

Do technocrats boost the acceptance of policy proposals among the citizenry? Evidence from a survey experiment in Italy

Daive Vittori^{*}, Emilien Paulis, Jean-Benoit Pilet, Sebastien Rojon

Université Libre de Bruxelles, CEVIPOL, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

Are policies proposed by technocrats more easily accepted by citizens than those proposed by traditional partisan actors? This is a crucial question, as politicians increasingly rely on technocrats for resolving “wicked problems” such as financial, environmental, and health crises. To answer this question, we conducted a survey experiment among 5000 Italian respondents. At the time of our experiment, Italy was governed by a “grand coalition” of various technocratic and partisan actors, enabling us to realistically vary the proponents of different policy proposals. Overall, citizens are more likely to accept policies proposed by technocrats as opposed to party leaders. In particular, we find that technocratic proponents boost policy acceptance even more for economic and valence issues. Furthermore, we find that this “technocratic effect” is generally stronger among citizens who are more likely to disagree with the policy content.

1. Introduction

In established democracies, the agents that embody the very essence of representative government, political parties, are facing an unprecedented legitimacy crisis (Ignazi, 2017). One of the criticisms directed at parties and elected politicians is that they are not equipped to face the complexity of contemporary policy decisions (Mair, 2013; Thomassen, 2015). They are also criticized for being too focused on the short-term goal of securing re-election and lacking the independence to adopt long-term perspectives (Caramani, 2017; Centeno, 1994). In light of such criticisms, we have witnessed across democracies a growing presence of experts in policy-making (Valbruzzi, 2020). This has happened through the creation of independent expert bodies (Gornitzka and Sverdrup, 2008), but also through the appointment of technocratic ministers in government cabinets (Vittori et al., 2022). These technocratic ministers are expected to have greater expertise and be more independent from parties and from the constraints of seeking re-election. Therefore, parties might hope that by bringing experts into the fold they might regain the public’s support (Dommett and Temple, 2020). Indeed, a case study from Italy found that the appointment of the Monti technocratic government in 2011 coincided with an increase in satisfaction with democracy and positive expectations for the country’s economy among the citizenry (Merler, 2021).

Yet, there is little research regarding the actual impact that

technocrats might have on citizens and how they relate to politics. Several studies have examined technocratic attitudes, or popular support for the exercise of political power by technical elites, also referred to as “technocrats” (Bengtsson Å and Mattila, 2009; Bertso and Caramani, 2020; Bertso and Pastorella, 2017; Chiru and Enyedi, 2021). Others have closely examined what citizens seem to like about technocrats and experts in government (Lavezzolo et al., 2021; Bertso, 2021). But one crucial question remains underexplored: could technocrats, because of their expertise and of their independence from party politics, boost policy acceptance, i.e. the overall agreement with the policy proposal? A few recent experimental studies have shown that citizens perceive policies developed in collaboration with experts as more legitimate (Bertso, 2021). Yet, we know little about whether this holds a) for policy acceptance and b) in experimental settings that closely resemble real political scenarios. We do not know whether citizens are more likely to support policy proposals made by actual technocratic ministers than by partisan politicians. Furthermore, we do not know the impact of technocrats on policy acceptance when voters are ideologically aligned with the new policy proposed and when the new policy measure runs counter to ones’ ideological predispositions.

We propose to answer these questions in the context of the Italian government led by Prime Minister Mario Draghi (2021–2022) who, having served for many years as a high-ranking civil servant, for example as President of European Central Bank, might be considered a

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Daive.Vittori@ulb.be (D. Vittori), emilien.paulis@ulb.be (E. Paulis), jean-benoit.pilet@ulb.be (J.-B. Pilet), Sebastien.Rojon@ulb.be (S. Rojon).

quintessential technocrat. He was leading a cabinet composed of both technocratic and partisan ministers and supported by a grand coalition composed of several parties with disparate ideological positions. The broad variety of actors in government meant that Italians were exposed to a range of proposals by both technocratic ministers or partisan ministers instructed by party leaders. We surveyed a sample of 5000 Italians and presented them with policy proposals debated within Draghi's cabinet and we tested whether associating the policy proposal to a technocratic minister from Draghi's cabinet leads to stronger support than when the policy proposal is proposed by party leaders, whose importance in Italian politics has grown substantially in the last thirty years (Massari 2015). Our research design not only provides a realistic test of the impact of technocracy on policy acceptance among the wider public, but also makes an effort to achieve a sufficient external validity as it was conducted while an actual technocratic-led cabinet was in power in Italy. Moreover, the grand coalition supporting the government enables us to realistically vary the proponents of specific policies (technocrats, right-wing and left-wing party leaders), providing a unique window of opportunity for a close-to-reality experiment. Such a coalition arrangement reduces, yet it does not eliminate, biases related to partisanship, as all major parties (and four-fifths of the Parliament) endorses the government.

Our findings show that, overall, policy proposals are more widely supported when proposed by technocratic ministers. The effect is especially strong when the policy proposal is a priori at odds with one's ideological preferences. By contrast, technocratic ministers do not boost policy acceptance when citizens evaluate policy proposals that are in line with their ideological preferences. Our findings suggest that technocratic ministers might contribute to boosting the acceptance of policies that citizens dislike. As policy outputs are the main concern for citizens when evaluating their satisfaction with a decision-making process (Esaïsson, Gilljam and Persson, 2017), such findings are key to understanding the impact of technocrats in government on satisfaction with decision-making processes.

2. What drives support for technocracy?

From an etymological point of view, technocracy means the power of the technique (téchne-kratos). Pastorella (2016: 951) defines it as the "rule by technical experts who take political decisions instead of politicians". One form of technocracy is the appointment of ministers who are not selected based on the electoral popularity or partisanship, but because they are experts in the policy domain they oversee and are independent from electoral politics (Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019). Recent analyses have shown that technocratic governments have grown consistently in the last two decades (Vittori et al., 2022) and the number of technocratic ministers appointed in partisan governments has grown accordingly, in almost all European countries and especially in Eastern and Southern Europe. From 2010 until 2020, about 15% of the ministers appointed in Europe were identified as technocrats or ministers coming from outside the realm of politics. Technocracy is regarded by some scholars as a symptom of the "malaise" that European democracies, and namely party democracy, are experiencing (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2017; Urbinati, 2014). Nonetheless, technocratic ministers have been appointed across Europe with the support of parliament and of political parties (Costa Pinto et al., 2018) and their role is largely to propose policies that are later approved by a vote in parliament, which appears to be how citizens would like experts to be involved (Bertsou, 2021). From a formal standpoint having a technocratic government or experts in government legitimized by a vote of confidence in the Parliament (where required) is in full compliance with the democratic game.

