



Experts replacing governments? The socio-cultural and authoritarian roots of citizens' preferences for experts in government in 58 countries

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Accepted: 10 July 2024

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Abstract

Technocracy is seen as a solution to the political challenges of our time by an increasing number of citizens. Using survey data from the World Value Survey, this study confirms the existence of a positive inclination towards experts replacing politicians as policy-makers in both democratic and non-democratic countries. Confirming what we already knew about individual drivers, citizens with low political interest and trust appear to be more supportive of experts in government. Counter-intuitively, a preference for right-wing market capitalism does not affect attitudes towards experts in government. The novelty of this study is that an expert-led model of governance is particularly appealing to citizens who oppose immigration (social conservatism) and, above all, to those who favour social order and control over democracy (authoritarianism). The latter finding holds across continents, highlighting that support for experts in government has common roots among individuals living in very different contexts. Despite this common trend, the cross-continent analyses reveal important divergences from the pooled patterns for other individual-level drivers, calling for further exploration of contextual factors.

Keywords Experts · Expertise · Technocracy · World value survey · Governance · Government

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Introduction

From the aftermath of the 2008's economic crisis until the recent management of the COVID pandemic, the number of non-elected, independent experts appointed in governments has increased markedly (Vittori et al. 2023a). This has led several scholars to inquire how widespread technocratic governments and technocratic ministers are and the macro-level contextual factors behind the appointment of technocrats (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Alexiadou et al. 2021; Hallerberg and Wehner 2020; Kaplan 2017; McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014; Pilet et al. 2023; Vittori et al. 2023a, b). This trend has been also reflected in the renewed attention of scholars towards citizens' support for technocracy and the role of technocrats in different stages of decision-making process (Beiser-McGrath et al. 2021, Bertsou 2021, Bertsou and Caramani 2022, Fernández-Vázquez et al. 2023, Lavezzolo, et al. 2021 and 2022; Wratil and Pastorella 2018). Technocracy, in this regard, is defined as “a form of power in which decisions over the allocation of values are made by experts or technical elites based on their knowledge” (Caramani 2020, p. 3).¹ Contrary to politicians, who derive their legitimacy from elections (and, thus, accountability), experts derive their legitimacy from their expertise (Caramani 2017). That is why, it is crucial to understand what leads citizens to support experts in government: is it possible to identify common traits among citizens that explain why citizens prefer experts in government to replace their current decision-makers?

Several works have shown that in Europe and in the US, there is a generally positive inclination towards experts and that non-partisan expertise represents a quality that voters tend to reward when selecting candidates or evaluating ministers (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017; Heyne and Costa Lobo 2021; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Lavezzolo et al. 2022). This means that, although technocratic governments (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014) and technocratic ministers (Vittori et al. 2023b) are a minority within representative democracies, they are supported by relevant sectors of the public opinion. Typically, citizens who support experts replacing politicians are politically dissatisfied (Bertsou and Caramani 2022; Bertsou and Pastorella 2017; Chiru and Enyedi 2021; Lavezzolo et al. 2021), lean to the right of the political spectrum (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017), or report low interest in politics (Chiru and Enyedi 2021). Bickerton and Accetti (2017) have coined a new term, technopopulism, to define the mix of appeal to the people and the lure for expertise; it remains unclear to what extent authoritarian people, besides preferring strong leaders in government, would also prefer experts to replace politicians as decision-makers. From a theoretical standpoint, technocracy in its most extreme form is considered to be authoritarian (Caramani 2017), as it rejects accountability and, *ultima facie*, elections as a method of selecting policy-makers. Therefore, in addition to examine established theoretical mechanisms, our main contribution is to consider whether there is support for technocracy stemming from authoritarian citizens.

¹ In line with Caramani, technocracy refers to the idea that expertise prevails over partisanship and, thus, experts should have the power to make themselves political decisions. Independent bodies within representative systems, thus, are not regarded as a form of technocracy.



Most empirical evidence on technocratic attitudes is confined to Western countries. There is little evidence on the drivers of support for technocrats in other parts of the world. This is crucial, however, because technocrats are not a prerogative of the Western hemisphere. The aim of this study is therefore twofold. First, building on recent developments in the literature on technocratic attitudes, we aim to extend the comparative breadth of these findings by using the largest sample of countries ever considered to our knowledge. Second, we provide new insights into the relevance of authoritarian attitudes and political ideologies, distinguishing the socio-cultural from the economic dimensions of ideology. Analysing individual-level survey data from the World Value Survey (WVS), which has covered some 145,000 individuals in 58 countries over 30 years, we confirm the existence of a global positive bias towards an expert-led model of governance, and that this support comes from disaffected citizens (low interest and trust in politics). Furthermore, we find that it also comes from those who favour social order and control, and from who still hold conservative cultural views on immigration. Finally, we also find important differences across continents, which we detail in the discussion of our findings. We call for further research into contextual factors and meanings of the role of experts in government.

Framework of analysis and hypotheses

Following Lavezzolo et al. (2021, p. 1126), “[t]echnocracy, as a system of government, mode of making political decisions, form of representation or source of legitimacy of the political power, is premised on the advantages that experts supposedly have compared to elected party politicians”. It implies leaving (part of) decision-making to an elite of experts (the “technocrats”), whose legitimacy as policy-makers derives from their specialised scientific knowledge and competence, their allegedly neutral position with regard to political conflicts and parties (non-partisanship), as well as their ability to be efficient and deliver effective policies (Costa Pinto et al. 2018; Bertson and Caramani 2022). In contrast, politicians are legitimised by representing (a group of) citizens through elections and political organisations (parties). While governments are based on the accountability of elected officials to voters, technocracy focuses on individuals’ expertise to deliver policy outcomes in the most efficient way (Caramani 2017). In this paper, we are not interested in the subcomponents of technocratic attitudes (Bertson and Caramani 2022; Lavezzolo et al. 2021; Fernández-Vázquez et al. 2023) or in support for the role of experts at different stages of the decision-making process (Beiser-McGrath et al. 2021; Bertson 2021). Nor do we focus on supporting systems where technocratic institutions coexist with democratically elected ones, such as the European Union. Our aim is limited to analysing positive views of experts in government in different contexts. Although recent works have highlighted the increasing support for experts among citizens (Bertson and Pastorella 2017, Heyne and Costa Lobo 2021), especially during the recent pandemic (Heinzel and Leisel 2021, Lavezzolo et al. 2022), this literature on technocratic attitudes is still not consolidated (Lavezzolo et al. 2021). The study of technocratic attitudes stems from the analysis of stealth democracy



(Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Lavezzolo and Ramiro 2018; Van der Molen 2017; Webb 2013). In short, stealth democrats are critical of representative democracy, preferring that policy decisions to be made through expert-based governance arrangements that promote efficiency and effectiveness that parties and elected politicians cannot afford. Building on this existing stream of literature on technocracy, we formulate a first set of three hypotheses about the well-established determinants of support for experts in government. We then propose two 'new' hypotheses that, to the best of our knowledge, have only been partially addressed by previous studies. For generalisation purposes, the theoretical framework remains broad and focuses on the level of individual citizens. Our hypotheses do not take into account differences between countries and continents, which we will address below. Indeed, if the empirical analysis reveals contextual differences, we will try to provide theoretical explanations that could open avenues for further investigation. Finally, it is worth noting that these expectations do not assume any causal mechanism, but rather aim to look for correlational relationships between technocratic attitudes and various other sets of attitudes.

Testing consolidated trends in the study of preferences for experts in government

Support for experts in government has primarily been predicted by low interest in politics (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009, Bertsou and Pastorella 2017, Chiru and Enyedi 2021, pp. 20–21, Coffé and Michels 2014, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Scholars have found that uninterested citizens prefer to delegate policy-making to experts because they are less motivated to engage in politics and elections and less attached to representational mechanisms. In contrast, interested citizens support a democratic status quo, although they are not yet opposed to minor, consultative participatory reforms (Bedock and Pilet 2020; Del Rio et al. 2016; Pilet et al. 2020). Against this background, we test whether:

Hypothesis 1 The lower the interest in politics, the higher the support for experts in government.

Second, preferences for experts in government have been linked to a lack of trust in politics (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017; Chiru and Enyedi 2021; Lavezzolo et al. 2021). Although the analysis of post-materialist attitudes has shown that citizens' distrust is linked to a desire for greater involvement in politics (Norris 2011), the studies on stealth democracy show that distrust is positively correlated with a model of governance in which important decisions are left to experts (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Coffé and Michels 2014; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Webb 2013). Indeed, citizens who distrust the political system find in the expert-based form of government a heuristic shortcut through which decisions do not emerge from protracted bargaining between (conflictual) actors such as parties and politicians, but through a direct and straightforward application of the expertise of non-partisan experts. This is the so-called anti-politics dimension (Bertsou and Caramani 2022) of the analysis of technocratic attitudes. As the



literature on stealth democracy has highlighted (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Lavezzolo and Ramiro 2018), experts may be particularly valued by those with lower trust in political institutions for their ability to depoliticise the decision-making process and make it more 'objective' and 'non-partisan'. Since stealth democrats do not want to be involved in politics (because they are not interested and do not like it) and view *politique politicienne* with suspicion, they prefer to take power away from politicians and delegate it to experts. Against this background, we test whether:

Hypothesis 2 The lower the trust in politics, the higher the support for experts in government.

Third, the literature has also focused on the importance of ideology in shaping process preferences (Christensen and Von Schoultz 2019), particularly support for expert-led decision-making processes (Chiru and Enyedi 2021). In Europe and the US, left-leaning citizens have been found to be less supportive of stealth democracy (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Similarly, right-wing ideological self-placement (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017; Chiru and Enyedi 2021; Del Rio et al. 2016) or voting preferences (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017; Lavezzolo and Ramiro 2018; Heyne and Costa Lobo 2021) are associated with stronger technocratic preferences among citizens. With similar findings, Bertsou and Caramani (2020: 14) explain that “technocracy’s emphasis on efficiency and output, although in principle non-ideological, is better paired with economically right-wing ideology and neoliberalism than with left-wing ideology”. Moreover, beyond the Western context, technocrats in Latin America or Asia, whether appointed by left or right-wing governments, are often associated with economic liberalism and orthodox versions of free-market capitalism, and thus opposed to left-wing economic policies (Barrenechea and Dargent 2000, Dargent 2015; Khoo Boo et al. 2014). Therefore, left-leaning citizens may reject technocracy because they associate it with neoliberal reforms (Centeno and Silva 1998). Based on these elements, the expression of right-wing, conservative views on the economy or immigration should have a positive effect on support for technocracy. Most of the literature has so far not distinguished between economic ideology and the so-called GAL/TAN or integration-demarcation cleavage, which is considered orthogonal to the classical left–right ideology (Kriesi et al. 2008). The GAL-TAN dimension focuses on socio-cultural issues, namely green, alternative and libertarian (GAL) positions on the one hand and traditionalist, authoritarian and nationalist (TAN) positions on the other. In particular, the GAL-TAN dimension has been analysed in the European context as a distinct socio-cultural dimension emerging from the conflict over immigration, European integration and trade (Dassonneville et al. 2024). An exception is the recent work of Hibbing et al. (2021), which found that economic and social conservatism is negatively related to support for one type of expert (scientists and doctors) and positively related to other experts (business and religious leaders, military figures). In Europe, however, the evidence is mixed (Pilet et al. 2023). As we will see in more detail below, we will examine the both dimensions of political competition.



Hypothesis 3 (3.1) Culturally and (3.2) economically right-wing citizens support experts in government more than left-wing individuals.

