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## Technocratic attitudes: a citizens' perspective of expert decision-making

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### ABSTRACT

Despite repeated appointments of technocratic governments in Europe and increasing interest in technocracy, there is little knowledge regarding citizens' attitudes towards technocracy and the idea of governance by unelected experts. This article revisits normative debates and hypothesises that technocracy and democracy stand in a negative relationship in the eyes of European citizens. It tests this alongside a series of hypotheses on technocratic attitudes combining country-level institutional characteristics with individual survey data. While findings confirm that individual beliefs about the merits of democracy influence technocratic attitudes, two additional important factors are also identified: first, levels of trust in current representative political institutions also motivate technocratic preferences; second, historical legacies, in terms of past party-based authoritarian regime experience, can explain significant cross-national variation. The implications of the findings are discussed in the broader context of citizen orientations towards government, elitism and the mounting challenges facing representative democracy.

**KEYWORDS** Technocracy; technocratic attitudes; political trust; experts; democratic attitudes; Europe

In recent years questions have been raised on citizens' attitudes to existing political institutions that make up democratic landscapes. The majority of scholarly articles has concentrated on the 'classical' institutions and actors, such as parties, governments, and local authorities, and has mourned the erosion of citizen trust and support for those representative institutions (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014; Caramani 2016; Dalton 2004; Norris 2011). There has also been a resurgent interest in the rise of populism, populist discourse and populist extreme parties, both on the right and on the left of the political spectrum (Akkerman *et al.* 2014; Tronconi 2015; Vasilopoulou *et al.* 2014). However, less research has focused on the topic of technocracy and people's attitudes towards

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technocrats, even though repeated appointments of technocratic cabinets have brought the topic under considerable media and academic attention (Begg 2011; Economist 2011; Habermas 2015; Incerti 2011; Odugbemi, 2011; Pastorella 2015). What is particularly missing is an understanding of how citizens view technocracy and how their support for this type of decision-making is shaped by individual and contextual factors. This article proposes the notion of technocratic attitudes and develops specific hypotheses drawn from the stealth democracy literature and beyond, on both individual and country-level determinants of citizens' favourable orientations towards technocracy. Its aim is to test in a comparative approach whether the narrative of a negative relation between technocracy and democracy holds for European citizens, and whether additional contextual factors, such as the trustworthiness of the political players and historical legacies, play a role in the formulation of such attitudes.

Overall, the article wants to add empirical analysis to the growing normative debate regarding the opposing political forces of technocracy, democracy and populism, and analyse with quantitative survey data how the relationships develop at the level of European peoples. The focus of this article is placed on better understanding citizens' orientation towards technocracy defined as independent, expert-driven political decision-making, in contrast to governance by popularly elected officials. Due to current data availability, our investigation of the attitudes of European citizens towards technocracy refers to the period prior to the euro crisis. We would expect that, following the appointment of a host of technocratic leaders and cabinets at the helm of European countries since 2009, those attitudes may have evolved. We revisit the potential implications of technocratic governance experiences, economic recession and financial austerity since the onset of the euro crisis in the latter part of the article. The present analysis provides the first examination of technocratic attitudes and the first such comparative study across European countries. We hope it will form the basis for further research into technocratic attitudes, adding a new dimension to the current literature on the rising scepticism towards institutions of representative democracy and growing citizen interest in alternative models of governance.

## **Democracy, technocracy and the people: a string of contested relationships?**

It is commonly argued that the power of technocrats – that is, experts acquiring and exercising political power (Burnham 1942) – is inversely proportional to that of democratically elected politicians, so that if the former increases the latter decreases. This is also the view of more recent scholars who see the technocratic mode of taking decisions as an impediment to democracy (Fischer 1990). Shapiro succinctly laments 'the inevitable tension between democratic control of public policy ... and regulation by experts' (Shapiro 2005: 343). In

other words, according to the majority of scholars, technocracy and democracy stand in a negative relationship.

There are, however, some isolated voices arguing that technocracy and democracy might be compatible, even necessary to each other. Schudson (2006), for instance, argues that democrats should incorporate a more forgiving view of the role of expertise in democracy and others have suggested that the de-politicisation of policy-making might even be a positive democratic feature (Pettit 2004). Williams (2006) goes as far as arguing that technocracy can lead to democratic externalities and, more recently, Rosanvallon (2011) agreed that the impartial legitimacy of technocratic non-majoritarian institutions might be a necessity – and part and parcel of – democratic legitimacy. Nevertheless, while many acknowledge that skills and expertise are part of what Fearon (1999) called a ‘good-type’ of politician, it is the lack of experts’ accountability that presents serious problems for the notion of representative democracy (Mansbridge 2003).

These theoretical debates are a good starting point to assess what may shape citizens’ attitudes towards technocracy. Since such political attitudes remain relatively unexplored and little qualitative work exists on this issue, we proceed with caution in investigating the notion of technocratic attitudes and what exactly citizens have in mind when they are asked to consider ‘technocracy’. Many people in Europe might think of technocratic governments and appointments of experts to key political posts,<sup>1</sup> some might use central banks as a reference point, while still others may think of European Union civil servants – often labelled Eurocrats – or even national civil service bureaucracies. Despite this diversity, we believe there to be an underlying orientation directed at political power and decision-making, which does not derive from popular selection and the political processes of party competition and elections, but from technical expertise.

Therefore, we would expect that citizens’ view of technocrats is influenced by their overall approach to representative democratic governance. In accordance with the normative analysis presented above, citizens’ attitudes to technocracy and democracy would stand in a negative relation, so that if citizens truly believe democratically elected representatives provide the best basis for a political system, they will not see technocrats in a favourable light. The current literature on citizens’ policy preferences for expert/non-partisan-based governance, or ‘stealth democracy’, as it has been conceptualised, is geographically limited and has occasionally brought forth contradictory results. Stealth democracy can be defined as a decision-making process where decisions are taken ‘efficiently, objectively and without commotion or disagreement’ (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002: 143). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) found that US citizens would rather see their democracy led by impartial experts or businessmen than being involved in it and seeing its workings too closely in their daily lives. Scholars have identified similar patterns of rising support for stealth

democracy in Finland (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009) and the Netherlands (Coffé and Michels 2014), mainly to be found among less satisfied, less politically trusting and less educated citizens. However, the same works simultaneously find growing support for alternative forms of politics, in particular more direct democracy and citizen involvement. There is little comparative evidence on such preferences and national-specific studies show increased citizen support for both direct and technocratic modes of governance as the alternative to representative ones (Webb 2013).<sup>2</sup>

As a further antipode to this tension between representative democracy and technocracy, scholars are increasingly turning their attention to the relation between citizen attitudes towards independent experts and populist attitudes (Akkerman *et al.* 2014; Caramani 2016; Hawkins *et al.* 2012). Efforts to define populism and populist attitudes of citizenries have led to a theory of a thin ideology or discourse that describes ‘elitism’ as its mirror image (Mudde 2004: 543). Although ‘elites’ are not defined explicitly in this discourse, they include ‘evil’ business elites, the political establishment and independent experts, which are then juxtaposed to the ‘good’ people (Akkerman *et al.* 2014). The authors are quick to point that there are some similarities between populism and elitism, both theoretical and empirical. One similarity is the emphasis on charismatic and strong leadership, or the division of the political world into a force of ‘good and right’ and a force of ‘evil, corrupt and wrong’. As a case in point, those studies that have tested measures of political attitudes among citizens have found a positive – not negative – relationship between populism and elitism (as attitudes towards experts) (Akkerman *et al.* 2014; Hawkins *et al.* 2012).

