Boston Review: What's Wrong With Technocracy?

Description

This article dances around the concepts of Technocracy but misses the mark by calling it a "utopian proposal for government". In fact, Technocracy called for an end to government altogether, to be replaced with an organizational chart of Technocrats who would summarily make decisions for the entire economic system. It also abolished the price-based concept and replaced it with a resource-based economic system using energy for accounting instead of money. ? TN Editor

The word "technocracy" has been around for a century, but as a term of political derision it has flourished since the global financial crisis of 2008, especially in the context of the European Union's austerity-driven response to recession. Critics have alleged, in particular, that EU policy was overdetermined by unelected experts—especially those within the European Central Bank, whose positions insulated them from democratic accountability. The Occupy Wall Street movement of the early 2010s gave voice to similar outrage in the United States.

In hindsight, these debates now register as early flashpoints in a twenty-first-century political showdown over the relationship between experts and citizens—what political scientist Archon Fung has called the rise of "wide-aperture, low-deference democracy." The signs of that showdown are everywhere. Since the COVID-19 pandemic plunged the world into a series of interlocking crises, public health agencies like the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have been accused of mismanagement, miscommunication, and even outright deception, while economic institutions like the Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank have exercised wide discretionary power over the path of recovery. Whatever one makes of the details of these debates, it is undeniable that democratic citizens in many nations find themselves in a position of dependence and distrust, reliant on technocratic institutions but lacking in meaningful mechanisms of oversight and accountability. Technocracy cannot be dismissed as a mere specter of the paranoid populist imagination.

At the same time, the concept of technocracy itself remains poorly defined, and arguments against it lack a firm, widely shared normative foundation. Critics have many targets, and it is not always clear exactly on what grounds we are supposed to find those targets objectionable. One reason for this situation may be that technocracy has rarely been a central concern for democratic theory, despite the efforts

of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and a few of his fellow travelers. Even among those with democratic sympathies, technocracy may seem a less pressing target than oligarchy, authoritarianism, or "minoritarianism."

In fact, plenty find the technocratic ideal desirable, or at least acceptable. Liberal and progressive intellectuals have often embraced technocratic and meritocratic institutions, especially in the face of "populist" insurgency. Why *not* leave decisions to those who are most competent to make them? Recent provocative arguments for political meritocracy and even epistocracy have put (lowercase) democrats on the defensive. Even some who demure from the exclusionary tone of these arguments look favorably on the depoliticization of policy decisions so that the cooler logic of utilitarianism may prevail.

But those who care about good policy, no less than those who care about deep democracy or public citizenship, should hesitate to take the technocrat's bait. Even if technocracy is not the most dire or imminent threat to democracy, its intersections with elite domination and minoritarian rule merit serious scrutiny. Resolving these debates requires getting clear about precisely what technocracy means—and how, why, and under what conditions it poses a problem for democracy. A range of scholarly work over the last few years helps to clarify these stakes and offers valuable resources for imagining what a democratic opposition to technocracy should look like.

The Concept of Technocracy

What exactly are we talking about when we talk about technocracy? Though deployed as a term of criticism today, the idea traces its origins to a utopian proposal for government. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Enlightenment thinkers such as Nicolas de Condorcet and utopian socialists such as St. Simon and Auguste Comte anticipated a predictive science of society that would allow for the perfection of government as a rational system of administration. The idea of surpassing politics with technical-scientific rationality such that the "the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things" is often associated with St. Simon, but the originator of the phrase, in fact, was German philosopher (and frequent coauthor of Karl Marx) Friedrich Engels, who believed that the communist state would be an overseer of production rather than a referee of political conflicts. It is in this context that Engels famously anticipates the "withering away" of the state form itself.

In the twentieth century, proposals for government by engineers were advanced by intellectuals such as Thorstein Veblen in the United States and Walter Rathenau in Germany, giving rise to a short-lived technocracy movement that proposed government by experts as a solution to the economic problems of the Depression Era. As a term, "technocracy" did not have much staying power, but the concept of government by experts proved influential. In the United States, in particular, technocracy was alternately bolstered and contested by Progressive Era intellectuals and policymakers. While the ends of Progressive reformers tended to be populist and egalitarian, they split on whether the means should be technocratic or democratic, as evidenced by the famous debate between journalist Walter Lippmann and philosopher John Dewey.

