

The consequences of technocracy on electoral participation

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The enhanced involvement of technocratic personnel in European cabinets has contributed to fueling scholarly interest in this matter. However, while scholars have investigated the drivers of technocratic appointments and citizens' preferences regarding competence and expertise in government, little is known about the consequences technocracy has on relevant components of political systems' proper functioning. This article sheds light on this uncharted area by investigating the effect of technocratic presence in government on electoral participation. It does so by relying on an original time-series cross-section dataset in 20 Western European countries since 1945. This article unveils the effect of technocratic presence in government on aggregate electoral turnout, showing that technocratic presence in government significantly decreases participation. The article discusses the implications of these findings for the functioning of the political system and the quality of democracy.

Keywords: technocracy; turnout; governments; elections; Western Europe; time-series cross-section.

Introduction

Democracies are under strain. In most advanced democratic countries, turnout has plummeted over the last decades (e.g. [Blais 2000](#); [Gray and Caul 2000](#); [Mair 2002](#); [Franklin 2004](#)) and many scholars raised serious concerns about this trend ([Diamond and Morlino 2005](#); [Angelucci et al., 2024](#)). Indeed, although there is

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no consensus in identifying the ideal level of turnout for a democracy, scholars are basically unanimous in considering declining turnout as harming the well-functioning of a democratic regime and jeopardizing the legitimacy of representative democracies (Verba et al., 1995; Lijphart 1997).

These concerns are even more alarming in the perspective of the party government model. According to the latter, legitimation of political action comes from voters by means of political parties which are chosen and kept accountable through the electoral process (e.g. Castaldo and Verzichelli 2023). Accountability is thus anchored to the electoral process, and it is made possible by parties *through* parties (Schattschneider 1942). It is of little wonder, therefore, that the decline of voter turnout has been in fact considered as one of the most striking signals of the crisis of the party government model (Katz 1973; Mair 2005, 2008)—a crisis which has spurred debate about possible alternatives to it. In this respect, an increasingly relevant strand of literature has focused on technocracy as an alternative form of ruling to the classical partisan-centered representative model (Caramani 2017; Van der Linden et al. 2017; Eyal 2019; Mede, and Schäfer 2020; Bertsoy 2022).

In particular, as a consequence of the increased importance of technocracy and expertise in politics, the literature has extensively debated about the role of expertise in liberal-democratic contexts (Van der Linden et al. 2017; Eyal 2019; Mede and Schäfer 2020; Bertsoy 2022), highlighting the potential tensions between processes related to the party government model and processes that shy away from this ideal, such as technocracy and populism (Pastorella 2016; Caramani 2017; Bertsoy 2022). The technocratic model of representation, contrary to the party government ideal, revolves around an idea of common good that is not bargained between elected representatives, but it is provided from outside politics by non-partisan experts via their knowledge and expertise (Caramani 2017). Furthermore, technocratic decision-making lacks one crucial aspect of the party government ideal, i.e. accountability. Experts in a technocratic vision of the society should be evaluated for the output they produce by peers, not by people who lack the knowledge to make informed decisions. In that sense, technocratic decision-making aims to defuse conflicts and maximize efficiency (e.g. Pettit 2004; Rosanvallon 2011).

From this perspective, it follows that the role of electoral participation in the technocratic model should be marginal at best. To a certain extent, one might also argue that mass participation could be rather an obstacle to decision-making processes which should be informed by knowledge and expertise, especially when decisions concern highly polarized issues in society. At the same time, as long as technocrats holding office positions are in fact not accountable to citizens, the latter are left with no chance to evaluate policymakers' decisions by means of standard electoral channels. This is all the more true considering that, as evidence show, parties turn to technocratic appointments to dilute responsibility

in electorally turbulent times (Emanuele *et al.*, 2023): as technocrats are perceived as objectively qualified for the job and esteemed by international markets and supranational institutions, they are the perfect scapegoat for the unresponsive policies of the government and may help governmental parties to reduce the related electoral cost at the ballot box. In short, if the legitimacy of governmental action should be judged by peers, based on their knowledge and expertise, and if technocratic appointments dilute responsibility and reduce accountability, elections and citizens' participation might even become fundamentally irrelevant. In other words, an increased role of technocrats in government might push voters to stay away from the polls.

To the best of our knowledge, no study has so far empirically tested this argument. Indeed, while the scholarly literature has started to analyse the reasons underpinning technocratic appointments, much less discussed are the political implications of technocracy. At the same time, to the best of our knowledge, the literature on turnout has never properly reflected on the effect of government configurations on electoral participation. As a consequence, the two strands of literature respectively dealing with turnout and the rise of technocratic governments have not dialogued with one another, despite they both share the idea that turnout decline and the rise of technocracy are symptomatic of the decline of the party government model.

In this article, we try to connect these two phenomena, and we do so by taking as a point of departure the argument for which technocratic appointments, by making office holders less accountable through political parties, contribute to weakening the chain of delegation between voters and governments. In our perspective, this dynamic might feed a sense of dissatisfaction with and distrust in the democratic process among voters, which in turn might have negative consequences for electoral participation.

We define technocrats as independent, non-partisan ministers, i.e. with no political affiliation. Instead of limiting our analysis to fully technocratic cabinets (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014; Wratil and Pastorella 2018) or binary distinctions based on their presence in government (Semenova 2020), in this study we adopt a nuanced approach, accounting for technocratic positions in all types of governments, including political ones where technocrats serve alongside partisan ministers (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006; Emanuele *et al.*, 2023).