This points to a misapprehension of citizen attitudes towards technocrats. Firstly, placing independent technocratic expertise in the same category as the existing political establishment of a democracy goes against the aforementioned tension between technocrats and a political system’s representative democratic machine. Technocratic attitudes entail support for people who have *not* been chosen by voters, through the existing political parties and following the present system of electoral competition. In other words, in so far as attitudes towards technocrats are elitist, they encompass only a specific part of a society’s elite (such as a ‘knowledge elite’) and stand in contrast to the current political elite, political parties, the legislature and their ways of ‘politics as usual’. At the same time, a preference for independent expertise also entails a belief that the people are unable to select worthy decision-makers through the current democratic system.

Therefore, we argue that in addition to overall beliefs about the merits of democracy as a regime, perceptions of the political class and of the institutions it populates are important considerations for citizen views of technocracy. Citizen distrust in the political system, in its institutions and its officials will influence the appeal of technocracy, as technocrats are contrasted with the elected political class. We know that trust is essential for the healthy functioning and legitimacy

of any democratic regime, creating a reservoir of citizens' 'goodwill' towards the political system, its institutions and the political class (Easton 1965), while distrusting attitudes have a significant negative effect on citizens' approach to political processes and their subsequent political behaviour (Hetherington 1998, 2005; Levi and Stoker 2000; Rothstein and Stolle 2008). Distrust of representative political institutions marks a break between citizens and their representatives, and existing research has traced its impact on citizens' decision to abstain in elections or to support alternative political groups, anti-systemic and radical parties (Belanger and Nadeau 2005; Hooghe *et al.* 2011; Hooghe and Dassonneville 2014). Therefore, citizens who perceive their democratically elected governments and institutions to be untrustworthy may redirect their attention to technocracy, as an alternative mode of decision-making by officials who are selected based on their expertise and not elected by the majority of the citizens.

### Individual-level hypotheses

As mentioned above, we expect that citizens' preference for technocracy will depend on their attitudes towards the democratic institutions and players in their political system and on their attitudes towards electoral democracy as a mode of governance. Those who are unconvinced about the benefits of democracy as a regime and are distrustful of political institutions will be more likely to express a positive attitude towards technocracy. The first hypothesis concerns citizens' beliefs about and support for representative democracy as a political system and can be formulated as follows:

**H1(a) More positive attitudes towards democracy as a regime and as a way of governance will lead to more negative attitudes to technocracy.**

We expect that political trust or distrust of political institutions has an additional influence on citizens' attitudes towards technocracy. A series of untrustworthy governments and institutional players may increase the attractiveness of independent experts, irrespective of a citizen's beliefs about the merits of electoral democracy, whereas trust in the officials and institutions of the political system render technocrats unnecessary, or worse, disruptive to the chain of representation and accountability. We focus specifically on trust in representative political institutions (national parliaments and national governments) and political parties, as these provide the link between the idea of representative democracy through elections and citizens. Citizens who trust elected officials and institutions to act in a competent manner and for the good of the community are more likely to be suspicious of unelected decision-making. If this trust is lost, however, citizens might shift their preferences towards technocratic governance. Hence we would expect that:

**H1(b) Higher citizen trust in representative democratic political institutions would lead to more negative attitudes toward technocracy.**

While the hypotheses above could apply to any political system, there is something quite specific about political attitudes of citizens in the countries analysed in this study, where the interaction between technocracy and democracy plays out more strongly: their belonging to the European Union. Technocracy is often associated with the EU as ‘the organisation which has perhaps more than any other faced accusations on account of the role of technocratic functions and expertise in its workings’ (Craig 2014: 32; also see Harcourt and Radaelli 1999). The ongoing debate over the EU’s democratic deficit includes references to the technocratic nature of the EU, which delegitimises it and distances citizens. The EU, as a hybrid between a technocratic independent body and a democratic polity, is the ideal place to assess how the views of citizens toward the EU might influence or change one’s attitudes towards technocracy.

The expectation is that a citizen who trusts the EU would be familiar, comfortable with – and indeed positively oriented towards – the idea of expert decision-making, thus having more favourable attitudes towards technocracy. Although at the individual level research has shown that trusting attitudes towards national and European political levels tend to reinforce each other (Rohrschneider 2002), studies such as Rothstein (2003) and Kritzinger (2003) provide evidence that citizens are able to evaluate different political institutions separately. If, moreover, the EU<sup>3</sup> is perceived by voters as acting behind the scenes to influence the appointment of technocratic national actors, this may reinforce existing convictions that technocracy and the EU are linked, and render the association between attitudes to technocracy and attitudes to the EU even stronger. Overall a positive relationship between trust in the EU and favourable technocratic attitudes (and vice versa) is to be expected.<sup>4</sup>

**H1(c) Citizens with higher trust in the EU will show a more favourable attitude towards technocracy.**

In our individual-level analysis we include a series of control variables: citizens’ ideological self-placement on a left-right scale, age and gender. We also include two control variables derived directly from the stealth democracy literature: that is, education and political interest. Both have been shown to be negatively correlated with support for stealth democracy (Coffé and Michels 2014; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). We would expect that the more active and interested a citizen is in politics, the less s/he will approve of delegating decision-making to ‘unelected technocrats’ (Kurki 2011). In addition, we expect that older citizens, having been socialised in an earlier period with stronger parties and partisan ties, will also be negative towards technocratic decision-making.

## Country-level hypotheses

We also maintain that different contextual characteristics in the countries under study will have an impact on the formation and expression of citizens' attitudes towards technocracy. Given the limited comparative research available, we rely on the same mechanism outlined above and expect technocracy to be seen more positively in countries where the political system is not stable or not fully established, and where governments are performing poorly in ensuring the well-being of their citizens. From these general assumptions two related hypotheses can be developed. The first concerns the pervasiveness of corruption. Corruption has been shown to diminish political trust dramatically (Van Biezen and Molenaar 2012) and rules to reduce or avoid corruption are premised precisely on the concern that political corruption undermines public confidence in politics (Ziller and Schübel 2015). We expect the poor quality of democratic systems due to corruption to make technocracy a more appealing alternative to citizens, and therefore to have a positive effect on individual support for technocratic decision-making.<sup>5</sup>

H2(a) In countries with higher levels of corruption, citizens will tend to have more positive attitudes towards technocracy.

We also expect that if citizens are dissatisfied with economic outputs, they will assign responsibility to the partisan political class and will, therefore, be more likely to accept, or even prefer, technocratic decision-making to improve the situation. Citizens tend to judge their political system not solely based on political and democratic standards, but also on their economic reality and the performance of the government (Gavin and Sanders 1997; Wagner 2011). Existing research on the appointment of technocratic ministers shows that negative economic conditions and fear of the markets increase the likelihood of technocrats and independents entering the cabinet (Halleberg and Wehner 2013; Neto and Strøm 2006). Therefore:

H2(b) In countries with more difficult economic conditions, citizens will tend to have more positive attitudes towards technocracy.

