

3 Technocracy and depoliticization

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Introduction

“We have a Fed that’s doing political things ... by keeping the interest rates at this level. [T]he Fed is not doing their [*sic*] job. The Fed is being more political than Secretary Clinton”. Thus spoke then-candidate Donald Trump (qtd in Blake 2016), during his first presidential debate with Hillary Clinton, expressing concerns about excessive central bank activism. Trump’s words echoed what Greece’s former finance minister, Yanis Varoufakis (qtd in Khan and Chan 2015), had said a few months earlier, from across the Atlantic and the political spectrum, about the European Central Bank (ECB): “[t]he attempt to ringfence Frankfurt from politics has produced a highly politicized central bank”.

Statements such as these reflect a diffuse feeling—these days particularly common among populists—that unaccountable technocrats too often intrude into political matters which, in a democratic polity, ought to be left to the elected representatives of the people. And while central bankers—arguably the arch-technocrats—are probably the most frequent and visible target of such diatribes, the criticism applies equally to other areas. Consider, for example, Italian interior minister Matteo Salvini’s response to warnings by Tito Boeri (the economist chairing the country’s main pension fund, INPS—Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale), about the effect of harsh immigration policies and a planned pension reform on the sustainability of the country’s pension system: “[t]he president of INPS should worry about making the work of his agency more efficient ... not do politics” (Meridiana Notizie 2018, author’s translation).

But how does one square the foregoing with the view, expressed by, among others, pundit Tim Harford (2017), that one of the main problems of contemporary democratic governance is actually that “[t]echnocrats may not be too interested in politics, but politics is interested in technocrats”—or, put differently, that technocrats are more often the victims than the perpetrators of unwarranted turf invasions? Certainly, this will sound about right to anybody witnessing the more or less open attempts by the formally democratic Polish and Hungarian governments to tighten control over courts and independent agencies. Finally, and to add a further twist, how does either of the positions just described fit with the observation by Jean Meynaud (1969: 237), one of the earliest scholars of technocracy, that “the idea of an absolute separation between the technical element ... and politics, is a myth ... When he changes into a technocrat, the technician becomes a ‘politician’”?

Partly, differences of opinion of the sort given above are due to interpretive disagreements on the available evidence, or to normative ones on the appropriate boundary between the technical and political sphere in public governance. However, the discord runs deeper than that, and stems from the coexistence of different conceptions of technocracy and of its relationship to politics, captured primarily by such terms as “depoliticization” and “politicization”. That these conceptual differences remain mostly implicit is unfortunate, for it fragments much of the scholarly and political debate into islands that do not communicate with one another as well as they should, and as a result are not as productive as they could be in answering important analytical and normative questions on the nature and role of technocrats in democracy.

In an attempt to improve on the conceptual status quo, this chapter presents a systematic analysis of the technocracy–politics nexus that posits (de)politicization as the main dimension along which different definitions of technocracy vary. In doing so, therefore, the chapter attains a twofold goal: it clarifies the relationship between politics and technocracy, and it formulates a unified conceptual framework for the latter. The next section begins the analysis by presenting a baseline definition of technocracy as a depoliticized method of decision making, located between full and no autonomy vis-à-vis majoritarian institutions. Movements along the autonomy spectrum politicize technocracy, with asymmetrical effects on the concept: as decision making loses autonomy, it becomes unequivocally less technocratic. As “technocracy-as-method” gains autonomy, however, it enters the territory of two distinct existing conceptualizations of technocracy—as a type of government, and as a type of

informal regime—examined in eponymous sections. For each, the chapter looks at their relationship to politics, democracy and the remaining definitions of technocracy. Additional reflections are presented in the Section “Technocracy as a Type of Informal Regime” on the contested nature of “technocracy-as-regime”. The final section recaps and concludes.

