

Technocratic myopia: On the pitfalls of depoliticising the future

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journals.sagepub.com/home/est**Jonathan White** *European Institute, London, UK*

Abstract

That democratic authorities are systematically focused on short-term considerations is a charge often made. This ‘democratic myopia’ thesis typically becomes the basis for advocating the empowerment of technocratic institutions, for example in economic policy. Much less examined is what one may call the technocratic myopia thesis – the possibility that technocratic institutions have their own distinctive drivers of short-termism. This article presents the case, with reference to the legitimacy forms, epistemologies and organisational structures in which technocratic authority is grounded. The suggestion is that not only may technocrats fall short of the claims to long-sightedness made of them, but that this is directly bound up in some of the core features of the technocratic method. The article goes on to discuss the implications for how contemporary societies govern the future in key domains of public policy.

Keywords

Democracy, public authority, public policy, technocracy, the future

Alexis de Tocqueville, the great nineteenth-century observer of American politics, was one of the first to argue that democracy is prone to short-termism:

It is this clear perception of the future, founded on enlightenment and experience, that democracy will often lack. The people feel much more than they reason; and if the present evils are great, it is to be feared that they will forget the greater evils that perhaps await them in case of defeat. (de Tocqueville, 2000/1835, p. 247)

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A polity that habitually mistook its priorities, minimising future threats or benefits relative to present-day concerns, would struggle to survive and prosper. Authoritarian alternatives might be undesirable in general, but in this crucial respect they were superior.

The notion that democracy handles the future badly has become a mainstay of political thought. Whereas Tocqueville focused on the demands of public opinion, others have emphasised the structure of institutions. Regular elections, it is said, make it hard to pursue projects that take time. Politicians have little reason to start what they cannot finish, and little reason to continue what their predecessors have begun (e.g. Thompson, 2010; for critical discussion: Boston, 2017; Mackenzie, 2021; Mackenzie et al., 2023; Schäfer & Merkel, 2021).¹ The thesis of democratic myopia is well established today, and it does not always take the form of a lament. Whereas Tocqueville's sympathies were clearly with democracy, contemporary observers employ such arguments to make a positive case for alternatives. The transfer of power to technocratic bodies, be they central banks or supranational executives, is often promoted in these terms. Insulated from public opinion and electoral politics, such institutions are said to be better placed to pursue far-sighted policy. Their political independence is extolled as the key to governing the future effectively.

This article seeks to challenge this conventional assessment, highlighting the drivers of short-termism in non-democratic institutions. Holding technocratic authority to the same standards used to acclaim it, we shall arrive at a quite different conclusion. The thesis of *technocratic myopia*, as I shall call it, describes how policymaking insulated from politics in the name of expertise can itself be a source of short-termism. Not only may technocrats fail to live up to the claims to long-sightedness made on their behalf, but there are structural reasons why this should be so. The article explores these in terms of the *legitimacy basis* of technocracy, the *epistemologies* it employs, and the *organisational structures* through which it is exercised. To the extent that technocracy is found wanting on these fronts, temporal reasons for the transfer of powers to unelected bodies will need to be viewed with scepticism. Rather than to circumvent democracy, the appropriate goal may be to strengthen it.

As we shall see, these are issues of real-world significance. The stakes of decision-making seem higher than ever today, and disputes proliferate over the authorities who should be in charge. From the economy to public health to climate change, key questions concern whom to entrust with tackling structural problems effectively and fairly. Debates about the role of central banking, including the possibility of redirecting it to progressive ends (e.g. 'green central banking'), are one expression (Dietsch et al., 2024; Langley & Morris, 2020). So too are wider debates about the merits and dangers of technocratic environmentalism, and about the role of public health authorities before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. In transnational policymaking in particular, the degree to which technocracy should be empowered is a live question, drawing in such authorities as the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB), the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. New regulatory challenges such as artificial intelligence are likely to sustain these concerns. A context of volatility and rapid change gives particular salience to how societies approach the future, and special significance to the political structures they adopt to shape and prepare for it.

What is long-sightedness in policymaking?

Outlooks towards the future can vary on many dimensions. As the historian Reinhart Koselleck famously showed, they can do so in the extent to which the future is seen as open to influence. The emergence of modern democracy in the eighteenth century coincided with rising expectations about the likelihood of social change and the scope to direct it by political means (Koselleck, 2004). This in turn opened further distinctions, such as what priority to give to the prospects of the individual or the collective (Mische, 2009; Urry, 2016; White, 2024). The dichotomy we are interested in here concerns whether the future is approached with an accent on the near or the far. Before looking more closely at what this means for institutions, let us consider some of the conceptual questions in play.

There are at least two senses in which a public authority can vary in its temporal range. First, an actor can be long-sighted (or not) in the sense of *having regard* for long-term concerns. This might involve, for example, recognising and committing to goals that take time to pursue, such as values like equality and liberty. It might involve weighing the claims of future people against those of the living, as these concern resources or environmental conditions (e.g. Warren, 2023; cf. Parfit, 1984). To be long-sighted, in this sense, is to see the worth of things whose arrival may be deferred. In a second sense, an authority can be long-sighted (or not) in the sense of *successfully advancing* such concerns. What matters here is less the deliberative process that informs policymaking than the effectiveness with which it is made.

