From Crisis to Technocracy: Economic Pressure, Institutional Factors, and the Rise of Non-Partisan Governance in the Eurozone (2006-2015)

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between economic crises, institutional factors, and technocratic appointments in European governments during the 2006-2015 period, with a specific focus on the European sovereign debt crisis (2010-2015). Using data from twelve Eurozone member states, the study demonstrates that countries most severely affected by the crisis—Greece, Italy, and Portugal—were the only ones to resort to technocratic appointments between 2011 and 2015. The analysis operationalises technocratic appointments as fully technocratic governments, technocrat-led governments, or technocratic ministers of finance. Through regression analysis, the study reveals that both general government gross debt and legislative fractionalisation serve as predictors for technocratic appointments, with gross debt showing a stronger impact. The findings confirm existing literature suggesting governments tend to appoint non-partisan, expert ministers during severe economic crises, potentially as a strategy to dilute political responsibility while maintaining governmental effectiveness. This research contributes to understanding how economic pressures reshape political institutions and decision-making during crisis periods.

Keywords: Technocracy; European Sovereign Debt Crisis; Eurozone; Government Formation; Legislative Fractionalisation; Economic Crisis; Technocratic Ministers; Political Responsibility; Government Debt; Economic Governance

Introduction

Crises over the past two decades—ranging from financial collapses to sovereign debt emergencies—have emerged from diverse causes, yet they often produce similar economic repercussions for both directly and indirectly affected countries. One of the most prominent examples of a recent economic crisis is the European sovereign debt crisis, which began in 2010 and continued until 2015. The crisis had a particularly detrimental impact on countries within the Eurozone, despite its initial roots being traceable to the 2008 global financial crisis in the United States. In such a situation, the entire economic system entered turmoil, creating a sort of domino effect and falling into a vicious cycle that was difficult to escape. Private enterprises were unable to access loans necessary for the purchase of raw materials and machinery and for the payment of the labour force. As a result, unemployment increased, and wages decreased. Consequently, consumer spending declined, and firms were forced to further restrict their production, which in turn reduced their profits.

Economic crises of this nature can also be understood as political crises due to their profound impact on institutional stability (Kahler and Lake 2013). Governments play a central role in responding to such crises, often required to adopt and implement urgent measures to contain and resolve them. These high-pressure circumstances can trigger internal political instability, potentially leading to the dissolution of governments or significant changes in their composition through cabinet reshuffles. As a result, periods of crisis are frequently marked by high government turnover, with successive administrations serving only briefly. This volatility can undermine both government efficiency—defined as the optimal use of available resources—and effectiveness, understood as the capacity to achieve stated policy objectives.

Technocratic governments—or, at minimum, the inclusion of technocrats in executive roles—are widely regarded as a response to periods of crisis, whether economic (Wratil and Pastorella 2018) or electoral (Emanuele et al. 2023). This paper investigates the conditions under which such appointments occur, with particular attention to economic distress and institutional fragmentation. For this study, technocratic appointments refer to three specific outcomes: fully technocratic governments, technocrat-led governments, and cabinets in which the Ministry of Finance is held by a technocrat. The analysis focuses on the twelve Eurozone countries that were members in 2006, covering the period from 2006 to 2015—a timeframe that includes both the European sovereign debt crisis (2010–2015) and the preceding years, allowing for comparison between times of crisis and periods of relative economic stability.

The following sections begin with an overview of the European sovereign debt crisis, outlining its origins and assessing its broader implications—particularly its effects on political systems. This is followed by a discussion of the key concepts underpinning the study: technocracy, technocrats, and technocratic governments. Drawing on relevant literature, the conditions that foster technocratic involvement will also be explored.

The empirical section details the methodology and data sources employed. It opens with a descriptive analysis of the economic conditions in the twelve Eurozone countries under study, focusing on two key indicators: Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth and total unemployment rates. The core of the analysis, however, concentrates on two independent variables—general government gross debt and legislative fractionalisation—examined in relation to the dependent variable: technocratic appointment.

The European Sovereign Debt Crisis (2010-2015)

Originating in late 2009, the European sovereign debt crisis—commonly referred to as the Euro crisis—reached its peak between 2010 and 2012 (Cross 2017). The crisis affected several European Union (EU) member states, particularly those within the Eurozone. Among them, the GIIPS countries—Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and Spain—were hit hardest. Greece suffered particularly severe consequences due to its failure to accurately report public debt and budget deficit figures upon joining the Eurozone (Trabelsi 2012).