Nonetheless, technocracy proposes a vision of society with an externally given common good based on seemingly objective facts and evidence, while in party government the common good is the result of a compromise between different forces in society (Caramani, 2017). That

is why technocracy, while being incorporated in the party government scheme, is partially at odds with it. Following the literature, technocracy represents a challenge to party democracy (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti, 2017; Caramani, 2017) and one of the main reasons behind this challenge is the diffuse and chronic distrust of political parties (Ignazi, 2017). This distrust coupled with the belief that parties are unable to deal with complex problems (Mair, 2013; Thomassen, 2015) inspired scholarly interest in studying public support for a range of alternative decision-making arrangements such as referenda (Coffé and Michels, 2014; Rojon and Rijken, 2021; Schuck and de Vreese, 2015), deliberative mini-publics ((Bedock and Pilet, 2020); Goldberg et al., 2020; Rojon and Pilet 2021) or the appointment of non-elected experts (Bertsou, 2021).

In this regard, one of the most compelling results in works based on experimental settings is that people care more about policy outcomes than about the fairness of the procedures through which those policy outcomes are generated (Arnesen, 2018; Dahlberg, Linde and Holmberg, 2015; Esaïsson, Gilljam and Persson, 2012; StrebelKubler and Marcinkowski, 2018). Nonetheless, some studies have also found that input legitimacy, i.e. the type of process that leads to a decision might be relevant as well. Citizens (or at least some of them) might be more likely to accept policy decisions when they are favourable to the decision-making process (Tyler, 1990; Brockner, 2002; Esaïsson, Gilljam and Persson, 2012; EsaïssonPerssonGilljam and Lindholm, 2019; Beiser-McGrath, HuberBernauer and Koubi, 2021). In particular, the actors associated to the policy decisions appear to have some influence as well. For example, Arnesen and Peters (2018) have shown that people are more willing to accept outcomes developed by politicians sharing similar characteristics to themselves. Here, we propose to answer questions related to input-legitimacy by examining whether technocratic ministers can make a difference for the overall policy acceptance. By varying "who" is proposing a policy measure and by having real independent experts as opposed to elected politicians as the proponents, would we observe that citizens are more positive about the policy proposal at hand?

There could be different expectations as to whether technocratic officials would boost policy acceptance more than partisan ministers. From a democratic theory point of view, party leaders should be perceived as more legitimate to take decisions because they are democratically elected and accountable. Their policy proposals should therefore enjoy more support. Partisan ministers most of the time have been elected first in parliament, meaning that they have been authorized by election to act on behalf of the people (Estlund, 2008). Moreover, they can benefit from the core role of parties in organizing representative democracy (Kölln, 2015) and their partisan identities help them find support, at least among their electorates.

However, parties and their representatives have suffered from a major decline in public support (Ignazi, 2017). They are, among other things, considered to lack the necessary expertise to take informed decisions and they are perceived as too constrained by electoral politics to adopt long-term perspectives in dealing with policy problems (Thomassen, 2015). In this regard it is worth highlighting that previous research in European countries, including Italy, has demonstrated widespread support for decisions being taken by non-elected experts as opposed to politicians (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Chiru and Enyedi, 2021). In such a context, and especially with the widespread decline in the perceived legitimacy of political parties among citizens (Ignazi, 2017), we might expect technocratic ministers to enjoy greater public support compared to partisans, and the policies they propose could be more widely accepted among citizens. This is also, potentially, because technocrats are perceived as more skilled and knowledgeable than run-of-the-mill politicians, and more independent from electoral politics. Indeed technocrats, especially those appointed in governments with the "mandate to change the status quo" (McDonnell and Valbruzzi, 2014), are usually nominated because their expertise is expected to provide a better "external good" than representative government, whose

common good is ultimately mediated by political forces. Alexiadou and colleagues (2021) have recently shown that the appointment of technocrats in government is a sign of credibility for economic investors, as their appointment reduces borrowing costs *per se*. Considering those contrasting elements, we adopt this latter perspective (while bearing in mind that an opposite outcome might be equally true) and we expect technocratic policy proponents (TPP) would lead to greater policy acceptance than partisan policy proponents (PPP). Hence, we propose the following baseline hypothesis:

H1. Policy proposals coming from technocratic policy proponents (TPP) receive a higher level of policy acceptance among citizens in general, than those coming from partisan policy proponents (PPP).

However, the overall acceptance of policies promoted by TPP as opposed to PPP might depend on the issues at hand. A first potentially relevant distinction in this regard is between economic and cultural issues. The transformation of the European spatial competition into a two-dimensional space (Bornschieer, 2010; Kitschelt 1994, Kriesi, Grande, Lachat, Dolezal, Bornschieer and Frey, 2008) has had crucial consequences for party competition: cultural-related issues became as prominent as economic-related issues in determining vote choice. Issues such as European integration (Hooghe and Wilson, 2002), immigration (de Wilde, Koopmans, Wolfgang, Oliver and Zürn, 2019; Hutter and Kriesi 2022), and globalization (Kriesi, Grande, Lachat, Dolezal, Bornschieer and Frey, 2008) are deemed to be orthogonal to “classic” redistributive issues. Cultural issues are rooted in the moral values (Carmines and Stimson 1980) making it is more difficult to establish an authoritative independent expertise (Bertsou, 2021). In this regard, a study from Spain found that on a civil-rights related issues, such as abortion, citizens prefer more voice, while on economic issues, representative processes are preferred (Wojcieszak, 2014). When it comes to experts in power, the literature has shown that experts are more often appointed to ministries dealing with classic economic-related issues, such as the economy, finance, labour or justice as opposed to ministries dealing with cultural issues (Vittori et al., 2022). Also, in a context of economic decline, such as those experienced by European countries, the appointment of economic and finance experts might even more desirable to citizens, as appointing technocrats in economic-related issues increase the credibility of the country vis-à-vis the market (Alexiadou, Spaniel and Gunaydin, 2021). Based on these findings it would be reasonable to expect that TPPs generate greater policy acceptance than PPP when it comes to economic issues, rather than cultural issues for which “gut responses” apparently activate partisanship-based biases and where technocrats might find more difficult to credibly claim a specific expertise.

H2. The positive effect of TPP (as opposed to PPP) on policy acceptance is stronger when the policymaking concerns economic-related issues (as opposed to cultural issues).