These two aspects, of intent and capacity, will not always align. One can have regard for long-term concerns while being ill-equipped to successfully advance them. Likewise, one can successfully advance long-term concerns in a haphazard or unintentional way. Insofar as democracy tends to be labelled as ‘myopic’, the charge tends to be that it is weak on both fronts. Its agents are said to be indifferent to long-term concerns (whether due to cognitive factors or institutional pressures), and in any case ill-suited to advancing them (due, e.g. to the periodic rotation of office-holders). But for the purposes of our discussion, it is worth noting that this is only one possible brand of myopia: a policy-making regime may have regard for long-term concerns while lacking the capacity to successfully advance them, or may construe them so narrowly that the advances it makes do not amount to something positive in the round.

Running through these issues is the challenging question of timescale. When does an outlook cease to be myopic? Clearly the answer may be context dependent. In a society or a policy area characterised by slow rates of change, it may be easier to conceive durable projects than in one characterised by volatility and discontinuity. In the debates we shall be looking at, the timescales are rarely spelt out, but the electoral cycle tends to act as a reference point. Myopia means a largely exclusive orientation to those goals that can be realised within a term of office, usually 4–5 years, whereas long-sightedness entails looking beyond this, perhaps several decades into the future. To be long-sighted is to adopt a perspective sufficiently encompassing and structural as to permit genuine address of the problems in question (Sprinz, 2009).²

Is long-sightedness better than short-sightedness? This is typically the assumption – that the longer view entails better awareness of what is at stake, better deliberation of the

options, and better policies all things considered (e.g. Thompson, 2010). That there might be a trade-off is implied by the metaphor: a capacity to focus on faraway things may be a handicap when attention is needed on those closer at hand. Present-day problems and injustices can be overlooked as one peers further into the distant future. One of the political dangers of the philosophical movement ‘long-termism’ (MacAskill, 2022), with its transhuman timescales and models evoking huge numbers of people to come, is that it can make inequalities in the present seem a matter of indifference, even something to welcome for their long-term utility. From the most macro perspective, anything less than an existential threat to the human race is really no problem at all, while anything that can be cast as an existential threat trumps all competing considerations. That one can be ‘too’ long-sighted is something implied by the use of discount rates in policy models, as ways of reducing the future to a manageable size (Stern, 2006). It is tempting to imagine a temporal sweet-spot, far enough into the future to enable the pursuit of structural change and general ideals, while not so far off as to dwarf concerns of felt relevance to the living.

How do we know long- or short-sightedness when we see it? Clearly there is the risk of polemical use, but there are some objective markers one could point to. One lies in *discourse*: the willingness to identify long-term objectives and build policy programmes that, rhetorically at least, are committed to their pursuit. Party manifestos are one kind of text that can be studied, often cited as evidence of unambitious or backward-looking views in the present (Zielonka, 2023). *Investments* are another possible indicator: the willingness to devote resources to projects that take time to mature (e.g. the building of infrastructure), or to hold back resources for future use (e.g. by creating a sovereign wealth fund), or to introduce regulations likely to produce short-term costs and long-term benefits (e.g. carbon taxing) (Boston, 2017; Smith, 2021, p. 3). Having regard for the future often means the willingness to make sacrifices in the short term.

Another indicator of long-sightedness widely invoked is *consistency*. Often this rests on the assumption that a certain line of policy is optimal (see e.g. the attachment of central bankers to an inflation target of 2–3 per cent), and that responsible policy-making involves minimising deviation from it. *Commitment in adversity* would be another way to conceive this: the willingness to stick to an agenda when progress seems in doubt or opinion turns against it.³ Finally, as an additional marker of long-sightedness, one may refer to the *sustainability of methods*. This describes an actor’s willingness to pursue policies in a way that does not weaken the institutions and authority on which future deliberation and policymaking will need to rely. Transparency, capacity and clear procedure are amongst the values that may be embraced to this end (Thompson, 2010).

As these remarks suggest, long- and short-termism is more than just a matter of rhetoric. Certainly, one can disagree about how to classify a given set of policies and methods, depending on the normative expectations and points of comparison applied. It may be possible to give the same actions justifications that are both long- and short-termist. But it is also the case that some actions will permit certain justifications more easily than others. There is an objective component one should not lose sight of, especially as one turns to the evaluation of particular forms of public authority.

The case for technocratic long-sightedness

When Tocqueville expressed misgivings about democracy's temporal horizons, it did not lead him to question its general appeal. The observation that democracy is prone to short-termism can invite the scaling back of expectations, or efforts to extend its horizons. But it can also invite a different conclusion: the need to empower *non*-democratic institutions. Courts are one possible kind. Constitutional checks on executive power can be advanced in the name of protecting a polity's basic norms and values from the transient whims of leaders and majorities – protecting long-term concerns, that is, against political short-termism and opportunism. Strong executives with latitude for discretion are also sometimes advocated on temporal grounds, able in paternalist fashion to see the long-term interests of the citizenry better than citizens themselves (Kagan, 2001; Mittiga, 2021). The institutions we shall focus on are different, however – those whose authority is epistemic.