Technocracy as a decision-making method

A good way to start exploring a term “used as loosely as is technocracy” (Centeno 1993: 309) is to identify a simple, baseline version of it on which to build by logical steps. At its broadest level, technocracy is defined etymologically as rule by experts (see the Introduction to the volume). What is usually left implicit in this definition, but is no less important for the nature of technocracy, is that experts rule by expertise—i.e. by rationally applying their knowledge (acquired by study and/or practice) to a certain field. In its basic version, therefore, technocracy is a specific method of (public) decision making. Radaelli (1999a: 764) characterizes this technocratic “mode” as “based on the idea of the ‘one best way’ reachable by the ‘competent’ professionals who know the best means to an end”.¹

How does this version of technocracy relate to the sphere of politics? Following Bernard Crick’s (1962: 16–17) celebrated reflections on the subject, politics can be defined as “the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and the survival of the whole community”. Differently stated, politics is the process whereby different groups within a polity (institutionalized primarily, but not only, through parties) compete peacefully for the definition of society’s values, priorities and, ultimately, policies.

It follows from the foregoing that the technocratic method of decision making is alternative to politics. Reaching a political decision entails a compromise among partisan preferences (however formed) consistent with the configuration of forces at play. Conversely, technocracy ignores, in principle, partisan positions and the existing balance of power to base its conclusions on the state of the art in the relevant area or discipline. *A technocratic decision is, therefore, in essence depoliticized.* Needless to say, these methodological distinctions tie into personal/professional differences between the politician and the technocrat: while the former has a more or less direct connection to a party and voters to whom he remains accountable, the technocrat is recruited based primarily on his sectoral expertise and intellectual abilities.

In its purest form, technocracy as a method should be not only depoliticized, but also *apolitical*. While depoliticization indicates the shifting of decision making from the party-political to the expert arena, the notion of apolitical technocracy takes this process to its extremes. It depicts decision making as an activity reduced to mechanical rules and procedures, in which knowledge—in particular scientific knowledge—is the one and only factor at play, and is able to provide certain and univocal solutions to any policy problem. Apolitical decision making, Marcussen (2009: 377) notes, is “dehumanized, eliminating personal ideological and emotional features that escape calculation”.

While conceivable in abstract terms, apolitical decision making is unlikely to ever materialize in practice, for at least two reasons. The first, epistemological, is that the production and the transmission of the knowledge on which technocracy rests are, at least to some extent, socially constructed activities reflecting the values and biases of researchers, both collective and individual (e.g. Feindt and Oels 2005, Fischer 1990, Jasanoff 1990). Although this is particularly true of the “soft sciences” such as economics, on which much technocracy is based (see Chapter 2 in this volume), the natural sciences are by no means immune from these dynamics. Few have articulated this view of knowledge as well as Michel Foucault (1980: 131):

Truth isn’t the reward of the free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. [...] Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enables one to distinguish true and false statements, [...] the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

Second, even when adopting a fully objectivist view of knowledge and science, the latter’s technocratic application to concrete cases will often require value judgements and choices among competing interests and

preferences that cannot be reduced to expertise (Nelkin 1975, Turner 2008). In deciding whether to authorize a certain drug for the market, an agency will make decisions about safety thresholds and acceptable side effects; in setting monetary policy, a central bank will have to make calls about tolerable inflation and/or unemployment levels; and so on. Using Flyvbjerg's (2002, 2004) formulation of the problem, the practical application of science—the transition from *episteme* to *techne*—usually calls, at least to some extent, for *phronesis*—namely, the handling of pragmatic and contextual value-based considerations and choices.

Institutionally, technocracy as a depoliticized decision-making method requires being located, both de jure and de facto, somewhere in the middle region of the spectrum between full dependence and full independence vis-à-vis the majoritarian institutions through which politics operates (above all, parliaments and executives). On the one hand, technocrats need a non-trivial degree of autonomy in order to have decision-making room for manoeuvre. On the other hand, however, expert knowledge can plausibly guide public policy only if confined within the limits of some overall goal—in other words, a mandate—set politically. As Sartori (1987: 423) puts it, “[a] government of experts is admissible in regard to means, not ends”.

So defined, technocracy is a familiar feature of modern democracies, embodied by institutions located at different points of the autonomy spectrum just described: from technical units within ministries and other executive agencies, which operate closer to political power, to highly autonomous bodies such as independent regulatory agencies and central banks. Courts could also be included in this baseline definition of technocracy, insofar as judges and prosecutors are considered technicians of the law, so to speak.