Another potential difference is whether the issue is polarized among voters or is rather a valence issue. Valence issues are issues for which there exists a shared goal among the population and in which there are few to no distinctions between the ideology of the respondents (Stokes, 1963) such as fighting corruption, reducing unemployment and improving the efficiency of public services. The valence model of voting is of particular importance, not only because of the rise in the importance of valence evaluations among voters in general (Green and Hobolt, 2008) and particularly among less sophisticated voters (Stubager, Seeborg and So, 2018), but also because in the valence model voters are

more likely to make their decision based on who is the best in delivering, rather than on the goal to be reached (which is shared by all voters). From a theoretical standpoint, credibility in delivering outputs matters more than partisanship for valence issues, unlike for polarizing positional issues. In this regard, it could be expected that once a goal is shared by the majority of the population, experts are capable of generating a surplus of policy acceptance, compared to party actors, both because party actors activate negative biases among respondents with different party identification and because experts activate a positive credibility bias. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis.

H3. The positive effect of a TPP (as opposed to a PPP) on policy acceptance is stronger when the policymaking concerns valence issues (as opposed to ideologically-charged issues).

For the first three hypotheses, we have assumed that all voters would react equally to the identity of the policy proponent (technocratic vs. partisan). Yet, we might also expect some differences between citizens. A first one is related to the level of institutional trust expressed by citizens. It has been shown in earlier research that support for experts to decide rather than elected politicians is especially strong among citizens with low institutional trust (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Chiru and Enyedi, 2021). We might expect that the same effect would be observed when it comes to evaluating a policy proposed by a technocratic minister or by a partisan one. The boost in policy support brought by technocrats could be expected to be high among low trusting citizens. By contrast, citizens with higher levels of institutional trust still value partisan ministers. This leads to our fourth hypothesis.

H4. The positive effect of a TPP (as opposed to a PPP) on policy acceptance is stronger among those with low trust in representative institutions (as opposed to those with high trust), regardless of the policy content.

However, voters are not policy-blind: they also care about the content of the policies proposed. Earlier studies have shown that citizens primarily evaluate a new policy based on its content and whether they agree with the new measure or not. Yet, it also appears that when citizens dislike a policy proposal, their evaluation of the process through which the decision was taken – whether they deem it fair or inclusive – might also matter (Arnesen, 2018; Esaiasson, Gilljam and Persson, 2012; Beiser-McGrath, Huber, Bernauer and Koubi, 2021). In the context of our study, it would mean that the proponent of a new policy measure, whether partisan or technocratic, would matter more when the content of the policy proposal is further away from the policy preferences of the respondent. We expect that, in such a situation, a technocratic proponent, by virtue of their expertise and independence from politics, will moderate the negative evaluation that the respondent has of the content of the policy proposal (i.e. citizens are more willing to accept something they disagree if they know the proponent is an independent expert). If these expectations related to policy (in)congruence are confirmed, it could also mean that technocrats are better equipped to propose unpopular policies such as austerity measures, tough welfare reforms, or climate protection policies with costly changes to one’s lifestyle (see Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019). Nevertheless, it does not mean that examining the impact of the identity of the policy proponent in a configuration of ideological congruence between the respondent and the content of the policy proposal is not interesting. Actually, observing a positive effect of a TPP compared to a PPP on policy acceptance in a situation of ideological congruence would be the neatest evidence of an exogenous effect of technocracy on policy acceptance (since it rules out

the role of outcome/content as opposed to processes/proponents). This is what can be observable for example in case of non-positional issues (see H3). We nevertheless articulate our hypothesis in line with earlier studies.

H5. The positive effect of a TPP as opposed to PPP on policy acceptance is (a) weaker among those who are ideologically inclined to support the actual policy, but (b) stronger among those who are ideologically disinclined to support the actual policy.

3. The Italian case

Italy is a paradigmatic case when it comes to technocracy in many respects. It is one of the European countries with the highest rate of technocratic ministers appointed to government (Vittori et al., 2022). In every major political crisis that Italy faced over the last thirty years, technocratic governments supplanted classic party governments. Since 1990, fully technocratic governments were in charge in 1995–1996 (Dini government) and in 2011–2013 (Monti government). Moreover, there were also two technocratic-led governments, composed of both technocratic and partisan ministers: Ciampi government (1993–1994) and Draghi government (2021–2022).

Conducting a survey on technocratic ministers in Italy in 2021, thus, offers a unique window of opportunity for testing hypotheses related to a real-case scenario: due to the number of technocratic governments Italy has had, Italian citizens have consolidated views on what technocratic governments are, and how policy proposals emerge under such circumstances of cohabitation between technocratic ministers and partisans in senior positions. The Draghi government, is especially interesting in that respect. Contrary to the previous technocratic cabinets in Italy (like Monti cabinet in 2011), it was not a fully technocratic government but a technocratic-led cabinet (McDonnell and Valbruzzi, 2014). Draghi cabinet included 7 ministers who were technocrats – defined as experts in the portfolio they manage and independent from political parties (see Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019) – and 15 partisan ministers affiliated to the parties supporting the Draghi cabinet in parliament. Such circumstances are very interesting for our study as they allow exposing respondents to realistic scenarios of policy proposals with good chances of being proposed by both technocratic and partisan proponents. And the scenarios can refer to the names of real technocratic and partisan proponents that were active at the time of our survey. Draghi's government also presents a situation in which the cabinet enjoys wide parliamentary support, from a “grand coalition” uniting left-wing (Liberi e Uguali, LEU), moderate left (Partito Democratico, PD), centrist (Italia Viva and + Europa), conservative (Forza Italia, FI) and radical-right (Lega, L) parties. In this regard, it is again plausible to design an experiment where right-wing and left-wing policies are proposed simultaneously. Furthermore, Draghi's government was not a caretaker cabinet whose mandate is restricted to a few policy issues, but proposes an ambitious agenda as a result of the Recovery Plan which provided the government with unprecedented spending capability.

4. Experimental design and survey data

Within this context, we ran a computer assisted web interview (CAWI) survey with an experimental component. Our sample comprises 5003 respondents with Italian citizenship and aged 18 years old or more. Our sample is representative of the whole Italian population for age, gender and region of residence.¹ As shown in Supplementary Materials, the sample is not fully representative of the Italian population in terms of education, as it was harder to recruit respondents that have not completed secondary education. Therefore, we corrected for the

¹ The areas are: North-West Italy, North-East Italy, Center and South (and Islands).

underrepresentation of lower-educated respondents by weighting our sample to the distribution on education in the general population.²

The survey first presented respondents with an introductory vignette in which we explained what they were about to see, i.e. a series of new policies that were to be proposed in the coming months by a technocrat from Draghi's cabinet or by leaders of the political parties supporting the government. The introduction screen mentioned that the proponents of those new policy measures could either be the leaders of the four main parties supporting Draghi's government (Partito Democratico, Movimento 5 Stelle, Lega, Forza Italia,³ or by three technocratic ministers (mentioning their name, portfolio, and background outside politics – see Supplementary Materials, Note on the survey experiment).

