



# Technocracy above partisanship? Comparing the appeal of non-partisan and partisan experts as ministers – A survey in 14 countries

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## Abstract

The literature on technocracy has shown that expertise is a crucial factor in driving support for technocrats. However, the literature has not investigated yet what happens when technocrats are opposed to partisan experts. In this article, we want to fill this gap by analysing the support for two potential ministers of health with relevant expertise for their portfolio but with a different relationship to partisan politics. For this purpose, we run a novel survey in 14 European countries with more than 20,000 respondents. Our main results show that non-partisan experts are preferred over partisan experts across Europe, both when citizens have a high sympathy and a low sympathy for the party appointing the minister. However, in the latter case, the effect is more evident.

## Keywords

expertise, experts, health ministers, non-partisan experts, partisan experts, partisanship, populism, survey experiment, technocracy, trust, technocrats, technopols

## Introduction

Several studies have signalled the growing appointment of non-partisan ministers within national governments (Valbruzzi, 2020). Such non-traditional profiles in government cabinets are generally referred to as ‘technocrats’. Following the seminal works on technocracy, technocrats should fulfil two conditions: they are from outside partisan politics (i.e. they are independent) and they have a specific expertise, that is, they are ‘specialists’ (Blondel and Thiébault, 1991; Costa Pinto et al., 2018).

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While non-partisanship does not rule out the possibility that technocrats are instrumentalised by political parties (see, for example, Copelovitch and Rickard, 2021; Kaplan, 2017; McDonnell and Valbruzzi, 2014), it signals that technocrats are not directly accountable to political parties and their electorates. This means they are free to take the best decisions as opposed to the most popular decisions. Furthermore, non-partisanship is the most ostensible, and therefore the most commonly cited, measure of independence from party politics (Alexiadou et al., 2022; Blondel and Thiébault, 1991; Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán, 2015; Costa Pinto et al., 2018).

Building on the growing presence of technocrats in government over recent years (Vittori et al., 2023b), scholars have started analysing attitudes towards technocrats in government. The first works have showed that the support for ‘having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country’<sup>1</sup> is widespread in most countries (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; see also Bertsou, 2022; Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Chiru and Enyedi, 2022; Lavezzolo et al., 2022). Yet, it remains unclear what characteristics of those independent experts make them appealing to many citizens. Current research has stressed that the expertise of technocratic actors is especially appealing to dissatisfied voters (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Lavezzolo et al., 2021). By contrast, the preference for the other core characteristic of technocrats, their independence from political parties, has not been examined yet.

With this study, we hope to engage with several broader debates on the current evolutions of representative democracy and how citizens engage with it. First, we focus on citizens’ attitudes towards political parties and in particular how much citizens care about independence from parties. Research has demonstrated the importance of partisanship in voting choice (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Campbell et al., 1960). In this regard, a recent study on the Swiss case highlights that partisanship affects the way Swiss citizens perceive experts (Hanimann, 2023). At the same time, over the last decades, citizens have also become increasingly critical of parties (Dalton, 2000; Ignazi, 2014; Van der Meer and Ouattara, 2019), loosening traditional partisan ties (Önnudóttir and Harðarson, 2020). We might therefore wonder whether ties with political parties would be a kiss of death for technocrats entering government or whether, on the contrary, technocrats with some ties with parties might be the ideal mix for many citizens, combining both responsibility and responsiveness (Mair, 2014). In this regard, the rejection of partisan experts might also be a sign that citizens are no longer favourable towards partisan leaders that present them with a package of ideologically connected policy proposals, but would rather be governed by leaders proposing policies that are independent from the values and beliefs of one part of society.

Second, our study connects with the broader literature on the role of expertise, knowledge and science in representative democracies. While technocrats are frequently depicted as the most competent policy-makers, we also know that many partisan ministers are highly educated (Bovens and Wille, 2007) and have expertise that is directly relevant to the ministry or portfolio they are assigned (Andeweg et al., 2020; Beckman, 2006; Dowding and Dumont, 2014). Such partisan ministers who have the relevant expertise for their portfolio are sometimes labelled ‘technopols’ (Dominguez, 1997), as opposed to ‘technocrats’ who are also experts but independent from parties (Alexiadou et al., 2022). Nonetheless, despite the growing appeal of knowledge-based appointment of political figures, recent research on science-related populism has shown that anti-elitist attitudes are no longer limited to political elites, but also include scientific elites (Mede and Schäfer, 2020). As our study examines the relative value of expertise and of (a)partisanship when citizens

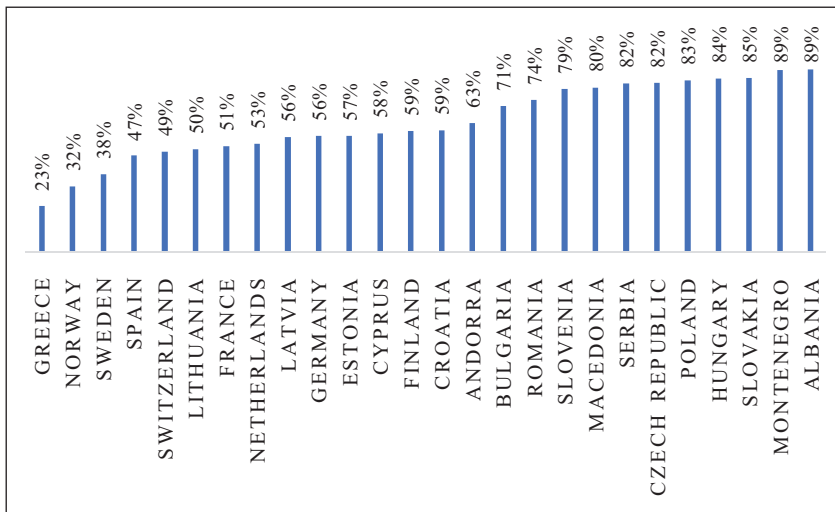
evaluate technocratic ministers, it provides a further confirmation of the importance of expertise, but at the same time it highlights the limits of focusing on expertise only.

To do so, we look at how citizens contrast two potential ministers with equivalent and relevant expertise for their portfolio but with a different relationship to partisan politics. We investigate (1) whether there is a general preference for ministers who are experts and independent from parties – real technocrats<sup>2</sup> – compared to ministers who are also experts but affiliated to a party – technopols – among citizens. And (2) we examine which political attitudes are driving this preference for technocrats. We do so by presenting citizens with two potential candidates for minister of Health both of whom have the same field expertise, having worked as medical doctors in a hospital. However, these candidates differ in that one is a partisan while the other is a non-partisan candidate.

Building on this research design, we assess the extent to which, besides expertise, non-partisanship is an appealing characteristic for ministers. Would citizens prefer non-partisan or partisan ministers when they have the same degree of expertise for the portfolio? Both scenarios are plausible. Lavezzolo and colleagues (2021) have shown that partisanship is a crucial element when citizens are asked to select between minister profiles. Citizens tend to strongly prefer ministers from the party they support, that is, citizens want their issues to be represented in parliament and in government. Citizens might therefore prefer technopols over technocrats, because of the expected ideological proximity, rather than someone whose personal partisanship is unknown. On the other hand, however, distrust in party politics is so widespread in Europe (Dalton, 2000, 2004; Petrarca et al., 2022; Van der Meer and Ouattara, 2019), especially in Southern and Eastern Europe (Torcal, 2017; Závecz, 2017), that citizens might prefer a non-partisan profile (technocrat) compared to a profile with a long-standing partisan career. Furthermore, while the literature has analysed the drivers (such as distrust in parliament) that foster technocratic attitudes among citizens (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Chiru and Enyedi, 2022), we still lack a study analysing whether these attitudes foster a preference for technocratic ministers as well: our second goal is to address this gap as well.