Hypothesising new trends in the study of preferences for experts in government

In its extreme version, technocracy has been described as authoritarian (Caramani 2017, p. 64) because its basic principle denies the pluralism of our society, which parties and elected politicians are supposed to respond to and represent in political institutions. Indeed, technocracy relies on a predetermined common good that is not for political actors to decide or mediate. According to the analysis of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), most of the public are not interested in politics, have doubts about the ability of other people to deal with the complexity of politics, dislike conflict and believe that there should be a global consensus on political issues and goals. Because of this belief in consensus, citizens perceive disagreement and conflict in politics as evidence that specific interests have overtaken the general interest. They would therefore not oppose the delegation of decision-making power to experts. In this sense, it can be argued and expected that stealth democratic beliefs reflect individuals' authoritarian predispositions (Muhlberger 2018) or a fundamental orientation in favour of social control (over individual autonomy, as promoted by libertarians) (Stenner 2005). In this regard, individuals who believe that politics would be better without debate and compromise prefer experts in government over politicians (Chiru and Enyedi pp. 20–21, Webb 2013). While the literature has not directly tested the link between authoritarianism and support for experts (see for a partial exception Pilet et al. 2023), we hypothesise that this may arise from the fact that authoritarian individuals want a monolithic public will to guide action and non-conflicting elites who must debate and compromise (Stenner 2005). Another important characteristic is that they tend to perceive an ongoing threat to the social unity and uniformity of their ingroup (Hetherington and Weiler 2009), which makes them less likely to believe in a liberal form of democracy that promotes and protects diversity and dissent (Dunn 2020). They express support for strong leaders and military rule and reject some liberal democratic principles (Miller and Davis 2020). More generally, authoritarian citizens prefer low cognitive effort in a variety of contexts (Butler 2000). Thus, while an autocratic, dictatorial model may be difficult to imagine in certain democratic contexts, a more efficient solution that leaves decision-making to experts acting as leaders of last resort may sound promising to authoritarian citizens. As a result, people with authoritarian views are expected to be more supportive of experts in government. Our hypothesis is thus as follows:

Hypothesis 4 The stronger the authoritarian attitudes, the higher the support for experts in governments.

Finally, another issue that has not been addressed in the literature is the relationship between ideology, authoritarianism and support for experts. Compared to moderate right-wing authoritarians (RWAs), "extreme" RWAs have been found to be more ethnocentric, intolerant and conservative, with greater opposition to equality



and higher levels of traditionalism (Altemeyer 1998). Although still controversial in the field, most scholars acknowledge that a parallel exists on the left (Costello et al. 2022). Like RWAs, left-wing authoritarians (LWAs) share a core characterised by dogmatism, punitive attitudes towards dissent and a desire for strong authority figures (Manson 2020). However, unlike RWA, LWA mobilises these beliefs in the name of left-wing values (e.g. anti-racism, wealth redistribution). In general, LWA is negatively correlated with socio-cultural and economic conservatism (Van Hiel et al. 2006). One might therefore expect an interaction effect between ideology and authoritarianism in relation to support for experts as decision-makers: while right-wing citizens should be more inclined to support experts in government, their authoritarian attitudes, if present, should further increase support for a technocratic model. In this respect, it might be expected that right-wing citizens with authoritarian attitudes would be more supportive of a technocratic model of government than left-wing authoritarians.

Hypothesis 5 Right-wing authoritarian citizens support experts in governments more than left-wing authoritarians.

Data and methods

Data

To test our hypotheses, we compiled individual-level data from the five waves (from wave 3 to wave 7) of the WVS, which cover a time span ranging from 1995 to 2020. We included 58 countries (see Appendix 1 for the full list) in five different continents (North America, Latin America, Europe, Asia and Oceania), which were surveyed at least once in the four waves. The WVS uniquely allows to enlarge the empirical scope further than Europe and the US, and to also explore the attitudes of citizens living in geographical areas that have been less studied for their technocratic preferences, despite all having their own experience with experts in governments like in Latin America (Centeno and Silva 1998), Asia (Khoo Boo et al. 2014) or Oceania (Hall 2022). About 145.000 respondents are included in our dataset. We retrieved information from the WVS website measuring support for experts in government, the five main predictors we were interested in and a set of socio-demographic controls.

Variables' operationalisation

Our main dependent variable measures the preference for experts-led government: *Is having experts, not governments, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country a very good, good, bad, or very bad option?*² The main

² A summary table of all the questions and items used in this study are provided in Appendix 2.



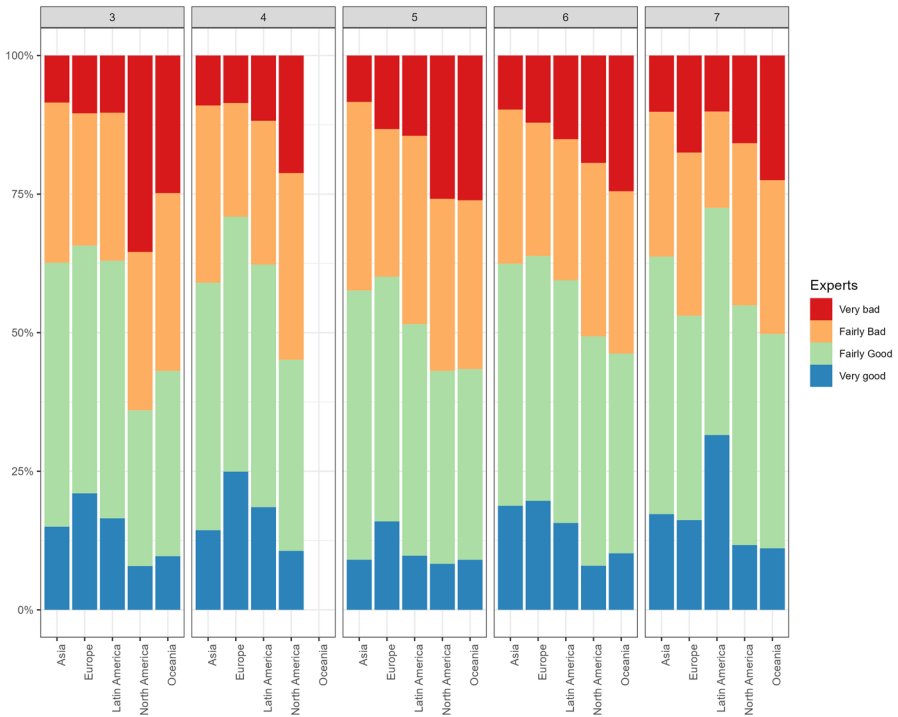


Fig. 1 Support for experts in government in different continents surveyed in Wave 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 of the World Value Survey. *Source* World Value Survey