This study contributes to existing literature in two different ways: first, it reinvigorates the scientific investigation on the main determinants of declining turnout in advanced democracies. Second, it contributes to the burgeoning body of literature on technocracy: while existing studies have concentrated their efforts on understanding the reasons behind the consolidation of a technocratic form of ruling, this study stresses its consequences for turnout—a key element of representative democracy.

The article is structured as follows. The second section presents the theoretical framework and introduces the research hypotheses. Then, the third section illustrates the data utilized and the methodological approach. The fourth section presents the results of the analyses. Finally, the last section discusses the implications of the findings and concludes.

Framework of analysis and hypotheses

The role of technocracy: blessing or curse for turnout?

Over the past few decades, research on technocracy has developed considerably. This phenomenon has been investigated adopting different perspectives and looking at different facets of it. Before and after the important contribution by Caramani (2017), in which technocracy is understood as an alternative form of representation to both populism and traditional party government, scholars have provided detailed enquiries on the drivers behind the appointment of technocratic ministers, pointing to the impact of economic conditions (Wratil and Pastorella 2018; Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Brunclík and Parížek 2019; Semenova 2020), institutional settings (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006; Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009), populist actors (Pilet et al., 2023), and party strategies aiming at escaping the costs of governing when the electoral environment is turbulent (Emanuele et al., 2023). Thus, so far, the literature on the contextual determinants of technocratic involvement identified poor economic conditions, electorally volatile contexts, and pronounced presidential powers as the main factors to consider when it comes to technocracy in government. On the other hand, a flourishing research agenda has been investigating the citizens' attitudes towards technocrats in power (Bertsou and Caramani 2020; Lavezzolo et al., 2021; Marlier et al., 2023), highlighting, for instance, that technocracy appeals to population strata characterized by a deficient sense of democratic quality, particularly where low political efficacy and authoritarian values are traceable (Chiru and Enyedi 2022). In this regard, attitudes towards technocrats very much echoed preferences for populists, rekindling Caramani's (2017) interpretation of the two phenomena.

Notwithstanding the growing interest in technocracy and its determinants, scholars working on this matter have not sufficiently reflected yet on the consequences of technocratic appointments on democratic choice, and, first and foremost, electoral participation. At the same time, despite the abundance of scholarly efforts on electoral participation, research on turnout has substantially overlooked the characteristics of governments. This article fills the identified gaps by studying the effect of technocratic presence in governments on turnout.

Following Emanuele et al. (2023), we consider technocratic appointments as party strategies to escape the costs of ruling (Paldam 1986). Appointing

technocrats in cabinet ministerial positions, even in partisan governments, can indeed be seen as a compromise between parties' inherent office-seeking nature and their attempt to avoid voter punishment.¹ (Paldam 1986). Appointing technocrats in key ministerial positions, even in 'political' governments and alongside partisan ministers, can indeed be seen as a compromise between parties' inherent office-seeking nature and their attempt to avoid the cost of ruling.

Drawing on Turnbull-Dugarte (2020), one of the key perceived benefits of voting is the ability to influence policy outcomes in the democratic system to which they belong. Crucially, as Downs (1957: 270) highlights, voters' faith in democracy itself is part of these perceived benefits, as voting is what makes democracy possible and democracy is framed as the 'reward of voting'. In this vein, the very act of having a say in policy decisions is a fundamental driver of voter participation (Riker and Ordeshook 1968: 28). Steiner (2010), however, argues that these utility-based and intrinsic benefits of voting are interconnected, as the latter is conditional upon the former. If voters do not believe that electoral processes provide a meaningful opportunity to influence policy outcomes, the intrinsic value of voting may diminish (Turnbull-Dugarte 2020). In other words, if elections fail to offer voters a genuine choice that allows them to express their preferences in ways that shape policy, the democratic expression of voting becomes hollow (Turnbull-Dugarte 2020).

The link between meaningful choice and voter turnout is critical (Turnbull-Dugarte 2020). Research shows that when voters perceive a broad spectrum of distinct political alternatives, they are more likely to feel represented and motivated to participate (Hobolt and Hoerner 2020). This is particularly true when there is high congruence between voters' preferences and the policy platforms on offer (Hobolt and Hoerner 2020). As Lipset (1983: 191) argues, the self-interested motivation to vote is activated only when voters see a meaningful differentiation in policy alternatives that could significantly impact their lives. When no such differentiation exists—such as in contexts where non-accountable technocratic government personnel dominate the agenda and no viable alternatives are proposed—voters are less likely to feel that their participation has value.

In this context, technocratic appointments in government may exacerbate the problem by further reducing the perception of meaningful political choice. When technocrats, often portrayed as neutral actors (Pastorella 2016), are placed in key decision-making roles, voters may perceive a detachment between political actors and policy outcomes. This can lead to a sense that

¹However, we are aware that voters act under a bounded rationality framework, as they may have biases and lack of information. Still, they can assess performance in office and attribute rewards and blames similar to the assumptions of the retrospective voting theory (Fiorina 1981).

their vote carries less weight in influencing government decisions. As previous research suggests (Caramani 2017; Emanuele et al., 2023), the appointment of technocrats—whether in full-technocratic cabinets or within partisan governments—may undermine electoral accountability by limiting voters' ability to reward or punish political actors based on policy outcomes. To solve the responsibility-responsiveness dilemma (Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020; Emanuele et al., 2023) technocratic appointments can be used by political parties as a strategy to shield themselves from the cost of ruling (Paldam 1986). However, this strategy may come at the expense of voters' engagement, as it erodes the link between electoral choice and policy impact, ultimately contributing to lower turnout.

