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The Rise of Technocratic Ministers in Italy: Theories and Explanations

L'ascesa dei ministri tecnocratici in Italia: teorie e spiegazioni

Antonino Castaldo and Luca Verzichelli

Abstract

The rise of technocratic ministers in Italy represents an increasingly relevant phenomenon: in fact, it has been evident since the early nineties and has reached its apex during the 2010s. To assess the growing presence and significance of technocrats in Italian governments, we consider three major arguments: the role of critical junctures (crises), the impact of formateur's strength, and the relevance of long-term systemic factors (complexity of policy-making; party decline). Thanks to an updated dataset on the Italian case (2001-2023) and employing a fresh taxonomy combining partisanship and expertise, the article provides a more accurate picture of ministers' profiles in Italy, highlighting a role of expert ministers greater than expected and identifying a hierarchical relation among causal factors: critical junctures and formateur's strength may represent proximate causes of the growing presence of technocratic ministers in Italy; however, these factors are heavily influenced by long-term causes such as the party decline.

L'ascesa dei ministri tecnocratici in Italia rappresenta un fenomeno sempre più rilevante: infatti, è evidente sin dai primi anni Novanta e ha raggiunto il suo apice durante gli anni 2010. Per valutare la crescente presenza e importanza dei tecnocrati nei governi italiani, vengono considerati tre argomenti principali: il ruolo delle critical junctures (crisi), l'impatto della forza del formateur o capo del governo e la rilevanza dei fattori sistemici di lungo periodo (complessità del processo decisionale; declino dei partiti). Grazie a un dataset aggiornato sul caso italiano (2001-2023) e utilizzando una nuova tassonomia che combina appartenenza partitica e competenza, l'articolo fornisce un quadro più accurato dei profili dei ministri in Italia, evidenziando un ruolo dei ministri esperti maggiore del previsto e identificando una relazione gerarchica tra i fattori causali: le critical junctures e la forza del capo dell'esecutivo possono rappresentare cause prossime della crescente presenza di ministri tecnocratici in Italia; tuttavia, tali fattori sono fortemente influenzati da cause di lungo periodo come il declino dei partiti.

Keywords

Italy, Ministers' selection, Technocracy, Party government, Party decline
Italia, selezione dei ministri, tecnocrazia, governo di partito, declino dei partiti

Introduction

The growing relevance of non-partisan ministers (and, in particular, the expansion of the proportion of technocrats in government) has recently attracted a growing scholarly attention. This phenomenon, part of a broader trend that has emerged in several countries (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 2001; Dowding and Dumont 2009; Costa Pinto et al. 2018; Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Caramani 2020), has been particularly relevant in Italy after the end of the golden age of the *partitocrazia* (i.e., Cotta and Verzichelli 2002; Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2012; Verzichelli and Cotta 2018; Castaldo and Verzichelli 2025). In fact, a preliminary summary of the main features of recent Italian governments (see Table 1 below) shows that technocracy has played a significant role in the government formation process in this country. Indeed, the presence of technocratic ministers has grown substantially over time, particularly during the last decade. This is true even if we do not consider the two fully technocratic governments (Dini 1995-1996; Monti 2011-2013) and the two technocratic-led governments (Ciampi 1993-1994; Draghi 2021-2022), which were established to cope with the consequences of different kinds of crises. Given these features, Italy stands out as a "typical" case (Seawright and Gerring 2008) for explaining the increasing selection of technocratic ministers in contemporary governments. It is particularly interesting because, during most of the so-called First Republic (1948–1992), Italy was considered a paradigmatic example of party government, with a very limited space for technocratic figures in the national executives, recruited only for some specific and policy-limited offices like administrative reforms. By contrast, during and after the crisis of the early nineties, Italy emerges, from a comparative perspective, as what can be defined as the promised land of technocracy. Hence, in this article, we address the following research question: what accounts for the growing presence of technocratic ministers in Italian governments?

