of that sample of countries, showing that in some cases the relationship between parliament and government could not be equally tight), but overall the model of party/parliamentary government was rather clearly confirmed. Moreover, when comparing earlier years with the period after 1964, a slight increase in the dominance of this model could even be seen (Cotta 1991).

This does not mean, however, that post-war European ministers were only chosen from among pure-politicians, the so-called generalists, regardless of their technical competence in any particular policy field. The conceptual distinction between ‘politicians’ and ‘experts’, or ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, is undoubtedly useful but should not be applied as a rigid dichotomy, since these categories are not always mutually exclusive. Indeed, a significant number of ministers do combine both skills, and while qualifying as professional politicians they may also add expert

knowledge acquired through their education and former occupational training, or through experience in parliamentary and governmental committees (Baturó 2016; Alexiadou 2016). The Blondel and Thiébaud study in fact found that a significant proportion of the political ministers exhibited previous service in public bureaucracies or in private professional positions. Their representative background was in fact complemented by some form of non-political expertise (Cotta 1991).

In recent decades, however, in a number of European countries and also in other parts of the world, the career paths of members of government show, in varying degrees, the recruitment of a greater proportion of people coming from outside the realm of politics and selected mostly on the basis of their technical knowledge and specialized expertise (Strøm 2000a; Yong and Hazel 2011). Some of them may have a loose partisan affiliation or connection (they are not pure ‘independents’), but they lack experience as national representatives or locally elected officers and never served in party executive committees. This tendency seems more pronounced in the ‘third wave’ democracies, but also occurs in a few older parliamentary democracies. Also significant is the fact that these experts, very frequently labelled ‘technocrats’ whenever they are trained in the ‘applied sciences’, namely, as engineers and economists (Meynaud 1964; Putnam 1977; Hira 2007), have increasingly occupied key executive positions (e.g. as finance ministers) and emerged as powerful actors in the decision-making process, sometimes challenging the prominent role of full-time politicians. A similar trend has also been observed in Latin America since the 1990s (Centeno and Silva 1998; Williams 2006; Dargent 2015). Moreover, fully technocratic governments—‘composed of all non-partisan, expert ministers and headed by a non-partisan prime minister’ (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014; Pastorella 2015; Brunclik 2015)—have been appointed more frequently, mainly as an alternative solution for crisis resolution.

If this phenomenon is more than an exception, what can explain it? Why is the presence of non-political ministers so significant? Why has it increased with time? We must also ask why the dimensions of this phenomenon vary across countries. In recent years a growing number of contributions have started to address these questions and have proposed a variety of explanatory hypotheses.

The most general assessments consider it as an indicator and evidence of the increasing complexity and sophisticated nature of modern-day governance, a major factor conducive to technocratic solutions and the assignment of sensitive policy issues to experts (Meynaud 1964 and 1967;

Putnam 1976; Fischer 2009). Other explanations focus on more specific institutional and political variables, which are supposedly correlated with the changing pattern of ministerial selection. These variables include: the constitutional framework of government, namely, the implications of the widespread diffusion of semi-presidential systems; the cabinet format (coalition vs. single party; majority vs. minority) (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006; Protsyk 2005a, 2006 and 2011; Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009; Amorim Neto and Samuels 2010); the so-called presidentialization of politics and the growing empowerment and autonomy of national chief executives (Poguntke and Webb 2005; McAllister 2007), a trend that some believe to be reinforced by Europeanization (Johansson and Raunio 2010; Johansson and Tallberg 2010) and the (declining) organizational strength and perceived reputation of mainstream parties, closely related with falling public trust in politicians (Blondel and Cotta 2000; Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Krouwel 2012).

The constitutional and political framework of government is one of the most accredited explanations for the presence of non-partisan ministers in democratic governments (Strøm 2000b). Using game theoretical (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006) or principal-agent (Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009) approaches, two recent studies focusing specifically on this variable have hypothesized the existence of a significant difference between parliamentary forms of government, where government portfolios should be more frequently controlled by parties, and semi-presidential ones, where a greater proportion of ministerial positions would escape party control. The new wave of democratizations in central and eastern Europe, which has brought a new diffusion of semi-presidential governments should, accordingly, have strengthened the presence of technocratic ministers (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006; Sedelius and Mashtaler 2013). Another study hypothesizes that presidential governments should be the most inclined to recruit non-partisan ministers (Amorim Neto and Samuels 2010).