In our perspective, technocratic appointments should have a negative impact on turnout. Indeed, being inherently non-accountable, technocrats in government interrupt the chain of delegation (Müller 2000; Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006) and the bottom-up relationship existing between citizens and parties. In a delegation perspective, citizens are principals recognizing parties as their agents with the duty of representing their needs and demands. By diluting governing responsibility to unaccountable figures such as technocrats (Emanuele et al., 2023), parties fail to fulfil their expressive function (Sartori 2005). Along these lines, technocratic presence in government may reduce the perceived importance of going to the polls, as there will be an increased perception of the disconnect between voters' preferences and the process of government formation. As a result, technocrats in government will enhance feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction as to how the democratic system works, which, in turn, will disincentivize electoral participation.

Based on the presented lines of reasoning, the first hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (Hp1): The higher the share of technocrats in governments, the lower the voter turnout.

As Fig. 1 illustrates, technocratic appointments in Western Europe have surged in recent years, particularly since the 2010s. In the first decades following World War II, the presence of technocrats in government was a rare exception to the principle of party government, e.g. Reino Kuuskoski's cabinet in Finland and Rainer von Fieandt's government in Belgium. However, technocratic appointments have now become a common feature of European democracies.

Cotta (2018) has already identified a growing trend in the appointment of technocrats to executive roles, attributing this shift to the increasing complexity of governance, which has prompted political parties to rely on technocratic expertise to address emerging challenges. This phenomenon—often referred to as the

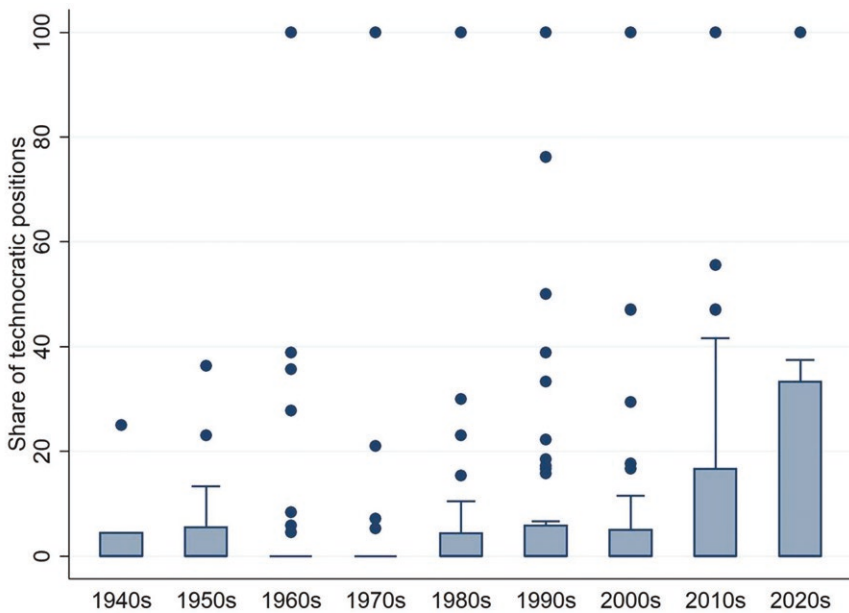


Figure 1. Share of technocratic positions (1940s–2020s). Source: Authors.

‘power without competence’ dilemma (Aberbach *et al.*, 1981; Costa Pinto *et al.*, 2018)—has been further reinforced by a profound crisis of public trust in political parties and significant organizational difficulties within party systems (Costa Pinto *et al.*, 2018).

As Peter Mair argues, contemporary democracies face mounting external constraints—such as globalization, European integration, and fiscal austerity—that have significantly limited the policy options available to national governments. In response, political parties increasingly prioritize responsibility over responsiveness, delegating power to technocrats as a way to navigate unpopular policy choices while shielding themselves from direct voter backlash (Paldam 1986; Costa Pinto *et al.*, 2018). What was once considered an exceptional response to crises has thus evolved into a routine governance tool for managing complex policy challenges.

At the same time, extensive evidence points to a steady decline in voter turnout across nearly all Western democracies over the past decades (Gray and Caul 2000; Angelucci *et al.*, 2024). This downward trend suggests that voters increasingly feel alienated from political processes, potentially due to the perception that elections have become less consequential and parties less responsive. In turn, this perception may stem from the belief that policy outcomes are shaped more by expertise and external constraints than by political competition.

Therefore, we expect the relationship in Hp1 to have become particularly relevant in recent decades. This expectation is rooted in the broader responsibility-responsiveness dilemma that has shaped Western democracies since the 1980s and has intensified in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession (Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020). As external pressures mount, governing parties increasingly seek to dilute responsibility by delegating power to technocrats, enabling them to navigate international and supranational challenges while minimizing political costs

As a result, our second hypothesis is the following:

Hypothesis 2 (Hp2): The negative impact of the share of technocrats in governments on voter turnout increases as far as time goes by.