Technocratic institutions are based on a claim to knowledge (Centeno, 1993). According to the technocratic principle, decisions should be guided by an informed understanding of the most efficient means to achieve determined goals. As one definition has it, technocracy is 'a form of representation stressing the prominence of expertise in the identification and implementation of objective solutions to societal problems' (Caramani, 2017, p. 55; cf. Bertson & Caramani, 2020). Rather than oriented to public deliberation and opinion-formation, technocracy is a form of instrumental rationality: it presents itself as seeking the efficient solution of problems on which there can be little reasonable disagreement, or on which disagreement has been resolved. The technocratic principle accordingly vests power in those said to wield the relevant knowledge and capacity. Importantly, technocracy is not just about experts giving advice but being able to set policy themselves.

Technocratic authority can be advocated on various grounds, but the temporal argument has become increasingly prominent. It was influentially spelt out by Giandomenico Majone in the 1990s (Majone, 1996; cf. Blinder, 1999). In his line of reasoning, what makes technocrats distinctive is that they can credibly claim *consistency* of policy. Whereas democratic authorities are prone to reversals, as one government struggles to bind the next, technocratic authorities can stick to their guns. They can set goals without fear of their being interrupted or aborted (Majone, 1996, p. 14). This fact, moreover, is publicly visible, meaning that these institutions can count on the confidence of others. Consistency and predictability can be expected by all. The result is that technocrats can credibly pursue long-term strategies, relying not on coercion but the authority of their word. This line of thought built on earlier theorising in economics about central banks (Kydland & Prescott, 1977), extending it to advocate the empowerment of supranational agencies such as the European Commission.

Majone did not present his arguments as reasons to dismantle democratic institutions. On the contrary, the conditions for preferring technocracy were circumscribed, with considerable emphasis placed on the distinction between policy areas where absolute gains ('Pareto optimality') could be pursued, suitable for technocratic policymaking, and those where the distribution of gains would be relative, for which democratic authority was crucial (Majone, 1996, p. 12). Rather than do away with democratic institutions,

Majone's aim was to correct for what he saw as their limitations. It was technocracy within a democratic frame. Still, one may note that, insofar as his arguments gave particular prominence to transnational settings such as the European Union (EU), they addressed a sphere where democratic institutions have always been relatively weak. To advocate technocratic authority in such contexts is liable de facto to become advocacy of an *alternative* to democratic authority.

A recent re-elaboration of the temporal argument for technocracy can be found in the work of the former central banker Paul Tucker. In *Unelected Power*, Tucker argues that one of the defining qualities of technocrats is their concern for their professional reputation. Whereas elected politicians are, he suggests, primarily concerned with re-election, hence prone to short-sighted decisions coloured by this goal, technocrats care more about the esteem they are held in by their peers (Tucker 2018, c. p.100, drawing on Alesina & Tabellini, 2007, 2008⁴). They therefore have reason to pursue coherence of decision-making and to prefer long-term effectiveness over short-term results. If institutions are well designed, this outlook can be reinforced to the benefit of public policy.

Whereas Majone was writing in the 1990s, in a period of relative stability and of consensus on what makes for good policy, Tucker's book was written after the financial crash of 2008 and the economic malaise of the 2010s. His account is sober in tone, with an emphasis on the stringent conditions that must be met before power is delegated to technocrats. Amongst these are: that there should be a stable societal consensus on the values that policymaking and its methods should serve; that this consensus should translate into a defined and monitorable set of goals; that controversial distributional choices should not be involved; and that there should be good reason to believe that the policy instruments available to technocrats will work (Tucker, 2018, c. p. 101). Tucker presents these as demanding conditions, ones likely to exclude delegation to technocracy in many areas. Climate change, for instance, is said to be an issue where public opinion is too polarised to permit a consensus on policy goals. Nonetheless, Tucker's expectation is that his conditions *will* be met in certain contexts, for example, in the field of central banking.

Combining the work of Majone, Tucker and others, one may distil a case for technocratic long-sightedness that blends *having regard* for future concerns with being able to *successfully pursue* them. Institutionally, the suggestion is that technocrats are able to commit to long-term goals because they are independent of the electoral cycles that invite policy reversals (and fear of them). They are in a position to make credible commitments. Cognitively, they are motivated less by short-term popularity than by the esteem in which peers hold them and their expertise, both in the present and in posterity. This frees them to see long-term concerns and to pursue them without distraction. In their discourse, investments and consistency of outlook, they are better attuned to the long-term good. To quote Tocqueville again for a point of contrast:

in democracies the ambitious are less preoccupied than all others with the interests and judgments of the future: the present moment alone occupies and absorbs them. They finish many undertakings rapidly rather than raise a few long-lasting monuments; they love success much more than glory. (de Tocqueville, 2000/1835, p. 595)

For advocates of technocracy such as Majone and Tucker, technocrats are distinctive in the attention they give to the interests and judgements of the future. In the sense that they care about their reputations as experts, they are concerned more with ‘glory’ than transient ‘success’.