advantage of this wording is that it captures the extent to which individuals prefer experts to any type of government: technically, it can be applied to different contexts as the word government does not specify the type of regime in place in a particular country. It also avoids social desirability, as it does not specify whether and how the government is elected. This question has some limitations that we acknowledge: (a) it considers experts as a monolithic group despite their great diversity (Caramani 2017; Rojon et al. 2023); (b) the question does not tap an important specification, namely that support for technocracy is issue and level dependent, i.e. people might prefer experts to politicians for a specific, technical issue or only at a certain level of government or still at a certain moment in the policy-making process (Bertsou 2021; Ganuza and Font 2020; Haesevoets et al 2024); (c) technocracy may have a different meaning in different contexts, as each country has its own experience with experts and technocrats in the political sphere and may give them a different role. However, we believe that such a formulation captures well a general orientation towards unelected experts exercising political power in national politics and that, with specific controls (such as the regime type of each country or a continent-based analysis), this question can be a useful tool for measuring preferences for the full or partial delegation of political power to experts. The geographical distribution in Fig. 1 shows that there is considerable support for experts in government. Almost two-thirds of our pooled sample have a positive attitude towards experts (60.6%, based on the sum



of fairly good and very good answers). This proportion remains fairly stable across waves and countries (see Table 1 in Appendix 3 for the distributions in the pooled sample of each wave), dismissing the idea of a growing presence of technocratic attitudes among individuals over time. However, it is worth noting that the peak in positive attitudes was reached in the last and most recent wave (64.3% in wave 7).

Regarding the individual-level predictors and the drivers of support, our first independent variable is political interest, which is measured via the question: *How interested would you say you are in politics?* Respondents were provided with a four-points scale going from “not at all interested” to “very interested”. This is a very classic way of measuring political interest, providing a subjective but robust unidimensional measure that can be tracked over time and across contexts. Moreover, existing evidence mitigates concerns about misreporting of political interest due to social desirability (Prior 2018).

The second dependent variable is institutional trust, measured as the level of trust in representative institutions (see Appendix 2 for the wording of the question). To operationalise trust, we calculated an additive index combining the three items related to government, parliament and political parties (Cronbach alpha = 0.8). Again, this is a fairly common way to measure political trust, and it is an accepted practice to construct trust indices by adding or averaging the level of trust that individuals have in a set of political institutions (Turper and Aarts 2017).

To test the third hypothesis, authoritarian predisposition is measured by a question that captures whether respondents believe that democracy is a suitable model of governance for maintaining social order. However, this question is worded slightly differently in waves 3 and 4 than in waves 5, 6 and 7. From Waves 5 to 7, we used the item measuring the level of agreement on the following statement “*The army takes over when government is incompetent*”. In Waves 3–4, we used a close question (“Democracies aren’t good at maintaining order”), for which the ordinal variable has four levels ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The two variables were then rescaled. The higher the score on this variable, the more authoritarian the respondent. We acknowledge that more comprehensive scales of authoritarianism have been developed in the WVS (with larger item sets), but unfortunately these have not been reproduced identically across waves. We have therefore opted for what we believe to be the best compromise: it is reasonable to assume that people who score high on these items have an authoritarian predisposition, as they show either a tendency towards military rule or a tendency to favour order at the expense of democracy. To control for the difference in the wording of the questions, we ran two separate models of our main model (shown in Fig. 2), one covering only Waves 3 and 4, and one covering the remaining waves. The results are reported in Appendix 7. As we will detail below, in both cases, the variable we labelled authoritarianism had the same direction and level of significance ($p < 0.001$) as in the main model, suggesting that our merging strategy was effective. However, the size of the coefficient is larger in the first two waves than in the remaining three waves.

In addition, we included questions related to the cultural and economic dimensions of the political competition. The first one measures cultural values via attitudes towards immigration: since opinions on immigration among citizens are well structured (Edo et al. 2019; Kustov et al. 2021), we deem it as the best proxy



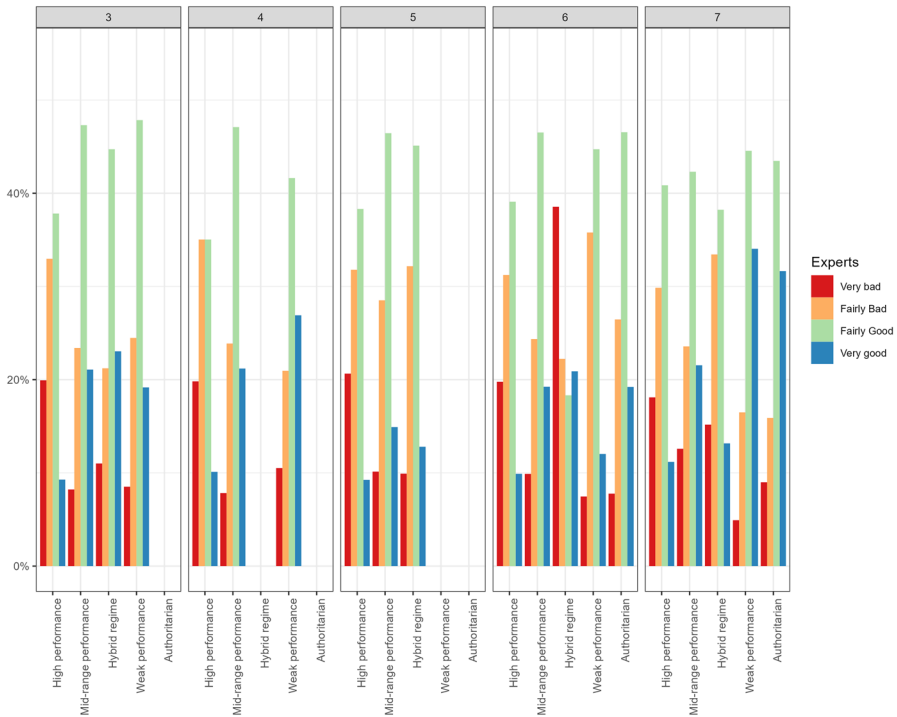


Fig. 2 Support for experts in government according to the regime of the countries in Wave 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 of the World Value Survey. The regimes' categorisation was taken from the Global State of Democracy Index