The crisis posed a significant threat to the EU, prompting decisive action from the European Central Bank (ECB), then under the leadership of Mario Draghi. His implementation of quantitative easing (QE) averted a potential mass exit from the Eurozone and prevented the destabilizing return to national currencies, which could have led to competitive devaluations to manage debt burdens (Bofinger 2020). Announced in January 2015, this monetary policy involved the ECB purchasing €60 billion per month in government bonds from European banks, aiming to inject liquidity into the economy, stimulate lending, and raise inflation toward the 2% target. At the same time, the crisis catalyzed a transformation within the European Monetary Union (EMU). What was once conceived as a "community of benefits" evolved to incorporate mechanisms for risk-sharing, reflecting deeper integration in response to systemic vulnerabilities (Chiti and Texeira 2013).

The Eurozone crisis also destabilized national political institutions, undermining their legitimacy and decision-making ability. Armingeon and Guthmann (2013) demonstrate that the economic crisis led to a sharp decline in public trust in democracy, marked by significant decrease in satisfaction with democratic institutions and eroding confidence in parliaments. Their analysis draws on 78 national surveys across 26 EU countries from 2007 to 2011. Faced with unsustainable debt levels, many governments adopted strict austerity measures (Armingeon and Baccaro 2012). In Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Cyprus, these policies were often externally imposed by the so called *Troika*—the European Commission, ECB, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—which provided bailout loans conditional on fiscal consolidation.

Defining Technocracy and Technocratic Governments

The concept of technocracy refers to two main characteristics: expertise and non-partisanship. In governance, it translates to ministers selected for their specialized professional and/or educational backgrounds, ensuring competence in their respective domains (Centeno 1993). Crucially, technocratic ministers remain unaffiliated with political parties and hold no prior legislative office (Cotta and Verzichelli 2002). Critics of technocracy warn of "epistemic democracy" (Urbinati 2014), arguing that overreliance on expertise risks depoliticizing governance and marginalizing democratic representation. Nevertheless, empirical studies challenge the assumption that technocratic governments are inherently undemocratic (Pastorella 2016). In parliamentary systems, technocratic cabinets retain democratic legitimacy through institutional mechanisms like legislative confidence votes (Valbruzzi 2020).

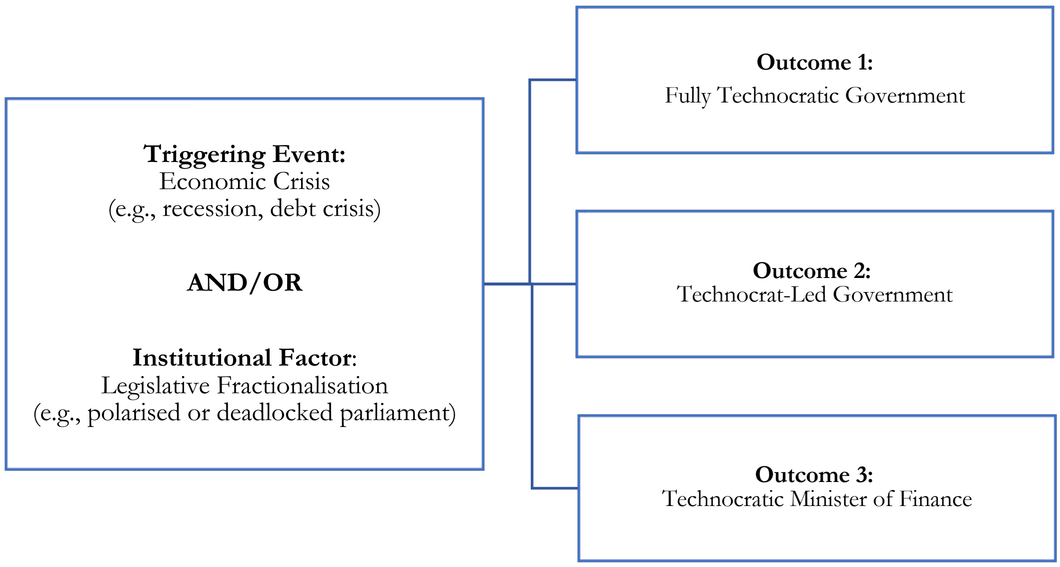
The appeal to technocracy should not be viewed as deliberate weakening of political parties and parliaments, but rather as a response to the erosion of traditional representative linkages (Andeweg 1996). This shift reflects broader societal trends, including declining partisanship among voters (Mair 2008), as evidenced by falling electoral turnout and increasing electoral volatility (Mair 2013; Pedersen 1979). Moreover, technocracy also serves as a strategic tool for political parties. By delegating decision-making to technocrats—particularly during crises—parties can distance themselves from unpopular policies, thereby avoiding electoral backlash (Emanuele et al. 2023). This aligns with Paldam's (1986) notion of avoiding the costs of governing, as parties balance their dual goals of vote-seeking and office-seeking. Governing during turbulent times risks alienating voters, who may punish incumbents in subsequent elections (Cotta 2018).