Empirically, while countries use different mixes of technocratic decision making, a historical increase can be detected in the recourse to technocracy across Western democracies since the post-World War II years, and increasingly from the 1980s. This is particularly true for areas such as regulation, where the privatization and liberalization of a number of utilities sectors (combined, in EU member states, with the Europeanization of governance structures) have led to the multiplication of independent agencies (Gilardi 2005), and monetary policy, in which central bank autonomy established itself as the dominant institutional paradigm in pretty much all developed economies by the 1990s (Marcussen 2009, Roberts 2011).

From a normative standpoint, the debate on technocracy-as-method remains wide open. On one side of the debate, supporters regard delegation of decision making to technocrats as not only necessary for tackling the increasing complexity of the business of governing advanced societies, but also desirable because it ties politicians' hands in areas where short-term electoral incentives are detrimental to good policymaking, thus increasing the quality and credibility of public governance (e.g. Blinder 1997, Pettit 2004, Vibert 2007). On the other side of the fence, critics lament the lack of political pluralism, debate and accountability entailed by the (fallible) technocratic method, and see the shifting of decision making to depoliticized arenas as little more than a way for governments to offload their political responsibilities (Burnham 2001, Flinders and Buller 2006, Roberts 2011).²

It is fair to say, however, that even among its critics, technocracy as a depoliticized decision-making method is not regarded as inherently and fundamentally at odds with the survival and thriving of a country as a democracy. In fact, besides probably being unfeasible, subjecting each and every stage and aspect of public governance to partisan political principles would likely cause more problems than it solves, not just in terms of policy performance but also with respect to the legitimacy of decision making. Removing some parts of policymaking from direct political control and placing it in the hands of experts can, in the last analysis, coexist with and even improve the quality of democracy to the extent that technocracy is circumscribed within its proper functional and normative sphere, corrected to mitigate its most negative features, and overall taken with a healthy grain of salt (Fischer 1990, Gilley 2017).

The politicization of technocracy-as-method

If methodological depoliticization necessitates technocrats to be located in a halfway position between full and no autonomy with regard to political actors and institutions, then the politicization (or repoliticization) of technocracy can be associated with movements away from that position. This is a logical conclusion which, as we shall see, is not always fully appreciated in the literature.

The most straightforward and broadly acknowledged mode of politicization is represented by losses of decision-making autonomy on the part of technocrats. As the political constraints on experts increase, the

argument goes, their technocratic room for manoeuvre shrinks, and their decisions increasingly resemble those of mere executors of political instructions. Taken to the extreme, movements in this direction will eventually make technocracy lose its nature altogether and turn into administration in the narrowest sense of the term (on technocracy as “agent” see Chapter 12 and Introduction to the volume).

Autonomy losses can take place formally as well as informally. Formal means include not only direct constraints imposed on the decision-making space of technocrats—for instance, through changing the statutory independence of a technocratic agency—but also, and perhaps more frequently, indirect measures that affect autonomy by acting on the technocratic body’s finances or its recruitment, promotion and dismissal rules (see Verhoest et al. 2004 for an overview). Taken together, these cases overlap to a great extent with the notion of politicization commonly employed in the literature on civil service (e.g. Peters and Pierre 2004, Rouban 2003). In addition to these formal constraints, technocrats can be politicized de facto whenever political actors manage to impose their influence on officially autonomous entities via personal, professional or ideological connections (e.g. Adolph 2013, Devins and Lewis 2008, Ennsner-Jedenastik 2014, 2015).³

Politicization can also take place in the opposite scenario, namely if technocrats acquire so much autonomy as to escape political constraints altogether. In the absence of boundaries delimiting technocratic action, experts will necessarily have to act following policy ends set by themselves, whether openly or implicitly. But, as explained above, this by definition takes them outside of the technical realm and directly into the sphere of politics. Put otherwise, unlike the previous type of politicization, in which technocrats end up doing the bidding of some political actors, in this case experts become politicized by turning themselves into partisan actors working towards their own view of the “good society”.

This form of politicization is every bit as important as the previous one. Yet it is often subtler, and less readily recognized by scholars and commentators alike. A key reason for this lies in the asymmetrical effects of the two types of politicization on the concept of technocracy. While politicization as loss of autonomy is regarded as marking, at least in its extreme form, a departure from technocracy tout court—and hence a full semantic break with the term⁴—politicization stemming from an excess of autonomy takes us outside of the confines of technocracy-as-method only to make us enter the territory of two additional conceptualizations of technocracy: as a type of government, and as a type of informal regime. These will be examined in the next two sections.