available. Compared to Wave 3,4,5 and 6, the question was formulated differently in the last wave (Wave 7). In the first waves, respondents were asked whether they agreed, disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed with the following statement: "When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to national people over immigrants". In the last wave, there were five levels from Agree strongly to Disagree strongly. We recoded this variable as a dummy, placing on the positive pole respondents who (strongly) agreed with the statement (right-wing) and on the other respondents who (strongly) disagreed or were neutral towards the issue (left-wing). On the other hand, the measurement of economic ideology is less controversial. The question revolves around equality. Respondents were asked where the place in a question with two opposite anchors ("*Incomes should be made more equal*" and "*We need larger income differences as incentive to individual effort*"). We used this variable as a continuous scale ranging from the left-wing to the right-wing pole. To ease the interpretability of the results, we opted for a log transformation of the continuous variables, while we maintained as indicated above categorical and dummy variables.

Along with these main independent variables, we included socio-demographic controls (age, gender, education, income), which have been found to affect



preferences for experts in government (Coffé and Michels 2014). Their descriptive statistics are available in Appendix 4. Furthermore, to deal with the lack of country-level insights in the field, we decided also to include two country-level controls, which are (a) the regime type and (b) the GDP growth. We believe that controlling for regime type is important because our sample includes countries with different levels of democratic institutionalisation and, in some cases, different regime types. Depending on these contextual differences, we might expect variation in individual-level support for experts in government, as institutionalised democratic regimes are on average less likely to favour the substitution of democratic norms for other decision-making processes (Wuttke et al. 2022). Moreover, the presence of experts in government can be interpreted differently depending on the political regime. In an institutionalised democracy, having experts in government might imply overcoming the representative system, whereas in authoritarian or hybrid regimes, it might imply overcoming non-democratic rule (with another potentially non-democratic rule).

We have categorised the regime of each country in each wave, following the data provided by the Global State of Democracy Index (GSoDI). The GSoDI provides a categorisation based on five categories (authoritarian regime, hybrid regime, weak/low performance democratic regime, medium performance democratic regime, high performance democratic regime). We have taken the corresponding category for each country for the year of the survey. Because of the importance of this variable and the different meanings that our dependent variable might take in different contexts, especially in democratic and non-democratic contexts, we repeat the main analyses without both authoritarian and hybrid regimes to check that the results are consistent. In Fig. 2, we report support for experts in government by regime type in the different waves. We can see that there is a difference between high performing democracies and other regimes, with the latter being on average more inclined to support experts in government. As a result, our modelling strategy takes into account the different regime types to control for the heterogeneity that results from living in countries with different political regimes.

As a further contextual-level control, we included the economic performance of the country, measured by a proxy for GDP growth in the year preceding the survey in each country. Data about GDP are taken from the World Bank. We deem this variable as important because the capability of a specific regime to deliver in terms of economic outputs might indeed be transferred at the individual level, making citizens more confident with the status quo and less prone to modify it in favour of experts.

Modelling strategy

In order to account for similarities and differences across countries and waves, our modelling strategy was twofold. On the one hand, the main model is to look for general trends within the pooled sample. It reports the results of cross-sectional ordinary least squares multilevel analyses where respondents are nested within countries and waves. It is assumed that respondents living in the same countries are more



similar to respondents living in other countries, while respondents surveyed in the same wave are more similar to respondents surveyed in other waves. However, not all 58 countries are surveyed in all waves. Therefore, we could not rely on a repeated time series, which would have provided a more fine-grained analysis by considering not only the two levels of analysis but also the country*year combination (Schmidt-Catran and Fairbrother 2016). In our general model, the baseline analysis includes the three main independent variables (political interest, institutional trust, authoritarian predispositions, economic and cultural ideologies) and all individual-level controls (age, gender, education, income), as well as country-level controls (regime type and economic performance). We then include two interaction terms in the model to test the final hypothesis (HP5) on right-wing and left-wing authoritarianism. We use the R package "lme4" to run the regressions.

As one of our aims is to explore whether the individual-level predictors of preferences for government experts are consistent across different world regions, we construct region-specific models that attempt to identify the extent to which the general trends observed for the pooled sample hold when we divide the sample by geographical continent. They provide the results of a subsample analysis in which the general model is replicated specifically for each continent. As the number of countries studied per continent is too small (except for Europe), we opt to include country fixed effects in these area-specific models instead of a multilevel regression. As the use of country-level fixed effects is not sufficient given that some countries appear more often than others in the different waves, we introduce another fixed effect at the level of survey waves. Thus, our models are cross-sectional ordinary least squares regressions with time and country fixed effects, as well as the two country-level controls mentioned above (regime type and economic performance). We also include a replication of the multilevel model described above with this double fixed-effects model specification to confirm the robustness of our results.

Results

Baseline model (pooled sample)

The results of the baseline analysis for the pooled sample are shown in Fig. 3. The plot shows the effects of our main predictors (the full model specification is available in Appendix 5). In terms of our hypotheses, it shows that the first two expectations related to the classical explanation of expert support in the literature find empirical support. The coefficients and their statistical significance suggest that (1) the lower the political interest, (2) the lower the trust in representative institutions, the more likely individuals are to express support for experts instead of governments as the main decision-makers. It should be noted, however, that in the pooled model, the effect of interest is almost twice as large as the effect of trust.