It is worth noting that the case for technocratic long-sightedness is embraced not just by onlookers. Research suggests that technocrats themselves may feel their capacity to pursue long-term goals is an important part of their authority. A study of the European Commission notes that its officials like to contrast themselves positively in this respect with their political colleagues in the European Council, whose authority is tied to national elections and where the turnover of personnel is faster (Vogt & Pukarinen, 2022, pp. 8–9). One may also assume that this perspective is shared by many in elected authority, who may refer to it when approving the delegation of power to technocratic bodies. Politicians, no less than experts, may see their strengths as lying in the near term, encouraging them to accept a division of labour. These arguments have real-world implications, in other words, which makes it important to examine their validity.

Why technocracy may be prone to short-termism

The following explores some of the reasons to speak of *technocratic myopia*. The focus is on problems distinctive to technocracy rather than those that afflict authority in all its forms. Clearly there are exogenous factors that make long-term planning hard for any governing agent, be it societal volatility, uncertainty of knowledge, the pressure for short-term rewards exerted by economic interests, or the inability to know what future generations will value. These are problems faced by democracy and technocracy alike. Nor will the focus here be on the imperfections that may characterise a particular institution at a particular moment. Appointments based supposedly on expertise may sometimes be coloured by political concerns (Adolph, 2013; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016). Insofar as these are isolated instances of manipulation or corruption, they do not undermine the technocratic ideal. The focus instead will be on the ways in which technocratic authority *systematically* falls short of the long-sightedness claimed for it – how it falls short not when it is failing but when working as expected.

Compared to the amount that has been written on ‘democratic myopia’, there has been relatively little critical examination of the claims for long-sightedness made of technocracy. Jonathan Boston has provided a compelling overview of the empirical evidence for technocratic long-sightedness, concluding that we should be much more cautious than is usual (Boston, 2017, chap. 9, esp. pp. 293–4). But an empirical analysis centred on the historical record is always vulnerable to the retort that true technocracy is yet to be tried – that past experiences have been undermined by poor design, poor leadership, political interference and so on. Only a more theoretical treatment can engage head-on with the argument for technocratic empowerment.⁵

I cluster the following analysis into three broad points, centred on the *legitimacy basis* of technocracy, the *epistemological methods* it relies on, and the *organisational structure* it is embedded in.

1. *Legitimacy basis.* Technocracy's legitimacy is meant to lie not in its responsiveness to public opinion, but the efficiency with which set goals are achieved. That powers can be traced to a democratic decision tends to be emphasised, but popular involvement is limited to the foundational moment: thereafter officials are to be regarded as independent. They claim 'output' rather than 'input' legitimacy, that is, the capacity to get good results (Scharpf, 1999). Typically this is understood as outcomes that are in some sense optimal, as judged from the perspective of the relevant expertise, but it can also be understood as outcomes that are the least bad, as, for instance, in an emergency context (White, 2019, chap. 5). In either sense, the idea is that independence from public opinion and contestation frees technocrats to take the longer view and pursue policies in accord with it.

In order to claim that successful long-term policy can be made without consulting public opinion, advocates of technocratic authority posit that wide public support (a 'stable social consensus' in Tucker's terms) exists for the policy ends in question, and that technocratic methods are effective in their pursuit. There is no need to heed or try and persuade public opinion if, as a condition of the transfer of power to technocrats, it is assumed to be already on board.⁶

But this assumption will always be difficult to sustain. Not only, if taken seriously, may it severely reduce *ex ante* the number of policy areas for which technocratic policy-making can be entertained. Even where such a consensus can plausibly be said to exist at the outset, opinion changes over time, and new concerns arise. What pass for good results in one period can easily look suspect in another. Rather than a stable exogenous condition, a social consensus on policy is something that needs to be nurtured – on the one hand by publicly justifying, in accessible terms, why the goals and methods adopted are desirable, and on the other hand by ensuring that policy stays in step with the wider priorities of society.

This is what technocracy, as a consciously 'independent' form of authority, is ill-suited to. That its officials may often be rather bad at explaining the merits of their actions, wrapping them instead in the language of necessity, is arguably the least of the problems: in principle, it can be addressed by making public communication a more central part of technocracy's remit. More challenging is to incorporate new concerns as these become salient in society. Consider how central banks struggle to accommodate green considerations that were less pronounced when their mandate was set. Monetary policy built around the goal of price stability is increasingly criticised for its contribution to supporting fossil-fuel capital (Dietsch et al., 2024). Because the mandate of a technocratic institution is designed to insulate it from political interference, and for that reason is hard to revise, a mismatch between policy and public opinion can be expected to develop over time.