In this regard, we fielded a survey in 14 European countries. Recent research has shown that the type of technocrats and their degree of independence from partisan politics varies considerably across European countries (Vittori et al., 2023b). Technocrats are much more present in some Southern European countries, like Italy, and in Central and Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Romania). But their degree of independence from political parties might also vary a lot. While some technocrats launched themselves into a political career (Monti in Italy and Yanev in Bulgaria), for example, by starting a political party, others maintained their independence from political parties (Draghi in Italy). This means that how citizens perceive and evaluate technocratic ministers, and how they value their expertise as well as their independence from political parties, might vary across countries. Our comparative perspective will shed a light on potential country variation.

Our findings suggest that technocrats are preferred over technopols across Europe (and with limited variations across countries), especially when citizens have low sympathy for the party which appoints the minister of Health. By contrast, preferences for a technocratic profile over a partisan one are reduced (yet still significant) when the party appointing the minister of Health is the most favourite party of the respondent. In a nutshell, when field expertise is neutralised, we show that citizens seem to care about independence from parties mainly when they are considering a minister who will act for a party they dislike, and therefore with a policy platform they do not support. When the



**Figure 1.** Support for experts in European Countries surveyed by the World Value Survey in waves from 3 to 7.

minister to be appointed is from a party they support, and therefore more likely to implement policies they like, whether the minister had a career within party politics or not matters only to a limited extent for citizens.

### Theory: The appeal for technocrats in government

Conceptually, technocratic ministers have two defining characteristics: (1) expertise that is directly relevant to one's ministerial portfolio and (2) being independent from political parties, meaning that they did not follow a partisan career path (Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019; Blondel and Thiébaud, 1991). From recent studies, it appears that they remain a minority compared to partisan ministers, accounting for about 10% of all appointed ministers in Europe over the last two decades, although their presence tends to vary across regions, with Southern and Eastern European countries being the most 'technocratic' (Vittori et al., 2023b).

Despite representing a minority, technocrats are usually positively perceived by public opinion, especially when surveys highlight their expertise (as opposed to partisan ministers who are implicitly considered as generalist profiles). In the World Value Survey, people are asked to what extent they agree with the following statement: 'Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country'. It appears that, overall, a significant share of citizens answers positively to such a claim (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> The appeal of independent experts in government is especially strong among citizens in Eastern Europe, while in Southern European countries (Greece and Spain), there appears to be an inverse relationship between the (high) number of technocrats appointed (Vittori et al., 2023b) and the (low) support for technocracy.

Building on similar findings, a new research agenda has developed recently on technocratic attitudes (see Bertson, 2022; Bertson and Caramani, 2020). It builds upon survey questions like 'The problems facing my country require experts to solve them', or 'Our country would be better governed if important decisions were left to independent experts'.

Nevertheless, a problem with such questions is that they insist on one characteristic of technocrats: their expertise. The questions do not explicitly refer to their other core characteristic: their independence from political parties. It is not evident that, on the one hand, there are technocrats who are both experts and independent, and on the other, elected politicians who are, by definition, not independent from parties but who would also be, implicitly at least, not experts. Ministers with a partisan background might also often have a specialised expertise and this expertise might give them a competitive advantage over other generalist figures (Jann and Wegrich, 2019). A relevant number of partisan ministers can actually be described as specialists in their policy domain (Barkema, 1991). One recent analysis of the Swedish case, for example, concluded that few governments are composed of amateur politicians and that field expertise is more common than usually assumed in the literature (Beckman, 2006). In the same vein, Alexiadou and Gunaydin (2019) have shown that, in the context of an economic crisis, parties search within their ranks for ministers of Finance who are both party members and experts. More generally, several studies (Besley, 2005; Galasso and Nannicini, 2011) have shown that the ‘quality’ of politicians in terms of educational attainment has increased in the recent decades. Several studies have also underlined that technocrats involved in policy decisions are not always totally independent from political parties. Several of them have more or less strong ties with partisan organisations (Copelovitch and Rickard, 2021; Kaplan, 2017; McDonnell and Valbruzzi, 2014). All these elements suggest that expertise is therefore not always what distinguishes best between partisan and technocratic ministers. The key difference rather lies in their independence from political parties.

However, the literature so far lacks empirical studies on the public appeal of technocrats recognising that one of the key characteristics of technocrats is their non-partisanship. For example, Lavezzolo and colleagues (2021) examined the most important factors shaping Spanish citizens’ support for different potential candidates as Minister of the Economy. A central factor was the level of expertise in economics of those candidates. Independence from political parties was not directly considered. The closest proxy was a factor distinguishing between a candidate with a short experience in politics and a candidate with a long experience. But all candidates were at the same time presented as belonging to one of the four main parties represented in the Spanish parliament. Pure independence from parties was therefore not captured. The question remains therefore open: what is the effect of independence from parties in the appeal for technocrats among citizens? This is a crucial question since it challenges the idea that technocracy is mainly about expertise (or experts in government) and less about independence from politics. Once the competitive advantage of being an expert with specialised knowledge is rule out, would citizens still be inclined towards technocrats (because of their independence) or rather they would prefer a figure that combines expertise with party political experience, as the literature would suggest (Carnes and Lupu, 2016; Kirkland and Coppock, 2018; Lavezzolo et al., 2021)?

## Hypotheses

Based on the framing provided above, we propose three sets of hypotheses. We do not provide country-specific hypotheses, as previous research has shown that experience with technocratic ministers in government does not play a very strong role in shaping preferences for expert government (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017). Nonetheless, we will provide a tentative discussion on country variation.

Our first pair of hypotheses concern the general preferences for either technocrats or technopols. It builds on the idea that the preferences for the partisan and the non-partisan profiles depend on partisanship. We expect based on Lavezzolo and colleagues' (2021) work that people will first and foremost prefer someone who has both expertise that is relevant to their portfolio and experience courting voters in the political arena. However, based on the literature which emphasises the importance of partisan cues in shaping political attitudes, behaviours (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Campbell et al., 1960; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007), as well as the relevance of political experience for ministerial positions (Carnes and Lupu, 2016; Horiuchi et al., 2020; Lavezzolo et al., 2021), we can reasonably expect that people would opt for the partisan expert (technopol) instead of non-partisan expert (technocrat). However, this might not be the case if the partisan expert has ties to a party they dislike. In other words, the appeal of 'pure' technocratic candidates materialises in situations of low support for the party that is appointing the minister into the cabinet. By contrast, when voters are positive about the party forming the government and selecting the minister, the appeal for technocracy decreases. In this latter configuration, technopols might be perceived as the perfect combination of someone pushing the policy agenda of a party I like, while having the necessary political experience to run the business in government and enough expertise to decide on issues they know best.

On the other hand, we have also highlighted that partisanship is in decline across European democracies and that trust in parties has plummeted in the last decade: this general trend might counterbalance the effect on voters' choice, and for this reason, we do not discard a priori that citizens' partisanship might be not enough to have a partisan minister preferred over a non-partisan one.

On the contrary, we believe that when citizens evaluate ministers appointed by a political party they dislike, the difference between non-partisan and partisan is clear-cut. What would dominate in this scenario is the fact that the party in government is the least preferred, coupled with citizens' low trust in politicians as well as the wide support for decisions by independent experts observed in the literature (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Chiru and Eynedi, 2022; Lavezzolo et al., 2021). Based on these two potentially conflating trends, we hypothesise that

1. (1.1) Partisans experts (technopols) are preferred over non-partisan experts' (technocrats) profiles when citizens evaluate ministers of their most preferred political party.
- (1.2) Non-partisan expert (technocrats) profiles are preferred over partisan experts (technopols) when citizens evaluate ministers of the least preferred political profiles.

Moreover, we also expect that the difference between partisan and non-partisan profiles is moderated by the *strength* of respondents' attachment (or lack of attachment) to the parties in government, since partisanship is a crucial driver in shaping voters' choices (Bartels, 2000; Campbell et al., 1960; Dalton, 2021a). Even in a context of declining partisanship, we can reasonably expect that those who feel more attached to a party are more inclined towards a partisan expert compared to those who express a lukewarm preference for the same party. In a nutshell, the different levels of attachment that citizens have vis-à-vis the parties appointing ministers should influence how they evaluate the partisan and non-partisan profiles. Respondents who show strong support for the most favourite party should theoretically be more responsive to a partisan figure and should be



less attracted by an independent profile. The contrary should be true when the least preferred party has to appoint the minister of Health.