Technocratic appointments have been widely analysed as a response to economic and political crises, including financial instability, scandals, and electoral upheaval (Wratil and Pastorella 2018; Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Emanuele et al. 2023). Scholars argue that technocrats are often favoured for their perceived policymaking expertise (Blondel 1991), particularly in high-stakes ministries such as Finance—a portfolio consistently ranked as the most salient in government structures (Batista 2017). Empirical studies further suggest that technocratic ministers in finance roles tend to achieve greater policy impact (Alexiadou 2020).

Institutional dynamics also play a role: fragmented party systems, for instance, may incentivize technocratic appointments (Merzoni and Trombetta 2024). However, recent research indicates that institutional variables alone lack significant explanatory power (Pilet et al. 2024). Given these findings, this study focuses on economic crises and legislative fractionalisation as key drivers of technocratic appointments, with particular emphasis on the European sovereign debt crisis. Political crises, while relevant, fall outside the scope of this analysis.

In order for a government to be considered fully technocratic, it is necessary for the prime minister and more than 50% of the ministers to be technocrats (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014). When technocrats do not comprise a majority of ministers, the government is classified as merely technocrat-led. Figure 1 presents the explanatory framework for technocratic appointments examined in this study, which may produce three possible outcomes: (1) fully technocratic governments, (2) technocrat-led governments, or (3) governments with technocratic finance ministers. For analytical purposes, any of these outcomes qualifies as a technocratic appointment. Importantly, these categories may overlap—for example, a government could have both a technocratic prime minister and technocratic finance minister without meeting the threshold for a fully technocratic government.

Figure 1. Pathways to Technocratic Appointments



Source: Author

Methodology and Data

The empirical analysis focuses on Eurozone member states as of 2006 (N=12). Government duration and initial composition are drawn from the Casal Bértoa (2024) dataset, while technocratic appointments occurring during each cabinet's term are identified through an original dataset on cabinet reshuffles compiled by the author. The period of analysis spans from 2006 to 2015, extending beyond the conventional 2010–2015 crisis period to assess whether technocratic appointments increased during the crisis.

The dependent variable measures the incidence of technocratic appointments, operationalised as the presence of at least one of the three outcomes previously illustrated in Figure 1. Following McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014), a fully technocratic government requires a technocratic prime minister and more than 50% technocratic ministers. Technocrats are identified by their non-partisanship and domain-specific expertise, consistent with established criteria (Centeno 1993; Cotta and Verzichelli 2002), with particular attention to their professional/educational qualifications for their portfolio.

Two independent variables are tested:

1. Economic crisis, measured via general government gross debt (% of GDP) from Eurostat, given its documented negative impact on growth (Ewaida 2017);
2. Legislative fractionalization, calculated using the Rae-index-based measure (Armingeon et al. 2023).