A unit of increase of the political interest change corresponds to a $\beta = -0.055$ ($p < 0.001$) decrease in the support for technocracy. As suggested in the literature, this may reflect the fact that people with low levels of interest are less attached to government and may see experts as an interesting delegative solution because it



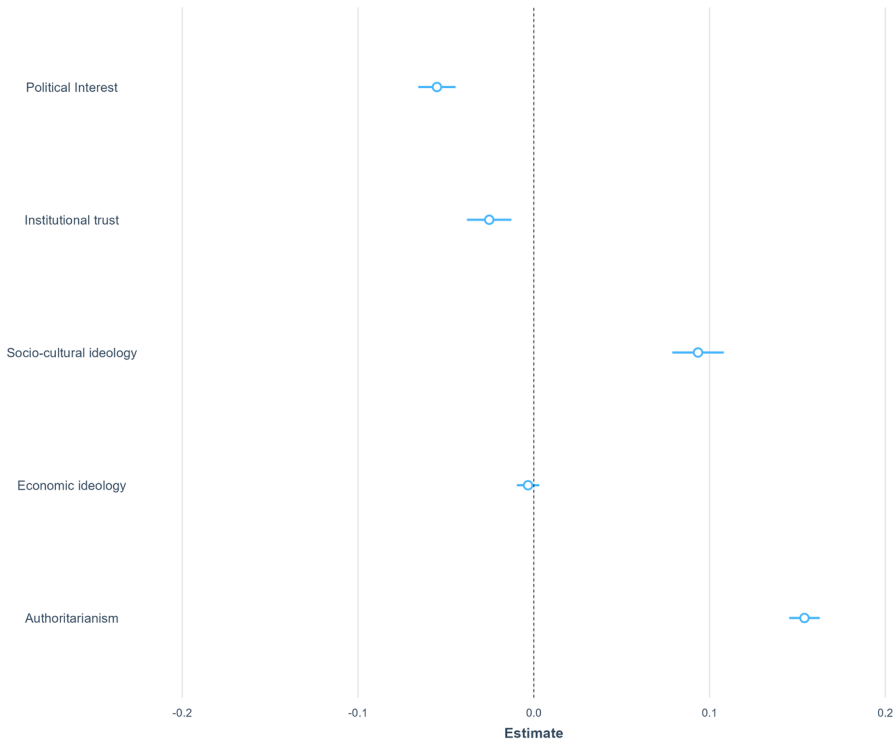


Fig. 3 Main determinants (political interest, institutional trust, socio-cultural ideology, economic ideology, authoritarianism) of support for experts in government. Fully specified model available in the Appendix 5, Model 1—Baseline

would require less of their involvement in something they find unattractive (whether because it is too complex or simply because they do not care).

Second, the model shows a statistically significant, albeit small, relationship between institutional trust and technocratic attitudes. This is consistent with the literature on technocratic attitudes and process preferences, which shows that those who report less trust in representative institutions favour expert-based governance (e.g. Bertou and Caramani 2022). All in all, our baseline model confirms that experts in government seem to be particularly attractive to those citizens who are politically disaffected and especially less active in electoral politics.

Our third hypothesis tested a consolidated finding on the impact of economic ideology (3.1) and a less explored one on the role of post-materialist social conservatism (3.2). Our model shows and confirms that right-wing citizens are more likely to support experts in government, but only in the post-materialist non-economic dimension of political competition. In contrast, the relationship between the economic right and the preference for experts to replace governments is not statistically significant (and even slightly negative). These findings call into question the natural affinity between technocracy in general and right-wing economic



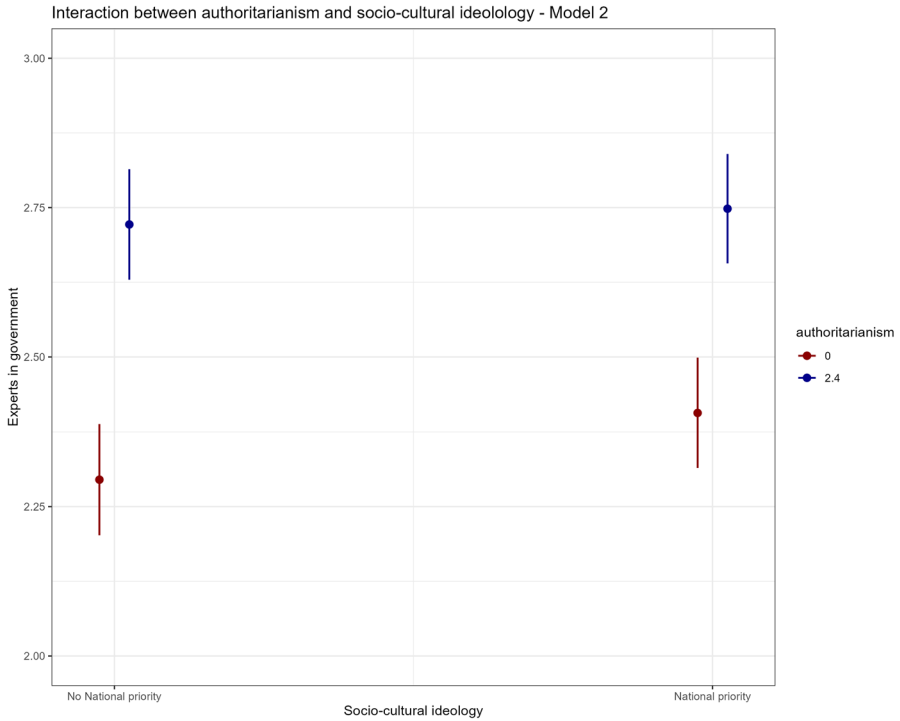


Fig. 4 Support for experts in government according to the interaction between authoritarian attitudes and the socio-cultural ideology. Fully specified model available in the Appendix 5, Model 2—Cult ideology*Authoritarianism

ideologies such as neoliberalism, at least at the citizen level. We can tentatively interpret the right-wing socio-cultural roots of support for experts in two ways: it might mean that socio-cultural differences better reflect the classical left–right division and, consequently, that this conflict has been absorbed into the left–right dimension (Knutson 2018). However, it could also mean that experts are seen as better able to protect the national community from global issues such as immigration by right-wing citizens.

The relatively new hypotheses on authoritarianism are partly confirmed: our models show that authoritarian dispositions lead to a higher demand for experts in government, and that this effect is three times larger than political interest. People who think that democracies are not good at maintaining social order, and who report a basic psychological orientation towards social control, turn out to be more supportive of a technocratic model of governance.