In Lippmann's "realist" view, ordinary citizens were helplessly, hopelessly constrained by the narrowness of their perspectives and interests and therefore incapable of self-government. But experts and elites, he maintained, could still deliver the goods that people want from their governments if

empowered to direct policy on the basis of social scientific knowledge. Dewey, while accepting much of Lippmann's account at the descriptive level, believed that more public discussion and decision-making—essentially more democracy—was the mechanism by which citizens could educate and organize themselves. Arguably it was Lippmann's vision that prevailed in the early twentieth century, as top-down approaches to governance predominated in the New Deal era. In his book *Democracy Against Domination* (2016), legal scholar Sabeel K. Rahman explains that the New Deal pursued progressive ends through a managerialist paradigm of economic governance wherein technocratic expertise was deployed toward the end of economic optimization.

By the middle of the twentieth century, a dystopian counterpoint to progressive or socialist visions of technocracy emerged, emphasizing the dehumanizing character of a society based on technical control. The classic works in this genre—from Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society* (1964) to Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), and Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952)—tend to be tinged with existential despair about a revaluation of values and a civilizational malaise in which humanity is dominated by technology, technique, and technical rationality. In this line of argument, technocracy is "not simply a power structure" but "the expression of a grand cultural imperative," as Roszak put it.

Such arguments may help us to understand what is at stake in the conflict between technocracy and democracy as abstract paradigms, but they are less helpful in identifying technocracy at the level of institutions. Closer to the mark is the concern among democratic theorists that a technological society, by virtue of its complexity, makes specialized knowledge a necessity in a way that justifies the exclusion of the average citizen and thus challenges the classical vision of citizenship based on practical judgment. Among the classic theories, these concerns are less like Ellul's or Marcuse's than that of French political scientist Jean Meynaud, who argues in *Technocracy* (1969) that the idea signifies "the rise to power of those who possess technical knowledge or ability, to the detriment of the traditional type of politician." This brings us closer to the concept of technocracy as it has been discussed since the 1990s, which has to do with the role of an expert class whose neutral or instrumental policy designs supplant the political discussion of values among citizens. Sociologist Elizabeth Popp Berman, among other contemporary analysts, extends this concern by arguing that both Republican and Democratic policymakers have naturalized an approach to economic policy that takes for granted the importance of efficiency while marginalizing competing concerns such as fairness, justice, and equality.

While the "classical" or "utopian" concept of technocracy entailed the direct rule of experts, technocracy as it has actually existed is often "formally respectful of democratic values and institutions," as Claudio Radaelli has observed. Much empirical work on technocracy has been guided by Miguel Centeno's definition: "the administrative and political domination of society by a state elite and allied institutions that seek to impose a single, exclusive policy paradigm based on the application of instrumentally rational techniques." Studies of technocracy in Latin America, for example, have described technocrats as an autonomous class capable of advancing their interests even against considerable opposition from democratically elected politicians. Technocracy in this sense is distributed throughout the executive branch of government as well as non-governmental institutions that assist technocrats in developing, advocating, and executing policies.

Others might prefer a narrower definition of technocracy that is easier to distinguish from democracy. Duncan McDonnell and Marco Valbruzzi, for instance, offer a typology in which "fully technocratic" or

"technocrat-led" governments empower experts appointed from outside the party-political apparatus. Four of the European regimes they identify—in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Greece, and Italy—all saw technocrats appointed in response to the global financial crisis. Yet the EU and U.S. policy responses to the crisis have both been characterized as technocratic despite the fact that experts did not govern or "rule" directly in the vast majority of instances. (One notable U.S. exception occurred in Detroit.) Defining technocracy as a distinctive regime type does not do justice to the full scope of technocratic politics.

Closer to the mark is what Christopher Bickerton and Carlo Accetti have identified as the "call for the transfer of political power to actors and institutions drawing legitimacy from their technical competence and administrative expertise." Equally important is where this political power is being transferred *from*: elected officials and the public that empowers them. The justification for technocracy is typically that experts will make better decisions than the public or its representatives—and that they will make the best decisions when they are several steps removed from the political pressures they generate. Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca contends along these lines that "technocracy can be characterized as political decision making by nonelected officials who are appointed because of their technical expertise. . . . The core idea of technocracy is that political decision-making is 'depoliticized' for efficiency reasons and insulated from the democratic process."

