

ECONOMY GOVERNMENT & POLICY

What Is Technocracy? Definition, How It Works, and Critiques

By WILL KENTON Updated June 03, 2024Reviewed by ROBERT C. KELLY

What Is Technocracy?

A technocracy is a model of governance wherein decision-makers are chosen for office based on their technical expertise and background. A technocracy differs from a traditional democracy in that individuals selected to a leadership role are chosen through a process that emphasizes their relevant skills and proven performance, as opposed to whether or not they fit the majority interests of a popular vote.

The individuals that occupy such positions in a technocracy are known as "technocrats." An example of a technocrat could be a [central banker](#) who is a trained economist and follows a set of rules that apply to empirical data.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A technocracy is a form of governance whereby government officials or policymakers, known as technocrats, are chosen by some higher authority due to their technical skills or expertise in a specific domain.
- Decisions made by technocrats are supposed to be based on information derived from data and objective methodology, rather than opinion or self-interest.
- Critics charge that technocracies are undemocratic and disregards the will of the people.

How Technocracy Works

selected specifically for their expertise in the area over which they are delegated authority to govern. In practice, because technocrats must always be appointed by some higher authority, the political structure and incentives that influence that higher authority will always also play some role in the selection of technocrats.

An official who is labeled as a technocrat may not possess the political savvy or charisma that is typically expected of an elected politician. Instead, a technocrat may demonstrate more pragmatic and data-oriented problem-solving skills in the policy arena.

Technocracy became a popular movement in the United States during the [Great Depression](#) when it was believed that technical professionals, such as engineers and scientists, would have a better understanding than politicians regarding the [economy's](#) inherent complexity.

Important: Although democratically officials may hold seats of authority, most come to rely on the technical expertise of select professionals in order to execute their plans.

Defense measures and policies in government are often developed with considerable consultation with military personnel to provide their firsthand insight. Medical treatment decisions, meanwhile, are based heavily on the input and knowledge of physicians, and city infrastructures could not be planned, designed, or constructed without the input of engineers.

Critiques of Technocracy

Reliance on technocracy can be criticized on several grounds. The acts and decisions of technocrats can come into conflict with the will, rights, and interests of the people whom they rule over. This in turn has often led to populist opposition to both specific technocratic policy decisions and to the degree of power in general granted to technocrats. These problems and conflicts help give rise to the populist concept of the "deep state", which consists of a powerful, entrenched, unaccountable, and [oligarchic](#) technocracy which governs in its own interests.

follow the will of the people because by definition they may have specialized expertise that the general population lacks. Technocrats may or may not be accountable to the will of the people for such decisions.

In a government where citizens are guaranteed certain rights, technocrats may seek to encroach upon these rights if they believe that their specialized knowledge suggests that it is appropriate or in the larger public interest. The focus on science and technical principles might also be seen as separate and disassociated from the humanity and nature of society. For instance, a technocrat might make decisions based on calculations of data rather than the impact on the populace, individuals, or groups within the population.

In any government, regardless of who appoints the technocrats or how, there is always a risk that technocrats will engage in policymaking that favors their own interests or others whom they serve over the public interest. Technocrats are necessarily placed in a position of trust, since the knowledge used to enact their decisions is to some degree inaccessible or not understandable to the general public. This creates a situation where there can be a high risk of self-dealing, collusion, corruption, and cronyism. Economic problems such as [rent-seeking](#), rent-extraction, or [regulatory capture](#) are common in technocracy.

What Is the Difference Between Meritocracy and Technocracy?

Technocracy and meritocracy are similar and overlapping concepts in the context of government. As defined above, technocracy is a model of society in which individuals are chosen to govern by their technical expertise and background. Meritocracy is a system of society where people are chosen to govern based on their merit, including praiseworthy ability, character, or other qualities. ^[1] A society can be both technocratic and meritocratic.

What Are the Features of a Technocracy?

The defining feature of a technocracy is a government comprised of individuals appointed or chosen for their technical expertise, rather than the support they draw from the broader populace.

What Are Pros and Cons of Technocracy?

past performance or know-how. Critics of technocracy argue that such a system of governance effectively ignores the will of the people and is therefore inherently undemocratic.

The Bottom Line

A technocracy is a form of governance whereby key decision makers are selected for their technical skills or expertise. Theoretically, technocracies are driven by individuals who make decisions based on data, empirical evidence, and other objective measures. In practice, technocrats' decisions may be vulnerable to political influence and self-interest, and can be criticized for failing to represent the will of the people.

ARTICLE SOURCES ▲

Investopedia requires writers to use primary sources to support their work. These include white papers, government data, original reporting, and interviews with industry experts. We also reference original research from other reputable publishers where appropriate. You can learn more about the standards we follow in producing accurate, unbiased content in our [editorial policy](#).

1. Merriam-Webster. "[Meritocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meritocracy)," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meritocracy>"

Related Terms

What Is Behavioral Economics? Theories, Goals, and Applications

Behavioral Economics is the study of psychology as it relates to the economic decision-making processes of individuals and institutions. [more](#)

Fiduciary Definition: Examples and Why They Are Important

A fiduciary is a person or organization that acts on behalf of others and is legally bound to act in their best interests. [more](#)

Power of Attorney (POA): Meaning, Types, and How and Why to Set One Up