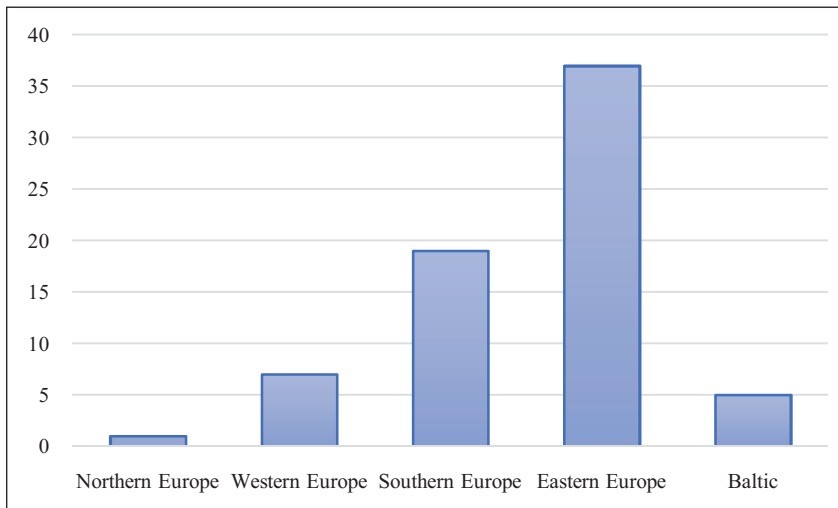
2. (2.1) The higher the sympathy for the most preferred party, the lower the appeal of the technocratic profile as opposed to technopol.
- (2.2) The lower the sympathy for the least preferred party, the lower the appeal of the technopol profile as opposed to the technocratic one.

So far, our hypotheses have focused mainly on the differences between the profiles of the most and least favourite parties in terms of partisanship. But other factors, and especially factors related to the profiles of our respondents might also come into play. In this regard, the literature has shown that individuals who prefer experts in government are usually more distrustful of institutions (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Chiru and Enyedi, 2022). Another important driver for explaining support for technocracy, or at least some of its subcomponents, is populism (Fernández-Vázquez et al., 2023); technocratic and populist forms of political representation share some relevant characteristics which are in opposition to the classic party government regime, such as a non-pluralistic vision of the society, the presence in the society of an external common good, the lack of accountability and an unmediated form of interest representation (Caramani, 2017). According to Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti (2017), technocracy and populism should be conceived as ‘complementary’ political phenomena, rather than two irreducible opposites. Previous research has not investigated whether populist attitudes are correlated with preferences for non-partisan over partisan experts. However, the characterisation of populism as non-pluralistic implies a rejection of the role of political parties in aggregating voters’ interests. Moreover, a key dimension of populism is a very negative perception of political elites that are seen as corrupt, incompetent and out-of-touch with the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2000). They could therefore be expected to attach a great importance to the non-partisanship of technocratic ministers. Therefore, we hypothesise an elective affinity between holding populist attitudes and preferring pure technocratic candidates. We expect, thus, that

3. (3.1) The more citizens distrust institutions, the higher the preference for the technocratic profile as opposed to the technopol profile.
- (3.2) The more citizens hold populist attitudes, the higher the preference for the technocratic profile as opposed to the technopol profile.

## Research design

To study the appeal of expert ministers that are independent from political parties, we build on an online survey conducted between 2021 and 2022 across 14 European countries: Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom. The countries were selected to have differentiated levels of technocratic experience, that is, different levels of technocratic ministers appointed in the last two decades (see Supplemental Appendix II, Table A.4). In each of the 14 countries, the survey was fielded online by Qualtrics (CAWI methodology) on basis of a questionnaire designed by the research team. Samples of minimum 1500 respondents by country were constituted, with quotas



**Figure 2.** Share of ministers of health who are technocratic in Europe (2000–2020).

on age, gender, education and region of residence (more information on the samples in the 14 countries can be found in Supplemental Appendix I, Tables A.1, A.2 and A.3). To control for possible bias in the sample composition and to make sure to have a fully representative sample for each country, in our analyses, we also decided to weight our data with regard to age, sex, education and region of residence.

Our survey asked respondents to rate different profiles for the position of minister of Health in their national government. The choice of the Ministry of Health was made for several reasons. The first is that we aimed at selecting a ministry that was extremely salient for citizens, to make sure that they will think carefully about who they would like to select as minister of Health. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the domain became extremely salient in all countries, and ministers of Health were on the frontline and the public was calling for expert knowledge in governments' response to the pandemic (Lavezzolo et al., 2022: 3). A second reason is that the Ministry of Health is among the portfolios for which the choice between a technocrat and a technopol is the most realistic when looking at the profile of ministers of Health across Europe. On the one hand, there have been several pure technocrats appointed as minister of Health. Recent examples are François Braun, active doctor in a hospital who was appointed as minister of Health in France by E. Macron in July 2022; Roman Prymula and Petr Arenberger, two medical doctors with no party affiliation who were appointed ministers of Health in the Czech Republic in 2020 and 2021; or Orazio Schillaci, doctor specialised in nuclear medicine and appointed minister of Health in Italy in 2022. In a recently published data set, Vittori and colleagues (2023b) have found that the Ministry of Health is one of the portfolios to which technocratic ministers were most commonly assigned across European cabinets, especially in Eastern and Southern Europe, between 2000 and 2020 (Figure 2). But the Ministry of Health is also a portfolio for which partisan ministers also often show strong credentials in the medical sector next to their political career. A good example is Vlastimil Valek in the Czech Republic who has been appointed minister of Health in December 2021 after a career in the medical sector and as elected MP. We have examined the profile



of all incumbent ministers of Health in the 14 countries since 2000; we have only found cases with no past experience in the medical sector in the United Kingdom and Denmark. In Italy and Finland, we also found cases of ministers of Health without past experience in the medical sector, but they were associated with a vice-minister who had such past experience. In all other cases, ministers of Health in cabinets across Europe had some expertise in medicine, even when they had a partisan background.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the demand for independent experts, such as scientists, in government (Lavezzolo et al., 2022). Given that we do not vary the level of expertise, but rather the partisanship of the candidate, we believe it is important to select a domain for which specialised expertise would be highly desirable. Nonetheless, future research might investigate whether partisanship is valued more favourable for policy domains that closely connected to people's values and beliefs, such as education, culture and family matters.

Building upon those considerations, we have built a survey experiment asking citizens to rate two pairs of potential ministers of Health. The two candidates had equivalent expertise as medical doctors, but only one of them had a clear link to party politics having been a member of parliament. The question was the following:

Let's imagine that a new government is being formed [*in the COUNTRY*], and that the [*party with the highest sympathy score*] has to select a candidate for minister of Health.

How would you rate your feelings about each of the following candidates selected by [*party with the highest sympathy score*] for minister of Health?<sup>4</sup>

1. Peter is 45-year-old doctor. He studied medical sciences and has worked in the field of paediatrics for several years.
2. Marc is 45-year-old. He studied medical sciences and has worked in the field of paediatrics for several years. He has been member of parliament for [*party with the highest sympathy score*] since 2010.