Why should forms of government matter? The basic idea behind this hypothesis is that an elected president (a common feature of the pure presidential form and of the ‘mixed’ semi-presidential form), who enjoys a direct popular legitimation and is not dependent in his office from parliament, enjoys greater freedom than a parliamentary prime minister in the choice of ministers. The lesser need to pay attention to the parliamentary/party base should reduce the incentives to fill the cabinet with partisans (otherwise needed to gain and maintain support in parliament) and leave

the president freer to pick ministers from other backgrounds. In the past, agency risks in presidential cabinets and in the relations between presidents and their own parties had not been sufficiently discussed by the literature. More focused research indicates that party-affiliated ministers are not always reliable agents for presidents, ‘and presidents appoint non-partisan ministers to limit agency loss’, as a study on partisanship of single-party cabinets in 12 Latin American countries convincingly claims (Martinez-Gallardo and Schleiter 2015). Expertise and personal loyalty will therefore have greater weight in the selection. The situation is obviously more complex in semi-presidential than in presidential systems, as in the former the cabinet is constitutionally subservient to a double principal—the president as well as the parliamentary majority, which has the power of confidence over the government.

The decline of parties in older democracies or the weaker development of parties in more recent democracies should produce a structural and long-term reduction of their ability (and in particular that of parties in parliament) to supply a sufficient pool of qualified candidates for positions of ministerial responsibility. The supply by parties of ‘ministrables’ could be affected also by more short-term and conjunctural effects such as a long period in office leading to a certain exhaustion of internal resources and to the need to look outside of party ranks.

Leaving aside for the time being some of the problems related to the quality of data and the conceptual categories employed, what are the main results obtained so far? Based on a sample of 134 European cabinets representing 12 semi-presidential and 12 purely parliamentary (republican) regimes in the 1990s, Amorim Neto and Strøm show that semi-presidentialism increases the probability of having non-political ministers (2006, pp. 636–637). ‘Owing to their direct ties to voters and more extensive constitutional powers, popularly elected presidents are more prone to try to influence cabinet formation than their parliament-selected counterparts’ (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006, p. 673). Using a somewhat larger set of data, covering 57 countries and including presidential, semi-presidential and both monarchical and republican parliamentary systems, over the period 1980–2000, Amorim Neto and Samuels affirm that the greatest difference is to be found between presidentialism and the two other forms of government. ‘The institutional leap from semi-presidentialism to pure presidentialism appears to have the largest effect on the relative degree of partisan composition of the cabinet’ (Amorim Neto and Samuels 2010, p. 14). Differences between parliamentary system

and semi-presidentialism in the recruitment of ministers exist but are definitely smaller (Amorim Neto and Samuels 2010, pp. 14–15). Placing the three forms of government—parliamentarism, semi-presidentialism and pure presidential system—on a continuum defined in terms of the influence (from weakest to strongest) of the head of state over cabinet appointments, Amorim Neto and Samuels find that, *ceteris paribus*, the stronger the executive and the more direct the role of electors in the executive's investiture, the higher the proportion of non-partisans in the cabinet.

Since, especially among semi-presidential systems, the variability of presidential powers is remarkable, most studies also introduce a measure of these powers as one of the crucial explanatory variables (Siaroff 2003). Using measures derived from established works such as those of Shugart and Carey (1992) and Metcalf (2000), a number of contributions have tried to establish a more precise relationship between the proportion of non-partisan ministers and the variable powers of the head of state. The hypothesis put forward is that, independently from the specific constitutional form of government, the stronger the powers of the head of state, the greater will be his or her ability to resist the influence of parliamentary parties in the selection of ministers and thus a greater space will be opened for the recruitment of non-partisans. The empirical evidence provides mixed support for this hypothesis: This variable is found to have a positive impact in the study of European parliamentary and semi-presidential regimes (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006), but is not significant in a more temporally extended study also covering presidential regimes (Amorim Neto and Samuels 2010).