Finally, we believe that a key factor in shaping widespread attitudes towards technocracy lies in the specifics of national political culture and, in particular, in past experiences or alternative forms of government to the one which can be broadly labelled as 'liberal representative democracy'. We expect that past community experiences influence the meaning and perception of democracy and alternative regime types among citizens. Two such types could be considered to leave a legacy in terms of peoples' attitudes to technocracy as an alternative to partisan democracy and are relevant for our analysis of European countries: the experience of communism, as party-based authoritarian rule, and the experience of technocratic government appointments, as a manifestation of political rule by unelected experts. We will consider each of them in turn.

The newer post-communist democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have attracted considerable scholarly attention in an effort to study the social, institutional and political legacy of communist rule (Mishler and Rose 2001; White *et al.* 2013). Distrust towards parties and politics in general is found to be widespread in many post-communist societies, where citizens are highly suspicious of politicians and the political institutions born out of the transition period are considered to fall short of citizen expectations (Ekman and Linde 2005). Because technocracy can be presented as an alternative to party-centred democratic governance, we would expect that citizens of post-communist states should hold more favourable attitudes towards this mode of decision-making. We remain cautious in identifying the precise mechanism behind this and suggest two possible explanations. Favourable attitudes towards un-elected experts could be motivated by negative perceptions of political parties and politicians as a class and fuelled by the experience of authoritarian party-based rule. At the same time, it is possible that an opposite mechanism is at play and that, in the minds of citizens, un-elected technocrats represent a mode of governance that is indeed more similar to the communist experience in its lack of citizen involvement, political selection and plethora of parties and in its general emphasis on expertise. Therefore, attitudes could be motivated by ‘communist nostalgia’, whether based on principles or on assessments of ailing current political outputs (Ekman and Linde 2005; Haerpfer 2003). If the latter mechanism dominates, we should be able to observe bigger differences among the older and younger generations in these countries, with older citizens being more favourable towards technocracy based on early socialisation during communist rule and the process of learning regime support.

H3(a) If a country has had experience of party-based authoritarian rule, in the shape of communism, its citizens will be more likely to report more positive attitudes towards technocracy.

It is important to note that we are interested in citizen attitudes towards technocracy in the widest sense of expert, non-democratically elected, political decision-making. However, technocracy is also manifested in specific types of technocratic governments – that is, cabinets where the prime ministers and/or ministers are independent, non-partisan figures (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014). Such an alternative form of government experience is expected to influence citizen attitudes towards the more ‘diffuse’ idea of technocracy, which is the one employed so far in the analysis. We investigate whether there is a ‘technocracy addiction’ effect, whereby once citizens who have experience of technocratic governments are more likely to be positive towards technocrats in the future, making it less of an affront to normal cabinet appointment. If that is the case, we expect a positive association:

H3(b )If a country has had experience of technocratic governments its citizens will be more likely to report positive attitudes towards technocracy.

## Data and methods

The hypotheses developed above will be tested using data from the 2008 European Values Survey (hereafter EVS) for all EU member countries excluding Croatia (27 in total). We are aware that using data restricted to one year is limiting, as there is no possibility to observe the evolution of the phenomenon over time, but we still think that the results will be informative as they will provide a snapshot of attitudes and motivations, and will constitute a good basis for further comparative studies of attitudes towards technocracy as newer data is collected.<sup>6</sup>

The dependent variable we use to capture citizen attitudes towards technocracy is phrased in the EVS as:

I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?

Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country.<sup>7</sup>

Substantively, the choice of this variable rests on the assumption that respondents interpret this question as referring to technocracy – that is, experts taking policy decisions and governing within the framework of their national political context.<sup>8</sup> We assume respondents think of technocracy in this way probed by the question, which precisely references ‘this country’. As mentioned earlier, attitudes towards technocracy may be linked to considerations of various technocratic actors, from the civil service, policy sphere or European levels. Nevertheless, we believe it captures orientations towards the idea of unelected experts exercising political power at the national level. We use the four response categories in our descriptive analyses below, but collapse the four categories into two, using the dichotomous dependent variable in subsequent analysis to ease interpretation of our results.<sup>9</sup>

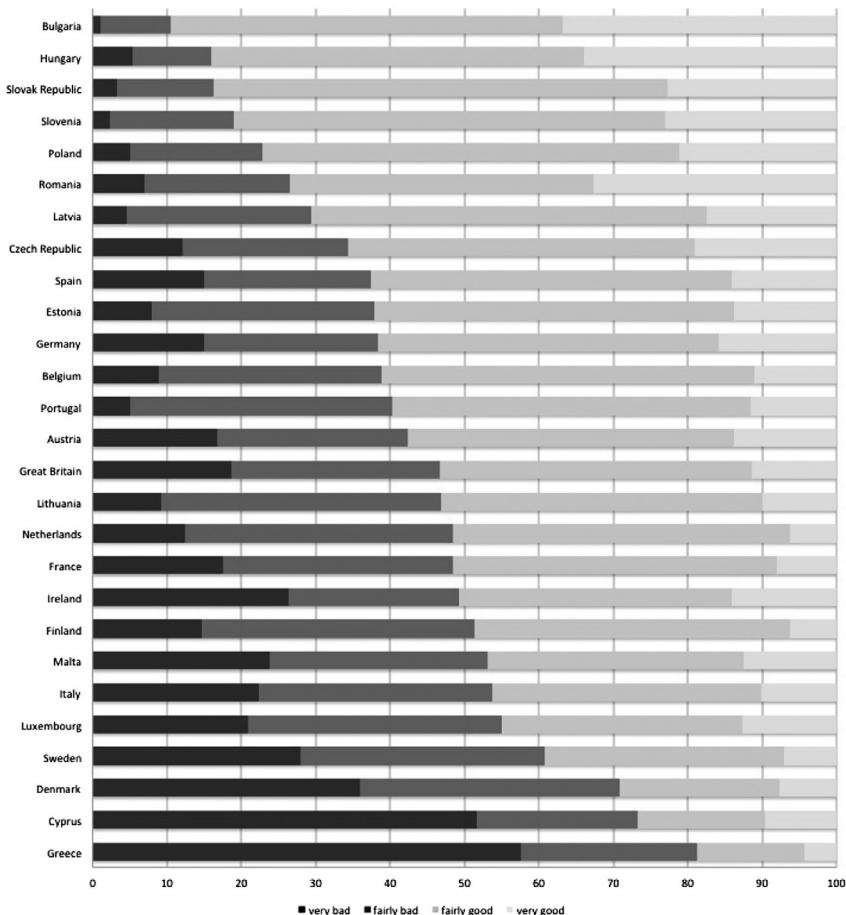
Individual-level explanatory variables are also taken from the EVS. We measure democratic attitudes using an index of four items asking about the effectiveness of democracy in maintaining a good economy and social order, its decisiveness and overall advantages as a form of government. Our choice of this measure is motivated by the need to capture respondents’ overall attitude towards democracy as a system of governance that is different from other common operationalisation choices, such as democratic satisfaction or evaluation of government, which register more specific evaluations of incumbents and more transient attitudes.<sup>10</sup> We also construct an index for political trust in representative institutions, using the survey items for trust in national government, in national parliament and in political parties. Trust in the European Union is measured using a single item.<sup>11</sup>

For the country-level variables, we use the Corruption Perception Index as our measure of systemic corruption. We use data from the World Bank

for the economic measures of GDP per capita in 2008 and a host of other economic indicators, such as unemployment, GDP growth, budget deficit and inequality index. The list of technocratic governments is taken from the work of McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014).