Each respondent was then presented successively with five policy proposals. These first elements of information were included because some respondents might not know who the technocratic ministers would be just mention their name. For each proposal, the respondent read a vignette describing the content of the policy proposal and the identity of the proponent. Proponents were randomized across respondents. The proponents could either be a technocratic minister of the Draghi cabinet or a leader of one of the four parties backing Draghi's government. While technocrats were selected because of the relation between their portfolios and the policy issue at stake, party leaders were selected because they proposed similar proposals to the ones we selected (see Supplementary Materials, Policy Proposals). In Italian politics, party leaders dominate the political agenda: even after the fall of the so-called First Republic (1948–1994), party leaders remained the king-makers in the government formation (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2002). The personalization of politics in Italy (Venturino 2001; Calise 2005; Massari 2015) has brought party leaders to the front of the competition. They are the agenda setters when it comes to proposing new policy proposals. Partisan ministers within the cabinet do not set the agenda and do not announce new policy proposals that would not have been pushed first by their party leader. Technocratic ministers are not in the same situation. They are the ones making policy proposals in the policy domain they oversee. The ideal scenario would have been to construct vignettes with policy proposals made by technocratic and partisan ministers, but it would have been at odds with the way politics function in Italy and could have appeared unrealistic for respondents. We therefore opted for more realistic scenarios contrasting party leaders and technocratic ministers proposing new policies. As we opted for including realistic, yet not identical, policy proposals advanced by party leaders, we nudge respondents to a real-case scenario, rather than thinking about policies in abstract. In the Supplementary Materials (see Policy Proposals), we indicate the leaders who propose policies similar to the ones we include in the experiment, the date of the proposal and the sources. The idea was to make it plausible that each of the randomized proponents would propose the policies, without allowing respondents to either straightforwardly identify the proponent or to identify the proposal as proposed by another party. In total, respondents were presented with five vignettes with five different scenarios. The five scenarios were selected starting from close-to-reality proposals by political parties and technocrats since the instalment of the Draghi government. One scenario comprised a valence issue (reducing bureaucracy and improving online services offered by the public administration). We opted for this issue, because of the generalized scepticism of Italians towards bureaucracy:

² The quotas for matching the population distributions are: primary or secondary education 2.2, upper secondary education 1.3, university degree 0.51. The results of the unweighted models are presented in the Supplementary Materials (see Tables with full model specifications (unweighted), Tables 3A and 4Aappsec1) and are robust.

³ The party leaders in our design have had in the past or have in the moment of the survey fielding governmental positions at either national or regional level: so, not only were they leading the parties that supported the government, but they were also experienced policy-makers.

76% of Italians expressed concern about the provision of public services (Eurobarometer 94) and, thus, improving the quality of bureaucracy might be perceived as shared concern among Italians. We also ensured that the proposal was equally supported by both left-wing and right-wing citizens, in line with Stokes' definition of a valence issue as cutting across ideological divides (see Supplementary Materials, Cross-ideological support for the Valence issue).

The four other policy proposals were selected to divide respondents ideologically. As explained in relation to hypothesis 2, we depart from the consolidated literature on the two-dimensional political space that characterize several European countries (Bornschieer, 2010; de Wilde et al., 2019; Kitschelt, 1992; Kriesi, Grande, Lachat, Dolezal, Bornschieer and Frey, 2008) and seek to contrast the effect of a TPP on policy acceptance for economic-related and "cultural" issues. For both, we selected one policy proposal that was more in line with the agenda of right-wing parties and one more in line with the agenda of left-wing parties. For the economic-related issue, the right-wing proposal is reducing taxes for self-employed persons earning less than 150,000 euro yearly, while the left-wing proposal is increasing the wealth tax on the richest 7% of the population. For the cultural dimension, the right-wing proposal is increasing entry restrictions for asylum seekers, while the left-wing proposal is decreasing the legal threshold for obtaining the Italian citizenship for immigrants born in Italy (see Supplementary Materials, Policy Proposals).

Below is the text of the first vignette which presents the valence issue for the technocratic minister (the text of the other vignettes can be found in the Supplementary Materials, Note on the survey experiment):

The news reported that **the Minister for Technological Innovation, the independent Vittorio Colao**, plans to put forward in the next months a law aimed at reducing bureaucracy and improving online services offered by the public administration.

For the valence issue, respondents were randomly presented with either a technocratic proponent (the Minister for the Technological Innovation Daniele Colao, who is former Vodafone CEO) or the party leader of the four parties supporting Draghi's cabinet (Forza Italia, Democratic Party, M5S and Lega). The technocratic minister was selected because he has expertise associated to the policy proposal (e-government).

For the four other issues, the identity of the proponent was also randomized between a technocratic minister (we selected also technocratic ministers with relevant expertise in the policy proposal, namely Minister of Finance Daniele Franco, former high-ranking civil-servant, for the economic issue and the Minister of Justice Marta Cartabia, former member of the Constitutional Court, for the cultural issues), and the leaders of the four parties backing Draghi's cabinet. Yet, in order to avoid unrealistic vignettes, the partisan proponents for the right-wing policy proposals can only be the leaders of the two right-wing parties (Lega and Forza Italia). For the left-wing policy proposals, the partisan proponents could only be the leaders of the two left-wing parties (PD and M5S⁴). We avoided having a policy proposal from the left proposed by a right-wing partisan proponent (and vice-versa) to avoid dissonance biases resulting from the mismatch between what respondents might pre-emptively know about the party and the content of the policy proposals.

⁴ As M5S at the time of the survey has already been an ally of PD and that M5S and PD proposed a structural alliance for the upcoming local level elections (with some exceptions) we consider M5S as a left-leaning party, even though we are fully aware that the party can hardly be encapsulated into classic "left" or "right" party families (Vittori, 2020).

4.1. Variables

4.1.1. Dependent variable

Our main dependent variable is the level of support for each of the policy proposals presented in the vignettes. This was measured by asking respondents "How much would you say you agree with this proposal on a scale ranging from 0 (strongly oppose) to 10 (strongly in favour)? The descriptive statistics for the support for each issue can be found in the Supplementary Materials (see Support for policy proposals).