This presents a basic challenge to the notion that technocrats can be distinctively long-sighted. If they pursue an adaptive approach, seeking to accommodate the changing priorities of the wider society, they compromise the consistency for which they were celebrated. They lose some of their status as independent authorities. If, on the other hand, officials choose to stick uncompromisingly to their existing commitments,

problems of public compliance will arise, even calls for the moderation or withdrawal of their powers.⁷ These too threaten to undercut their capacity to pursue long-sighted policy. Observation suggests that technocrats often try to combine these approaches, emphasising fidelity to their mandate while courting public approval – a mix that presents its own challenges to the coherence and consistency of policy (Moschella et al., 2020). While the promise of output legitimacy is to grant authorities more scope to act on the long term, the elusiveness of consensus on what counts as a good outcome leads to short-term pressures that are hard to ignore.

2. *Epistemological methods.* Technocratic authority tends to come with a focus on measurable targets. Goals are defined in quantifiable terms – central-bank targets on price stability are emblematic. Partly this may be the expression of a general ethos of empiricism. Measurable targets can seem the best way to avoid the temptations of ideology and partisanship. They are a basis on which to generate expert consensus and thus to underpin the institution's authority. But it is also about designing mandates that can be monitored. For the advocates of technocratic authority, these are the *quid pro quo* for technocratic independence. Majone speaks of the importance of 'clear and narrowly defined objectives', while Tucker talks of the desirability of technocrats having a 'monomission', so that their activities can be tracked against an agreed standard.⁸

While this concern to delimit technocratic authority is well taken, tying officials to measurable goals is likely to weaken their long-sightedness. It is often observed that prioritising one particular measure of success can blind officials to the wider range of considerations that should go into any evaluation of the public good. One likely result of a monomission is *monomania* – an obsession with one metric to the exclusion of others (Williams, 2005).⁹ While some such simplifications may be appropriate in the context in which they are adopted, little guarantees that they will remain so in the light of social change. There is a rigidity to the arrangement, an absence of self-correcting mechanisms. A likely consequence is policymaking that ignores important concerns and allows certain problems to fester, creating the conditions in which emergency interventions are later needed.¹⁰ It can be a form of short-termism, in other words.

Policymaking that has regard for a longer-term future, and that can successfully pursue long-term objectives, arguably depends on the adoption of more general principles – things that are not too concrete. Political ideals and ideologies act as a compass with which to navigate the further future. Concepts such as freedom, equality and solidarity are 'generative' ideas offering points of orientation beyond any one set of metrics. Being broad and susceptible to reinterpretation, they can evolve with changing conditions (Mulgan, 2022, p. 73). Whereas advocates of technocracy tend to underline the importance of 'credible commitments', it is not at all clear that the unwavering pursuit of particular quantified indicators is the best way to structure policy in an evolving context.

Especially in a world of expected tipping points and exponential change, from climate change to artificial intelligence, the capacity to find orientation in the face of fast-changing conditions and unpredictable events is crucial. Pressing environmental

concerns challenge the notion that a single metric such as price stability can be a viable measure of the healthy economy (Dietsch et al., 2024). Nor is the answer just to expand the set of metrics used. This point is made by climate scholars when questioning the utility of decarbonisation deadlines: how things turn out will depend on far more than ‘hitting the carbon numbers’ (see e.g. Hulme 2019; Asayama et al., 2019). Prioritising measurable targets tends to narrow the range of policies considered, often to the exclusion of more radical and promising options (Mahony, 2022, p. 203).

In practice, technocratic authorities may find themselves falling back on a more flexible approach. Quantitative targets may be supplemented with narratives intended to shape expectations, as studies of central banking suggest (Beckert & Bronk, 2018; Braun, 2015; Holmes, 2013). ‘Broad discretion’ may be involved in the interpretation of the goals and methods to be applied, as the ECB asserts in its monetary policy (Lokdam, 2020).¹¹ Unconventional and discretionary approaches may be substituted for the more formulaic, for example with the ECB’s purchasing of government debt (White, 2020). Indeed, under the cover of ‘strategic ambiguity’ in the communication of policy, ideological change may be possible, even within the constraints of an institution that is meant to be about consistency of outlook over time (van’t Klooster, 2022).

But there are real constraints on how far the solution lies in experts taking a more flexible approach. Even in a more qualitative or intuitive form, their expertise may be no more far-sighted. Research suggests that the predictive capacity of experts in general, even those of a flexible cast, is not strong (Tetlock, 2017).¹² Moreover, when technocrats embrace an adaptive, creative or ambiguous stance, they deviate from the notion that their authority is tied to a clear and monitorable mandate. Disagreements with their political counterparts may arise, as well as within their own ranks. The more intuitive and expansive their methods become, the more the authority of their expertise falls into question.

3. *Organisational structure.* Technocracy involves the compartmentalisation of authority. Rather than a single institution with responsibility for policymaking as a whole, it entails delegating power in particular areas to one or a number of specialised actors. This is the organisational expression of the sectoral focus noted above: to give an agency a particular mandate or ‘monomission’ is inevitably to parcel out responsibilities such that no institution has overall control. Again, this may be done in the name of policy long-sightedness, insofar as it gives agencies a sphere of responsibility in which their expertise is protected from interference.