Other political and institutional factors have also been evoked, sometimes in conjunction with the form of government, to explain our phenomenon. It has been suggested, for instance, that in parliamentary systems, high-party system fragmentation tends to lead to stalemated legislatures, which then favour the formation of occasional caretaker cabinets who will be relatively more likely to have non-partisan ministers (Linz and Shain 1994). In semi-presidential regimes, when the parliament's ability to bargain is inhibited by party fragmentation, presidential influence rises, and party control over portfolios declines (Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009). Let us not forget also that semi-presidential regimes (and sometimes even parliamentary ones with strong parliamentary elected presidents) have more caretakers or interim governments than pure parliamentary ones. Technocratic cabinets, defined as cabinets with a non-partisan prime minister and a majority of non-partisan ministers, similarly

to minority cabinets, have been found to be associated with fragmented parliaments in central and eastern European democracies (Protsyk 2005b). More broadly, the proportion of non-partisan ministers in the cabinet is found to increase as legislative fragmentation increases in all systems (Amorim Neto and Samuels 2010) (yet this relationship did not hold in another, more restricted, study) (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006). The incidence of non-partisan appointments was also found to rise with electoral volatility and to be higher with minority than with majority governments (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006).

The impact of electoral systems has also been examined as a potential factor. Based on a cross-country analysis of post-communist experiences where, in comparison to the broader European context, the share of non-partisan ministers looks very high, Protsyk has explored the combination of a version of semi-presidentialism that includes a constitutionally powerful president with single-member district/mixed electoral system. His conclusion is that this situation favours the ability of presidents to enhance their control over parliament and the cabinet (and thus to have less party-dominated governments). In countries with ‘little tradition of multi-party politics, such a combination will further deter structuration of politics along party lines and will affect patterns of executive accountability and responsiveness’ (Protsyk 2011, pp. 107–110).

The ‘presidentialization of politics’ is another factor which has been often discussed in this context. For some scholars several interrelated processes have led to a political process increasingly moulded by the inherent logic of presidentialism implying stronger leadership power and autonomy of the prime minister within the executive (Poguntke and Webb 2005). The presidentialization hypothesis highlights the augmented centralization in the cabinet and an electoral process increasingly focused on the personality of prime ministers, who more and more approximate the chief executives of presidential systems and who select ministers from outside parliament to bolster their cabinets’ effectiveness (Bäck et al. 2009).

It has been strongly debated whether presidentialization is the best term to designate such phenomena (Dowding 2013; Webb and Poguntke 2013). Critics affirm that if there has been an increase in the powers of prime ministers this has made them *less similar* rather than more similar to (American) presidents at least with regard to legislative activities, as US presidents have a much tougher job than prime ministers in obtaining success for their policies. Prime-ministerialization or personalization would be better words to designate this trend (Dowding 2013). Leaving

aside the general discussion about this phenomenon, a number of country studies suggest that, thanks to an enhanced role (more presidentialized or more prime-ministerialized) prime ministers in parliamentary and sometimes in semi-presidential countries, have gained a greater autonomy (from parties and parliamentary groups) in the selection of ministers and this can be conducive to a larger selection of non-partisan ministers. Spain and Portugal, two countries with different forms of government (fully parliamentary Spain and semi-presidential Portugal), are major examples of one-party cabinets with highly presidentialized features, increasing cabinet dominance over the party and with (some) prime ministers using executive leadership as an instrument to control the party (Pinto and Tavares de Almeida 2009). A specific study of Spanish cabinets indicates, however, a significant degree of variation in this respect as some cabinets have been formed only by party ministers, while other cabinets have had a majority of non-partisan ministers; personal loyalty to the prime minister is perhaps the crucial factor in this (Rodríguez Teruel 2010). Studies of Scandinavian cabinets have also provided some evidence in the same direction (Beckman 2006; Bäck et al. 2009)

For Member States of the European Union, the phenomenon of presidentialization (or, if we prefer, prime-ministerialization) of government, with all its consequences, has been ascribed at least in part to the effects of the advances of European integration and in particular to the role of summitry in decision-making (Johansson and Tallberg 2010). The role played by prime ministers in the European Council and the needs of intergovernmental bargaining should have contributed to increase their autonomy, also with implications in the selection of cabinet ministers. In particular, European integration, as it strengthens the need for technocrats able to master the coordination of national and EU policies, would discourage the presence of MPs in cabinets (Bäck et al. 2009).