To address this research question, we rely on major contributions from both national and international literature on this subject. Comparative studies have proposed numerous arguments to explain this phenomenon. Despite several nuanced perspectives and specific formulations of similar causal factors, we argue that the following three arguments constitute an effective synthesis that incorporates most of the explanations offered by the leading scholars in this academic debate. A first argument concerns the causal role played by critical junctures (i.e., the 2008 financial crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak): complex scenarios may persuade political parties to step back from the main stage of government and rely on the policy expertise provided by technocrats to solve the most urgent issues (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Hallerberg and Wehner 2018; Wratil and Pastorella 2017; Bertsou and Caramani 2020).

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Other arguments have been elaborated to explain the growing presence and relevance of technocratic ministers. For example, several studies focused on the formateur's features: loyal non-partisan ministers may be selected by a strong formateur to deal with agency loss risks (Amorim Neto and Samuels 2010; Costa Pinto et al. 2018; Camerlo and Martínez-Gallardo 2018). A third type of determinant regards long-term and non-conjunctural factors. These are, for instance, the increasing complexity of policy-making, due to the challenges of globalization and the EU integration process, or the decline of a robust party-government model based on powerful party élites, which may have generated the need for expert ministers. The impact of these factors may have caused a more evident opportunity to select ministers without an intense link with a political party (Costa Pinto et al. 2018; Bäck et al. 2009; Caramani 2017; Roberts 2017; Dyson and Featherstone 1996).

In this article, after reviewing the evolution of the government formation process in contemporary Italy, which provides the context for our analysis, and the literature on ministerial selection that focuses on this case, we discuss the three arguments briefly described above, formulating general expectations. Thanks to a rich dataset on Italy (2001-2023) and by adopting a four-type taxonomy of ministers' profiles, we will attempt an exploratory analysis based on descriptive statistics that aims to make sense of the growing presence and relevance of technocratic ministers in Italian governments during the last two decades.

Government formations and ministerial selection in Italy

The process of government formation and ministerial selection in Italy is governed by the 1948 Constitution (Section III, Art. 92-94) and by long-established praxes, which assign a crucial role to the President of the Republic and other key actors, such as party leaders and institutional figures, at both formal and informal levels (Verzichelli and Cotta 2000; Verzichelli, 2009; Di Virgilio et al 2012; Russo 2015; Verzichelli and Cotta 2018).

While the formal procedure of government formation has remained unaltered since the early days of the republic, fundamental changes in the electoral rules and the party system have led to consistent modifications of the government formation process. During the period known as the «First Republic» (1948-1992), the electoral systems for both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Republic were based on proportional representation, yielding very similar outcomes in both chambers (Russo, 2015). The multipolar party system was very stable, with largely the same parties dominating the political landscape until the early 1990s. Due to the so-called *conventiones ad excludendum*, both the large Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the

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small but persistent Italian Social Movement (MSI, neo-fascists) were always excluded from government coalitions. Hence, between 1948 and 1993, Italian coalition governments always included the Christian Democrats (DC), which on average collected one third of the votes, along with smaller parties such as the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), the Social Democrats (PSDI), the Republicans (PRI), and the Liberals (PLI). Due to the peculiarities of the Italian political system, pre-electoral coalition agreements did not exist, and the processes of government formation and minister selection were essentially a post-election game dominated by leaders of the external party organizations. These leaders decided on the coalition agreement, the policy platform, the allocation of portfolios, the PM, and the ministers' list (Verzichelli and Cotta 2018). Party leaders usually preferred to remain out of government, a feature that contributed to the low degree of governmental stability despite considerable rate of élite continuity (Verzichelli and Cotta 2000). In conclusion, during the First Republic – regarded as the heyday of party government in Italy - political parties exerted almost total control over ministers' selection and government formation. Together with other non-conjunctural factors, the nature and strength of party government prevented the appointment of non-partisan technocratic ministers, with only marginal exceptions during the 1980s.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Italian political system underwent radical changes. The new mixed electoral system required that three-quarters of parliamentarians be elected in single-member districts under the plurality rule, while a proportional rule allocated the remaining 25 percent on a regional basis. In 2005, a new proportional system was adopted, with a majority bonus correction applied nationally for the Chamber of Deputies and regionally for the Senate of the Republic, which had the potential to produce significant differences in the composition of the two chambers that could theoretically complicate the process of government formation (Russo, 2015). Finally, the 2018 and 2022 general elections were held under a new mixed electoral system: one-third of parliamentarians were elected in single-member districts by plurality rule, while a proportional principle was used to elect the remaining two thirds. Concerning the party system, a dramatic crisis at the beginning of the 1990s led to the disappearance of most of the parties that had dominated the scene for about half a century. Despite the high fragmentation, between 1994 and 2013 the Italian party system became bipolar (Verzichelli and Cotta, 2000), with the right-wing coalition dominated by Silvio Berlusconi and a much more fragmented left coalition, later dominated by the Democratic party (Pd).[1] In the last three general elections (2013,

[1] This party merged in 2008 the main heir of the Communist party and the left Christian democratic faction.