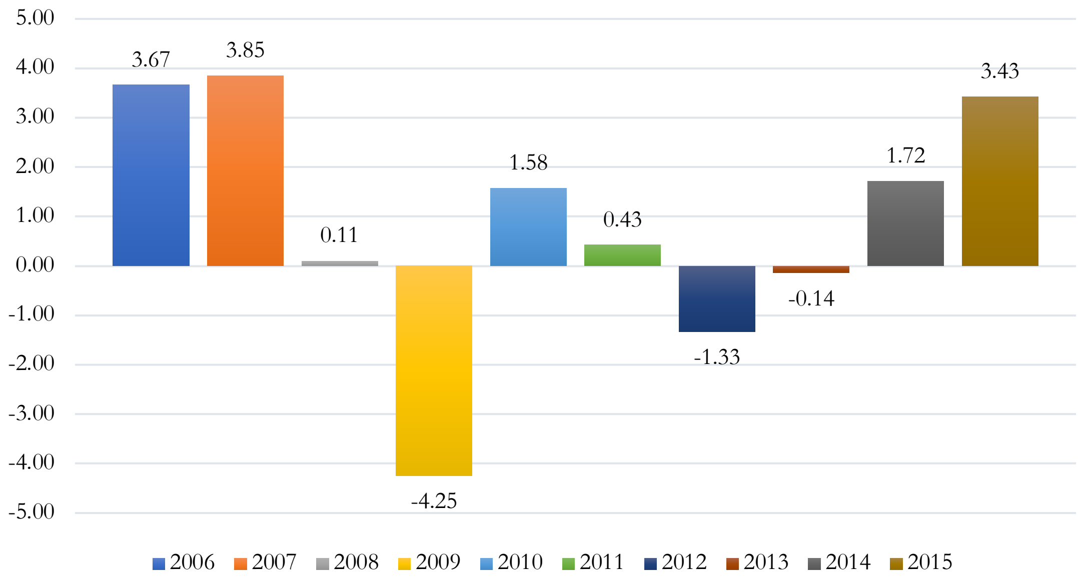
The primary hypothesis—that elevated economic distress and legislative fractionalisation predict technocratic appointments—is tested through descriptive statistics and linear regression. Subsequent analysis contextualizes these variables using key economic indicators (GDP growth, unemployment, debt levels) derived from IMF, World Bank, and Eurostat data, supplemented by the author's cabinet reshuffle dataset where applicable.

Analysis and Results

In 2006, the Eurozone consisted of twelve members: Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. Figures 2 and Figure 3 show aggregate data on real GDP growth rates and unemployment rates (% of total labour force) from 2006 to 2015, serving as key indicators of the Eurozone economy's health. By including pre-crisis years (2006-2009), these figures provide essential context for assessing the crisis's full impact following its onset in 2010.

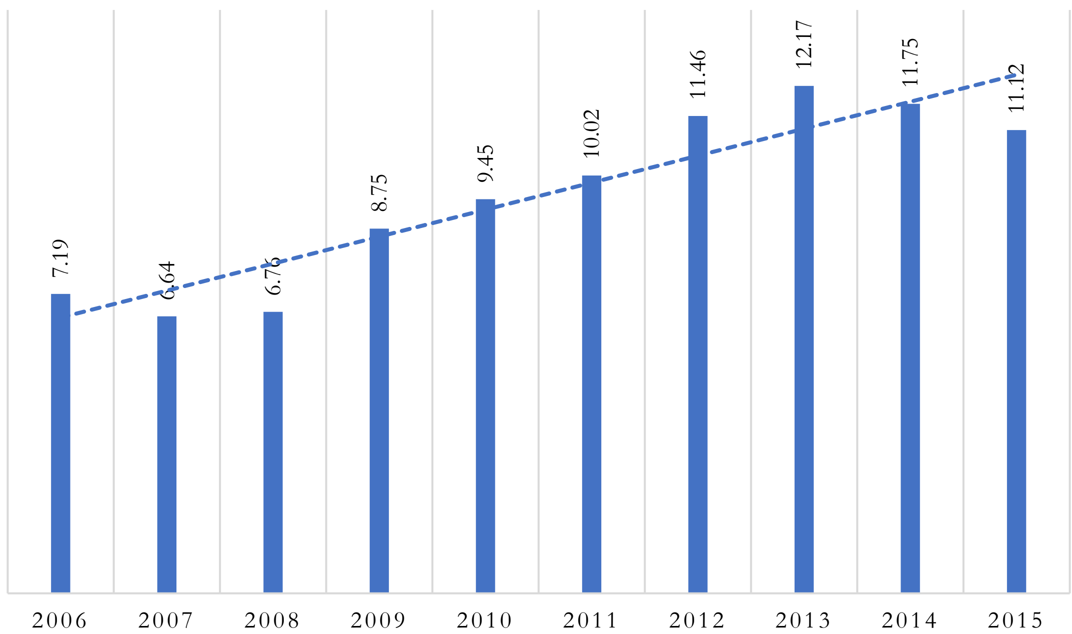
The Eurozone first felt the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis—which originated in the United States—in 2009. That year, member states saw GDP growth plummet by 4.14 percentage points (year-on-year), while unemployment began its upward trajectory, peaking at 12.17% in 2013. The crisis hit Greece, Italy, and Portugal particularly hard, with these countries experiencing both severe GDP contractions and rising unemployment throughout 2010–2015. This economic deterioration is further evidenced by soaring government debt levels across the Eurozone, as depicted in Figure 4.