This question was asked mentioning that the minister of Health would be appointed by the party which was given the highest sympathy score by the respondent in an earlier question in the survey. The question was then repeated with a second pair of candidates with identical backgrounds but this time with a minister of Health to be appointed by the party which received the lowest sympathy score.<sup>5</sup>

The scenarios we presented to respondents are different from situations of purely technocratic governments in which no party is associated at all with the choice of technocratic ministers. The portfolios are attributed to political parties that decide on who is to fill the position. The experimental design departs from recent studies which have opted for conjoint experiment (Lavezzolo et al., 2022) to examine the appeal for experts in government in comparison with other characteristics (age, party affiliation, political seniority, gender). Here, we want to isolate the effect of one specific factor – being or not independent from a political party – for profiles that are equivalent on all other aspects, and especially on their expertise in the medical sector. The appeal for experts is already well-established, but our design taps into the comparative appeal of a partisan expert (technopol) and of a non-partisan expert (technocrat). We also made sure that the other characteristics mentioned in the experiment (age and gender) match the characteristics (on average) of technocratic ministers in Europe (Vittori et al., 2023b).

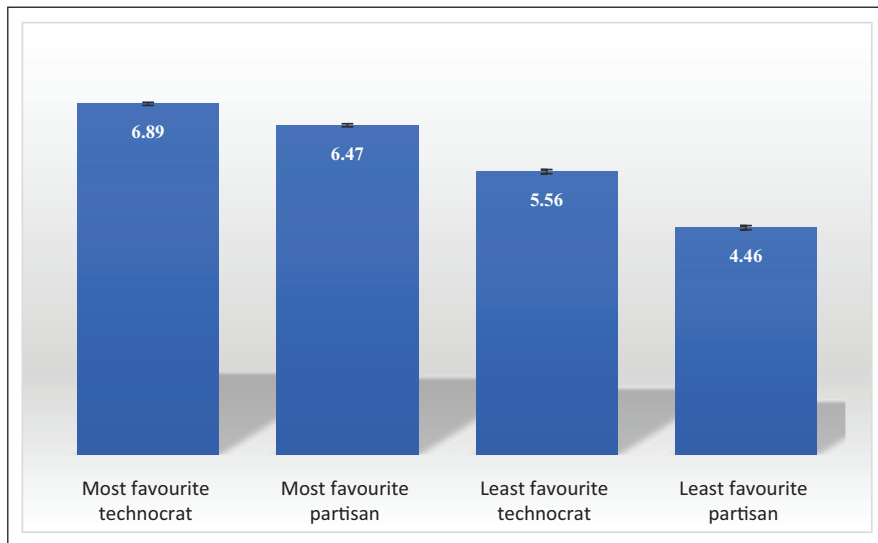
## Method

To test our hypotheses, we proceed in two steps. First, for hypotheses 1.1 and 1.2, we compare the score given to the technocratic and technopol profiles of potential minister of Health when this portfolio is assigned to the most preferred party (H1.1) and to the least preferred party (H1.2).

For the next two sets of hypotheses (H2.1, and H2.2), we opted for a series of multivariate ordinary least square regressions with country fixed effects. For these regressions, we have used two dependent variables. They measure the difference in the scores given to the non-partisan and the partisan profiles when the minister of Health is to be appointed by respondents' most favourite party, and when it is appointed by respondents' least favourite party. The two dependent variables range from  $-10$  to  $+10$ . A value of  $+10$  means that the technocratic profile got a score of 10, while the technopol received a score of 0, that is, positive values indicate preference for the technocratic minister. A value of  $-10$  means that the technocratic profile got a score of 0 and the technopol a score of 10, that is, negative values indicate preference for the partisan expert.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the higher the score, the higher the preference for the technocratic profile over the technopol one, and the lower the score, the higher the preference for the technopol profile. When the difference between the two profiles is equal to 0, it means that the respondent gave the same score to both profiles as potential minister of Health (the distribution of the two dependent variables is plotted in Supplemental Appendix V, Figures A.10 and A.11).

In the models, we examine how these two dependent variables are associated with a series of independent variables. First, to test hypotheses 2.1 and 2.2, we rely on the scores that respondents gave to the most preferred party ('Party Sympathy Max') and the least preferred party ('Party Sympathy Min') to see whether the intensity of the sympathy/antipathy towards those two parties is affecting the gap in support for the partisan and non-partisan profiles for becoming ministers of health. The sympathy scores range between 0 and 100.

Then, our last set of hypotheses (H3.1 and H3.2) is about the moderating role of populist attitudes and institutional trust. The index of institutional trust is an additive index comprising the questions on trust in Parliament, trust in politicians and trust in parties (see Supplemental Appendix III, Table A.6) (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.908$ ). We used an additive index for the four questions on populism included in the survey (see Supplemental Appendix III, Table A.6) (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.702$ ). These items are closely connected to the growing literature on populist attitudes (see Castanho Silva et al., 2019; Schulz et al., 2017). They tap especially into the three main components of populism, people-centrism, homogeneity of the people and popular sovereignty, plus Manicheism (see Supplemental Appendix IV). Unfortunately, the survey did not contain any item tapping into the perception of political elites as corrupt or immoral (see Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2000), since it just includes one anti-elitism question. Furthermore, our survey does not include question on the so-called science populism (Mede and Schäfer, 2020). Nonetheless, as Eberl et al. (2023) have shown, political populism and science populism, while conceptually different, empirically they overlap. Nonetheless, we believe that additional elements could have been an interesting relation to be explored. In addition, we are also aware that our additive index of populism might entail some reliability problems as it sums up respondents' answers on the four items, but without making sure that respondents score high on each and every component of populism (Wuttke et al., 2021). As a robustness check, we opted for measuring populism with the Sartorian approach identified by Wuttke



**Figure 3.** Mean support for the four profiles of the two vignettes. The black bars on the top of each bar represent the confidence interval.

and colleagues, which combines a dichotomous quantifier of concept structure and a non-compensatory qualifier of concept structure (see Supplemental Appendix VI, Sartorian approach; Castanho Silva et al., 2019).

Finally, we also included socio-demographic controls for age, gender and education, which are the four stratifications in our survey, plus place of residence. The models have also two other attitudinal controls for which we did not detail any hypothesis: political efficacy and political interest. Whereas political interest is negatively correlated with stealth democratic attitudes (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Webb, 2013), it is positively correlated with technocratic attitudes (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020) (see Supplemental Appendix III, Table A.7, for the descriptive statistics).

## Results

The first two hypotheses postulate that the partisan profile would be rated more positively when the portfolio is assigned to the most preferred party (H1.1), and that the rating would be more positive for the non-partisan profile when the portfolio is assigned to the least preferred party (H1.2). Figure 3 provides the mean scores for the non-partisan and partisan profiles for the most favourite party and for the least favourite party. Contrary to our expectations, the technocratic profiles are preferred over technopols both for the most and least preferred parties.<sup>7</sup> The gap between the technocratic and technopol profiles is, however, larger when respondents evaluate potential candidates for the Ministry of Health attributed to their least preferred party. The mean gap, in this case, is of 1.1 points (19.8% difference between the two mean scores), while the gap is only of 0.39 points (6.1% difference between the two) for the technocratic and technopol profiles for a minister of Health from the most preferred party. We ran a t test to compare the mean scores of the technocratic and technopol profiles of, respectively, the most and least preferred party. In

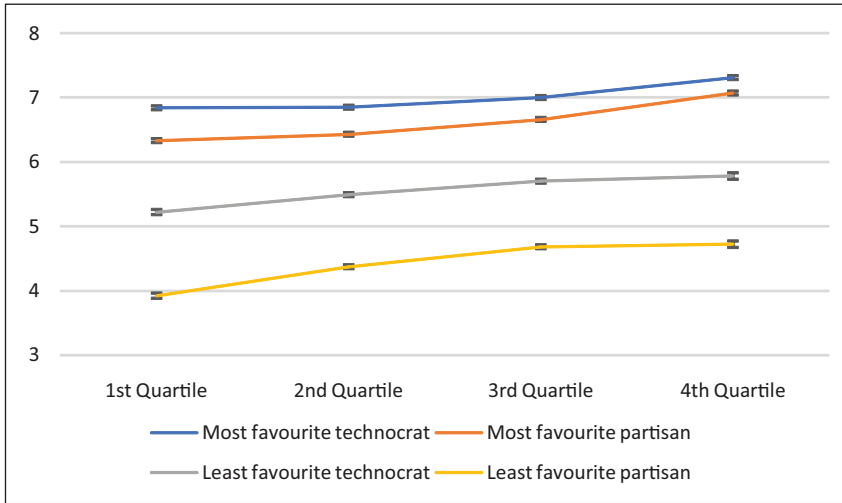
both cases, the mean score of the technocratic profile is significantly greater than the mean score of the technopol profile.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, contrary to our expectations, non-partisan profiles are better appreciated than partisan ones, even when the minister is appointed by the respondent's more preferred party, which attests to the strength of citizens' preferences for pure technocratic ministers.