4.1.2. Independent variables

Our main independent variable is the proponent of the policy. Based on the five vignettes and in order to make the model straightforwardly intelligible, we created a dummy variable opposing technocratic proponents (TPP = 1) to partisan proponents (PPP = 0). To test hypothesis 2 we create a dummy distinguishing cultural and economic policies ("Economic vs. Cultural"), while to test hypothesis 3 we create a dummy distinguishing valence and ideologically-charged issues "Valence issue". When testing other hypotheses not related to the kind of issues at stake (hypothesis 1 and 4), we include a categorical variable to control for any differences caused by differences between policy domains. To test hypothesis 4, we include an index measuring "Trust in political institutions" (namely parliament, politicians and parties).⁵ To test ideological congruence between the proposal and the ideology of the respondent, we include the standard item on left-right self-placement. Finally, we include a set of controls: gender, age, education as socio-demographic controls; political interest and political efficacy as attitudinal controls, as some studies have shown that preferences for non-elected experts are stronger among those with lower levels of confidence in their abilities to influence politics (Chiru and Enyedi, 2021). Furthermore, we include a further control related to the support of the Draghi government: as our experiment is based on real technocratic ministers and real parties supporting the government, we consider this control as fundamental. We also add a propensity to vote score for the parties in order to control for party preferences beyond ideological self-placement. As our study focuses on proposals coming from technocrats vis-à-vis partisans, we include a variable measuring the technocratic attitudes of the respondents (for the operationalization see the Supplementary Materials, Variables included in the models).

4.1.3. Modelling strategy

The models in Tables 2 and 3 present the OLS multivariate regression estimates of policy acceptance (with full model specifications provided in the Supplementary Materials, Table 1A and Table 2A). In all models, we clustered the standard errors at the respondent level to account for the fact that respondents rated several vignettes. In Model 1 we test whether there is an overall positive effect of TPP on policy acceptance (H1) based on the pooled data from all five vignettes, including a control for differences caused by the specific policy issue. In Model 2 we test whether the effect of a TPP depends on the type of policy proposal (economic- or cultural) (H2) by including an interaction between the proponent and the dummy distinguishing whether the issue revolves around economic and cultural issues. To limit the comparison to economic vs. cultural issues we excluded the valence vignettes from Model 2. In Model 3 we test whether the effect of a TPP is stronger for valence issues (H3) by including an interaction between the proponent and the dummy distinguishing between valence vs. ideologically-charged issues. In Model 4 we test whether the effect of a TPP changes depending on the level of trust (H4).

The models in Table 3 test whether the effect of a TPP is weaker for individuals whose ideological positioning is congruent with the proposal (H5a) and stronger for those whose ideological positioning is

⁵ See the Supplementary Materials (Variables included in the models) for the question wordings and the recoding of the variables.

Table 1
Mean policy acceptance by policy proposal and policy proponent.

	All respondents	Technocratic minister	FI	L	PD	M5S
Valence (improving online public services)	7.4	8	7.2	6.9	7.5	7.4
Right-wing economic issue (reducing taxes for self-employed)	6.2	6.6	5.9	6	-	-
Left-wing economic issue (increasing taxes on the rich)	6.5	6.8	-	-	6.3	6.4
Right-wing cultural issue (increasing entry restrictions for asylum seekers)	5.8	6.1	5.9	5.5	-	-
Left-wing cultural issue (facilitating citizenship acquisition for immigrants)	5.8	6	-	-	5.7	5.8

incongruent with the proposal (H5b). This was done by sub-sampling the whole sample, focusing on left-wing issues only (Model 1), right-wing issues only (Model 2) and the valence issue only (Model 3) and including an interaction between the proponent and a respondent's left-right-self-placement. The samples for both models in Table 3 exclude the ratings of valence vignettes, which cannot be assigned a specific ideology, and excluding respondents who "preferred not to place" themselves on the LRSP scale as they cannot be matched to the policy proposal. For

Table 2
OLS regression estimates of policy acceptance (H1-H4).

	Model 1: Preference for TPP	Model 2: Economic vs. Cultural	Model 3: Valence vs. Ideologically charged	Model 4: Trust
Key predictors	<i>Coef(SE)***</i>	<i>Coef(SE)***</i>	<i>Coef(SE)***</i>	<i>Coef (SE)***</i>
Technocratic policy proponent (PPP = 0)	0.50 *** (0.05)	0.37 *** (0.08)	0.46 *** (0.06)	0.50 *** (0.04)
Economic vs. Cultural issues (economic = 1; cultural = 0)		0.43 *** (0.06)		
Valence issue (ideologically-charged = 0)			0.27 *** (0.05)	
Policy issues				
Vignette: Economic (ref. Cultural)	0.49 *** (0.04)			0.49 *** (0.04)
Vignette: Valence (ref. Cultural)	0.56 *** (0.05)			0.56 *** (0.05)
Institutional trust	-0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.04)
Interactions				
TPP*economic vs. cultural		0.19. (0.11)		
TPP*Valence issue			0.21. (0.12)	
TPP*Institutional trust				-0.02 (0.05)
Controls				
Age, Sex, Education, Education, Political Interest, Political efficacy, Technocratic attitudes, Support for Government, Propensity to vote for FSM, PD, FI, L, LRSP	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N. vignettes	23,430	18,744	23,430	23,430
N. respondents				
R squared	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.04
Adj. R squared	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.04
Df. residual	1042.30	1035.01	950.49	1042.19

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; . p < 0.1.

Table 3
OLS Regression estimates of policy acceptance (H5a-H5b).

	Model 1: Left-wing issues	Model 2: Right-wing issues	Model 3: Valence issue
Key predictors	<i>Coef(SE)***</i>	<i>Coef(SE)***</i>	<i>Coef(SE)***</i>
Technocratic policy proponent (PPP = 0)	-0.37. (0.20)	1.73 *** (0.19)	1.09 *** (0.21)
Left-right Self-Placement (LRSP)	-0.34 *** (0.02)	0.39 *** (0.02)	0.06 * (0.03)
Interactions			
LRSP*TPP	0.14 *** (0.03)	-0.23 *** (0.03)	-0.07 (0.04)
Controls			
Age, Sex, Education, Education, Political Interest, Political efficacy, Technocratic attitudes, Support for Government, Propensity to vote for FSM, PD, FI, L, Trust in institutions	Yes	Yes	Yes
N.obs	7684	7684	3842
R squared	0.21	0.28	0.08
Adj. R squared	0.21	0.28	0.08
Df. residual	753.68	753.83	717.49

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; . p < 0.1.

the third model, we did not advance any specific hypothesis related to the interaction between respondents' self-placement and the proponents. Being a valence issue, one might expect that the interaction effect should be non-significant as it ideally cross-cuts the political spectrum.