2018, and 2022) the system has become tripolar due to the rise of the populist Five Star Movement (5Sm) which in 2018 collected around one-third of votes.

With regard to the minister selection, during the period often referred to as the «Second Republic» (1994-), the indication of the prospective PM before the elections became customary and, in some cases, the same leader also announced a team of potential candidates to specific ministries before the vote (Verzichelli 2009). This innovation allowed the use of ministerial selection as an electoral campaign strategy, which may have favored the appointment of technocratic ministers to signal to the electorate that, if elected, the new government would be run efficiently by experts. However, the actual selection of ministers remained mostly a post-election game even in the Second Republic. It is worth noting that during the Second Republic party leaders were directly involved in the government as PM or ministers. In 2013 and even more so in the 2018 general elections, the tripolarization of the party system, which signalled the crisis of major political parties, led to the absence of a clear winner among the pre-election coalitions, shifting the definition of parliamentary majorities, policy platforms and the candidate PM back to the post-electoral phase. Hence, the praxes established during the First Republic regarding government formation and minister selection were, to some extent, revived. The general elections of 25 September 2022 determined a situation bearing relevant similarities with the 2000s: the center-right coalition emerged as the clear winner, with an astonishing performance by *Fratelli d'Italia* (26%), whose leader, Giorgia Meloni, became the first female Italian prime minister and head of the most right-wing government in decades. However, no relevant changes were adopted regarding the rules and praxes of ministers' selection.

Reframing the puzzle: explanaining a growing technocratic presence

Comparative analyses of ministerial élites have often pointed out the peculiarities of the Italian case. Research focused on the golden age of Christian democracy (Zuckermann 1979; Calise and Mannheimer 1983; Dogan 1989) revealed a systematic connection between the importance of ministerial appointments and personal electoral legitimation (measured by preference votes in the lower chamber and by the relevance of the territorial district in the Senate). Another fundamental unwritten rule (Dogan 1989) was the geographical balance in the ministers' distribution: all the regions where the main governmental party was predominant had to be fairly represented in the cabinet. This feature was confirmed in the first decade of the post-Christian democratic era (Amoretti 2002), but became less relevant in the following period (Tronconi and Verzichelli 2023).

The consolidated practice that prevented the Christian Democratic leader from being directly involved in government resulted in a clear division of roles: while the general party secretary in charge was usually not appointed to the cabinet, other relevant faction leaders could occupy top ministerial offices (i.e. Minister of the Interior, Foreign Affairs, Defense), sometimes leaving the prime ministership to a secondary figure. Other members of a usually broad government were established politicians and senior parliamentarians,[2] who could climb the governmental ladder ranking thanks to their electoral connection and their proximity to a given faction leaders.

Such a mix of party rule and patronage potential enhanced the fundamental requisite of parliamentary career as the main element of ministerial selection (Dogan 1989), a principle that also applied to the minority of ministers representing smaller parties of the first republic. This rule began to break down at the end of the 1980s, when Italy's public finance conditions and the complexity of policymaking led party leaders to make room for non-partisan, experienced figures. A notable example from this period is Guido Carli, the former governor of the central bank, who served as Treasury Minister from 1989 to 1991 and led the negotiations for the Maastricht Treaty.

After the crisis of the First Republic, two «fully technocratic governments» (Dini in 1995 and Monti in 2012) emerged to cope with economic conjunctures following the failure of a political executive (in both cases, a government led by Silvio Berlusconi). Beyond these, two «technocrat-led partisan government» (McDonnell and Valbruzzi, 2014) were formed - in 1992 (Ciampi) and 2021 (Draghi) - representing, respectively, an absolute novelty in the Italian scenario and a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis coupled with the need to assure proper management of the EU recovery plan.