We tested whether those first findings were robust across party families: we split voters according to the party family of the party to which they assigned the highest and the lowest sympathy (see coding in Supplemental Appendix III, Table A.5). The findings are robust (Supplemental Appendix IV, Tables A.8 and A.9). Across all party families, we observe that the technocratic profile is invariably preferred over the technopol one for both the most favourite and the least favourite parties. Although these findings hold across all party families, there are two interesting findings related to two party families: the Radical Right and the Conservatives. As for the Radical Right, the interesting difference is that when the least preferred party of the respondents is from that party family, the score given by respondents to the technopol profile for the Ministry of Health tends to be significantly lower (3.76, against, for example, 4.62, for the Radical left and 4.88 for the Greens). This means that when respondents' least favourite party family is the radical right, they penalise the partisan profile more than other party families. This finding appears in line with earlier studies that have shown that negative feelings were much stronger towards radical right parties (Harteveld et al., 2022). The second marked difference is for respondents who gave the highest sympathy score to a conservative party. In this case, they tend to give a higher score to the technocratic profile compared to respondents who declare another party family as their most preferred one. Here again, it is in line with earlier studies that identified a specific affinity between technocracy and conservative parties (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2021).

We can now turn to the two other sets of hypotheses. Hypotheses 2.1 and 2.2 postulate that the gap between the technocratic and the technopol profiles for becoming minister of Health would vary depending on how intense the sympathy (or antipathy) for the most (or least) preferred party is. A first descriptive test is proposed in Figure 4, which reports the mean scores of the four profiles for the Ministry of Health divided by quartiles. The first quartile indicates that respondents assigned a score for the most and the least favourite parties which ranges from 1 to 25; for the second quartile, the scores range from 26 to 50; for the third from 51 to 75 and for the fourth from 76 to 100. It appears that, for the most preferred party, the gap between the technocratic and the technopol profiles is slightly reduced when the intensity of the sympathy for the party goes up. Thus, the higher the sympathy for the party, the less respondents discriminate between the non-partisan and the partisan figures. We observe the same pattern, although less pronounced, for the least preferred party, meaning that, the weaker the antipathy towards the least favourite party, the lower the discrimination between the technocratic and the technopol figures. However, in the latter case, the gap is still consistent along the quartiles.

To test for the effect of the intensity of the sympathy (or antipathy) towards the most (or least) preferred party on scores given to the technocrats and technopol for becoming minister of Health, we have run a series of multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. Results are reported in Table 1, which reports four different models (full model specifications available in the Supplemental Appendix VI, Table A.10).



**Figure 4.** Mean support for the four profiles of the two vignettes according to the partisanship (split into quartiles).

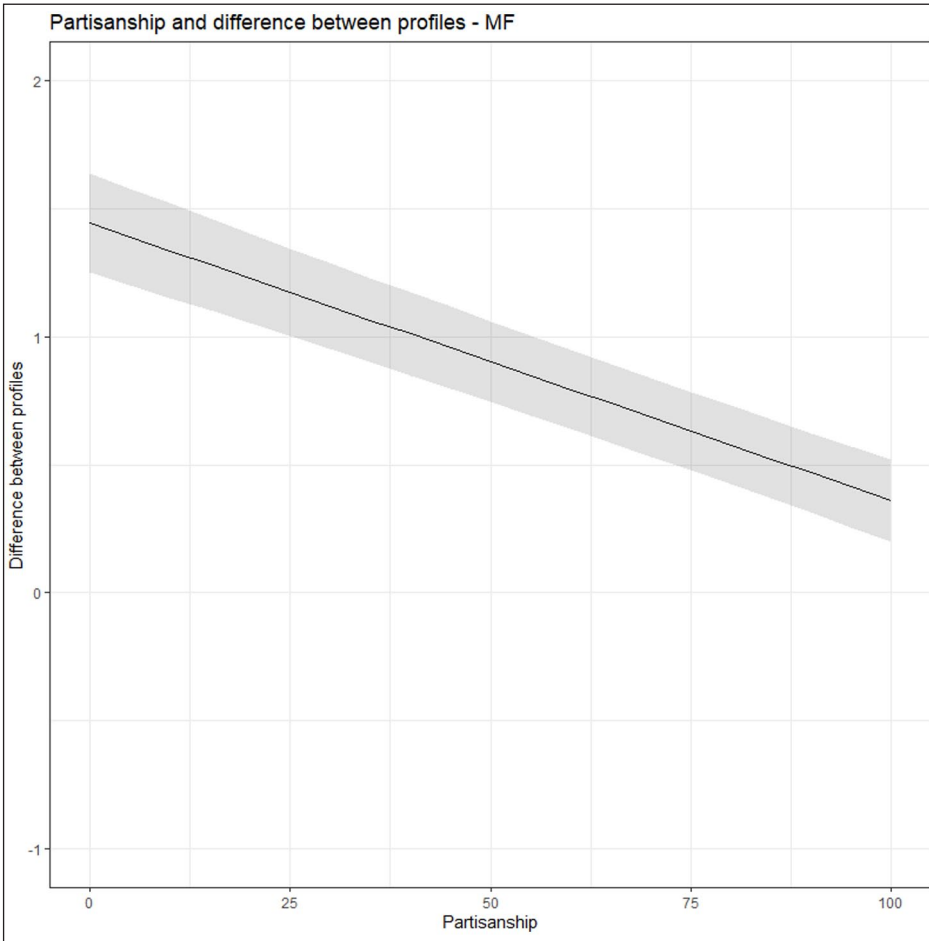
Models 1 and 2 test hypotheses 2.1 and 2.2. In Model 1 (Party Sympathy Max), the dependent variable is the gap in the scores given to the non-partisan and partisan profile when the most preferred party appoints the Ministry of Health. For Model 2 (Party Sympathy Min), the dependent variable reports the gap when the Ministry of Health is appointed by the least preferred party. Both models confirm H2.1 and H2.2. The variable Party Sympathy Max in the first model is negative and significant. This means that, overall, the higher the sympathy towards the most favourite party, the lower the difference between the scores given to the technocratic and technopol profiles (our dependent variable). The same applies for the Party Sympathy Min: the effect is negative and significant, meaning that the higher the support for the least favourite party, the lower the difference between the scores given to technocratic and technopol profiles. In other words, when respondents evaluate a minister of Health appointed by their most favourite party, the closer they are to the party, the lower the positive effect of having a purely non-partisan background as opposed to a partisan one. Similarly, the more they like their least favourite party (or the less they dislike it), the lower the difference between the two profiles. It seems, thus, that party sympathy limits the bonus enjoyed by potential ministers of Health with a purely technocratic and non-partisan background. The effect is admittedly small for a unit of increase; however, for both the partisanship of the most favourite party (Figure 5) and of the least favourite party (Figure 6), we see a relevant decrease in the predicted values of the difference between the two profiles when party sympathy grows. The results are robust when splitting the sample into the four quartiles, yet with one caveat (Supplemental Appendix VI, Table A.16): we observe a constant decrease in the difference going from the first to the fourth quartile for the most favourite party (and in particular going from the first and the second to the fourth), but we see a significant decrease in the least favourite party only between the first and the second quartiles. The differences between the second, the third and the fourth are not significant (Supplemental Appendix VI, Figure A.1 and Figure A.2).

**Table 1.** Multivariate OLS regressions explaining the gap in the scores given to the non-partisan and partisan profiles for the Ministry of Health.