In order to test the aforementioned hypotheses for the determinants of technocratic attitudes we employ a multilevel binary logistic model. This statistical method allows us not only to account for correlated error terms among individuals from the same national context, but also to test contextual effects at the country level (Steenbergen and Jones 2002).

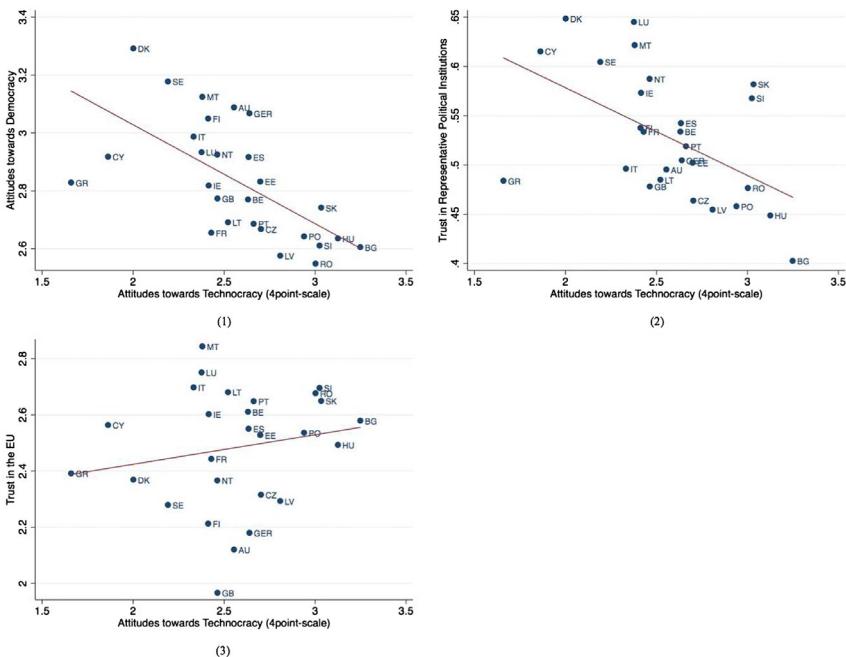




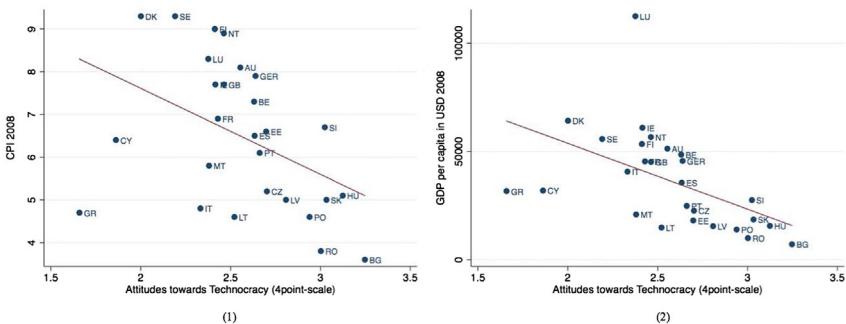
**Figure 2.** Distribution of technocratic attitudes (EVS 2008).

## Analysis and findings

Taking a first look at the distribution of positive and negative technocratic attitudes across countries as plotted on a European map, it is clear that there is considerable variation between the 27 EU countries under investigation. Darker shadings in Figure 1 indicate overall more positive attitudes towards technocracy in that country. Differences stand out mostly in terms of Eastern and Western Europe, with Central and Eastern European countries scoring widespread positive attitudes. The distribution of technocratic attitudes presented in Figure 2 also shows countries of CEE topping the list, while citizens in Denmark, Sweden, Cyprus and Greece register the most widespread negative orientations towards technocratic decision-making. Interestingly, the distribution of attitudes using 1999 data is very similar, both in terms of country



**Figure 3.** Country scatterplots – democratic attitudes, trust in the EU and political trust.



**Figure 4.** Country scatterplots – corruption perception index and GDP per capita.

ordering and share of respondents with positive attitudes.<sup>12</sup> Figure A2. Comparing positive attitudes towards technocracy (1999–2008).

Scatterplots presented in Figure 3 show that at the country level, citizen attitudes towards democracy (1) and the average level of political trust (2) have a negative relationship to technocratic attitudes. Trust in the EU (3) appears to be positively related to favourable technocratic attitudes, though the association is considerably weaker.

**Table 1.** Multilevel logistic models using EVS2008 (dependent variable: technocratic attitudes).

Null Model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
<i>Individual-level variables</i>							
Democratic Attitude index	0.542*** (0.015)	0.543*** (0.015)	0.543*** (0.015)	0.542*** (0.015)	0.543*** (0.015)	0.544*** (0.015)	0.546*** (0.015)
Political trust	0.475*** (0.047)	0.477*** (0.047)	0.477*** (0.047)	0.475*** (0.047)	0.478*** (0.047)	0.416*** (0.048)	0.478*** (0.047)
Trust in EU	1.128*** (0.022)	1.127*** (0.022)	1.127*** (0.022)	1.128*** (0.022)	1.127*** (0.022)	1.129*** (0.022)	1.127*** (0.022)
Political interest	0.912*** (0.015)	0.912*** (0.015)	0.912*** (0.015)	0.912*** (0.015)	0.912*** (0.015)	0.914*** (0.015)	0.910*** (0.015)
LR ideology	1.028*** (0.007)	1.028*** (0.007)	1.028*** (0.007)	1.028*** (0.007)	1.028*** (0.007)	1.028*** (0.007)	1.029*** (0.007)
Male	0.969 (0.027)	0.970 (0.027)	0.970 (0.027)	0.969 (0.027)	0.970 (0.027)	0.970 (0.027)	0.972 (0.027)
Education	0.997 (0.003)	0.997 (0.003)	0.997 (0.003)	0.997 (0.003)	0.997 (0.003)	0.997 (0.003)	0.996 (0.003)
Age	0.996*** (0.001)	0.996*** (0.001)	0.996*** (0.001)	0.996*** (0.001)	0.996*** (0.001)	0.996*** (0.001)	0.995*** (0.001)
<i>Country-level variables</i>							
CPI (2008)	0.858* (0.071)	0.999** (0.001)	1.089 (0.341)	2.750*** (0.651)	2.130*** (0.534)	2.182*** (0.559)	
GDPpc (2008)							1.005*** (0.002)
Tech. government exp.							
Communist regime exp.							
<i>Interaction term</i>							
Age* Communist exp.							1.559*** (0.296)
Pol. trust* Communist regime exp.							
Overall intercept	1.418** (0.228)	12.30*** (2.29)	33.16*** (18.65)	21.24*** (5.90)	11.95*** (2.56)	8.439*** (1.55)	8.951*** (1.66)
Random effects estimates (entries are standard deviations of intercept)	0.833 (0.114)	0.765* (0.105)	0.720** (0.099)	0.687*** (0.095)	0.764* (0.105)	0.589*** (0.082)	0.588*** (0.082)
Country level	0.174	0.151	0.136	0.125	0.152	0.095	0.095
ICC	26.227	26.227	26.227	26.227	26.227	26.227	26.227
Observations	27	27	27	27	27	27	27
Number of groups							

Note: Dependent variable technocratic attitudes is dichotomous (0 = negative attitude, 1 = positive attitude). Entries are odds ratios, standard errors in parentheses.  
Significance: \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.10$ .