Several studies have focused on the new features of the Second Republic regarding the processes of government formation, ministerial selection, and, though to a lesser extent, the profiles of the new ministers (Cotta and Verzichelli 2002; Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli 2017; Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2012; Verzichelli 2006, 2009; Verzichelli and Cotta 2018; Improta 2021; Castaldo and Verzichelli 2025).

Analysing the process of minister's selection from the period before the Italian state's unification to the beginning of the XXI century, Cotta and Verzichelli (2002) identify several relevant diachronic changes in the profiles of Italian ministers. Their educational levels has progressively increased; changes in their social backgrounds were impressive, with the nobility and upper classes losing ground; a set of contex-

[2] The governmental personnel (ministers and junior ministers) during the period 1948-1992 presented an average rate of parliamentary experience higher than 95%. Moreover, the percentage of ministers having a junior ministerial experience was about 57%. The dataset presented in this article is developed by the COPEI project (CIRCaP Observatory on Political Elites and Institutions), at the University of Siena. As we will see later, this evident path of ministerial selection and circulation would have been much reduced after 1992.

tual factors such as the role of the monarchy, delayed the rise of professional politicians. Finally, the impact of political competence, primarily parliamentary seniority, gradually increased. This elite-centred analysis, conducted over the long cycle of the First Republic (1946-92), confirms the conclusion previously reached by Calise and Mannheimer (1983) and Dogan (1989). Due to the robust control of political parties over the entire system of government (*partitocrazia*), partisanship became the dominant feature among Italian ministers. As a result, party background and political experience were decisive conditions for a ministerial career. Future ministers usually acquired political competence by being elected at the local, regional, and parliamentary levels; then, they were socialized at the executive level through junior minister positions. At the party level, the process was similar, with positions to be held in local, regional, and national bodies. During the 1980s, the emergence of a small but significant number of technocratic ministers, especially in delicate positions such as the Treasury, was a relevant novelty, anticipating changes that would emerge with the breakdown of *partitocrazia* during the 1990s. After this important historical watershed, a more varied range of ministers' profiles appeared: a few technocrats were selected for their expertise, along with «personal loyalists» directly recruited by the PM. These figures complemented the traditional «party watch-dogs» representing their parties' within governing coalitions (Cotta and Verzichelli 2002). Recent studies have confirmed this assertion (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2012; Verzichelli and Cotta 2018)"title":"Da un ceto politico all'altro. Il mutamento nel personale legislativo italiano (1992-2001.

The analysis proposed by Verzichelli and Cotta (2018) conducts a long-term evaluation of the presence and selection of non-partisan (technocrats) ministers and a diachronic comparison between the First Republic (1948-1992) and Second Republic (1992-2014). The main findings of this study can be summarized as follows. Inspired also by a definition of non-partisan ministers based on the absence of parliamentary experience or political activism of any kind at any level, a taxonomy identifying four ministers' profiles is proposed: 1) 'insider party minister' include those with at least 5 years of parliamentary experience and who have held a national party office at least once; 2) 'other political combination' refers to ministers with parliamentary experience and a party office at any level; 3) 'outsider minister' are those holding party or elected offices at the local level along with a parliamentary background; 4) 'pure technocrats' are defined as ministers with no political or public office experience at any level. The number of 'pure technocrats' began to increase in the last decade of the First Republic and grew more rapidly during the Second Republic, reaching 29,8% of all ministers and even rising in core executive positions. This descriptive analysis shows a broader selection of non-partisan ministers in minority governments during