In principle, one can imagine a set-up whereby a single technocratic institution is granted power across public policy as a whole. There would then be no parcelling of authority, simply a full transfer of power from the elected to the technocratic realm. Arguments for rule by experts are occasionally made (e.g. Brennan, 2016). But they are quite at odds with those more often advanced for technocracy, where the goal is not to substitute for democratic institutions but to counter their negative tendencies.

There are several ways in which the compartmentalisation of authority is at odds with long-sightedness. It can, for instance, create problems of coordination. A limited mandate

entails limited control and the need to square policy with other authorities. A division of powers may have its appeal, but consistent policymaking is not something it will reliably yield. It heightens uncertainty, since each authority must reckon with and adapt to the unpredictable actions of peers. Even the most future-regarding policymakers will find their calculations and interventions thereby complicated (cf. Smith, 2021, pp. 18, 61). The compartmentalisation of authority also constrains the policy tools available to any one actor. As the policymaking of the ECB suggests, institutions that are reliant on a limited set of tools can easily find themselves ill-equipped for the tasks they face, or tempted to over-extend the means they have at their disposal (Matthijs & Blyth, 2018, p. 112).

The problems may be exacerbated by institutional turf wars, as can occur even in the most rulebound settings, and especially in international organisations. Technocratic authority in the EU is dispersed across numerous functional agencies at the national and supranational level, often in a state of inter-agency competition (Everson & Vos, 2021). The more power is diffused, the more frictions can be expected. Tensions will be further exacerbated when a policymaking domain loses its depoliticised character and becomes something that multiple authorities (technocratic and political) are trying to influence, as recently the case in many areas of economic policy.

The compartmentalisation of authority also makes it more susceptible to lobbying by special interests. Compared to the bureaucracy of the state as whole, it puts authority in the hands of a small number of people. Technocratic agencies may be especially vulnerable, in that they cannot invoke public opinion as a counterweight to the demands of lobbyists, and because their activities may lack media scrutiny. Rules on good conduct are rarely sufficient. That such bodies are politically independent in the institutional sense hardly guarantees that they are consistently independent in the interests they serve.

As these points suggest, there is much to be said for general-purpose authorities when it comes to governing the future. Democratic governments and parliaments can count this amongst their merits, to different degrees according to the constitutional details of a particular polity. They can look at public policy in the round. Technocratic authorities, by contrast, are structured in such a way as to inhibit the general view. What is presented by their advocates as a source of long-sightedness is rather what shortens their horizons.

Implications

While these remarks do not imply that technocratic decision-making will always be flawed in the ways described, they suggest tendencies to short-termism are built in. They point to a credible thesis of *technocratic myopia*, one that challenges the assumption that expert authority enjoys particular advantages in how it approaches the future. How might defenders of technocracy respond?

One rejoinder would be to highlight that the technocratic principle can be rendered in different ways – that problems of organisational structure, for example, can be corrected by institutional design, or that a narrow focus on a few quantitative metrics can be remedied by embracing a more flexible, qualitative and creative outlook. Those who look to central banks as a potential source of progressive policymaking in connection to climate change may point to the capacity of technocratic institutions to reinvent

themselves, redefining their authority and reinterpreting their mandate. Institutional innovations such as the inclusion of dissenting opinions in the public communication of technocratic rule might be adopted to tighten its relation to public opinion and make its policymaking seem less dogmatic (Pamuk, 2021, chap. 3).

It is important to emphasise, however, that the points made in the previous section are logically interdependent. The organisational structures of technocracy are constrained by the epistemological methods it relies on, which in turn are constrained by the legitimacy basis that underpins it. The compartmentalisation of authority, for instance, is part and parcel of the technocratic ideal – or at least, it is if we want to consider technocratic authority *alongside* democratic authority rather than as a substitution for it. A focus on a limited set of quantitative indicators is a function of the need to keep non-democratic authority in check, and the more it deviates from this model the more it tends towards unaccountable rule. To highlight the place of disagreement and judgement in technocracy makes good sense when expertise is offered on an advisory basis, but works less well when power has been transferred to technocrats on the understanding that there is a stable consensus on the ends and methods in question. In general, the more flexible and adaptive technocratic institutions become, the more they are liable to compromise the temporal consistency on which their claims to long-sightedness rest.

Clearly one can make arguments for technocracy which are unrelated to its future horizons, much as Brennan (2016) makes the case for ‘epistocracy’ (cf. Vibert, 2007). Such an approach would sidestep some of the concerns about consistency and might permit a stronger case for the place of independent authorities in public life. Historical models of technocracy on the left, whether Keynesian or Soviet, may hold some lessons in this regard, insofar as they were supported by different kinds of reasoning. But to the extent that the argument for technocracy rests on its regard for the future and its capacity to act on this, the points made in the previous section are not so easy to remedy by institutional design.