Contextual drivers of turnout: a brief overview

Vital to both the proper functioning and legitimacy of democracies (Powell 1986), electoral participation has a consolidated record in political research. Scholars have generally investigated the issue by focusing on both the structural and individual drivers boosting or depressing turnout. At the macro level, the literature has emphasized the role of country characteristics, such as the size and stability of the population (Blais et al., 2003; Cancela and Geys 2016), the levels of inequality (Lister 2007; Polacko 2020), and the role of globalization (Steiner 2010). Moreover, previous studies have stressed the critical role of institutional settings and rules, notably the stimulating effect resulting from the presence of compulsory voting (Jackman 1987; Franklin 1996; Stockemer 2017; Kostelka et al., 2024). Additionally, relevant institutional factors considered are the form of government, with parliamentary systems recording higher levels of electoral participation compared to presidential systems (Fumagalli and Narciso 2012) and the electoral systems' features, with systems adopting proportional representation achieving higher turnout rates compared to majoritarian systems (Blais 2006; Eggers 2015). Research on turnout demonstrates that the characteristics of the election play a role as well. Among them, it has been ascertained that the decisiveness of the competition and the closeness of the electoral dispute positively impact participation (Blais 2000; Franklin 2004). The reasons underpinning this effect lie in the higher stakes characterizing more decisive and competitive elections. Therefore, citizens are incentivized to go to the polls when the competition acquires increased relevance. Indeed, as Franklin (2004: 57) noticed, 'only in elections where there is uncertainty as to the numerical outcome does each voter who cares about the outcome have reason to believe that their votes might make a difference'. Also, 'if the outcome of the election hangs in the balance, then uncertainty about the outcome renders the election highly competitive and turnout will be high' (Franklin 2004: 149). To gauge the influence of competitiveness, scholars

have tested different factors. In particular, while [Blais and Dobrzynska \(1998\)](#) use proportionality, i.e. PR systems, suggesting it favours turnout by reducing alienation, increasing choice, and making elections more competitive, [Franklin \(2001\)](#) grasps competitiveness by investigating factors such as the polarization of the party system, as studies demonstrated its strong effects on turnout variations ([Crepaz 1990](#); [Gray and Caul 2000](#)). Moreover, other measures that have been taken into account are the time elapsed between elections of the same type (e.g. national elections) ([Franklin 2001](#)), arguing that turnout should increase as the time between elections increases ([Norris 2002](#); [Franklin 2004](#); [Ezrow and Xezonakis 2016](#)). Considering the multilevel governance configuration of contemporary democratic systems, recurrent elections within a short span of time can deflate participation as citizens may develop a sense of voting fatigue which ultimately alienates citizens from voting ([Franklin 2001](#); [Kostelka and Blais 2021](#)).

Albeit to a lesser extent, the literature has also focused on the economic context. First, the state of the economy might play an integral role when it comes to turnout (e.g. [Frank and Martínez i Coma 2023](#)). Yet, the literature found little consensus about the direction of this effect, that is, whether a poor economy depresses voters as this situation increases sentiments of detachment or, instead, a poor economy mobilizes voters, as in difficult economic conditions they become particularly prone to punish incumbents. Another relevant factor is the level of political corruption in the country. Scholarly contributions on this showed mixed results. On the one hand, it has been demonstrated that corruption mobilizes voters, thus increasing turnout ([Karahan et al., 2006](#); [Escaleras et al., 2012](#)). Intuitively, high levels of corruption may boost turnout as citizens seek to force a change in the political system avoiding the spread of corruption. On the other hand, however, some authors argued that corruption alienates voters as it contributes to spreading feelings of apathy and detachment in citizens, thus decreasing turnout ([Stockemer et al., 2013](#); [Sundström and Stockemer 2015](#)).

Moreover, less explored factors in the literature are the countries' ties with supranational actors. The recent developments in the electoral arena of European countries suggest an increased importance of European institutions when it comes to domestic politics and governance. In particular, the intervention of the EU and of other key supranational actors might affect voter turnout. In this regard, [Turnbull-Dugarte \(2020\)](#) recently demonstrated that the EU intervention played a key role in depressing the electoral participation rates in the intervened countries.

Another important work in voter turnout research is that of [Kostelka and Blais \(2021\)](#), who focused on two primary explanations for the decline in turnout: generational change and the proliferation of elective institutions. These factors, according to Kostelka and Blais, account for the majority of the observed global downturn in electoral participation since the mid-20th century. Regarding the generational explanation, it is argued that younger generations have been socialized

in conditions of relative economic affluence. Therefore, they have developed different values compared to their older counterparts, values that are less conducive to electoral participation. For instance, younger cohorts increasingly view other forms of political engagement as more effective than voting (e.g. protests). This generational replacement mechanism explains the gradual erosion of aggregate voter turnout over time, particularly in economically developed democracies. The second major factor emphasized by [Kostelka and Blais \(2021\)](#) is the proliferation of elective institutions, stemming from the increasing frequency of elections driven by decentralization, regional integration (e.g. the European Union), and the introduction of new elective offices such as directly elected presidents. While ostensibly enhancing opportunities for democratic participation, this trend has paradoxically depressed turnout even in first-order elections. Indeed, an overabundance of elections may lead to voter fatigue, reducing the perceived importance of electoral contests and diminishing mobilization effectiveness.