Finally, we should not forget the impact (possibly accrued in European countries by EU related constraints) of critical junctures, namely, political and/or financial crises. The technocratic elements of European integration (independent agencies and binding rules on economic affairs) have expanded dramatically in scope (Sánchez-Cuenca 2017), and many scholars have suggested that economic conditions and the need to pursue efficiency affect the likelihood of technocrats entering the ministry. In a global sample, negative economic conditions seem to increase the likelihood of non-partisan technocrats entering the cabinet and some studies illustrate that executives have greater incentives to appoint non-partisans

when the economy is in crisis (Amorim Neto and Samuels 2010). Counterintuitively, however, in a previous study, a negative relationship between the two factors was suggested (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006). In the context of the implementation of structural reforms during the 1990s, Latin American scholars have developed an important number of studies on the performance and impact of powerful non-partisan ministers within presidential cabinets (Centeno and Silva 1998; Silva 2009). Signals to the electorate, the business community and international investors, as well as the position of the country in the business cycle, are powerful elements of explanation for partisan shifts in technocratic appointments in the region (Kaplan 2016).

Since we can assume that technocratic cabinets will have a higher than normal number of non-political ministers, the question as to whether there is a close relationship between critical junctures and ‘technocratic cabinets’ is also relevant to our topic. While in some cases it is quite clear that such cabinets can be associated with the impact of the Eurozone crisis developing after 2008, a more systematic exploration of the diffusion of technocratic governments shows that they are not just a recent (if extraordinary) political phenomenon: From the end of the Second World War until June 2013, there have been 24 technocrat-led governments in 27 European Union democracies (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014). The relevance of factors like scandals, economic crisis and the fragmentation of the party system illustrates that the appointment of technocratic cabinets happens more frequently ‘when the political system is unstable, deadlocked or unable to face a situation of crisis (be it economic or political)’ (Pastorella 2015). It is interesting as well to stress that in these junctures the few studies we have on citizens’ attitudes in Europe indicate a preference for technocrats over party politicians (Bertsou and Pastorella 2015). This is not so surprising as the trust on parties has generally reached a very low level.

Last but not least, it can be observed that in critical junctures associated with unpopular reforms, involving cuts in social welfare, labour market liberalization and other hard decisions, politicians may be induced to invite technocratic or non-partisan ministers to the relevant portfolios in order to avoid high political costs to their political careers. A recent study of 13 west European democracies pointed out convincingly that in this type of crisis juncture, the primary motivation of prime ministers for the ministerial recruitment of technocrats is more related to their independence from electoral politics than to their expertise (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2015).

We cannot conclude this discussion of the literature without highlighting the fact that an important (but difficult) aspect is still almost unexplored: the consequences of the presence of technocratic elements in the government of democratic countries. Do non-partisan ministers (and even more non-partisan cabinets) perform differently in terms of policymaking? A recent study of Italian lawmaking which provides some preliminary evidence about this suggests this as a promising line of research (Pedrazzani 2017). Do they deliver what is expected from them or do they fail to deliver? And, on a higher level, do they mean a significant limitation of democracy by weakening the electoral delegation chain or can they be considered a useful remedy to protect democracy from some of its defects (short-termism, electoralism, demagoguery)? These are questions which at some point will have to be taken seriously.

### THIS BOOK AND ITS AIMS

This synthetic discussion of the recent literature suggests a number of observations concerning the themes debated and the results obtained. The first is that on the relevance of the phenomenon, there is a sufficient agreement in the literature. The presence of gaps in the ‘old normal’, that is, the model of party government, is a phenomenon, which clearly deserves to be more carefully analysed and which can also possibly help us to understand better, ‘by opposition’, the working of party government and its mechanisms of political delegation. The phenomenon can take either the extreme form of a fully technocratic cabinet, where both prime minister and ministers have non-political qualifications, or else entail the presence of a variable proportion of ministers with a technocratic background side by side with partisan ministers.

The second point concerns the size of the phenomenon, whether it is equally distributed across countries or not and whether it shows a growing trend over time. Variations across countries have been repeatedly documented (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006; Amorim Neto and Samuels 2010), but variations over time in a comparative perspective have received less systematic and specific attention (Strøm 2000a), except perhaps for the more limited phenomenon of fully technocratic cabinets (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014). With regard to comparative analyses of this phenomenon, which use an extensive research strategy, some caveats can be raised about the quality of the data used. In most of the cases, data come from already existing data collections (Woldendorp et al. 2000; Strøm 2000a) not specifically designed for analysing this phenomenon. While

there are no doubts about the general quality of these data collections, the criteria used for defining partisan and non-partisan ministers are not always as clearly operationalized and standardized as it would be required when zooming in on our topic.