Technocracy as a type of government

Politicization produced by excesses of technocratic autonomy can take place formally as well as informally. The former case is the most straightforward, and hence will be discussed first. In its fullest form, the elevation of technocrats to formal political independence would take us outside of the confines of democracy and into those of authoritarianism. Perhaps the clearest example of such a situation is that of military juntas—to the extent, of course, that the military are included within the category of technocrats. More generally, any system in which the reins of power (or significant and protected portions of it, as for example in present-day Myanmar) are in the hands of people selected on the basis of their professional affiliation and competences, rather than through free and fair elections, has the traits of an authoritarian technocracy.⁵ Crick (1962: 105) describes this combination of technology and undemocratic politicization quite well in his discussion of decision making in communist systems:

People in unfree societies which have abolished or forbidden the institutional means of making political decisions may think that the ideology—Marxian science, for instance—determines these allocations, so that everything remains simply a problem of application. But this, however much believed, is simply an error. [...] What they are in fact doing, faced with all sorts of complicated choices and alternatives as to how to allocate scarce resources, is to make political decisions without the institutions and procedures which register actual social demands honestly.

Because this chapter is mostly concerned with technocracy within formally democratic settings, we shall not elaborate further on the notion of technocratic authoritarianism. There is at least another case, however, in which we can speak of a formal acquisition of political autonomy on the part of technocrats while remaining within the boundaries of democracy: this is the case of so-called technocratic governments (discussed also in Chapter 6). The latter expression usually indicates executives in parliamentary systems where the post of prime minister and at

least the most important portfolios are held by experts with no party affiliation (although not necessarily without previous politico-administrative experience). The government headed by Mario Monti in Italy between 2011 and 2013 is probably the most prominent recent example of technocracy so defined. Relaxing the definition a little, the term “technocracy” is sometimes also used for mostly partisan governments headed by a non-partisan expert (such as the Papademos government in Greece in 2011–12) or, especially in presidential systems, for governments in which the key portfolios (above all the economic ones) are held by technocrats (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019, Dargent 2015, McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014).

Technocratic governments constitute the apex of political power for technocrats, who find themselves virtually unconstrained in their formulation and pursuit of policies, except for the same constitutional limits that would also apply to any party government. In fact, one might argue that technocratic governments are even less encumbered politically than party executives, as they are usually called in with a clear mandate to carry out deep social and economic reforms (on this, see also Valbruzzi’s analysis in Chapter 6). This is especially the case in difficult political junctures, such as those engendered by scandals and economic crises, in which traditional parties find themselves without the ability, willingness or credibility to carry out difficult measures (Brunclík and Parížek 2018, Wratil and Pastorella 2018). That such reforms are more often than not underpinned by a pro-market agenda only confirms the inevitably partisan nature of “technocracy-as-government” (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019).

At the same time, as he is elevated to a ministerial position, the technocrat changes, at least temporarily, his formal status in the polity. While in a military dictatorship members of the junta are co-opted qua officers and remain in that role, the central banker who becomes finance minister in a democracy ceases to be a central banker and acquires a new role, inclusive of its recruitment mechanisms, for the duration of his tenure. This is an obvious but important aspect, which has at least two key implications. The first is that the relationship of technocracy-as-government with democracy is not as problematic as it is often depicted in political as well as academic discussions. Technocratic governments certainly weaken the representation and accountability links between government and voters. However, they act entirely within the same constitutional rules as any party government. One might argue, moreover, that technocratic governments are as much a symptom as they are a cause of the decline in the quality of democratic governance that is often associated with them, insofar as they fill a political vacuum left by ineffective party systems (see also Caramani in the Introduction to the volume). Their relationship with democracy seems, therefore, at worst ambivalent, but certainly not incompatible (Pastorella 2016, Schmidt 2011).