Finally, when dealing with turnout it is important to consider the age of democracy ([Kostelka 2017](#); [Mainwaring et al., 2017](#)), which informs about the maturity of the democratic system. A late-comer democratic instauration can indeed delay the development of a voting habit in the population, while established democratic experiences contribute to producing solid voting habits.

In this study, we therefore control for both established macro-level determinants of turnout and novel potential explanatory factors which have been overlooked so far by previous enquiries.

Data and methods

The hypotheses presented above have been tested relying on an original comparative longitudinal research design based on a time-series cross-section dataset that includes 371 general elections held in 20 Western European countries² from the end of World War II to 2022. The dependent variable at the aggregate level is *Voter turnout*. The variable is the aggregate share of citizens entitled to vote that actually turn out in a given general election (Lower House). Data on turnout come from [IDEA \(2022\)](#) or the pertinent electoral authority of each country. Our focal predictor aims at providing a comprehensive picture of the presence of technocrats in Western European governments. As anticipated in the introductory part of the article, we conceive technocrats as independent, non-partisan ministers, namely, ministers with no political affiliation. Rather than focusing exclusively on fully technocratic or technocratic-led cabinets ([McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014](#); [Wrati](#)

²Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

and Pastorella 2018) or overly simplified dichotomies based on the presence or absence of technocrats in government (Semenova 2020), we opt for a more fine-grained operationalization that considers the number of technocratic positions in all kind of governments, including especially *political* governments, where technocrats hold ministerial positions together with partisan representatives (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006; Emanuele et al., 2023). As a result, for each election under study, our focal predictor, *Share of technocratic positions*, reports the share of ministries held by technocrats in the last cabinet before the election.³

Additionally, in the Supplementary Appendix, we provide robustness checks with alternative operationalizations of the focal predictor. The empirical analysis considers several contextual factors discussed above in the theoretical framework as potential drivers of turnout. Following the relevant literature, we can certainly distinguish among four sets of controls: institutional incentives, competition factors, economic constraints, and time controls.

To begin with, institutional incentives concern the presence of compulsory voting and the type of electoral systems. As for the former, we add a dichotomous variable that takes 1 if turnout is compulsory in the country in that specific election and the provision is enforced by the authority. As for the latter, we include a categorical variable that distinguishes among proportional, majoritarian, and mixed systems (Massicotte and Blais 1999). Data on compulsory voting come from IDEA (2022), while data on electoral systems are retrieved from Bormann and Golder (2013).

Second, among factors related to the structure of the competition, we include a measure of party system fragmentation, namely the Effective Number of Electoral Parties (ENEP) (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) and a measure of ideological polarization through Dalton's Polarization index (Dalton 2008).⁴ Moreover, we also control for the *Decisiveness* of the election, a variable that captures the extent to which the election is decisive for future government formation. This measure was first introduced by Carey and Shugart as an index of 'identifiability of future governments' and later refined by Emanuele (2018). It ranges from 0 to 1 and can assume five possible values: 0 in the case of a prospective government that is the result of a long-range agreement apparently independent of elections (e.g. Switzerland); 0.25 if the prospective government is the result of negotiations among parties after the elections; 0.5 in the case of implicit/asymmetric (e.g. on the left but not on

³Consistent with Emanuele et al. (2023), our measure is based on ministries (including the prime minister position) rather than ministers as we are interested in the assessment of the power of technocracy in terms of posts, not people. In this regard, if the same person holds two different ministries, there is not one but two positions to be considered, held by the same minister. Data on cabinet composition come from Casal Bértoa and, in case of missing data, from Sonntag.

⁴Data on ENEP and Polarization come, respectively, from Gallagher and Döring and Manow.

the right) preelection coalition; 0.75 if there are explicit preelection coalition; and finally 1 if a single-party majority is expected as the outcome of the election.⁵

Third, we also control for economic constraints that are deemed important drivers of turnout, especially in times of economic crisis. In particular, we include three variables. The first is the *GDP growth rate* measured one year before the election. The second is the level of *Corruption*, measured through the Political Corruption Index taken from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al., 2021). The third variable draws upon Turnbull-Dugarte (2020) and Emanuele et al. (2023). It is an ordinal variable, *EU constraints* that returns the level of institutional, economic, and financial EU constraints on a given country: the variable assumes the value of 0 if the country is not a member of the EU in the election year, value 1 if the country is an EU member, value 2 if the country has also adopted the Euro, and eventually the value of 3 in those elections where the country is subject to a EU intervention and signed a memorandum of understanding with the EU institutions (as well as with the International Monetary Fund) that forces it to pursue severe austerity programs (Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020).⁶

Finally, among the controls related to time, we add *Age of democracy*, which is nothing but the age of country's democracy measured as the number of years elapsed since the country's democratic instauration (Mainwaring et al., 2017); *Time between election*, namely, the number of days elapsed since the previous general election (to grasp election frequency, see also Kostelka et al., 2023); and a trend variable (*Year*), which is particularly suitable for time-series analysis, as it provides control to problems of spurious correlations (Roberts and Wibbels 1999; Tavits 2005). Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics of all the variables that will be included in the analyses.