At the country level, the bivariate associations between corruption control, GDP per capita and technocratic attitude are shown in Figure 4 and appear to be in the hypothesised direction, with citizens in countries with lower corruption and higher GDP per capita reporting more negative attitudes towards technocracy on average, although the associations are far from strong. Utilising a single time-point for our analysis makes it harder to argue about the impact of worsening financial performance, since many of the indicators capture structural economic characteristics as much as performance. We discuss the role of economic conditions in more detail in the ensuing analysis.

Given the wide variation in average attitudes towards technocracy in countries, we employ a multilevel binary logistic model to test the individual-level hypotheses while accounting for the hierarchical structure of the data. In our data, approximately 83 per cent of variation in responses is captured at the individual level, with a considerable 17 per cent of variation being located at the country level. The likelihood ratio test comparing the null multilevel model to a null simple regression model also suggests there are significant country effects and the appropriate methodological approach is a multilevel model ( $\text{LR} = 4579, p < 0.001$ ). The Null Model in Table 1 presents the intercept only model and Model 1 introduces the individual-level variables. All of the variables retain their statistical significance and direction of the effect on technocratic attitudes even when country-level variables are added in Model 2 onwards.<sup>13</sup>

The initial hypotheses on the relationship between democratic attitudes and trust in representative institutions are supported, with higher scores on the democratic attitude index decreasing the odds of supporting technocracy as a political model of decision-making. Registering a high score on the democratic attitude index decreases one's odds of reporting favourable technocratic attitudes by about 50 per cent. Similarly, and in addition to the effect of general attitudes towards democracy as a regime, trust in the country's representative political institutions (government, parliament and political parties) also has a negative and even stronger effect on support for technocracy. The hypothesis for individual-level trust in the EU is also confirmed. Despite the fact that trusting attitudes are considered to be influenced by the same life experiences and personal characteristics, and are thus often positively correlated, trust at the EU level has a positive relation with favourable technocratic attitudes.<sup>14</sup> The relationship between EU trust and technocratic attitudes is weaker, but it is in the hypothesised direction, suggesting there is an independent effect of orientations towards the EU. This further confirms the suggestion that attitudes towards the EU and attitudes towards technocracy might be capturing similar belief systems. Predicted probability plots in support of our hypotheses are shown Appendix 3 (Figure A3).

Given the limited existing knowledge regarding the possible influences on attitudes towards technocracy, it is worth pointing out some of the associations captured by our control individual-level variables in Model 2. Political interest

has a small negative effect, as hypothesised by the stealth democracy research and age has a weak negative effect, with older citizens being less favourable to technocracy than the young. We consider these effects to be in line with expectations – that is, citizens who express stronger interest in politics and are more invested in the political processes of their country are negative towards a system of governance that goes against democratic representation and popular election. Similarly, older citizens socialised under a different political landscape with stronger party ties (at least in Western European countries) should be more sceptical towards political decision-making that challenges this form of delegate representation. In addition, the more right-leaning citizens are more likely to report favourable attitudes towards technocracy. While technocracy can serve left- or right-wing ideologies (Phillips 2011), studies of Spanish citizens have shown that having a left-wing ideology is a key factor to explain lack of support for stealth democracy (Font *et al.* 2012). In general, within and certainly outside Europe, technocrats ‘have been associated with orthodox versions of free-market capitalism.<sup>15</sup> During the past years, the new technocrats in Eastern Europe have also been clearly associated with market economics (Fischer 1990). While the link between technocracy and neo-liberal policies<sup>16</sup> has no inherent validity as such (Centeno 1993), the reality in Western Europe too shows that the two often go hand in hand. Such *entente* has been explained as originating in the fact that both place emphasis on productive efficiency.

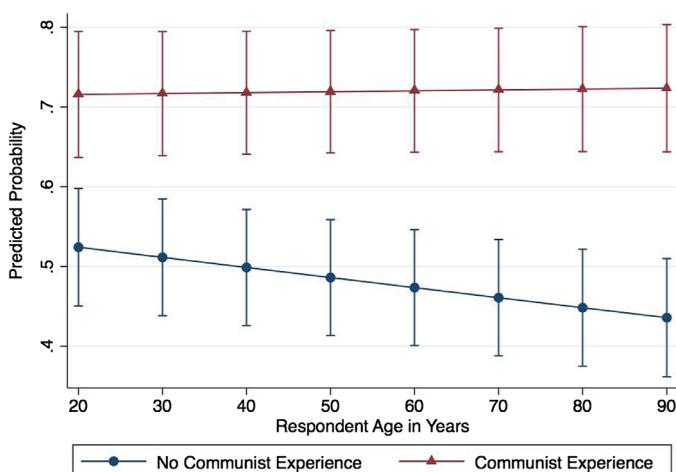
Finally, contrary to what is argued by Coffé and Michels (2014), education levels in our models do not have a significant influence on attitudes towards technocracy. For these scholars, lower levels of perceived political efficacy and satisfaction were the main explanation for the correlation between low education and support for stealth democracy. However, in our analysis, these mechanisms are better captured by the effect of political interest, trust and democratic attitudes. Furthermore, Coffé and Michels’ results were based on a survey of Dutch citizens, and while single-country studies are valid and useful, our Europe-wide analysis shows that citizens’ perceptions and preferences might not be the same as in one country. In our sample, we do find a negative bivariate association between education levels and technocratic attitudes in many Western European countries (including the Netherlands), though the association is weak and does not hold for Central, Eastern and Southern European countries.

Looking at the country-level variables in Models 2–8, we find some support for the corruption hypothesis, with the corruption perception index having a negative effect, but significant only at the 10 per cent level.<sup>17</sup> The economic indicator related to economic development shows that per capita GDP has a very small negative effect, whereas all other indicators related to economic performance do not reach statistical significance and are not reported in Table 1.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, though we find that corruption and economic development levels have a weak effect on technocratic attitudes, we cannot say the same

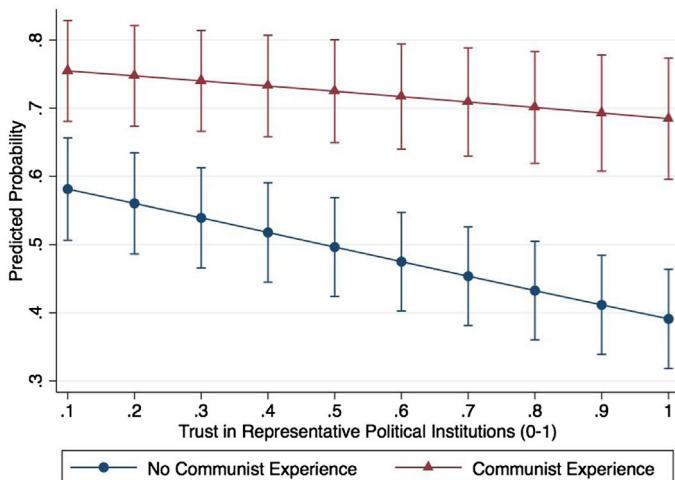
about economic performance. If additional data from different time points were available, we would be better equipped to trace changes in economic performance and technocratic attitudes for each country. At this point, the data do provide some evidence that these structural conditions undermine the relationship between citizens and politicians and are indeed related to citizens reporting a more favourable attitude towards technocracy and partially support hypotheses 2(a) and 2(b).