The second implication is that the politicization of technocratic governments is largely in the open. While these executives sometimes employ a rhetoric of the necessity and inevitability of the policies they are introducing, for the most part the game they play is highly political, and it could hardly be otherwise given their institutional position. They are located within structures, procedures, and rituals that are eminently political: both the institutional ones, from receiving votes of confidence to finding parliamentary support for measures, and extra-institutional ones, such as being subject to the scrutiny of media and public opinion. They are entrusted with competences and responsibilities that would be hard to pass off as merely technical, and despite often resting on grand coalitions of parties, they do have an opposition that is there to remind them of the ultimately partisan nature of their choices. Commenting on the technocratic governments formed in Italy and Greece as a result of the Eurocrisis, *The Economist* (2011) remarked:

Even a wholly technocratic government can never fully escape politics. In any country powerful lobbies bargain and wrangle. In a parliamentary system technocrats must deal with the partisanship and intrigues of an elected legislature (in Athens and Rome, lawmakers are eagerly waiting to trip up the newcomers). They also face public ire if they are seen as sharing out gains or pains unfairly.

If technocracy-as-government transcends depoliticization not only in its methodological dimension (by acquiring political autonomy and therefore starting to determine the ends of public policy) but also in the institutional and discursive ones (by switching to a new formal status—that of executive power—and playing an openly political game), then what remains to connect this type of technocracy to the baseline conceptualization of technocracy-as-method? In other words, in what way, if any, can technocracy as a type of government be seen as depoliticized? The answer boils down to the personal/professional dimension: the only significant aspect of depoliticization that

is left in technocratic governments is that its key posts are held by persons with a technical rather than a party background.⁶

Technocracy as a type of informal regime

Technical experts do not necessarily have to be in government to have a say on the content and ends of public policies. They can also acquire partial or total autonomy vis-à-vis majoritarian institutions while remaining formally subordinated to the latter. In this situation, technocrats are just as politicized as in the previous case, but their transformation into partisan players able to impose their preferences on public policy takes place in the shadows, so to speak, behind an official façade of rule by political parties in parliament and government. Rather than a specific type of executive, therefore, this version of technocracy is better described as a *de facto* regime, whose key feature is “[t]he administrative and political domination of a society by a state elite and allied institutions that seek to impose a single, exclusive policy paradigm based on the application of instrumentally rational techniques” (Centeno 1993: 314).

How do technocrats acquire such domination? Meynaud (1969) identifies four ways in which experts may “dispossess” politicians of their power. In the first place, they can rule simply as a result of ample—nay, excessive—delegation of competences on the part of political authorities. This is especially the case when the terms of delegation are so vague as to render the expert “practically master of the problem” (Meynaud 1969: 80). Second, technocrats may disobey or resist, more or less overtly, the instructions and mandates set by politicians. Third, in their role as technical consultants and advisers to majoritarian institutions, experts can gain sway over political decisions by setting the terms of policy problems, pushing for their preferred solutions and downplaying or hiding disliked ones. (Needless to say, the more obscure the technical subject is to the politician, the greater the opportunities for this sort of technocratic domination.) Finally, technocrats may gain political influence by exploiting their role as mediators or coordinators of the work of other departments, particularly when inter-agency cooperation is difficult and the hard-won expert solution is unlikely to be questioned.

Whatever the mechanism of dispossession, the latter radically alters the relationship between technocrats and politicians compared to what happens in the baseline conceptualization of technocracy as a decision-making method, despite the formal equivalence of the two situations. Technocracy-as-method is a tool in the hands of elected politicians, who use it to depoliticize part of the governance process for a variety of reasons, and more or less strategically, but always remaining in control of the perimeter of expert action. In technocracy-as-regime these roles are reversed, with technocrats being usurpers of the real power in the polity, and politicians the (more or less aware) victims.

That the acquisition of political autonomy by technocracy-as-regime takes place in a covert fashion produces very different consequences compared to the case of technocracy-as-government. In the first place, while the latter is, as explained above, at worst ambivalent vis-à-vis democracy, technocracy-as-regime constitutes an unquestionable violation of democratic principles, for it takes ultimate political power away from electorally legitimized institutions and places it in the hands of personnel without any (even indirect) popular mandate or accountability for their policy decisions. In technocratic regimes, democracy becomes to a great extent an empty ritual, which is renewed through elections every few years but is unlikely to be notably consequential when it comes to real power.