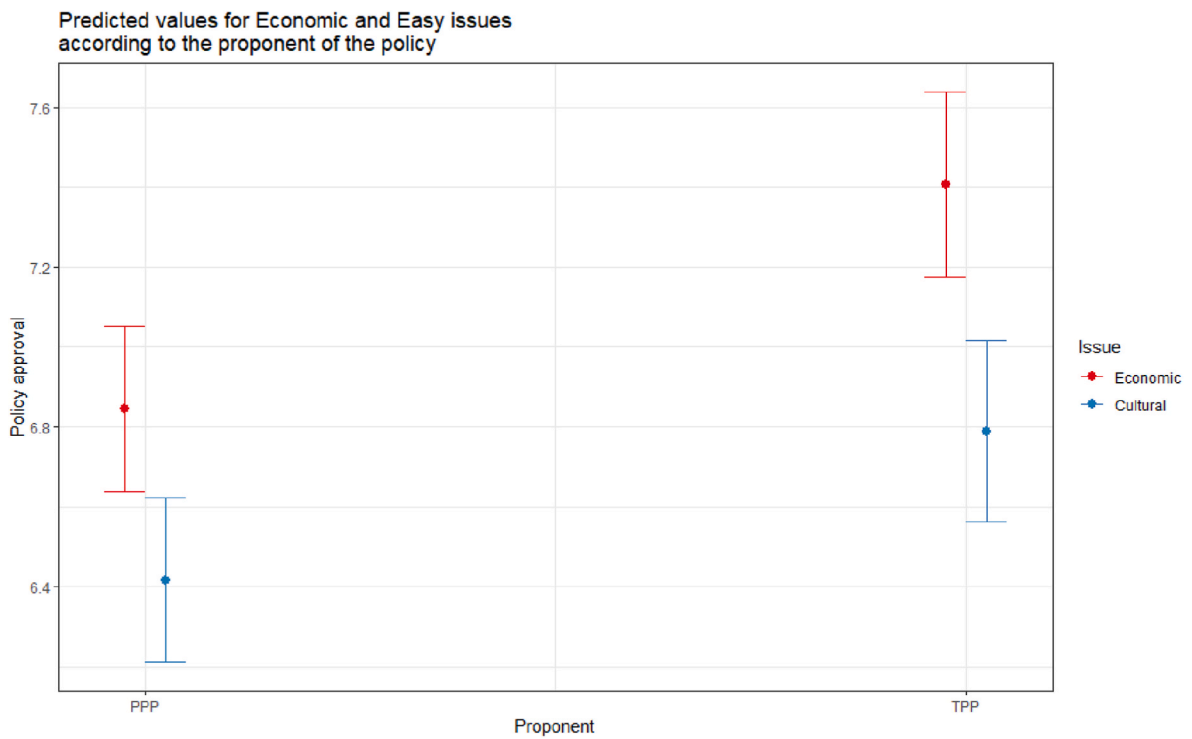


Fig. 1. Predicted values depending on the type of policy issues and proponents (interaction plots).

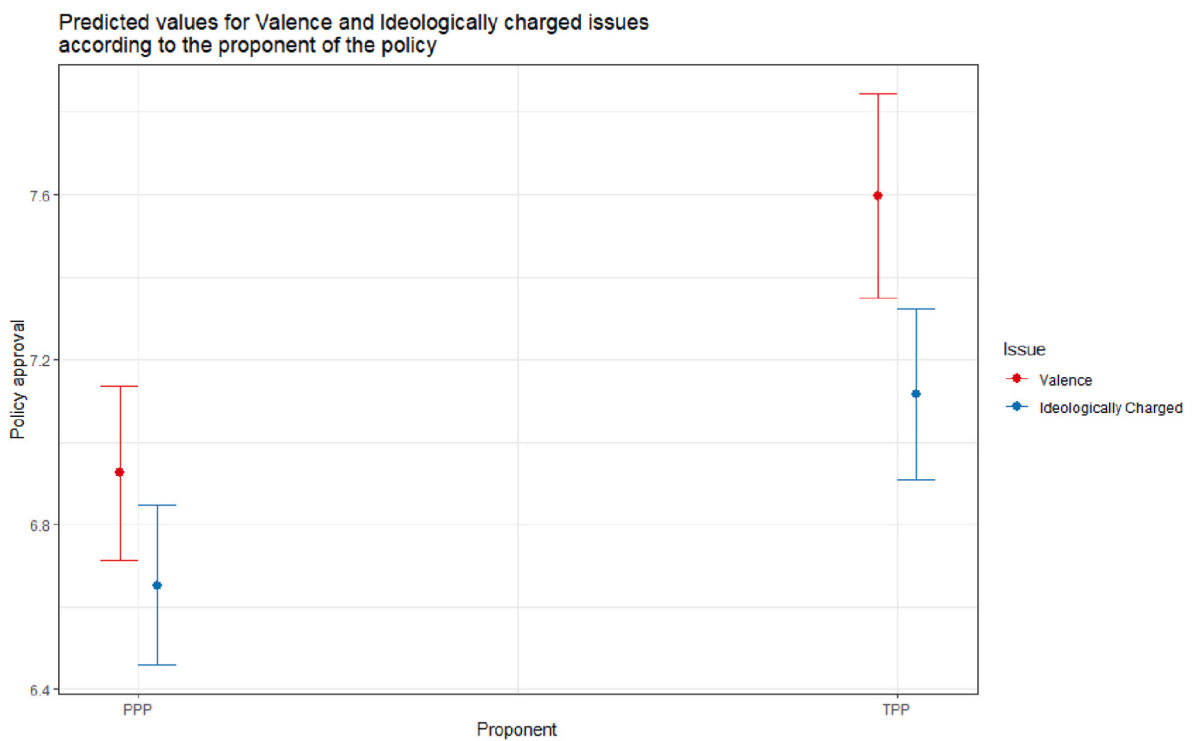


Fig. 2. Predicted values depending on the type of policy issues and proponents (interaction plots).

5. Descriptive results

Table 1 shows the mean support for each of the five legislative proposals disaggregated by policy. For all five vignettes we see that the mean support is always higher for policies proposed by a technocratic minister than for those proposed by a partisan actor (in line with H1). The column showing the mean support for policies proposed by

technocratic ministers demonstrates that support is the highest for valence issues (which is in line with H3) and higher for economic than for cultural policies (which is in line with H2). The overall mean support for all respondents is considerably higher for the valence issue than for all other issues, which confirms that it is indeed a more agreeable proposal.

6. Analysis

In line with H1, the significant effect of the technocratic policy proponent (TPP) dummy in Model 1 demonstrates that, even when controlling for technocratic attitudes, respondents are overall more favourable towards policies proposed by a technocratic minister than by a partisan actor. Switching from a policy proposed by an elected politician to a policy proposed by a non-elected technocrat is associated with an increase of 0.5 points on an 11-point scale.