In Model 4 we fail to find any result for past experience of technocratic government (hypothesis 3(b)). While the effect runs in the expected direction (i.e. having experienced the technocratic mode of governance improves citizen attitudes to technocracy), the variable is not statistically significant. This could be explained by the relative crudeness of the dichotomous variable, yet even estimations using the distinctions between the different types of technocratic government based on length of remit and composition does not yield any significant results.<sup>19</sup> We believe this is because such operationalisations fail to capture citizens' experience and perceptions of these governments, which would help shape general attitudes towards technocracy.

Model 5 tests the hypothesis regarding communist legacies for citizen attitudes towards technocracy. Citizens of countries that experienced Communist Party rule are more likely to report a positive attitude towards technocracy, as expected in hypothesis 3(a). In fact, the dummy variable captures most of the variation that occurs at the country level (the ICC for Model 5 is reduced to 0.095). This effect is in line with our expectations, though its influence is greater than anticipated. Further, we find that such technocratic preferences are most likely motivated by the negative experience of party-based authoritarian rule and the difficulties of establishing credible political parties in its aftermath,



**Figure 5.** Impact of age on attitudes towards technocracy for different country groups.



**Figure 6.** Impact of political trust on attitudes towards technocracy for different country groups.

rather than a nostalgia for the communist regime. Figure 5 (Model 6) shows that respondent age has no significant effect on technocratic attitudes in post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, the hypothesised effect of age, with older people being more likely to disapprove of technocratic decision-making, is only true for the remaining European nations, in line with earlier explanations of stronger attachments to party-based political processes.

Given that we know post-communist party legacies in Central and Eastern Europe have made it harder to develop and establish citizen-state trust relations, we also test how citizen distrust shapes attitudes towards technocracy in that context. Figure 6 (Model 7) shows that distrust of representative institutions does increase citizens' preference for technocracy across all European countries, though citizens in post-communist states are less sensitive to individual levels of trust and are consistently more likely to report favourable attitudes towards technocracy than their counterparts in Western Europe. This suggests that technocratic decision-making is evaluated by citizens across European countries not solely in terms of its potential advantages or disadvantages, but also in terms of the solution it may offer to democratic politics.

It is important to note at this point that, in our analysis, country-level factors are considered in turn due to the strong correlations between country indicators. Therefore, although we find some evidence that control of corruption has a negative effect on technocratic attitudes, economic development has a weak negative effect and communist legacies have a strong effect, these hypotheses are tested individually. As more data on citizen attitudes towards alternative forms of government become available we hope to revisit these hypotheses and to better map economic changes and technocratic preferences. At present,

we find that a significant part of the explanation for the contextual differences between countries can be accounted for by the varying political cultures, specifically the legacy of communist authoritarian experiences. This interpretation helps to explain the country variations presented in descriptive analysis and is in line with in-depth case studies of citizen attitudes in Central and Eastern European countries. Bulgaria is still struggling to free itself from party-based rule inherited from communism, including corrupt clientelistic structures, and its citizens are still highly apprehensive of politicians and political party rule (Chiru and Gherghina 2012; Dobrinsky 2000; Genov and Krüsteva 2001; Wight and Fox 1998). In the Czech Republic, where the culture of ‘non-political politics’ has been entrenched since the overturning of communism, there is a deep suspicion of excessively partisan leaders (Ehl 2009; Hanley 2013; Hloušek and Kopeček 2014). As Morlino aptly summarises, ‘Memories of repressive patterns and action can continue to inhibit political discourse, political participation and individual notions of political efficacy, associability and trust’ (2010: 509–510).<sup>20</sup>

## Discussion and conclusion

The relationship between technocracy and democracy is increasingly being debated in the academic literature, but so far less work has assessed how the two stand in the eyes of the citizens. This article has attempted to fill this gap, offering a comparative analysis of factors that influence attitudes towards the technocratic mode of governance, as represented by experts making policy decisions instead of elected officials. Our analysis has shown a consistent story. Citizens are more inclined to show support for the technocratic mode of governance when they have weaker democratic attitudes and are distrustful of their politicians and representative institutions, either in themselves, or because of structural factors such as corruption or political culture.

While more work would be required to test the impact of these factors through time and especially to compare attitudinal developments as new technocratic governments are appointed in Europe, the results obtained so far provide novel evidence on what influences citizens’ approach to unelected experts and can help explain the popular resistance to technocrats in Greece, while remaining more optimistic about technocratic appointments in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and, more recently, Romania. Further, this article has helped to clarify some of the contradictions found in the stealth democracy and populism literature. Our results support the idea that more distrustful and less politically interested citizens are more likely to approve of the delegation of decision-making to experts. At the same time, though independent experts can be considered part of a ‘knowledge elite’, in the eyes of the citizens they stand in sharp contrast with the political elites and current political establishment. A final important contribution stems from the intriguing contextual country effects on attitudes towards technocracy, where we find that a political culture

shaped by the experience of authoritarian party-based rule reinforces positive attitudes towards technocracy.

Finally, we wish to address an important point about the nature of technocratic attitudes. We have sought to explain citizen attitudes towards technocracy through their beliefs regarding the merits of representative democracy as a regime, as well as their assessment of the trustworthiness and operation of their current political system. Such political attitudes are not formulated in isolation, but are in constant interaction with each other. It is possible that citizens' belief in the merits of representative democracy entails their beliefs about the potential benefits and dangers of alternative regimes. Influences do not run solely in one direction and in the present observational study we do not claim to determine causal effects. However, we argue that given the heightened levels of frustration citizens are expressing towards their democratic systems and the mounting pressures placed upon representative democratic institutions at the national level, citizen distrust and historical legacies that form national political culture can help us better understand how citizens approach such alternative modes of governing in addition to their beliefs about representative democracy.

Technocracy is primarily evaluated in relation to the current political system in European countries – that is, representative democracy – and preferences for unelected, non-partisan politics are motivated by the perception that party democracy fails to fulfil its function (Mair 2008). While we cannot, for reasons of data availability, provide a more specific analysis of what failings of democracy influence citizens' attitudes towards technocracy, these results have significant implications for debates on the quality of democracies and citizens' political engagement. In particular, the importance of trust in political institutions and in democracy as a whole has been shown once again to be an important feature of democratic life, with distrustful citizens being more likely to turn their attention – and potentially votes – away from representative democracy. Recent studies of citizen attitudes during the euro crisis have already shown how economic contraction and austerity policies have impacted on citizen trust and satisfaction with democracy (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014). We would expect that post-2008, socioeconomic developments, the experience of technocratic appointments in many European nations and their outputs will increase polarisation between complete support and complete rejection of technocracy, adding to the societal divisions and populist challenges observed in strained representative democracies and political parties across the board.