	Model 1 H2.1 – MF Max. support	Model 2 H2.2 – LF Min. support	Model 3 H3.1 – MF Attitudes	Model 4 H3.2 – LF Attitudes
<i>Key predictors</i>				
Party Sympathy Max	–0.011*** (0.001)		–0.008*** (0.001)	–0.019*** (0.001)
Party Sympathy Min		–0.022*** (0.001)	–0.237*** (0.019)	–0.144*** (0.021)
Trust in institutions			0.333*** (0.025)	0.317*** (0.026)
Populist attitudes				
<i>Controls</i>				
Age, education, town size, subjective income, political efficacy, political interest	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country fixed effects	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.06
R <sup>2</sup>	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.06
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	22,136	22,136	22,069	22,069
Num. obs.				

The DV indicates the preference for non-partisan over partisan figures.  
MF: most favourite party; LF: least favourite party.  
Table obtained through texreg function in the software R (Leifeld, 2013).  
\*\*\*p < 0.001; \*\*p < 0.01; \*p < 0.05.

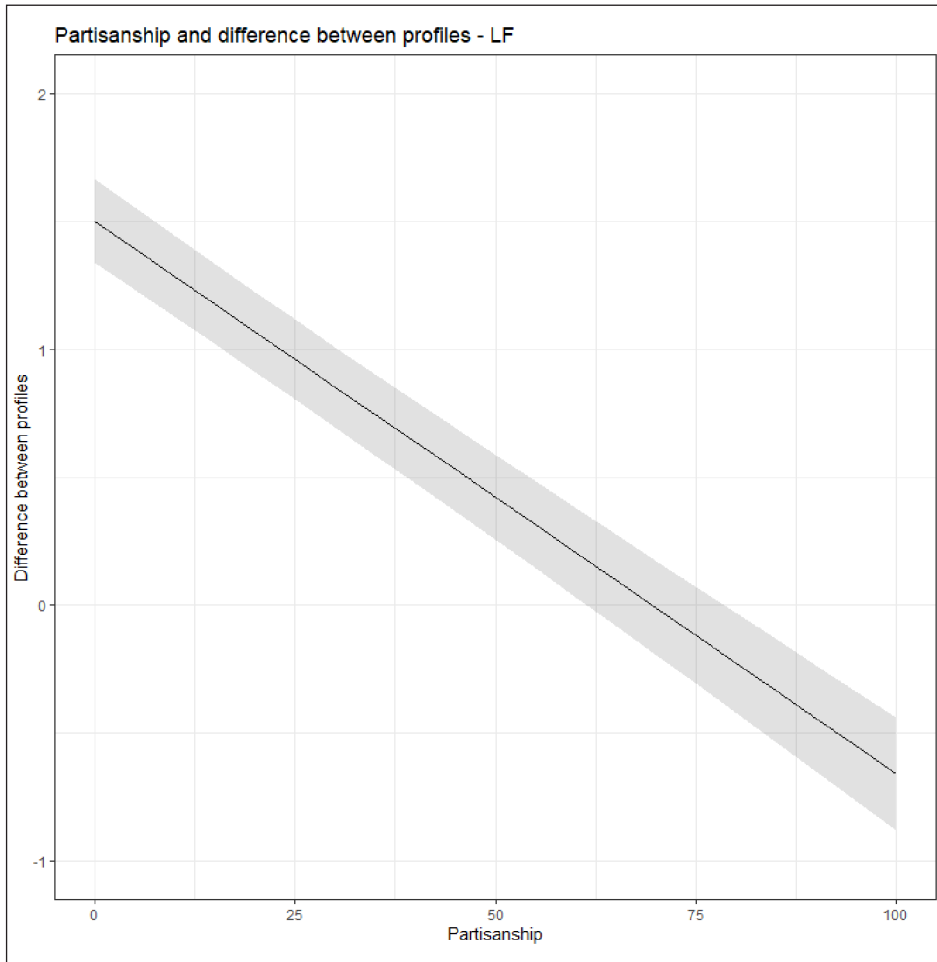




**Figure 5.** Predicted values for different levels of support of the most favourite party (Party Max).

The results are also robust across party families (Supplemental Appendix VI, Tables A.11 and A.12).<sup>9</sup>

Finally, our third set of hypotheses (H3.1 and H3.2) was about the effect of institutional distrust and populist attitudes on how respondents evaluate technocrats and technopols for becoming minister of Health. These hypotheses are tested in models 3 and 4 in Table 1. In both cases, we find support for our hypotheses. Both distrust in institutions and populist attitudes are significantly associated with preferring a technocratic to a technopol minister. Our results show that citizens with lower political trust and stronger populist attitudes are more likely to select an expert with no partisan affiliation over an expert with partisan ties as minister of Health. It holds both when the most liked and most disliked parties appoint the minister of Health. The robustness check measuring populism with the Sartorian approach yields similar results (Supplemental Appendix VI, Table A9). These results are robust across party families for both the most favourite and the least favourite parties, with few exceptions (the Green, the Liberal and the Radical left families



**Figure 6.** Predicted values for different levels of support of the least favourite party (Party Min).

for the most favourite parties and the Radical left, for the least favourite party) (Supplemental Appendix VI, Tables A.14 and A.15).<sup>10</sup> The results are also robust for both the most and the least favourite party scenarios, even though for the most favourite scenario, the Italian case does not reach the significance threshold (see Supplemental Appendix VI, Figures A6 and A7).

An interesting element to explore further in future research is the link between populist attitudes and attitudes towards technocratic ministers in countries where populist parties have been in power, and might even have supported the appointment of some technocratic ministers (see Greece or Italy). Recent research has shown that traditional batteries of populist attitudes tend to perform less robustly in countries with populists in power (Jungkunz et al., 2021). In our case, there seems to be consistent findings across countries with ideologically different governments in place, when the survey was fielded. Yet, further research is needed in this regard.

## Analysing country differences for the non-partisan and partisan score

Since we also want to examine whether our main findings related to the preferences for technocratic ministers hold across countries, in this paragraph, we analyse country differences. In line with H1, we start by looking at the mean scores given to the technocratic and technopol profiles for becoming minister of Health. It appears that the general trend is confirmed. Respondents rate technocrats more favourably both when the minister of Health is appointed by their most and their least preferred party. There are only three exceptions. In Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands (and Dutch-speaking Belgium), the differences between the mean scores for the partisan and non-partisan profiles are not statistically significant (see Supplemental Appendix VI, Table A.8 for country-specific t test).