The third point concerns the explanations offered for this phenomenon. Highly different factors have been proposed. To remind them we can provide a list of the most frequently discussed factors:

1. Forms of government
2. Powers of the head of state
3. Government fragmentation
4. Legislative fragmentation
5. Cabinet status (majority vs. minority; single party vs. coalition)
6. Electoral system
7. Decline of parties
8. Presidentialization of government
9. European integration
10. Economic crises
11. Age of democracy

To organize this rich field of hypothetical factors we can read them from the point of view of their potentially negative impact upon the party government model and the ‘voters-parliament-cabinet’ delegation model associated with it. All these factors are hypothesized to be relevant, at least in principle, because they in some way contradict the operating mechanisms of party government (which entails that a collective body with some sort of programmatic identity/platform plays the role of intermediary between voters and the government and that this intermediary role is predominantly implemented through the parliamentary assembly). The ability to mobilize electoral (and then parliamentary) support, to provide collective loyalty in decision-making and to groom a personnel suited for these purposes, are the classic resources which parties in their best shape can offer (or, one could say, impose) to the government thanks to their organization and programmatic/ideological identity. The impact of these resources can be weakened either because of factors internal to the working of party government itself which reduce their supply and effectiveness or because of external factors which reduce their demand. Moreover, the control of the parties upon ministerial selection can be diminished structurally, and with long-term effects, or conjuncturally and thus with short-term effects (Table 1.1).

**Table 1.1** Factors explaining technocratic government

	<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>
Short term	Cabinet status (majority vs. minority and single party vs. coalition) Government fragmentation	Economic crises
Long term	Party decline (and exhaustion of internal resources) Legislative fragmentation Presidentialization of government	Age of democracy EU integration Form of government Presidential powers Electoral system

Internal factors suggest effects from the side of supply and external factors from the side of demand. The distinction between long-term and short-term factors should be highlighted as the first will produce stable (and possibly growing) levels of non-partisan ministers while the second will produce more variable and reversible patterns.

In Table 1.2, we summarize the different factors, their theoretical background, the typical operationalization and also some of the problems arising at both the theoretical and empirical level.

How does this book innovate in comparison to previous studies and what are its limitations? Our strategy is a bit different from the strategies followed so far: There have been either in-depth case studies (data collecting and hypotheses generating) or extensive comparative analyses exploiting existing databases and testing different hypotheses with multivariate statistics. We acknowledge the merits of these strategies but we try to improve in respect to some of their problems. With respect to case studies, we add a comparative perspective which is better able to test the soundness of hypotheses; with respect to existing extensive comparative analyses, we provide a series of national ad hoc in-depth collections of data based on carefully standardized criteria. The confidence in the quality of data is thus enhanced. Admittedly our strategy will not enable us to provide robust tests of the influence of all the factors mentioned. It should however permit a more qualitatively articulated exploration of the relationship between some of the hypothesized explanatory factors and the mechanisms of ministerial recruitment and of their variations across countries and across time.

In this book we are able to provide detailed empirical evidence concerning the phenomenon of non-partisan, expert ministers in 14 European countries. The national cases selected include the Czech Republic, Estonia,

**Table 1.2** Explanatory factors

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Theoretical bases</i>	<i>Operationalization</i>	<i>Problems</i>
Form of government	Different forms of government influence the degree of autonomy of the head of the executive in the choice of ministers vis-à-vis the parliament	Classification of forms of government	The semi-presidential form of government (if formally defined) covers very different political arrangements affecting the powers of the president
Powers of the President	The constitutional powers attributed to the head of state influence the degree of autonomy of the head of the executive in the choice of ministers vis-à-vis the parliament	Different scales	Not all the powers listed in the scales are relevant for the phenomenon of non-political ministers. Beside formal powers also political situations which affect the relationship between president, prime minister and parliament should be considered
Government fragmentation	The fragmentation of the cabinet and the difficulties in the bargaining process should give more space to the head of the executive to assert its influence vis-à-vis parties	Effective number of parties in the cabinet	The opposite view would seem equally plausible: With many parties in government to accommodate the space for non-partisan ministers would be reduced
Legislative fragmentation	By making the formation of cabinets more difficult, and increasing the probability of caretaker governments it should increase the probability of full or mixed technocratic cabinets	Effective number of parties in parliament	The opposite view would seem equally plausible: With many parties in parliament to reward the space for non-partisan ministers would be reduced