## Notes

1. European countries that experienced technocratic governments prior to 2008 include Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Finland, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Romania (McDonnell and Valbruzzi, 2014). It is worth noting that these technocratic experiences varied in terms of composition (fully technocratic, technocratic-led), mandate (caretaker, full mandate) and duration.

2. For a comprehensive literature review, see Font *et al.* (2015). The present article will leave the question of direct democracy aside, and concentrate on expert-driven political decision-making, i.e. technocracy, but recognises that these two pressures on traditional representative democracy may stem from citizens' frustration with representational and institutional democratic shortcomings.
3. Clearly there are different actors behind the common name 'EU' but often in citizens' minds these are all conflated in one category, the EU.
4. This relationship between attitudes towards the EU and technocracy may have shifted since the advent of the euro crisis, but the available data capture attitudes in the preceding period.
5. Although we do recognise that, in a political culture of increased permissiveness towards corruption, businessmen and the private sector may be as corrupt as politicians and public officials, this hypothesis is motivated by the idea that citizen exposure to corrupt elected officials undermines the appeal of electoral democracy.
6. The survey question on technocratic preference was asked only in the 1999 and 2008 EVS. We use the 2008 data for our main analysis and repeat the analysis on the 1999 dataset as a robustness check. Full robustness tests are available in the online appendix.
7. This is similar to the question used as a proxy for stealth democracy, which is 'our government would run better if decisions were left up to non-elected, independent experts rather than politicians' (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). This item was also used in studies of populist attitudes as part of an elitism scale (Akkerman *et al.* 2014; Hawkins *et al.* 2012).
8. It is however useful to recall that the literature on technocracy spans from the analysis of experts taking power in dictatorships or semi-dictatorships outside Europe (Ward 1998; Xiao 2003) to technocrats within international administrations such as the European Union (Radaelli 1999; Stie 2013; William 2000), to independent agencies and bodies such as central banks (Freeman 2002).
9. Non-response levels by country are reported in the Appendix. We report results using multiple imputation (following Rubin 1987, 1996), but find no substantial differences through other methods of dealing with non-response (unconditional mean imputation or listwise deletion).
10. In the robustness checks, we have tested both measures of 'Satisfaction with Democracy' and 'Evaluations of National Governments' as two alternative ways of measuring satisfaction with the current workings of democracy, yet these measures are more contingent in the current workings of political systems and are not as powerful in predicting attitudes to technocracy.
11. The precise wording of all variables and descriptive statistics can be found in Appendix 1.
12. Figures A1 and A2 in Appendix 2 show distributions of technocratic attitudes in 1999 and a comparison between 1999 and 2008. Differences in the percentage of respondents who register positive attitudes towards technocracy range from 0 to 10 per cent, yet the country ordering remains relatively stable. It is worth looking at the case of Romania, which experienced a technocratic government between the two EVS waves (Isarescu's technocratic-led partisan cabinet was formed in November 1999 and lasted for 12 months) and while the percentage of respondents with favourable technocratic attitudes fell from 84.7 to 74 per cent between the two waves, there are still widespread positive attitudes towards technocracy in the country in 2008.

13. We include one country-level variable in each step due to the high correlations between country-level variables (correlations between country-level variables are available in the online appendix). Models with additional operationalisations of countries' economic performance are not presented here, but are available in the online appendix).
14. Overall in the EVS2008 sample trust in the EU is correlated with the political trust index at Pearson's coefficient  $r = 0.431$ . The strongest correlation is found in the Maltese dataset ( $r = 0.656$ ), although in most other national samples the association remains moderate.
15. The 'Berkeley Mafia' in Indonesia, the 'Chicago Boys' in Chile, and Marcos' 'Pillars' in the Philippines.
16. Under the broad umbrella of neo-liberal policies one can include macro-economic stabilisation and occasionally structural reforms, including privatisation and liberalisation.
17. We also tested for the occurrence of scandals as an alternative operationalisation of corruption, but found no significant results. More information available in the online appendix.
18. We have tested for the effect of national unemployment, unemployment rate change, GDP growth change, government budget deficit, economic inequality, as well as the occurrence of a banking, currency or budget crisis. Results are available in the online appendix.
19. Further analyses with an alternative operationalisation for technocratic government experience based on McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014) is available in the online appendix.
20. Though we have not articulated expectations for the influence of right-wing authoritarian experiences, a converse argument could be made for countries that experienced recent right-wing dictatorships, which can fuel citizen suspicion of non-political actors. In our data, the number of countries available make such an analysis difficult and both the bivariate association between experience of military dictatorship and technocratic attitudes and the inclusion of this as a country-level independent variable are negative, but fail to reach statistical significance. The cases of Greece (and Cyprus) fit this explanation particularly well. The Greek military-based authoritarian experience of the junta between 1967 and 1974, which culminated in a bloody student uprising and the Turkish invasion of the island of Cyprus, has left a complex legacy and widespread suspicion of non-democratically elected political rule (Sotiropoulos 2010).

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.



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## Appendix 1. Key variables and measures

Dependent Variable: 'Attitudes towards technocracy' is a single-item question with non-response rate per country between 3.3% and 28% (average 12%). Non-response was dealt with using multiple imputation (following Rubin 1987, 1996). Four-category variable: M = 2.57 SD = 0.93, lowest Greece (M = 1.66, SD = 0.87), highest Bulgaria (M = 3.25, SD = 0.66).

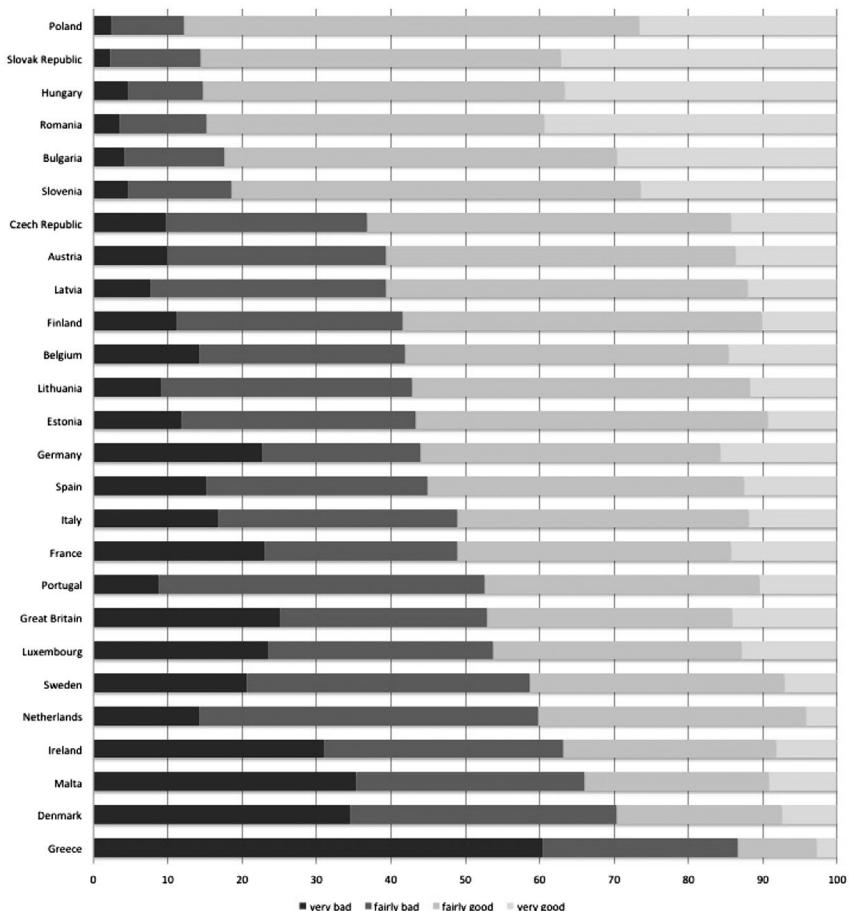


Figure A1. Distribution of technocratic attitudes (EVS 1999).