Putting all this together, technocracy might best be construed as ensembles of actors and institutions, typically but not always national or supra-national, that concentrate power among unelected experts and make binding decisions on the basis of expertise, as opposed to offering merely advisory input. Technocratic institutions of this kind are distributed throughout state bureaucracies, where they advance policy on economics, national security, military, immigration, education, environment, and much else besides. From this perspective, it is not important that we reach a conclusion about whether a given political system, writ large, is technocratic or democratic; most display aspects of both. Instead of seeking to identify a vanishing point or bright line at which a democracy "becomes" a technocracy, we should focus on identifying illegitimate or undesirable manifestations of technocracy—those that preempt, exclude, or otherwise diminish democratic decision-making capacities.

Examples abound of such *technocratic domination*. Many case studies on technocracy in the twentieth century have focused on development policy, including public health, infrastructure, and especially fiscal policy—areas where experts have not only the broad autonomy that characterizes technocracy, but also, when empowered by national or supra-national institutions, some ability to force the hands of elected politicians by offering or withholding funds or overriding local institutions. One of the key findings in this literature is that technocrats may present and perhaps understand their projects as apolitical but they nonetheless engage in political maneuvering to expand their influence and protect their autonomy. Indeed they often excel at this aspect of their work even as the substantive aims of their policies fail or backfire. James Ferguson, for example, demonstrates in a classic study that the World Bank's development projects in Lesotho expanded the state bureaucracy without helping the poor, while Eve Buckley's recent work on Brazilian development policy shows that technocrats neglected political questions of equity and distribution in order to maintain favor with governing elites. In both instances, the promise of "solving" poverty without political confrontation led to the entrenchment of political and economic inequalities.

While such cases present some of the most striking instances of technocratic domination (and frequently of technocratic failure), this problem is hardly confined to the developing world, of course.

Economic policy in the United States and the EU is a case in point. In his recent book *Unelected Power: The Quest for Legitimacy in Central Banking and the Regulatory State* (2018), Paul Tucker calls central banks such as the European Central Bank and the U.S. Federal Reserve the "epitome of technocratic power." And [recent](#) scholarship at the intersection of history and political economy has clarified the intellectual and institutional trajectory that led us here. In both its initial interwar formulation and its more recent neoliberal articulations, the doctrine of central bank independence has justified a politics of "technocratic exceptionalism," as Jacqueline Best has put it, that suspends and contains ordinary democratic politics in order to impose "discipline" on the state and circumscribe the distributive claims of citizens.

Rahman has made similar arguments concerning U.S. economic policy. He has characterized the Obama administration's response to the 2008 financial crisis, for example, as a product of "managerialist" philosophy that emphasizes the need for regulatory institutions that are "centralized, expert-led, and politically insulated, free to make policy on the basis of morally neutral scientific knowledge." Elsewhere, he contends that the Dodd-Frank Bill—the centerpiece of the Obama administration's reform efforts—exhibits a "technocratic impulse," based on its architects' view that good governance is best pursued by containing political pressures and securing expert autonomy. At exactly the juncture where more responsive and transparent economic policy was needed, Rahman argues, the executive and legislative branches both acted largely to insulate decision-making from public pressure.

More broadly still, both the United States and the EU delegate a profound level of decision-making power to administrative agencies that receive little meaningful oversight from either the public or elected officials—not only central banks but institutions like the CDC, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Food and Drug Administration. Scrutinizing the technocratic nature of these institutions may seem risky at a time when the U.S. right is mounting an all-out assault on the administrative state. But democratic criticisms of technocracy do not entail viewing all forms of bureaucracy as innately malign or illegitimate. Instead, they raise questions about the chains of accountability that bind its actions to the public—and what democratic commitments tell us about how these institutional forms may need to be reformed.

POSTED BY: MATTHEW COLE

Category

1. Crime-Justice-Terrorism-Corruption
2. Main
3. NWO-Deep State-Dictatorship-Tyrrany
4. Science-Tech-AI-Medical & Gen. Research

Date Created
10/06/2022