The foregoing is compounded by the second consequence of covert politicization—namely, that technocracy-as-regime justifies and reinforces its power by hiding its partisan nature. As they exercise political power, technocrats continue to deploy a depoliticized ideology and a discourse of expertise, impartiality, objectivity and pragmatism, and to present their policy solutions as the best and most rational, or even the only ones possible under existing circumstances (Caramani 2017, Putnam 1977).⁷ This fiction is made possible by technocrats’ formal position as servants of majoritarian institutions, which shields them from political exposure and responsibility. As Sarfatti Larson (1972: 5–6) puts it,

the implicit appeal to an univocal notion of rationality, embodied in scientific and technical expertise, is inseparable from the *depoliticization* of social and economic issues. Thus, technocratic ideology legitimizes technocratic power by negating the political nature of the apparatus of domination in which technocracy is rooted (emphasis in original).

That technocracy-as-regime remains depoliticized not only at the personal/professional level, but also at the institutional and discursive level makes this conceptualization definitionally closer to technocracy-as-method than is the case for technocracy-as-government (whose connection with the baseline definition is stretched quite thin, as shown above). Where the relationship between the three types of technocracy changes is in the normative sphere, in which technocracy-as-regime stands apart from the other two conceptualizations for being the only one unequivocally undemocratic. It is no surprise, then, that this variant of technocracy is the one more often giving rise to political as well as academic debates, as shall be discussed further in the remainder of the chapter.

The contested nature of technocratic regimes

Where can we observe technocracy defined as a de facto regime? Leaving aside the (far too many) extravagant accounts of the phenomenon that belong less in the realm of political analysis than in that of conspiracy theory, technocracy nonetheless remains quite a frequent occurrence. Studying 1960s France, for example, Meynaud (1969) claimed that an elite of *grandes écoles* graduates had appropriated significant chunks of policymaking power from their positions within the *Grands Corps* (such as the *Inspection générale des finances*, the *Conseil d'état* and *Ponts et chaussées*). Needless to say, that France was an archetypally strong state was both a cause and an effect of its technocrats' vast power. More recently, the European Union has repeatedly been accused of being a system that allows unaccountable Commission officials and central bankers to rule over democratically elected member state governments (Radaelli 1999b). The EU, write Matthijs and Blyth (2017) "is a technocracy, run by bureaucrats who see rule-breaking as a challenge to their own authority". On the other side of the Atlantic, the United States is not immune from domination by experts. Centeno (1993), for instance, sees aspects of technocracy-as-regime in such executive agencies as the Office of Management and Budget, with its key role in budgetary agenda setting. Expanding the analysis to the sphere of policy advice, Fischer (1990: 147) observes:

It is far from clear that policy experts are necessarily constrained by an agenda preestablished by those they serve. Indeed [...] they can be deeply involved in determining the agenda. To be sure, such a role only confers an indirect form of power [...] But it is nonetheless very real power that can be used at propitious moments to shape the course of events.

Yet, for each of these examples it is possible to find opinions and analyses directed in the opposite direction. Writing in the same period as Meynaud, and acknowledging the prominent place of the French *grands commis* among the country's ruling elite, Ridley (1966: 38) nonetheless cautioned against concluding that real power had shifted away from party politicians to the technicians. Technocratic dominance over the state, he noted, "is generally proved by explaining why it must have happened, rather than by showing that it has in fact happened. The proof is theoretical and the conclusion not tested". Balfour and David-Wilp (2016) provide a similar rebuttal with respect to the EU, whose "dictatorship of technocrats and a bloated bureaucracy" they call the number one myth about the Union. Finally, in her study of scientific advice in the areas of environmental policy and food and drug safety in the United States, Sheila Jasanoff (1990: 208) concludes that, despite the increasing role of expertise in federal decision making, "regulatory science continues to be debated and interpreted within the structural constraints of an administrative process that still is heavily dominated by politics and law". Politically accountable officials in both the legislative and the executive branches, she continues, retain ultimate control of the advisory process, primarily through their power to decide whether and how to receive and accept policy advice.