As anticipated above, we leverage a time-series cross-section dataset, with repeated observations over time (elections) on the same fixed units (countries) (see Beck and Katz 1995). Diagnostic tests on our data confirm the presence of heteroskedasticity and autocorrelation, typical issues of this kind of data structure (Stimson 1985).⁷ That is why we opted for a Prais–Winsten regression, namely a panel-corrected standard errors method (PCSE) with a first-order autoregressive parameter (AR1).

⁵Data on Decisiveness come from Emanuele (2018) for the period 1965–2015, and our own calculation for the remaining elections.

⁶Data about the GDP growth rate comes from the Total Economy Database (Conference Board 2021), while data about the EU intervention are taken from Emanuele et al. (2023).

⁷We performed an LR-test for panel heteroskedasticity ($P < .001$) and a Wooldridge test of autocorrelation ($P < .001$). Moreover, the Hausman test between the pooled model and the country-fixed effect model shows that H_0 is not rejected and, therefore, the pooled model can be used. At any rate, for the sake of completeness, we will report both specifications in our main analyses.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Voter turnout	80.11	11.55	42.2	97.2	371
Share of technocratic positions	7.12	19.08	0	100	371
Compulsory	0.12	0.33	0	1	371
El. system (Ref: PR)					
Mixed	0.09	0.29	0	1	371
Majoritarian	0.09	0.29	0	1	371
ENEP	4.40	1.59	1.71	10.94	371
Polarization	0.41	0.09	0.15	0.69	371
Decisiveness	0.52	0.33	0	1	371
GDP growth rate	3.12	3.37	-9.13	33.5	371
Corruption	0.07	0.09	0	0.34	371
EU constraints (Ref: Not in the EU)					
EU member	0.33	0.47	0	1	371
Euro member	0.19	0.39	0	1	371
EU intervention	0.01	0.12	0	1	371
Age of democracy	60.65	46.46	1	182	371
Time between elections	1,307.60	417.78	42	2548	371
Year	1,984.99	20.82	1,946	2,022	371

Results

Our analysis starts from a preliminary assessment of the evolution of voter turnout across all the countries covered in this study. [Figure 2](#) displays these trends, broadly confirming that turnout is in decline in most Western European countries. The dynamics, however, are not univocal: while turnout is clearly declining in 13 out of 20 countries, it has maintained a certain degree of stability in Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) and, not surprisingly, in those countries which implement compulsory voting (Belgium and Luxembourg). Turnout has remained stable also in Spain (where we observe trendless fluctuations) and it even increased in Malta.

The data also show that, despite some common trends across different countries, the level of participation in the elections varies considerably. In some cases, despite the downward trends over time, turnout is still comparatively high: this is the case of Italy, for example, where the decline started back in the late 1970s and it has never really stopped since then. However, even in its lowest record (general elections of 2022, with a turnout that was equal to 63.9%),

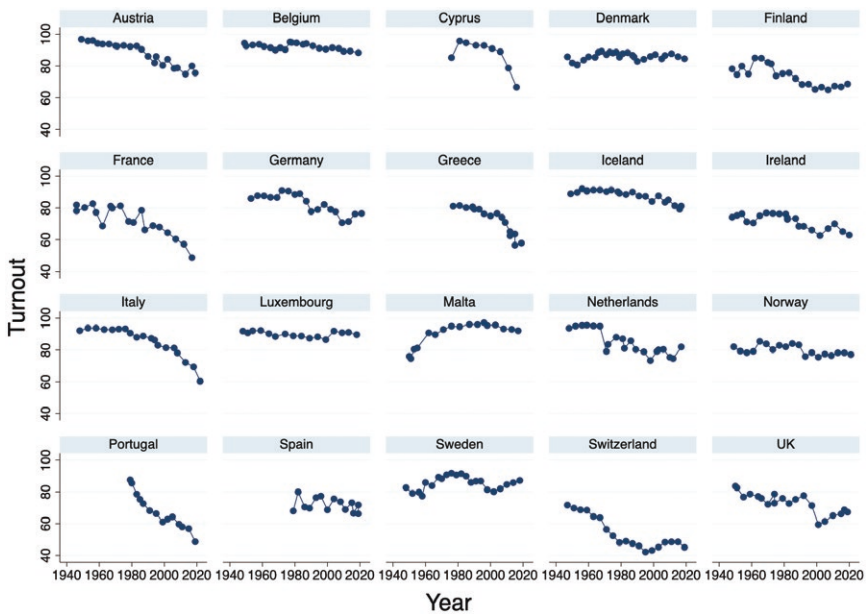


Figure 2. Temporal trajectories of turnout over time. Source: Authors.

this figure was clearly higher compared to what was observed, for example, in France in 2017, not to mention Portugal or Switzerland in the same period. If this data might sound alarming for Western democracies, this variability across countries and time is nonetheless useful when it comes to the estimation of our models, as it allows us to rule out relationships between variables due to common trending.

To what extent turnout is affected by technocratic appointments? We assess this relationship and test our first two hypotheses through the Prais–Winsten regression models presented in [Table 2](#).