'Attitudes towards democracy' is an index of four items, measured on a scale of 1-4 where higher values represent stronger democratic attitudes. The index scores high in reliability (Chronbach's  $\alpha = 0.727$ ) and uses the following four items:

'I'm going to read some things that people sometimes say about a democratic political system. After I read each one could you please tell me if you agree strongly, agree, disagree, or disagree strongly with it?'(1 Agree strongly, 2 Agree, 3 Disagree, 4 Disagree strongly)

Item 1: Democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government (Recoded).

Item 2: In democracy, the economic system runs badly.

Item 3: Democracies are indecisive and have too much squabbling.

Item 4: Democracies aren't good at maintaining order.

'Political trust' is measured using three items: confidence in political parties, in national government and in national parliament. The index is measured on a scale of 0-1, with higher values representing higher trust in representative political institutions, and has a high reliability (Chronbach's  $\alpha = 0.823$ ).

We use standard survey items for 'Trust in the EU', 'political interest', 'left-right-wing ideology'. For the controls we use the respondents' gender, age and level of education measured using the respondents' age when they completed their education. We tried alternative measures such as educational attainment with 8 and 13 categories and they all yielded the same results.

Country-level variables: 2008 CPI index, available at <http://www.transparency.org>, 2008 GDP per capita and 2008 unemployment available at <http://www.data.worldbank.org>.

We also tested alternative measures of corruption, such as occurrence of scandals. We have calculated the number of scandals that have taken place in each of the 27 European states between 2007 and 2008, following the coding scheme used in Kumlin and Esaiasson (2012). Whether a scandal happened in that period is reported with a 0-1 dummy. The variable was not significant, probably due the fact that scandals are 'one-off' events, which might influence the voter insofar as s/he will trust a particular party or individual politician less, but, unless the scandals are recurrent, they will not have a lasting effect on the overall attitude of citizens towards their democracy.

## Appendix 2. Distribution of technocratic attitudes in 1999

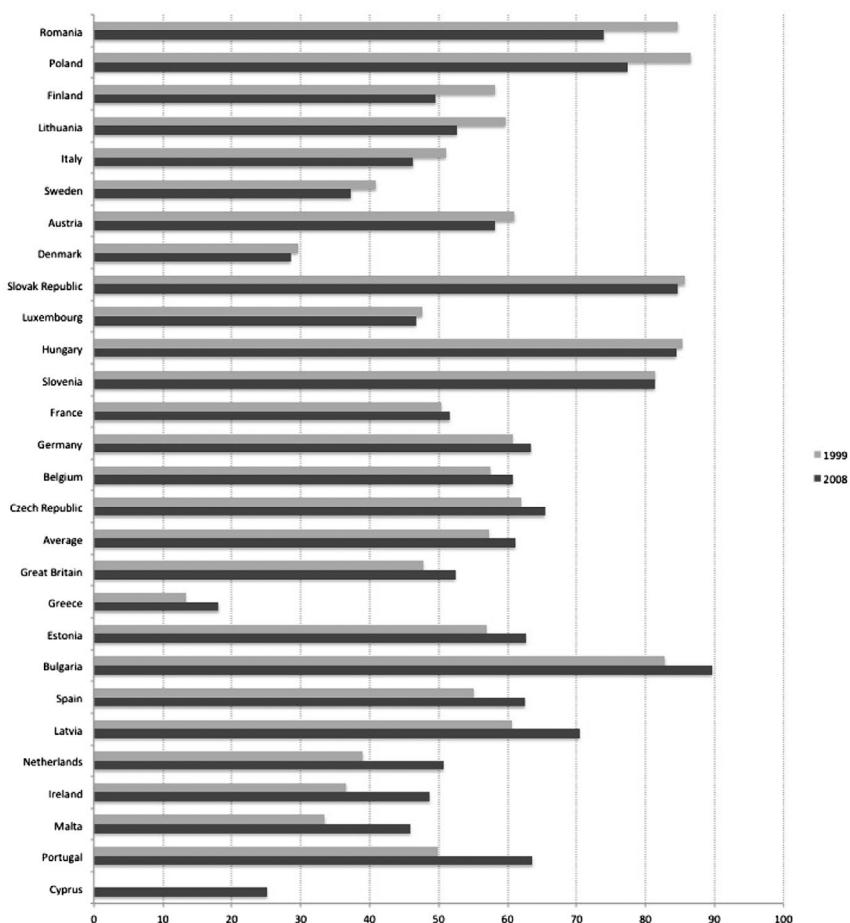
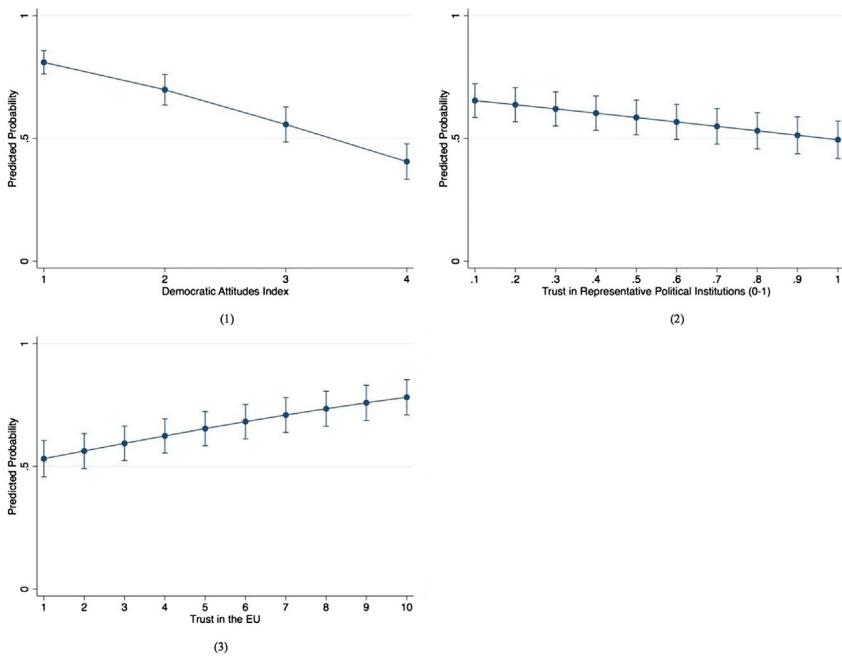


Figure A2. Comparing positive attitudes towards technocracy (1999–2008).

### Appendix 3. Probability plots for the effects of democratic attitudes, political trust and trust in the EU



**Figure A3.** Effect of democratic attitudes, political trust and trust in the EU on attitudes towards technocracy.