Advocates of technocracy might argue that we should focus not on particular institutions but the qualities of the system as a whole. While individual technocratic authorities might be prone to myopia, they might nonetheless exert a beneficial effect on other actors – technocratic and/or political – and contribute to long-sightedness overall. Let us set aside the empirical evidence that might question this, for example to do with the effects of central-bank independence on the policymaking of elected governments (Aklin & Kern, 2021; Aklin et al., 2021). A system in which technocratic agencies offered *advice* to other authorities, without seeking to implement their own recommendations, is indeed one that might deliver deliberative advantages at the systemic level. But to the extent that experts are authorised to make policy themselves, the qualities of the system as a whole will directly reflect the strengths and weaknesses of their input.

Perhaps the most straightforward rejoinder for defenders of technocracy would be to say that, for all its faults, it is more desirable than the alternatives. Whatever tendencies to myopia its institutions may display, the myopia of democratic institutions is worse. It may be said, for instance, that while technocrats may struggle to *successfully pursue* long-term policies, at least they *have regard* for long-term concerns. In their intentions at least, they are better attuned to the bigger picture. While the points of the previous section should put even this relative assessment in question, it is enough here to note

that the relative advantages of technocratic institutions should be clear and pronounced if they are to be the basis for transferring powers from democratic institutions. Democracy may well display tendencies to short-termism, but there are good reasons to see it as having intrinsic value, for its contribution to political liberty and equality (Rostbøll, 2015). The technocratic alternative has to be *considerably* superior if one is to think of conceding this ground.¹³

For the same reason, one should be wary of inferring that, if both technocracy and democracy have myopic tendencies, only some third option will do. A Hayekian might conclude from the preceding discussion that one should fall back on the unregulated market, either on the grounds that it can be no worse, or that it is a system whose self-correcting mechanisms amount to an alternative form of long-sightedness. Likewise, an advocate of monarchy or dictatorship might argue that only the authoritarian rule of an individual, unencumbered by public opinion and rigid expertise, can combine a long-term perspective with the flexibility required to advance it (rather, perhaps, as Tocqueville feared). Again one may highlight that democracy's intrinsic value puts the burden of argument firmly on the side of those advocating for an alternative. In the absence of compelling such arguments, the proper response to notions of democratic myopia is to explore ways to make democracy more future-regarding.

While that is beyond the scope of this article, the categories we have been using give a steer to what it might mean to make democracy more attuned to the future (see also White, 2024, chap. 8; Moore and Mackenzie chapters in Mackenzie et al 2023). In terms of *legitimacy basis*, one implication of the above is that elected representatives should be wary of seeking to bypass public opinion. One of the distinctive features of democratic authority is that it has many opportunities to engage with the wider public. While this is typically seen as an impediment to long-term policymaking, it is also the case that long-term projects are unlikely to be successful if they lack public support. As Gramscians have long understood, real political change requires an effort to remake the political commonsense. The shaping of public preferences through persuasion and debate is arguably one of the most important future-regarding interventions that public authorities can make. This carries implications for *epistemological methods*. Agents of electoral democracy such as political parties are set up to be lasting communities of the like-minded, defining themselves not so much by quantified targets as by general values and principles, things which can be revised and reinterpreted as circumstances change. *Organisationally*, they are well suited to adopting a general rather than compartmental view. Tied to institutions whose remit is broad, they can bundle issues together into a larger programme and sustain its pursuit over time. Democracy contains the resources for long-sightedness, in other words, however poorly they may be deployed at present.

Democracy also provides ample scope for incorporating expertise into policymaking. Partisanship and expertise tend to be conceived as opposites, but there are ways they can be integrated. What one might call *partisan expertise* is expertise developed within the parameters of certain political commitments – to values such as equality or sustainability, for instance. Even where parties are not themselves the generators of this expertise, they can be key nodes in the broader networks that produce it, and conduits for its entry into policymaking and public discourse.¹⁴ There are also institutional innovations to be considered, such as the creation of new forums of contestation that pit different bodies of

expertise against each other (Pamuk, 2021, chap. 4). Such an approach promises to recast expertise as the stuff of disagreement and public debate. In such ways democracy can benefit from specialised knowledge without depriving itself of its powers.

To query the technocratic alternative is not to invalidate such goals as trying to 'green' the policies of independent authorities. In a world where technocratic institutions are powerful and well established, it makes good sense to contest their actions in this way, seeking to broaden the range of factors they incorporate into policy. But this should not prevent us from asking the more fundamental question of whether they should have those powers in the first place.

Conclusion

Policymaking is always entwined with the future, whether in its explicit ambitions or its unintended effects. Consciously or otherwise, public authorities can prioritise the near future of the coming months and years, or they can prioritise a longer future of decades and more. Aside from the questions of moral philosophy this raises – whose interests to prefer, and on what grounds – it raises questions of institutional makeup. What kinds of authority can be expected to have regard for the longer future and to successfully pursue goals for it? Since its emergence in the modern world, many have seen democracy as ill-suited to this. Comparing real-world democracy against an ideal of technocracy, they find the latter more to their taste. Without calling for democratic institutions to be scrapped, they suggest powers be ceded to independent organs more blessed with the longer view.