In Model 1, turnout is regressed on all the control variables we have previously introduced but our focal predictor, namely the share of technocratic appointments in the incumbent government, which is included in Model 2. Model 3 replicates the analysis with country-fixed effects, while Model 4 also adds the interaction between our focal predictor and the time variable. The results of Model 1 are somehow in line with what we know about the evolution of turnout over time. First, we observe a negative and significant coefficient for our time variable, thus confirming that turnout has, all else equal, declined over time; second, and not surprisingly, we found that turnout is comparatively higher in those countries implementing compulsory voting; finally, we also observe that

Table 2. Continued.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	b	pcse	b	pcse	b	pcse	b	pcse
Euro member	0.732	1.573	0.565	1.522	-0.845	1.399	-1.007	1.382
EU intervention	1.757	2.352	2.521	2.32	0.599	2.089	0.787	2.152
Age of democracy	0.007	0.023	0	0.023	-2.238	2.304	-2.382	2.437
Time between elections	0.001+	0	0.001	0	0.001	0	0.001	0
Year	-0.206***	0.044	-0.197***	0.044	2.065	2.303	2.215	2.436
Country-fixed effects					☑		☑	
Constant	490.152***	86.125	472.383***	85.333	-3,924.333	4,480.2	-4,215.99	4,739
Wald χ^2	99.092***		118.75***		827.708***		960.418***	
N of elections	371		371		371		371	
N of countries	20		20		20		20	

Note. Prais-Winsten regressions; panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE) are reported. + $P < .10$; * $P < .05$, ** $P < .01$, *** $P < .001$.

majoritarian electoral systems are associated with lower levels of turnout compared to PR systems.

In Model 2, we also included our focal predictor. When controlling for relevant predictors of turnout, we found that there is a significant association between technocratic appointments and turnout ($P < .01$). Although the coefficient of technocratic appointments is relatively small ($b = -0.034$) compared to other predictors, such as compulsory voting, it is not substantively negligible. Based on our model, the transition from a government with no technocratic appointments to a fully technocratic government yields, on average, a decrease in turnout of 3.4 percentage points. While this effect may seem modest in absolute terms, it is far from trivial, as even small shifts in turnout can have meaningful consequences for democratic legitimacy, political representation, and—perhaps most importantly—electoral outcomes, particularly in highly competitive elections. It is also important to note that this effect is observed independently of whether a country is experiencing socio-economic and political conditions that could, in themselves, justify the call for technocratic expertise, as was the case during the Euro crisis. Moreover, this result remains robust even when country-fixed effects are included in our models (Model 3): although the coefficient of technocratic appointments becomes slightly smaller compared to Model 2 ($b = -0.027$), it remains statistically significant at $P < .05$. Finally, our findings hold across several robustness tests reported in the Supplementary Appendix. First, the results remain consistent when a categorical variable for decades replaces the linear time variable (Model 1 in [Supplementary Appendix Table A1](#)), further corroborating the negative effect of technocracy on turnout. Second, the findings are robust to alternative operationalizations of the focal predictor. In Model 2, [Supplementary Appendix Table A1](#), we operationalized technocratic appointments as the mean proportion of technocratic positions in the legislature before the election, while in Model 3, [Supplementary Appendix Table A1](#), we instead use a dichotomous variable indicating whether the last cabinet before the election was led by a technocratic Prime Minister.⁸ Taken together, these results provide strong support for our hypothesis (Hp1), confirming the negative impact of technocratic appointments on voter turnout.

Once we have observed the link between technocratic appointments and turnout, now we dig further into this relationship. In particular, we explore more in

⁸Additional robustness tests are reported in the Supplementary Appendix. In particular, in [Supplementary Appendix Table A2](#) we replicate Model 3 in [Table 2](#) of the main text, accounting for potential spurious correlations arising from unobserved country-specific time trends in voter turnout. In [Supplementary Appendix Table A3](#), we estimate a first difference model (FD) to analyse the determinants of changes in voter turnout over time. The results of these analyses are consistent with our main findings.

detail whether and to what extent the impact of technocracy varies over time (Hp2). This is particularly relevant, as we know that technocratic appointments have been increasing over time and, more generally, that the role of expertise in politics has become progressively more relevant. All this granted, one might hypothesize that as the room for experts in politics has increased, the impact of technocratic appointments should be increasing over time as well. To test this hypothesis, we interact the effect of technocratic appointment with a time variable, i.e., year (Model 4). The interaction coefficient is statistically significant at $P < .05$. We present the results in graphical form in Fig. 3. The marginal effect plot suggests that the depressive role of technocratic appointment on turnout has slightly increased over time: whereas it was not significant in the first decades after WWII, it became significant starting from the late 1980s, with an effect that seems to have reached its apex during the post-2008 Great Recession. The fact that the model includes country-fixed effects tells us that this relationship is significant within each individual country of the region. Moreover, the temporal evolution of the negative relationship between technocracy and turnout suggests that it is strongly intertwined with the responsibility-responsiveness dilemma. The latter, as Mair argues, have influenced Western democracies since the 1980s, as external constraints linked to globalized markets and supranational institutions started to put pressure on ruling parties to fulfil responsible policies even at the expense of their