There are at least three reasons why the empirical application of technocracy defined as an informal regime is more contentious than is the case for the remaining two conceptualizations of technocracy. The first (already touched on earlier) is that technocracy-as-regime is much more normatively loaded than both technocracy-as-method and technocracy-as-government. Saying that a state (or some other kind of polity) is a technocratic regime is saying that it is, at least to a significant extent, undemocratic. This makes technocracy a tool in rhetorical battles in which the term is used (or rejected) with respect to this or that political system (but also government, party or ideology) depending on one's political position and interests. And while populists from left and right are especially fond of the word—for in their eyes technocrats are part and parcel of the elites working against the will of the people (e.g. Müller 2016)—they are by no means the only ones who have deployed the notion of technocracy for electoral gain.

The second reason is conceptual: it has been argued here that the key defining feature of technocracy-as-regime is the experts' de facto transcendence of the autonomy perimeter set by political authorities, which takes them from the realm of policy means to that of policy ends. Very often, however, tracing the line between ends and means is easier said than done. This is particularly the case for those expert bodies entrusted with broad mandates, which may encompass policy options so diverse in their characteristics and effects as to be themselves subject to being framed as policy ends. For example, a central bank instructed to preserve price stability within the economy not only has to define what price stability means in the first place, it might also have a range of choices in the pursuit its goal—e.g. whether and to what extent to purchase treasury bonds—that can in turn have important consequences on, among other things, the sustainability of public debt, the fiscal space of a state and, ultimately, the performance of an incumbent government.

Finally, technocracy-as-regime is empirically contentious because of the many challenges presented by the empirical operationalization of this concept, even when policy means can be clearly told apart from ends at the theoretical level. A case in point is the role of experts as advisers of political actors and institutions. To what extent is a certain policy measure informed by scientific advice a manifestation of technocracy, with experts subtly manipulating politicians, or of a much healthier effort on the part of the latter to gain more information in order to make a better final decision? More often than not, the exchange process and the dynamics between the expert and political levels are too fluid to lend themselves to this sort of dissection. Another clear example is that of the resistance, boycott or violation of politically set mandates on the part of technicians, which can be very difficult to substantiate even when they are dealt with at the legal level—as, for instance, the recent court battles on the legitimacy of some of the European Central Bank's crisis measures demonstrate.⁸

Taken together, all these aspects place technocracy-as-regime squarely into the category of “essentially contested concepts” (Connolly 1993, Gallie 1956). It is a paradox of these concepts that they are contested largely due to their social and political importance, but it is precisely because of their importance that scholars should strive to hone and clarify them as much as possible—ultimately making them less contentious. Technocracy-as-regime is a tricky case in this respect: grey areas, both theoretical and empirical, may never be eradicated completely. Nonetheless, noteworthy advances have been made, over time, in trying to trace the contours of this phenomenon more neatly (e.g. Radaelli 1999a, 1999b, Tortola 2019, Tortola and Pansardi 2019). Within the broader research agenda on technocracy this is certainly one of the most challenging tracks, but one that should nonetheless be accorded high priority for the analytical and normative payoff at stake.

Conclusion

This chapter has achieved two related goals: first, it has systematically examined the relationship between technocracy and politics, which is primarily expressed by the notions of depoliticization and politicization. In doing so, the chapter has also expounded a unified conceptual framework for technocracy, which contains the three main usages of the latter term: technocracy as a decision-making method, as a type of government, and as a type of regime. Table 3.1 summarizes this framework by listing the main characteristics of each of the three conceptualizations of technocracy.

In ordering the principal ways in which technocracy is used in existing political, journalistic and scholarly debates, this analysis has clarified the concept in an inclusive fashion. In other words, the goal here has not been to privilege one “truer” definition of technocracy over the others, but rather to shed light on the varied connotations of this important term and on the links between its several facets. Technocracy is a broad concept that is used in different ways by different people, at different times and for different purposes. To it we can apply much of what Hanna Pitkin (1967: 10–11) once said of the concept of representation:

We may think of the concept as a rather complicated, convoluted, three-dimensional structure in the middle of a dark enclosure. Political theorists give us, as it were, flashbulb photographs of the structure taken from different angles. But each proceeds to treat his partial view as the complete structure. It is no wonder, then, that various photographs do not coincide, that the theorists' extrapolations from these pictures are in conflict. Yet there is something there, in the middle in the dark, which all of them are photographing; and the different photographs together can be used to reconstruct it in complete detail.