Figure 2. Real GDP Growth Rates in Eurozone Member States, 2006–2015



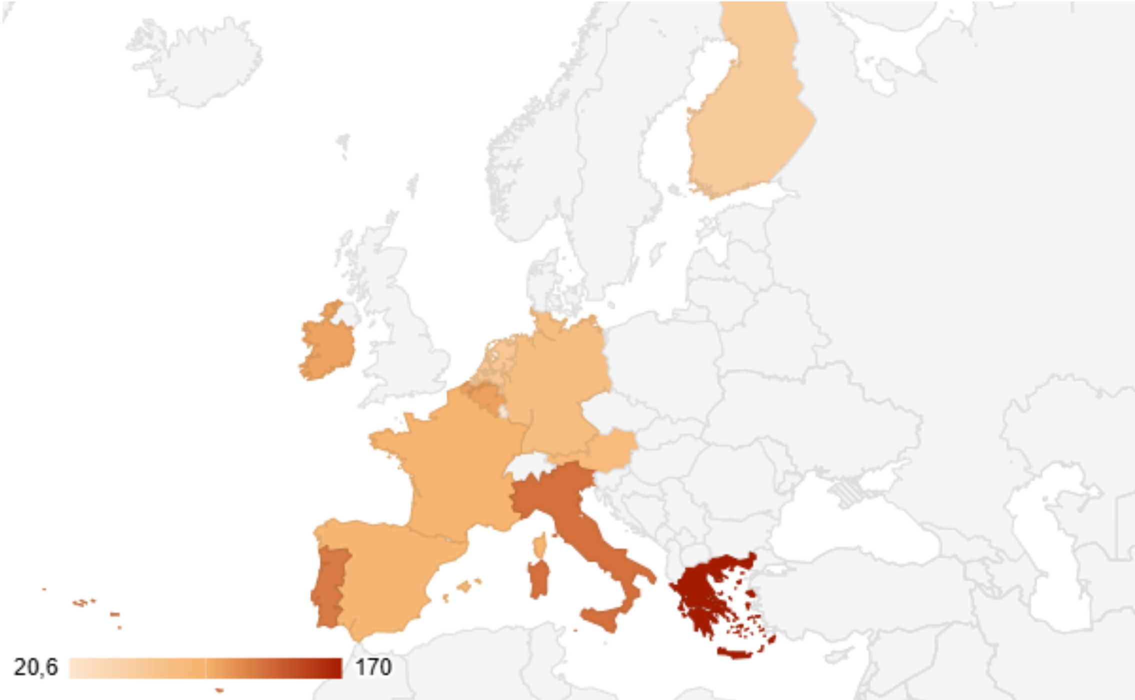
Source: Author's calculations using IMF data on real GDP growth (annual % change).

Figure 3. Unemployment Rates (% of Labour Force) in Eurozone Member States, 2006–2015



Source: Author's calculations using World Bank data on unemployment (% of total labour force) and IMF data on real GDP growth (annual % change).