The main effect of TPP in Model 2 ($0.35, p < 0.001$) shows us the effect of a TPP on the policy acceptance of cultural issues. The significant positive interaction coefficient shows us that a TPP has an even stronger positive effect ($p < 0.1$) on the policy acceptance of economic issues. Therefore, a TPP increases policy acceptance in both scenarios but especially for economic issues, confirming H2. This is also plasticly shown in Fig. 1, which plots the predicted values for the economic and cultural issues. Fig. 1 shows that even in the case of a cultural issue, respondents still slightly prefer policies proposed by technocrats as opposed to those proposed by partisan actors.

The main effect of TPP in Model 3 ($p < 0.001$) demonstrates that a TPP increases policy acceptance even for ideologically-charged or polarizing issues, i.e. in the condition valence = 0. The significant positive TPP by valence interaction coefficient shows us that a TPP has an even stronger positive effect on policy acceptance ($0.21, p < 0.1$) for valence issues, in line with H3. Fig. 2, which plots the predicted values of the proponents by valence interaction, shows the difference between the policy acceptance of valence versus ideologically-charged issues when they are proposed by partisans and by the technocratic minister. Even in the case of an ideologically-charged issue, respondents are still more likely to support policies proposed by a technocratic minister than those proposed by a partisan actor.

The fourth model (*Trust*) tests whether policy acceptance depends on how trusting one is of representative institutions. The non-significant interaction effect shows that the effect of a TPP does depend on one's level of trust. Therefore, H4 is rejected: policies proposed by a technocrat are perceived as more legitimate than those proposed by a party leader, regardless of how trusting one is of representative institutions. This finding goes against earlier studies that had shown that support for technocrats in government was stronger among distrustful citizens (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Chiru and Enyedi, 2021). Here we can observe that technocratic ministers proposing a new policy measure seems appealing to citizens with both high and low levels of political trust. One interpretation could be that technocratic ministers are appreciated by citizens who reject the role of political parties, but also by more trustful voters who see technocratic ministers as an element of stability and of credibility in politics. This coalition of low and high trust citizens might be boosted by the specific context of the Draghi cabinet in

Italy. The coalition received support from more mainstream parties like PD and Forza Italia, but also from the two parties, M5S and Lega, that attracted most of the politically distrustful voters (Angelucci and Vittori, 2022).

Table 3, finally, allows testing hypothesis 5. It examines whether the identity of the proponent has a different effect depending on whether the respondent is ideologically aligned with the policy proposals or not. Model 1 tests it, first, for the two policy proposals (economic and cultural) in line with a more left-wing agenda. There is a significant positive TPP by LRSP (left-right self-placement) interaction effect ($.14, p < 0.001$), which shows that the more a respondent identifies as right-wing, the more positive the effect of a TPP on policy acceptance ($-0.37 + 0.14 = -0.23$), thus confirming both H5a and H5b. In a nutshell, the more a respondent is ideologically de-aligned with the left-wing policy proposals, the greater the boost in policy acceptance brought by having a technocratic minister making the policy proposal. Fig. 3 (left-side) provides a visual representation: there is not a statistically significant difference between PPP and TPP in the left pole of the x axis, while the more respondents are inclined to the right the higher (and significant) the difference between PPP and TPP. Therefore, the results suggest there is no effect of TPP on policy acceptance for those who are ideologically inclined to support the issue, whereas there is a positive effect of TPP for those who are ideologically disinclined to the issue. In other words, it means that we do not observe an exogenous effect of technocracy on policy acceptance as there is not boost induced by having a TPP in situation of ideological congruence. The effect of technocracy is rather conditioned to being in situations of a policy proposal de-aligned with respondents' ideological preferences.

Model 2 replicates the analysis focusing on right-wing issues: the results are similar, but in the opposite direction. The interaction is highly significant and positive ($0.23, p < 0.001$), meaning that the more respondents identify as left-wing, the more positive the effect of a TPP on policy acceptance. Again Fig. 3 (right-side) provides a visual representation: there is not a statistically significant difference between PPP and TPP in the right pole of the x axis, while the more respondents are inclined to the left the higher (and significant) the difference between PPP and TPP. Thus, we find a further confirmation of H5a and H5b. Similarly to Model 1, we find that a TPP has no effect among those who are most likely to support the issue, but it has a positive effect among those who are less likely to support the issue. Overall, and on a more explorative level, there also seems to be a marginal difference when (radical) right-wing respondents evaluate left-wing policies proposed by TPP (Fig. 3, left-side) and left-wing respondents evaluating a right-wing policy (Fig. 3, right-side). Namely, left-wing discriminate slightly more between TPP and PPP when evaluating a right-wing policy, than right-wing respondent when evaluating a left-wing policy. It could indicate that the importance of the process, of who decides, would be higher for

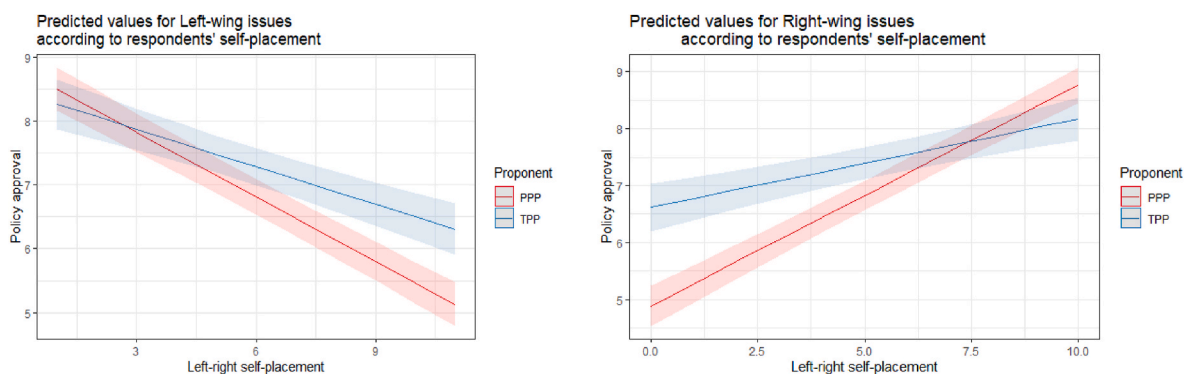


Fig. 3. Predicted values depending on Left- or Right-wing issues and the type of proponents (interaction plots).

left-wing citizens. Yet, further exploration of the differences would be needed in future studies as our data does not really allow to dig deeper into those differences.

Finally, we do not advance any hypothesis related to the valence issue in Model 3. However, due to the valence nature of the issue, we would expect no effect for ideological self-placement. The interaction is not significant, thus lending support to our first intuition.