*(continued)*

**Table 1.2** (continued)

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Theoretical bases</i>	<i>Operationalization</i>	<i>Problems</i>
Cabinet status	Minority governments will be more probably open to technocratic components	Type of parliamentary support	Minority governments are more probably single-party governments and this would run against the government fragmentation hypothesis
Electoral system	Single-member district (SMD) electoral systems should reduce the control of parties upon recruitment	SMD electoral systems vs. PR systems	The effects of electoral systems are strongly dependent from configurations of political actors (and their effects could change significantly)
Decline of parties	The organizational and ideological weakening of parties should reduce their supply of qualified personnel and increase the legitimacy of experts	Measures of party membership, measures of party identification	Risk of tautology: The decline of partisan ministers is in itself a measure of party decline
Presidentialization of government	The transformation of the role of the prime ministers should increase their ability to choose autonomously the ministers	Strengthening of the PM Office, enhanced electoral role of PM candidate	Ambiguities in the concept: presidentialization, or personalization or prime-ministerialization?
Economic crises	The policy solutions to a crisis require greater competence and their unpopularity incentivizes the shifting of the burden on non-elected ministers	GDP growth level, unemployment level	How strong must be a crisis to activate technocratic solutions?

*(continued)*

**Table 1.2** (continued)

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Theoretical bases</i>	<i>Operationalization</i>	<i>Problems</i>
European integration	The growing importance of European level decisions taken by the European Council should enhance the independence of heads of governments in national politics	Stages and levels of EU integration	Difficulties in defining precisely when the effects of European integration impact upon the role of national executives
Age of democracy	More recent democracies are supposed to have less consolidated party systems and thus leave a greater autonomy to heads of governments	Time from democratic instauration	The assumption linking age of democracy and party system consolidation is debatable

France, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey (a country which, depending on the point of view, can be considered European or non-European), thus covering a rich variety of democratic polities, with different institutional settings and divergent political paths. We have thus countries from Western and from Central-Eastern Europe, old democracies and new ones, pure parliamentary systems and semi-presidential ones (and with a significant variation in the role of the elected president), countries that have deeply suffered from the economic crisis of recent years and countries that have managed fairly well during the same period. The degree of fragmentation of their party systems and the degree of persistence or decay of the traditional party government also differ significantly. Although the period of time examined in each country varies according to the age of democracy, the data series collected enables us to scrutinize medium or even long-term trends—more than 20 years for the CEE countries and an even longer period for Western Europe and Turkey.

For the sake of cross-national comparisons, a common operational definition of ‘non-partisan minister’ is applied: people without a relevant

political background—they never held local office (e.g. mayor) and had no parliamentary experience (at regional, national or European level) nor a previous record in leading positions in a political party. In other words, people who have come to be members of the cabinet from outside the world of party politics and, presumably, on the basis of different qualifications (typically but not exclusively a specialized expertise in some domain). We distinguish them, therefore, from the ministers who have had a structured political background and have acquired their qualification to be minister through the channels of representative politics (having occupied party and parliamentary positions and/or local offices). As already mentioned, a simple affiliation to a party, without a formal role, is not considered as a sufficient element to qualify a minister as a party politician. As concerns parliamentary experience, we also include among non-political ministers those who, without a party career, were appointed to the cabinet shortly after being elected for a first mandate as deputies and had no time to occupy their seat in the legislature.

The country chapters cover six single case studies (France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Turkey), a binary comparison (Hungary and Romania) and one six-country comparison (Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and the three Baltic countries). The individual chapters follow a common format. They measure the extent and variations over time of the ministerial recruitment of non-partisan experts; they describe their background profile, the type of portfolio allocation and length of tenure (risk of dismissal) and, whenever possible, the post-ministerial career; and finally they discuss the range of potential driving factors which promote or inhibit the rise of this particular subset of ministerial appointees. The concluding chapter summarizes the main lines of inquiry presented in each chapter, pointing out similarities and convergences, as well as divergences related to historical legacies and contextual idiosyncrasies, and revisits the key explanatory factors underlying the role played by non-partisan experts in various European cabinets.

Bringing together a group of scholars with a sound record of publications in the field of elite studies, and relying on rich and unique empirical evidence for a large number of countries, harmonized and standardized for cross-national comparisons, this book hopefully offers a firm grounding and new insights into the current public and scholarly debates on the introduction of technocrats into politics, an expanding phenomenon with significant potential implications for the very fabric of democracy.

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