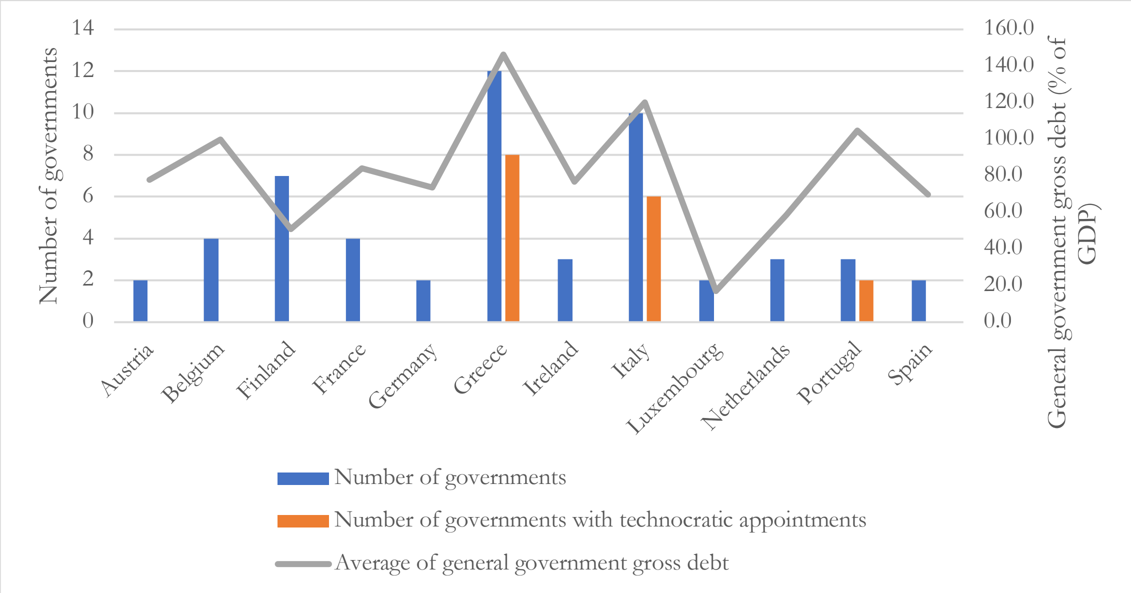
Figure 4. General Government Gross Debt in Eurozone Member States, 2010-2015



Source: Author's analysis of Eurostat data on general government gross debt (% of GDP).

The relationship between sovereign debt and technocratic appointments becomes particularly evident when examining longitudinal trends. As Figure 5 demonstrates, Greece, Italy, and Portugal - the three Eurozone members with the most severe and sustained debt burdens - were exclusively the ones to appoint technocratic governments during the 2006-2015 period. This striking correlation suggests that critical debt thresholds may serve as key triggers for technocratic intervention.

Figure 5. General Government Gross Debt Compared to Technocratic Appointments (2006-2015)



Source: Author's analysis using Eurostat general government gross debt data (% of GDP), Casal Bértoa (2024) government composition records, and original data on cabinet reshuffles.

Table 1 details all technocratic appointments from 2006-2015, including finance ministers appointed through cabinet reshuffles. Notably, no technocratic governments emerged before 2011, suggesting that both (1) critical debt thresholds, and (2) the peak phase of the European sovereign debt crisis (2011-2015) served as key catalysts for technocratic intervention.

However, when examining the second independent variable, the pattern reverses. As noted earlier, the Armingeon et al. (2023) index of legislative fractionalisation, which ranges from 0 (minimal fractionalisation) to 1 (maximal fractionalisation), has been employed in this analysis. During the 2006–2015 period, the countries with the highest legislative fractionalisation were Belgium (0.88), Finland (0.82) and the Netherlands (0.83). By contrast, Greece, Italy, and Portugal recorded the lowest levels of fractionalisation, ranging from 0.65 to 0.71. Notably, Greece and Italy exhibited the highest standard deviation (0.06 and 0.05, respectively) in fractionalisation over time, compared with the average standard deviation of 0.03 across all twelve states.

Table 1. Technocratic Appointments in Eurozone Governments, 2006-2015

Country	Day of appointment	Government	Fully Technocratic (%)	Technocrat -led	Technocrat Finance Minister	Technocrat Finance Minister Added in Reshuffle
Greece	11/11/2011	Papademos I	0	1	0	0
Greece	10/02/2012	Papademos II	0	1	0	0
Greece	17/05/2012	Pikrammenos	1 (100%)	1	1	0
Greece	21/06/2012	Samaras I	0	0	0	1
Greece	25/06/2013	Samaras II	0	0	1	0
Greece	10/06/2014	Samaras III	0	0	1	0
Greece	22/08/2014	Samaras IV	0	0	1	0
Greece	28/08/2015	Thanou-Christophilou	1 (82%)	1	1	0
Italy	18/11/2011	Monti	1 (100%)	1	1	1
Italy	28/04/2013	Letta I	0	0	1	0
Italy	15/11/2013	Letta II	0	0	1	0
Italy	23/11/2013	Letta III	0	0	1	0
Italy	25/02/2014	Renzi I	0	0	1	0
Italy	06/02/2015	Renzi II	0	0	1	0
Portugal	19/06/2011	Passos Coelho I	0	0	1	1
Portugal	26/11/2015	Costa I	0	0	1	0

Note: "Fully Technocratic %" indicates the proportion of technocratic ministers in each cabinet.