Of the two interactions introduced in the model to test the fifth hypothesis, only the term combining socio-cultural ideology and authoritarianism is statistically significant. However, looking at Fig. 4, we do not find any interaction effect. What we see is that people with high authoritarian attitudes (2.4) do not change their support for experts, regardless of their ideology. Only citizens with low



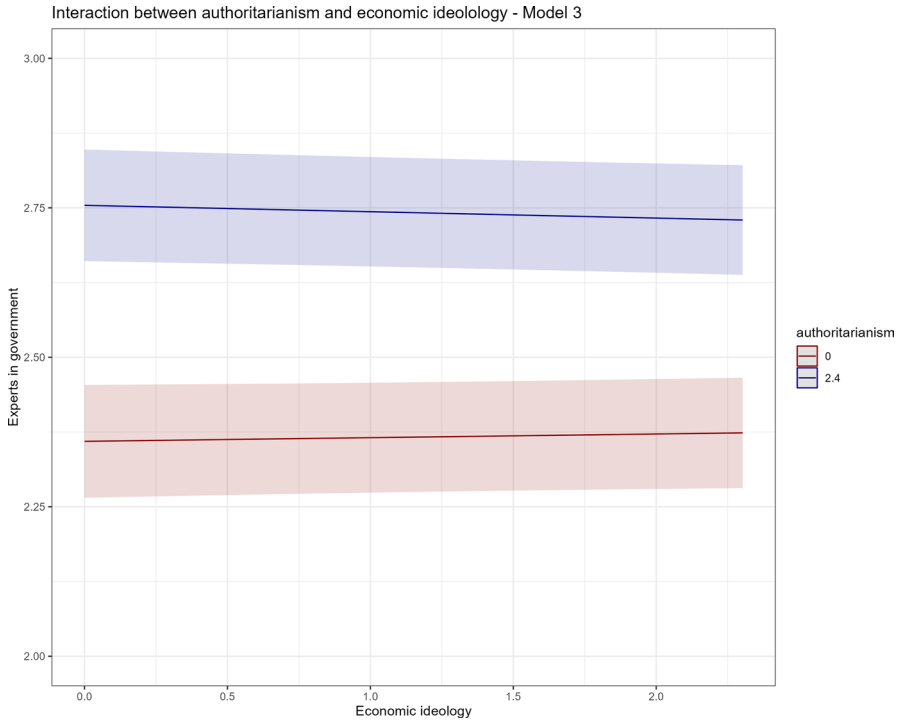


Fig. 5 Support for experts in government according to the interaction between authoritarian attitudes and the economic ideology. Fully specified model available in the Appendix 5, Model 3—Eco ideology*Authoritarianism

authoritarian attitudes increase their support for experts if they are socially conservative, as we already highlighted in the main model. Moreover, as the following interaction plot (Fig. 5) shows, authoritarian attitudes do not influence economic ideology in shaping support for experts. This result implies that H5 is not supported, as both left- and right-wing authoritarians seem to support experts as decision-makers to the same extent. Overall, it is authoritarianism alone that better explains support for experts, supporting the theory linking technocracy (in its extreme version) and authoritarian rule (Caramani 2017).

Continent-specific models

To test the robustness of the results, we re-ran our baseline model using a different modelling strategy (as specified in the Data and methods section), this time splitting countries by continent. We also replicated the analysis using a different technique for the pooled sample to test whether the comparison made in the previous analysis and in this section is methodologically consistent (Fig. 6). The fully specified models are presented in Appendix 6. Overall, the results are robust to the findings of the previous section, with some nuances. First, and most importantly, authoritarianism



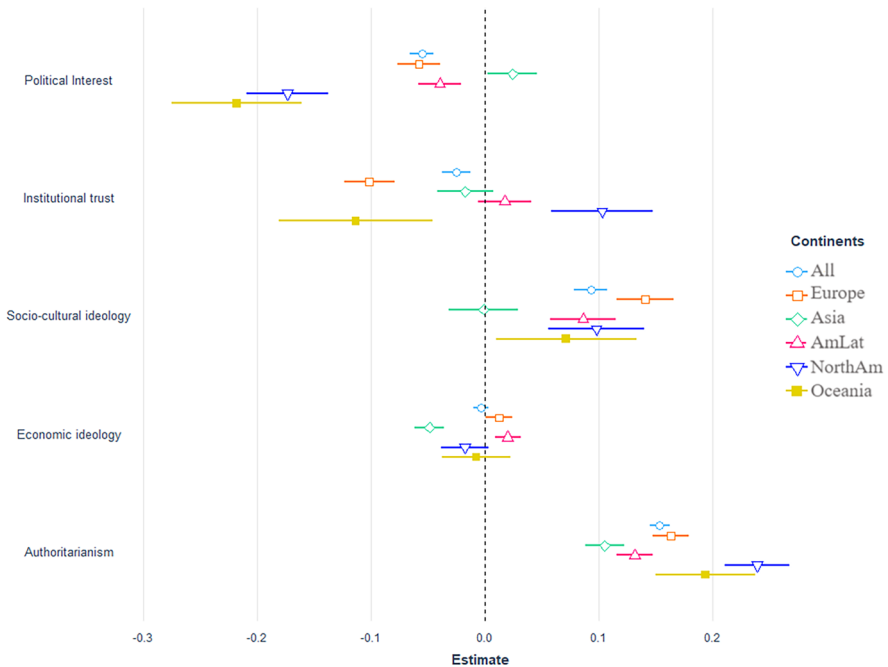


Fig. 6 Main determinants (political interest, institutional trust, socio-cultural ideology, economic ideology, authoritarianism) of support for experts in government in each continent under analysis. Fully specified models are available in the Appendix 6

is positively correlated across the board. This seems to indicate that the relationship between authoritarian traits and technocratic support is relatively unaffected by contextual factors. However, the magnitude of the effect appears to be stronger in North America, particularly in the US, where authoritarianism is strongly associated with the support for experts in power, as suggested by previous studies (Hibbing et al. 2021). The effect of political interest on support for experts also holds across almost all country groups, except in Asia, where, contrary to our expectations, the more interested citizens are slightly more supportive of experts in government (while the opposite is true in other areas). The relationship with post-materialist non-economic right-wing ideology is also supported for almost all groups of countries, except (again) Asia, where there is no significant relationship. Overall, our findings on political interest and social conservatism are confirmed for people living in all the different geographical areas, except for the Asian countries.