7. Discussion

Recent studies have shown that European citizens are quite supportive of experts in government, while at the same time having less and less trust in partisan actors (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Chiru and Enyedi, 2021). In this context, we proposed a study that looked at the impact of technocratic ministers on policy support. There are contradictory expectations regarding how such non-elected, non-partisan expert ministers would affect policy acceptance. On the one hand, democratic theory leads us to expect that those ministers would decrease policy acceptance, as they are not mandated by citizens to act on their behalf. On the other hand, empirical research shows that, citizens are also increasingly critical of politicians, whom they perceive as not only distant and corrupted but also incapable of dealing with complex policy issues (Thomassen, 2015). In this scenario, technocrats could precisely be perceived as the appropriate cure for the crisis of democracy as they have stronger expertise in the domain in which they are normally appointed as ministers and they are independent from electoral politics (Alexiadou and Gunaydin, 2019).

In this study, we have confronted those two views on basis of a survey experiment fielded in Italy in the summer of 2021. We have examined whether having technocrats proposing policies provides a surplus of policy support compared to when party leaders propose the very same policies. We did so by running a survey experiment in Italy, where the Draghi government (2021–2022) offers a unique window of opportunity for delineating plausible policy scenarios with actual technocratic ministers and partisan politicians. Our results demonstrate that policy proposals made by technocrats are more appreciated than when they come from party leaders. Those findings seem to indicate that partisan politics, rather than boosting policy acceptance, decreases it. Another important finding is that the positive effect of having a technocratic proponent on policy acceptance is observed irrespective of the level of political trust of the respondent. This finding indicates that the appeal for technocratic ministers taking the lead in proposing new policies might go beyond what earlier studies had suggested (Bertsou and Pastorella, 2017; Chiru and Enyedi, 2021). Technocratic ministers are also, at least in Italy, appealing for citizens who are not completely politically disillusioned. Yet, as we will elaborate below, future research should investigate whether this finding would hold in more stable political contexts than Italy under the Draghi cabinet.

A second core finding in our study is that citizens are not policy-blind. Our study suggests that it would be too simplistic to assume that they prefer technocrats over politicians no matter what is at stake. Firstly, the type of policy matters: even though technocrats are preferred over all policies domains, respondents prefer technocrats more for valence issues compared to ideologically charged ones, meaning that for policies whose goals are shared among the overwhelming majority of the population, technocrats increase their acceptance. Or, vice-versa, that technocrats will have a harder time convincing citizens to accept proposals that are ideologically-charged. When it comes to such issues, technocrats appear to have more of an advantage in pushing decisions on economic policy issues, rather than on those pertaining to the new cultural cleavage. This means that technocrats provide a less relevant surplus of public support for issues in which “gut responses” are at stake, while when their expertise might be more valuable (e.g. for economic issues) they appear to boost policy acceptance. Again, further research is still needed to evaluate whether left-wing respondents care more about technocracy than right-wing respondents: our results tentatively

indicate that this is not the case, but other works might want to dig deeper into the relationship between process preferences and policy proposals mediated by ideology.

Furthermore, the second section of our analysis points to an interesting finding, which is that process (or input) matters more to those who disagree with the outcomes. Right-wing respondents appreciate more left-wing policies proposed by technocrats than by party leaders from the opposite pole, and the same reversely occurs for left-wing respondents. However, when respondents' ideology is in line with the direction of the policy, the difference disappears as shown by Fig. 3 (left- and right-side). This is an important point because, when the voters and the policy proponents are ideologically congruent, it makes no difference who proposes it. This finding is in line with the outcome-oriented analysis of trust in institutions (Arnesen, 2018): as long as you can get what you want from public policies, it does not matter whether it is proposed by a technocrat or by a partisan politician. Accordingly, technocracy does not boost policy acceptance when you expect a favourable outcome. By contrast, when policy proposals go against ideological preferences, having a technocrat pushing the new policy could boost support. The results hold for the valence issue we selected, as we find no significant distinction among respondents with diverse ideological orientation.

These findings have broader implications for the party government system. Studies on the increased polarization of contemporary democracies seem to indicate that feelings of dislike towards voters and parties from the opposite side are very high in many countries (Reiljan, 2020). It could have direct consequences for the capacity of government of making new policy measures acceptable for voters who are ideologically distant from them. Our findings seem to indicate that appointing technocratic ministers might help in such contexts. Technocratic ministers can boost policy acceptance of policies that citizens would ideologically dislike, without compromising the acceptance of those citizens who already support the policy. Those findings also connect to broader debates on political legitimacy. In a broader context of declining political legitimacy, scholarly research on what might generate legitimacy has burgeoned. And one of the findings has been that although legitimacy is primarily affected by the content of policy decisions, the process through which they are taken (so-called input legitimacy) also matters (Tyler, 1990; Brockner, 2002; Esaiasson, Gilljam and Persson, 2012; 2019; Arnesen and Peters, 2018; Beiser-McGrath, Huber, Bernauer and Koubi, 2021). Yet, those findings were mostly examining the perceived fairness of the decision-making process, or the impact of the involvement of citizens. Here we show that having technocratic ministers as policy proponent might also contribute to the public legitimacy of political decisions.

Such findings are especially important in the context of Italy that we have studied. The technocratic cabinet led by Mario Draghi was set up as an attempt to deal with the economic crisis Italy was facing. Earlier research had shown that technocratic ministers could indeed improve financial credibility on international markets (Alexiadou, Spaniel and Gunaydin, 2021). Our findings would seem to suggest that it could also be an efficient solution in terms of policy support. Nevertheless, those conclusions should also be read in the specific context of Italy, and with the Draghi technocratic cabinet in power during a pandemic crisis, an admittedly exceptional case, which nonetheless is becoming more and more part of the daily life of all citizens. Indeed, the technocratic ministers were collectively chosen by the key political parties and Prime Minister Draghi, as opposed to being imposed on citizens by supranational institutions.

Finally, the policy proposals were taken from the range of policy proposals discussed by the Draghi government and by the coalition partners, but none were very harsh policy proposals that would have a direct impact on the economic situations of most citizens. We have not examined support for proposals that would block salaries, cut down drastically all social benefits or impose a new tax to all citizens. For such policies, whether technocrats would induce higher policy support is less

clear. We also do not know whether our findings would apply in countries with less technocratic familiarity or where technocrats might have a less positive reputation than in Italy. In that sense, our study is only a first step in understanding whether technocrats could affect public support for policies, and therefore might boost political legitimacy. We hope to see in the coming years new research on more countries and with a wider range of policy proposals.

Data availability

Data and the replication materials will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102566>.

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