Technocratic institutions have been a major beneficiary. Central bankers have been granted policymaking powers on the grounds that their independence from the electoral cycle lets them pursue long-term objectives. The assumption is that they can see and act on the future without bias and distortion. These arguments need more scrutiny than they get. Examining the empirical record of technocracies to date will be part of that, but such an approach will track impure forms of technocracy that have been compromised by contextual factors. It is important to think theoretically about what one can expect from technocracy at its best. This article has sought to initiate an analysis of this kind, looking at the legitimacy basis of technocracy, the epistemological methods it relies on, and the organisational structure it is embedded in.

As I have argued, there are good reasons to speak of *technocratic myopia*. It is not just that technocrats sometimes fall short of the claims to long-sightedness made of them, but that this is directly bound up in some of the core features of technocracy. One can expect it systematically to fall short, not just when it is failing but when it is working as it should. Transfers of authority to technocratic institutions should therefore be viewed sceptically, certainly when advocated on temporal grounds. They weaken democracy for poor reason, depoliticising large areas of public policy and leaving the expertise that informs it unchallenged. This is especially relevant as the conventional definitions and boundaries of expertise are challenged by climate change and other emerging threats.

If one of the problems of the present is that technocrats have too much power, perhaps a more insidious one is that political representatives are prone to ape them. With only a touch of exaggeration, one may say that today's politicians behave like technocrats.

They ask to be judged on their technical competence rather than their capacity to enlist people to a long-term cause. Too often they embrace a managerial ethos and seek to insulate themselves from public opinion, even where their powers are not formally outsourced. If there is something to the charge of technocratic myopia, it is a message that should be heard not just by experts themselves but by the elected officials who pose in their clothes.

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Notes

1. Tocqueville also hinted at these institutional pressures for short-termism: de Tocqueville (2000/1835, p. 172).
2. Defining a long-term challenge as one that ‘leads to substantial adverse effects for at least a human generation of 25 years or [one whose] remedy would take an equally substantial amount of time’: Sprinz (2009, p. 2). Even problems whose effects are very long-lasting – notably climate change – tend to permit a structural response within a matter of decades.
3. Only sometimes, of course, will this reliably be an indicator of long-sightedness; sometimes it may be an indicator of the opposite.
4. Alesina and Tabellini (2008, p. 434): ‘Bureaucrats tend to care more about the long run consequences of policies, compared to politicians, for two reasons. First, often bureaucrats are appointed for longer than electoral cycles, precisely to avoid short-termist policies. Second, even when bureaucrats have short terms of office, the blame for myopic policies may reach and hurt them later on. The reason is that bureaucrats care about their professional reputation in the eyes of their peers. This gives bureaucrats a strong incentive to focus on the long term goal.’
5. The futurist and cultural theorist Alvin Toffler, in his famous 1970 book *Future Shock*, offered some critical remarks about how ‘technocratic planning is *short-range*’ and how ‘technocrats

- suffer from myopia. Their instinct is to think about immediate returns, immediate consequences' (Toffler, 1970, pp. 449, 458). But he did little to explore why this should be so, and his conception of technocracy was a more general one extending to executive power in general rather than independent institutions based on expertise.
6. Of course, where such a consensus exists, it might seem that democratic institutions are well able to govern themselves. For their critics, the point is that elected officials have incentives to undermine that consensus, for example so as to distinguish themselves from their opponents.
 7. See, for example, the recurrent challenges brought against ECB policy by the German *Bundesverfassungsgericht*.
 8. The danger being that technocrats with multiple missions prioritise one over the others in ways that are hard to assess. Tucker notes nonetheless (2018, p. 122) that multiple missions may be needed sometimes, hence the need for clear constraints.
 9. Note also that the problem may be compounded by technocracy's reliance on a narrow band of expertise and a desire to maintain internal consensus for the sake of public authority: possible groupthink or the suppression of disagreement can mean the dangers of 'monomania' go overlooked (cf. Smith, 2021, p. 78).
 10. Consider, for instance, studies that suggest central bank independence and an emphasis on price stability can drive economic inequality and higher unemployment, either because of the direct effects of the policy or because of how it changes the policies of elected authorities: see Aklin and Kern (2021) and Aklin et al. (2021).
 11. For the ECJ granting the ECB this latitude, see Opinion of the Advocate General Cruz Villalon, 14 January 2015, Case C-62/14.
 12. Distinguishing two kinds of expert, the intuitive 'fox' and the formulaic 'hedgehog', Tetlock suggests that the former outperforms the latter when making predictions, but that neither meaningfully out-performs an informed layperson.
 13. Note that even those seeking to rebut the 'democratic myopia thesis' can be too quick to concede that independent institutions are superior in this respect. See the Conclusion to Mackenzie et al. (2023, p. 260).
 14. Consider the model of the 'Green New Deal', developed widely in democratic contexts through the 2010s.

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