The subsample analysis provides more important nuances when it comes to institutional trust and economic ideology. On the one hand, the results show that the negative effect of trust on individual preferences for government experts in the pooled model is mainly driven by people living in European and Oceanian countries (and to a lesser extent in Asia, but the coefficient is not statistically significant in the latter case). The pattern is different for those living in countries in the Americas,



both North and Latin America: here, institutional trust is positively correlated with support for experts in government, with a strong significant effect for North American countries. This is counterintuitive and contradicts the findings in the field of stealth democracy. On the other hand, when we look at the effects of the economic dimension of competition, we see scattered patterns: left and right orientations pull in different directions in different areas. In Europe and, more importantly, in Latin America, economically right-wing citizens are more likely to have a positive view of experts replacing governments, a finding that is fully consistent with the literature (Bertsou and Pastorella 2017, Chiru and Enyedi 2021 for the European case; Barrenechea and Dargent 2020, Dargent 2015 for Latin America). The relationship is reversed in Asia, where left-leaning respondents report a higher propensity for experts in government. In Oceania and North America, the relationship is in the same direction as in Asia, but the coefficients are not statistically significant.

Our analysis at the continental level confirms the link between authoritarianism, political interest, social conservatism and support for experts. Nevertheless, the results show that Asia is an exception compared to all other continents. Further research would be needed to disentangle the reasons for this. Moreover, another divergent pattern in our analysis by continent relates to the negative role of trust, which is driven by only two areas (Europe and Oceania), while we find a positive relationship in North America. The latter seems to contrast sharply with existing findings in these countries as reported in the literature on stealth democrats (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Hibbing et al. 2021). Moreover, all the countries in these three world regions are democracies (with different levels of institutionalisation), which calls for further research that examines the perceptions of experts, their role in policy-making, and the experience of technocracy in each country in order to disentangle these somewhat surprising results. Our data seem to suggest that there are other contextual factors within democratic countries that are worth exploring, but this is beyond the scope of this paper and calls for further research.

Discussion: can experts change the status quo?

This study has highlighted regular patterns in preferences for experts in government. We wanted to measure support for experts in government, so we took stock of a dataset from the World Value Survey. First, support for experts in government is widespread. A majority of the population surveyed support the idea that independent experts could play a greater role in politics. We believe this is a crucial finding because it shows the extent to which experts are preferred to traditional politicians, regardless of the political regime in which citizens live. Second, our results, which aim to confirm what we already know about the reasons why citizens value experts in government, are consistent with the previous literature. We agree with the existing literature that politically disaffected citizens (low interest and trust in politics) are more likely to support experts in government. However, our study also adds important factors to the picture. Contrary to the expectations derived from the literature emphasising the proximity between technocracy and neoliberalism, our results challenge the idea that experts are preferred by neoliberal-oriented citizens when authoritarian attitudes are



controlled for. Instead, we show that in both democratic and non-democratic regimes, support for experts can be better explained by looking at socio-cultural political orientations (social conservatism is a stronger predictor than economic conservatism). Moreover, perhaps the most robust and interesting finding is that authoritarianism turns out to be an extremely powerful explanatory variable in our analysis. Our results show that authoritarian attitudes are better at explaining the support for experts than classical ideological positions, thus indirectly contributing to the literature reflecting on the authoritarian nature of technocratic governance. Thus, we caution other scholars working on this or similar topics to control for authoritarianism when examining technocratic preferences in both democratic and non-democratic regimes.

However, continent-specific analyses show that the general trends also have some specificities that need to be taken into account. In North America, experts are viewed more positively by citizens who trust representative institutions. This finding deserves more attention as it partially undermines the US-based theory of stealth democracy. Another direction to explore is that economic attitudes still matter for three continents: Asia, where economically left-wing citizens are more supportive of experts (and which appears as an overall deviant case: no effect of cultural ideology and a positive effect of political interest), and Latin America and Europe, where we find the expected link between right-wing economic values and technocratic preferences. In the former case, the link between authoritarian governments and the appointment of technocratic figures to promote neoliberal reforms may have influenced the experts' overall assessment. For these three groups of countries, the results deserve to be interpreted more thoroughly in the light of the heuristic value of the left–right schema, as well as taking into account the politicisation of experts in the political regimes. Although some research has now applied the concept of left and right outside Europe (Jou 2010; Wiesehomeier and Doyle 2012), we are cautious about making comparisons across continents. Further research is also needed to capture alternative contextual-level factors that may influence support for experts, such as previous exposure to technocratic governments or technocratic ministers. Moreover, despite our individual-level analysis, we acknowledge that further research is needed to disentangle the causal mechanism between individual-level variables and geographical contexts. We have addressed this issue by including regime and economic variables, but other indicators could be used in the future studies. What we found is that citizens living in countries that are or have been under authoritarian rule are more positive towards experts than those living in countries with higher democratic standards. We were not able to explore this aspect further, but it would certainly require some follow-up. For example, is the effect of mistrust magnified in these countries where democratic performance is weaker and where citizens might therefore be less trusting of their institutions? Is support for experts in government different for authoritarians living in autocratic regimes compared to those living in democratic countries? Our results might suggest a positive answer, but more research would be needed to be sure. In conclusion, we believe that explaining the preference for an expert-led model of governance in different contexts through the use of a common framework is of some interest to scholars of democratic theory. Indeed, such a preference reflects a broadly shared conception of politics that involves lower levels of citizen participation in the political sphere, weakened citizen control over policy and, more generally, a process of depoliticisation of policy-making.



This particular conception of how politics should work is, in theory, particularly attractive to any citizen who is attracted by authoritarian values. It is therefore not surprising to find empirically that authoritarian values increase support for experts in government, regardless of the political context in which citizens live. Although our goal was to focus on the individual-level determinants of support for experts, we believe that this paper also contributes to the discussion of theories of democracy: how people value and articulate different models of democracy, including technocracy, is crucial not only for understanding the attraction of experts per se, but also for assessing support for the classical conception of democracy.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-024-00357-3>.

Funding This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 773023). Replication materials are available here: <https://osf.io/hn9vm/>.

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