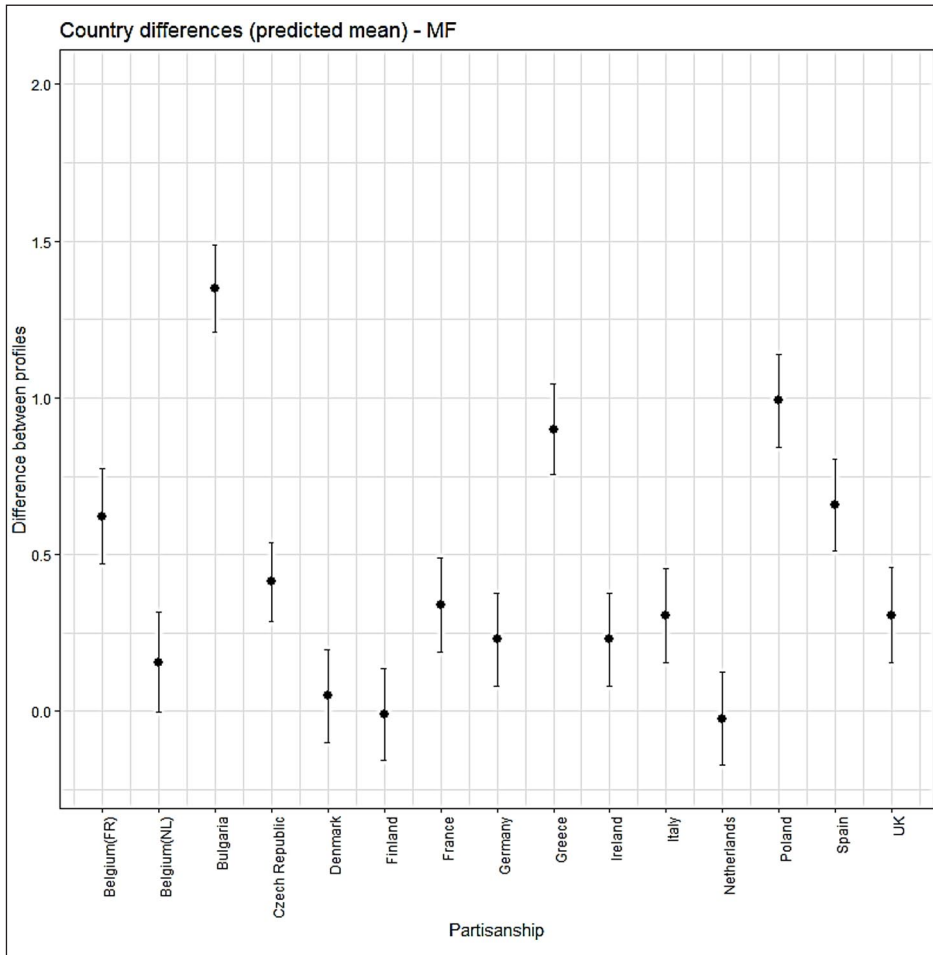
While t tests provide the first evidence of cross-country similarities, we also check whether results are robust in our models. To do so, we extract from models 1 and 2 (see Table 1) the predicted values on our two dependent variables for each country separately.

Figures 7 and 8 plot the predicted values of the difference between the non-partisan and partisan profiles for all countries for the most favourite and the least favourite parties, respectively.

In Figure 7, we identify three main clusters: the first is the cluster in which citizens markedly prefer the technocratic profile over technopols. This cluster is represented by the Eastern and Southern European countries (+ French-speaking Belgium), with the two exceptions of the Czech Republic and Italy: the countries in this group have a preference for technocrats, even when the minister of health is appointed by the most preferred party. The second cluster of countries groups together France, Germany, Ireland, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, and Italy. In those five countries, there is also a preference for the technocratic profile, but it is less marked. Finally, in the third cluster of countries (Scandinavia, the Netherlands and Dutch-speaking Belgium), there is no apparent discrimination in how respondents evaluate technocrats and technopols. These findings corroborate the t-test analyses in the preliminary findings.

In general, these results are in line with the literature on support for independent experts in Europe: Eastern and Southern European countries are the countries with higher distrust in political parties and higher support for experts in government (with the only exception of Greece in the latter case, see Supplemental Appendix VI, Figures A.8 and A.9; Rojon et al., 2023). Furthermore, the most technocratic-supportive cluster is composed of the countries which have had a higher number of technocrats in governments over the last decades (Vittori et al., 2023b). By contrast, the countries where there is no discrimination between non-partisan and partisan figures are those where trust in parties is higher and support for technocrats in governments is lower (see Supplemental Appendix VI, Figures A.8 and A.9). Overall, thus, it seems that country differences matter, more than what the existent literature has anticipated.

Figure 8 shows the predicted values of the gap in the evaluations of the technocratic and technopol profiles for the least favourite party. Here the clusters are harder to identify. In all countries, there is a positive difference between technocrats and technopols, meaning that the non-partisan is better evaluated than the partisan one when it comes to a minister of Health appointed by a party respondents dislike. What differ across countries is the size of the gap. We identify two clusters of countries. A first, composed of Belgium



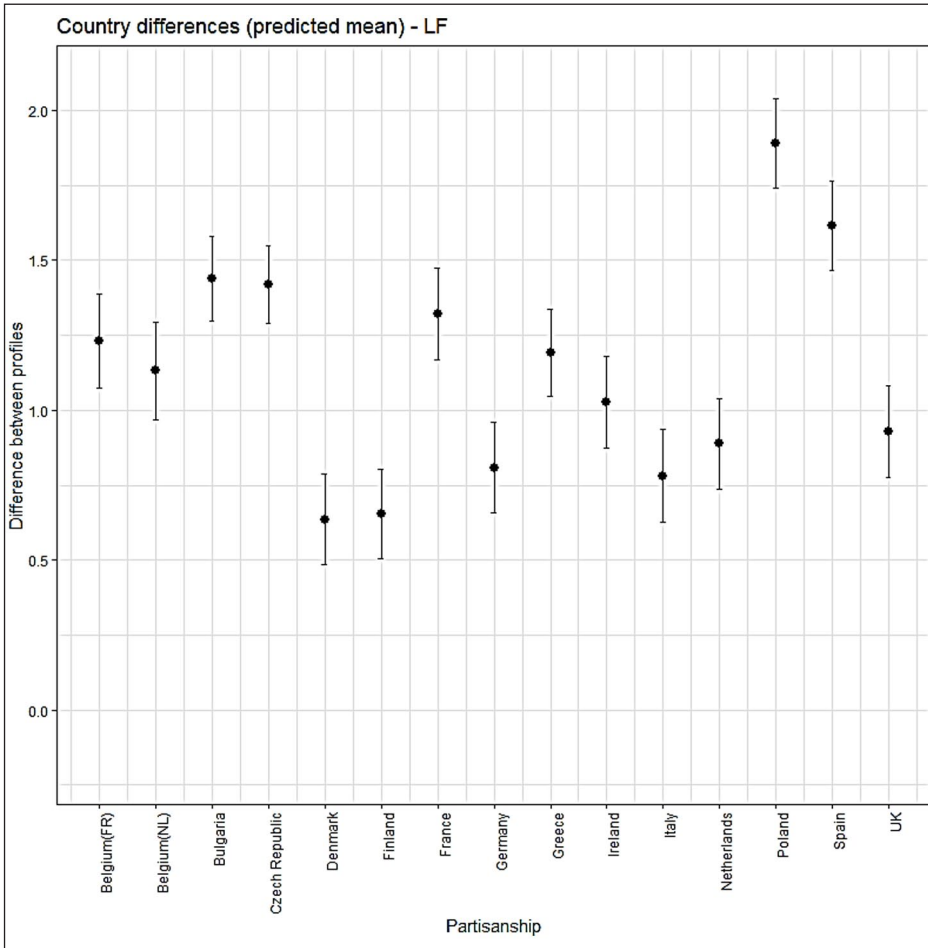
**Figure 7.** Predicted value for each country of the difference between the technocratic and the partisan figures for the most favourite party. Model: HP2.I – MF Max support.

(NL and FR), Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, France, Greece, Poland and Spain, with a strong preference for a technocratic minister of Health, and a second one (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) where the same preference exists but is less marked.

If we take both Figures 7 and 8 together, we see two main clusters of countries emerging: one markedly pro-technocratic represented by Eastern and Southern Europe and one where respondents differentiate much less between the two profiles (Scandinavian countries, plus the Netherlands).

## Conclusion

In the literature, technocrats are defined by two traits: their expertise and their independence from parties (Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019), yet, it is not always self-evident that all technocratic ministers enjoy both qualities. It is therefore important to examine more



**Figure 8.** Predicted value for each country of the difference between the technocratic and the partisan figures for the least favourite party. Model: HP2.2 – LF Min support.

in details how citizens value those two characteristics, as the literature on support for technocracy is rapidly expanding (Alexiadou et al., 2022; Bertson, 2022; Lavezzolo et al., 2021). So far, the literature has either not clearly distinguished between the two dimensions or has mostly highlighted how much citizens value expertise in politics. Thus, we know less about the appeal for ministers who are independent from political parties, which is crucial given both the alleged demise of party politics and party attachment in Europe and the broader debate on citizens' attitudes towards science and knowledge in the management of public affairs (Mede and Schäfer, 2020). Non-partisanship is of utmost importance as, in most cases, ministers recruited from the ranks of political parties also have relevant expertise for their portfolio. The key difference between partisan ministers (technopols) and technocratic ministers lies therefore more in their ties with political parties, rather than their expertise.