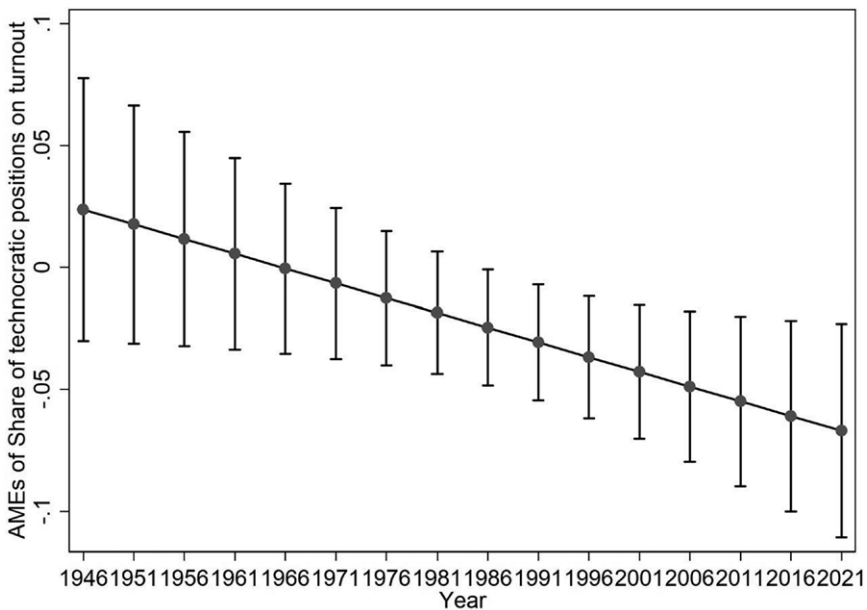


Figure 3. The effect of technocratic appointments on turnout over time. Source: Authors.

promises to their social constituencies. This process became far more constraining during the Great Recession period, as the Eurozone crisis further reduced the room for manoeuvring for the ruling parties (e.g. Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020). Since the 1980s, appointing non-partisan experts became a strategy of ruling parties to cope with international and supranational challenges and, at the same time, to use technocrats as a scapegoat in voters' eyes for the unresponsive policies of the government (Emanuele *et al.*, 2023). So far, the political consequences of this behaviour have been underexplored. This analysis adds a new piece of evidence to this puzzle by showing that ceding power to technocrats and breaking the chain of delegation may bring a progressive reduction in electoral participation.

Conclusion

This study investigated the connection between technocratic presence in government and the electoral participation rates of 20 West European countries since 1945. In doing so, it provides the first attempt to examine the impact of technocracy on a relevant dimension of democratic quality, electoral participation.

By leveraging an original longitudinal dataset, this article hypothesized a negative role of technocracy vis-à-vis turnout by drawing upon two main theoretical considerations. On the one hand, the appointment of inherently non-accountable personnel in government reflects parties' difficulties in managing the responsibility-responsiveness dilemma in contemporary democracies and leads to an increasing disconnection between electoral results and government formation. On the other hand, by diluting responsibility to technocrats, parties interrupt the chain of delegation, which importantly connects citizens to their representatives and fails to fulfil their expressive function. Along these lines, if citizens are disconnected from their representatives in government by means of technocratic involvement, their likelihood of showing up at the polls would be reduced.

Through comparative longitudinal analyses based on a time-series cross-section dataset, this paper reached two main findings that confirm our original hypotheses. First, there exists a negative relationship between technocratic appointments and electoral participation at the aggregate level. The higher the share of technocrats in government, the lower the turnout rate in the following general election. Second, this relationship did not exist in the first post-war decades, turned significant in the 1980s and became increasingly relevant in the last few decades, consistent with the timing of the responsibility-responsiveness dilemma highlighted by Peter Mair and recently emphasized by several scholars as a more-than-ever strong phenomenon after the Great Recession with detrimental consequences for the party government model (Lefkofridi and Nezi 2020; Emanuele *et al.*, 2023). All these findings are robust to multiple controls and alternative model specifications.

There are a few noteworthy limitations to this study. First, we focus exclusively on West European democracies, which limits the generalizability of the findings. While this choice is appropriate for testing the theory in a relatively similar set of political systems, the relationship between technocracy and voter turnout might differ in non-Western or newly democratized contexts, where the political dynamics and the role of technocrats could vary significantly. Expanding the geographical scope of the analysis could provide additional insights and test the broader applicability of the findings.

Second, the study relies on aggregate-level data to measure voter turnout and technocratic appointments. While this approach is suitable for assessing broad patterns and trends, which is our article's goal, it may overlook individual-level factors influencing voter behaviour, such as political attitudes and socio-economic status. Therefore, future research could complement this study by utilizing survey data to analyse the micro-level mechanisms that link perceptions of technocracy and technocratic presence with voter disengagement. In this regard, a more fine-grained exploration of the individual-level mechanisms underlying the findings of our study would be useful to scrutinize further beyond the aggregate-level analysis we conducted in this study. Indeed, future research could investigate whether and how psychological mechanisms come into play among citizens when they see political parties relinquishing government positions to figures who are freed from the accountability derived from the electoral process.

The results of this study have important implications for the democratic quality of contemporary democracies. Specifically, they show—for the first time—the consequences of technocratic appointments on a relevant component of democratic quality. Indeed, while technocrats can be deemed necessary by political actors to face turbulence in economic and electoral contexts, parties need to fully reflect on the consequences of such appointments. The analysis shows that appointing technocrats in government has the potential to create a vicious circle affecting the quality of representative democracies. This is because, by observing the increased share of technocrats in office, citizens may interpret this phenomenon as a signal of party abdication of their representative role, maturing a sense of inefficacy in affecting democratic decisions and policy making. This process of increasing dissatisfaction with democracy and distrust towards political institutions will translate into lower turnout rates, which, in turn, further undermine the legitimacy of representative democracies.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data is available at *Parliamentary Affairs* online.

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