Table 3.1 Technocracy and depoliticization: a unified conceptual framework

<i>Technocracy as a...</i>			
	<i>Decision-making method</i>	<i>Type of informal regime</i>	<i>Type of government</i>
Dimensions of depoliticization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal/professional • Institutional/discursive • Methodological 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal/professional • Institutional/discursive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal/professional
Main policy object	Means	Ends and means	Ends
Relationship with democracy	Compatible	Distortive	Compatible to ambivalent
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent regulatory agencies • Independent central banks • Ministries' technical units 	(All contested) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • France (e.g. <i>grand corps</i>) • European Union (e.g. Commission, ECB, independent agencies) • United States (e.g. policy advisers, federal agencies) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dini government (Italy, 1995–96) • Fischer government (Czech Republic 2009–10) • Papademos government (Greece, 2011–12) • Monti government (Italy, 2011–13)

That there is a complicated structure there in the middle means that while we can and should embrace conceptual pluralism, we should also strive to find common linguistic ground to allow various users of the term “technocracy” to understand and dialogue with one another. This is what the foregoing analysis has tried to achieve. To go back to some of the questions raised at the beginning of the chapter, technocrats in a democracy can be both victims and perpetrators of politicization, depending on whether they lose or gain too much autonomy with respect to political authorities.

Perhaps more importantly, this chapter has shown that technocracy can be political and depoliticized at the same time and in different ways, based on the dimensions of (de)politicization we are looking at. Accordingly, modes of politicization will change in different cases, and so will our normative assessment of it. For example, for a technocrat abiding by the boundaries with politics, the space for politicization is above all methodological: will he keep following his expertise, or will he start making decisions based on (undesirable) political criteria? However, in technocracy-as-regime the only way left is what Frank Fischer (1991: 340) refers to as “politicizing the political”: namely, acknowledging the inherently partisan nature of experts’ actions—something which might not improve things much, but which would at least increase the transparency of the political status quo.

Political disagreements over the proper role of technocracy and politics in public governance certainly do not end here, and will likely continue for as long as democracy exists. What the reflections presented in this chapter can do, however, is to demarcate more sharply the analytical field on which these battles are fought.

Notes

- 1 The reader should note that other authors in the volume (see e.g. Caramani in the Introduction) may use the term “technical” rather than “technocratic” to indicate the expertise-based method of decision-making described here.
- 2 An attempt to transcend the traditional dualism between responsibility and responsiveness, on which much of this normative debate is based, is presented by van der Veer in Chapter 4 in this volume.
- 3 Technocratic bodies can, of course, be influenced or even captured by societal actors that are not strictly speaking political—for an example, see Braun (2018) and Jacobs and King (2016) on the sway of the financial sector over, respectively, the European Central Bank and the Federal Reserve. Insofar as these societal actors are seen as carriers of partisan interests, these cases are analogous to the type of politicization just described.
- 4 This is the position taken in this book overall. See the Introduction to the volume.
- 5 Unlike Caramani in the Introduction to this volume, I refrain from using the term “regimes” to indicate these cases of technocratic authoritarianism in order to avoid confusion with the different meaning of “technocratic regimes” proposed in the next section of this chapter. There the noun “regime” is used to signify informal patterns of power and influence within a formally democratic framework.
- 6 In this respect, it might not be a coincidence that Italians—who have gained some experience in this area over recent decades—do not refer to this type of executive as technocratic government, but rather “government of technicians” (*governo tecnico* or *governo dei tecnici*).
- 7 This discursive depoliticization is not too different from the notion of depoliticization as denial of political conflict discussed by Caramani in the Introduction to the volume.
- 8 See, most notably, rulings by the Court of Justice of the European Union in *Peter Gauweiler and Others v Deutscher Bundestag* (case C-62/14, judgment of 16 June 2015), and *Weiss and Others* (case C-493/17, judgement of 11 December 2018). By establishing the consistency of, respectively, the European Central Bank’s Outright Monetary

Transactions (OMT) and quantitative easing (QE) with the Bank's legal mandate, the Court essentially rejected the plaintiffs' interpretation of the ECB as a technocratic usurper of power within the Monetary Union.