The goal of this study was precisely to investigate the appeal for independent ministers among citizens when they are asked to rate potential ministers of Health with a

similar level of expertise but with or without party ties. We design an experiment in which citizens across 14 countries were asked to rate potential ministers of Health with a similar level of field expertise but with no partisan tie for one, and past experience in party politics for the other. This design allows testing whether non-partisanship is crucial in how citizens evaluate potential ministers, and therefore to see how this dimension of technocracy might complement what we already know about the appeal for experts in government.

Our results confirm that European public opinion is overall more inclined towards independent experts (technocrats) than towards partisan experts (technopols). We find that experience within the political arena is not a plus for experts: people generally prefer an expert who remained independent from politics than an expert who coupled their field expertise with a track record of courting and representing voters. Overall, partisanship (or lack thereof) is an additional attribute to expertise that cannot be ignored when analysing technocracy. The non-partisan bonus in the evaluation of a technocratic profile grows when one is less sympathetic towards the party in government and when respondents show low levels of institutional trust or hold populist attitudes. Interestingly, these main findings hold for the most part across the 14 countries surveyed and irrespective of the party family of the respondents' most and least preferred parties.

However, some elements tone down this general conclusion. First, when it comes to a minister of Health appointed by respondents' most preferred party, the bonus enjoyed by the technocratic profile is smaller. It also tends to disappear in countries with higher institutional trust and lower experience with technocrats in government. By contrast, the appeal for technocrats as opposed to technopols is higher for citizens with low levels of political trust and holding populist attitudes. Finally, the study was conducted in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which made the policy domain more salient, but also activated some polarisation regarding how health policies should be managed. Such a context might have induced stronger preferences for independent experts as minister of Health.

These results have, nevertheless, important implications. First, it shows that the appeal for pure technocrats – independent from parties and experts – remains a reality among many citizens even when compared to politicians with actual expertise. However, technocratic appeal cannot be reduced to an appeal for expertise. The other dimension of technocracy, that is, the independence from parties, is crucial.

Second, we show that this preference for technocrats is the strongest when citizens evaluate potential ministers for a party they dislike. In that respect, technocrats in governments might be better able to defuse negative feelings coming from citizens who do not support the party selecting them. This could have two theoretical implications. It could, first, relate to the concept of loser's consent (Anderson et al., 2005). Losers of elections might be less negative about ministers appointed by the party did they not support if those ministers are independent. This less negative attitude coming from citizens could increase technocrats' capacity to push policy proposals that would be less popular beyond the core supporters of the party appointing the ministers. Second, we have also shown that the appeal for technocrats was even stronger the greater the antipathy towards the party appointing him. This finding resonates with the literature on (affective) polarisation of politics (Dalton, 2021b), with technocrats being more appealing than technopols for polarised citizens.

Third, and in complement to the previous point, we show that the appeal for technocrats is stronger but not reduced to ministers selected by a party that citizens dislike. The appeal also holds, even if more modest, when it comes to ministers appointed by a party that citizens like. This seems to suggest that public distrust in politicians is so widespread



that, even when citizens are closely attached to a political party, they prefer the candidate with no political experience (yet appointed by their party). However, it does not mean that citizens rule out the value of partisanship tout court. When they like a party, citizens tend to make fewer distinctions in how they evaluate a potential minister with a partisan or a non-partisan background. Yet, they also do not give a bonus to the partisan profile either. In a nutshell, being a partisan is no longer an asset. At best it is not a handicap. In this regard, however, we acknowledge that the health ministry might also be a portfolio where party ties matter less compared to other portfolios, even though during the pandemic it became a crucial political asset due to its salience. Future research might compare citizens' attitudes towards technocrats and technopols across different portfolios.

Finally, we have also confirmed earlier research connecting technocratic and populist attitudes. We find that populism (and distrust) drives the support for technocracy, thus empirically confirming an elective affinity between the two phenomena (Caramani, 2017). In a recent study on Spanish citizens, Fernández-Vázquez and colleagues (2023) confirmed the correlation between the two sets of attitudes and found that they were anchored in two dimensions of technocracy: anti-politics and pro-expertise sentiments. We show, across a wider range of countries, that their findings apply to citizens comparing ministers with a similar level of expertise but with different appeals to the anti-politics system. We stress the need to pursue this path in future research.


All these findings can also feed in broader debates on citizens' attitudes towards politics and the management of state affairs. They show that the appeal for technocratic ministers is rooted also in support for independence from political parties. Independence from parties, we reiterate, is key when they evaluate ministers, especially from parties they do not support. This finding opens broader reflections on the exact value that citizens attach to knowledge and expertise. Like other studies, we show that those values may be important for citizens when they reflect about government and policies. But expertise itself does not seem to be sufficient and to trump all considerations related to party politics and to wider attitudes towards political elites.


The multi-faceted nature of citizens' evaluations of technocratic ministers that we observe in our study could also be related to the actual support of technocrats in power. Recent studies, including ours, indeed, indicate that there is a real appeal for technocrats in power (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Chiru and Enyedi, 2022; Lavezzolo et al., 2021; Rojon et al., 2023). However, there are also signs that this support is limited and that citizens are not willing to give up too much power to technocrats (Vittori et al., 2023a). After all, the few examples of technocrats creating their parties and running for elections have not been real success stories (the case of Mario Monti in Italy, being probably the most known). Thus, it might be that citizens want more technocrats but with a limited role. As Bertsou (2022) recently showed, experts are liked by citizens to advise on policy decisions but not to have the final say. Even if satisfaction with democracy has eroded, citizens remain deeply attached to elections and to representative democracy as a model (see Anderson et al., 2021; Ferrín and Kriesi, 2016). It is even more true among elected politicians. Therefore, having technocrats who are both non-partisan and experts in power might be appealing for citizens. Nonetheless, apparently they are not willing to shift completely to a model in which technocrats will be the norm, and elected politicians the exception.

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## Supplemental material

Additional supplementary information may be found with the online version of this article.

## Notes

1. This is the question used in the European Value Survey questionnaire.
2. In this article, we use the terms ‘technocrat’ and ‘non-partisan experts’ interchangeably.
3. The positive evaluations include respondents who claim that this is a ‘very good’ or a ‘good’ idea.
4. The vignettes were translated into the national languages of the 14 countries but remain identical in their content.
5. In case of draw in highest or lowest sympathy scores, the party presented was randomly assigned. The full list of parties for which respondents had to give a sympathy score can be found in Supplemental Appendix III (Table A.5).
6. We also split the variable in three categories: the partisans are those who score negative value (from -10 to -1), neutrals are those who do not discriminate between the two figures (0) and the technocrats are those who score a positive value (from 1 to 10). We replicate the main models presented in Table 2 with these two categorical dependent variables through multinomial regressions and the results are robust (Supplemental Appendix VI, Table A.17).
7. The confidence intervals of the means are 0.03 for the most favourite party and 0.04 for the least favourite party.
8. The t test was run with t.test function in R, with the following specification *alternative* = ‘greater’.
9. We find some country differences when it comes to the significance of the Party Sympathy Max (Supplemental Appendix VI, Figure A.3 and A.4). Party Sympathy Max in Model 1 is not significant in Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland and Poland, while Party Sympathy Min is significant across all countries. This means that in two countries with the highest trust (Denmark and Finland) in political parties and in two with the lowest (Bulgaria and Poland), the intensity of the attachment to a party does not play a role in determining the preference of a technocrat over a partisan.
10. We also run the analysis by country to determine whether the significance of our predictor depends on different contexts. The results are also robust at the country level, with only one deviant case, Italy, where populist attitudes are not significant for both scenarios (Supplemental Appendix VI, Figures A.5 and A.6).

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