Source: Author's analysis of Casal Bértoa (2024) and original data on cabinet reshuffles.

The linear regression analysis focuses exclusively on the three states with technocratic appointments—Greece, Italy, and Portugal. As an initial analytical step, the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated between the two independent variables (government gross debt and legislative fractionalisation). This metric, which ranges from -1 to 1, measures the strength and direction of their relationship, where 0 indicates no correlation. The analysis reveals a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.67$) between debt and fractionalisation in these countries.

For the first regression model (government debt vs. technocratic appointments), the equation is:

$$y = 0.0673x - 6.7298$$

The model demonstrates strong explanatory power, with $R^2 = 0.83$ (adjusted $R^2 = 0.81$), highly significant $p < 0.001$ (0.000219), and minimal residuals (0.54).

For the second model (legislative fractionalisation vs. technocratic appointments), the equation is:

$$y = 50.425x - 32.193$$

Here, the R^2 and the adjusted R^2 are substantially lower (0.48 and 0.41, respectively), though the p-value remains statistically significant (0.026) and residuals are higher (1.71).

While both variables predict technocratic appointments, the descriptive and regression analyses collectively demonstrate that government gross debt exerts a stronger influence than legislative fractionalisation.

Conclusion

This study investigates the conditions that lead to technocratic appointments, with a particular focus on economic crises and institutional factors. The analysis covers the twelve Eurozone member states as of 2006 over the 2006–2015 period, thereby encompassing the European sovereign debt crisis. The working hypothesis posits that both the degree of economic crisis severity and elevated legislative fractionalisation would increase the likelihood of technocratic appointments. In line with broader conceptual approaches, this study examines not only fully technocratic governments (as defined by McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014) but extends to two additional categories: technocrat-led governments and governments with technocratic finance ministers—the latter inclusion being justified by the ministry's established portfolio salience (Batista 2017).

The theoretical framework examines both the origins of the Euro crisis and the supranational solutions implemented to address it (Bofinger 2020). Scholarship demonstrates the crisis's profound political consequences, such as the decline in citizens' support for democracy as a result of austerity-driven fiscal policies (Armingeon and Baccaro 2012). This context proves critical for understanding the rise of technocratic governments during crises (Wratil and Pastorella 2018; Emanuele et al. 2023)—despite normative debates about their democratic credentials. Technocratic appointments emerge through two complementary mechanisms: (1) as a structural response to weakening voter-representative linkages in contemporary democracies, and (2) as strategic tools for political parties to distance themselves from unpopular crisis measures while maintaining governing capacity (Paldam

1986). This dual function positions technocrats as both pragmatic crisis managers (Pedrosa et al. 2020) and temporary shields for partisan actors navigating electoral constraints.

The countries most severely impacted by the crisis—Greece, Italy, and Portugal—exhibited sharp declines in GDP growth, rising unemployment, and increasing public debt in both the short and long term. These were also the only countries to resort to technocratic appointments between 2011 and 2015, with no such instances recorded prior to this period. Interestingly, an inverse pattern emerges when considering legislative fractionalisation: countries that turned to technocracy—such as Greece and Italy—now show more stable or improved performance in this regard compared to those that did not, such as Belgium, Finland, and the Netherlands.

The regression analysis establishes both economic and institutional factors as statistically significant predictors of technocratic appointments. A key finding emerges—general government gross debt demonstrates markedly greater explanatory power than legislative fractionalization in predicting technocratic appointments.

The findings reinforce existing research on the role of economic crises in prompting technocratic appointments, suggesting that governments tend to bring in non-partisan experts when faced with severe economic distress. At the same time, the study highlights the need for further exploration of institutional factors, which is in line with recent work by Pilet et al. (2024). Expanding the dataset could help identify additional conditions that either facilitate or prevent the adoption of technocracy. Future research might also consider crises of different origins, such as the Covid-19 pandemic or Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, both of which triggered economic disruptions across Eurozone member states.

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