the First Republic, in oversized governments during the Second Republic, and in caretaker governments during the entire period. In the Second Republic, center-left governments appear to select more non-partisan ministers compared with center-right executives. Hence, the comparative analysis stresses an enlargement of the 'pool of ministrables,' which testifies to the decline of both political parties and the party-government model. However, the presence of pure technocrats tended to be limited to specific types of government (i.e. caretaker governments), specific ministerial positions (i.e. finance minister), or particular junctures during which expertise became a regular feature of ministerial selection. Building on the literature, Verzichelli and Cotta identify five main factors that explain the increasing choice of non-partisan ministers in Italy: the decline of political parties and the party-government model; the impact of macro-institutional variables (i.e. the President of the republic) (Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006); the process of "presidentialization of government" (Poguntke and Webb 2005); the growing policy-making complexity (Hallerberg and Wehner 2018); the role of supranational arenas and institutions (i.e. EU) (Johansson and Tallberg 2010). The empirical analysis showed that all these factors were at work in the Italian case and that the prevalence of some could be detected when each government was considered: in the Monti government, for example, the supranational dimension played a crucial role, while the selection of non-partisan in the Berlusconi governments stresses the role of presidentialization.

The factor attracting the attention of the most recent literature on ministers' profiles in Italy has, therefore, been the growing qualitative and quantitative relevance of non-partisans, technocrats in particular. Table 1 provides preliminary information on the features of Italian governments during the Second Republic and shows, in its last column, data regarding technocratic ministers. Beyond the technocratic and technocratic-led governments established to address specific political, economic, or health crises, the percentage of technocratic ministers constantly increased during the Second Republic, despite a significant reduction in the number of portfolios.

Table 1 - Governments and Technocratic Ministers in Italy since 1992.

Government	Begin-end	Parliamentary majority	N portfolios	Cabinet ministers (N)[a]	Technocratic ministers[b]
Amato I	1992-1993	Centrist	21	25	1 (4%)
Ciampi (tech)	1993-1994	Centrist	20	29	11 (37.9%)
Berlusconi I	1994-1995	CR	20	26	2 (7.7%)
Dini (tech)	1995-1996	Oversized coal.	20	19	19 (100%)
Prodi	1996-1998	CL	20	20	2 (10%)
D'Alema I	1998-1999	CL	20	25	1 (4%)
D'Alema II	1999-2000	CL	20	25	0 (0%)
Amato II	2000-2001	CL	20	24	2 (8.3%)
Berlusconi II	2001-2005	CR	15	23	4 (17.4%)
Berlusconi III	2005-2006	CR	15	24	2 (8.3%)
Prodi II	2006-2008	CL	18	25	3 (12%)
Berlusconi IV	2008-2011	CR	12	21	0 (0%)
Monti (tech)	2011-2013	Oversized coal.	13	18	16 (88.9%)
Letta	2013-2014	CL+CR	14	21	4 (19%)
Renzi	2014-2016	CL+Centre	14	16	3 (18.8%)
Gentiloni	2016-2018	CL+Centre	14	18	2 (11.1%)
Conte I	2018-2019	Hybrid Coal.[c]	14	18	6 (33.3%)
Conte II	2019-2021	Hybrid Coal.[d]	14	21	5 (23.8%)
Draghi (tech)	2021-2022	Oversized coal.	14	23	7 (30.4%)
Meloni	2022-	CR	15	24	6 (25%)

Sources: Castaldo and Verzichelli (2025).
[a] Members of the cabinet at the beginning of the mandate. Prime Ministers are excluded.
[b] The percentage is calculated from the number of cabinet ministers appointed.
[c] The hybrid coalition supporting the Conte I government was formed by 5SM and the League.
[d] The hybrid coalition supporting the Conte II government was formed by 5SM and the Democratic Party

After analysing the increasing relevance of non-partisan and technocratic components within Italy's ministerial elite, we move to the potential determinants of the phenomenon, presenting three of the major arguments elaborated by the literature to explain the appointment of technocratic ministers. Even a short review like the one proposed above clearly demonstrates the relevance of Italian democracy as a case in point to match alternative or cumulative explanations of technocracy. In particular, the grid of factors to be considered for the Italian case can be summarized as follows:

Turbulence and crisis. As shown by recent literature (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Costa Pinto et al. 2018; Bertsou and Caramani 2020), critical junctures trigger the selection of technocratic ministers. The basic argument is that political parties cope

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with complex scenarios by abdicating some of their prerogatives as an élite selectorate (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Wratil and Pastorella, 2017). Several explanations for the growing selection of technocrats during critical junctures have been proposed: the need for greater policy expertise (Alexiadou, 2018; Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Costa Pinto et al. 2018; Bertsou and Caramani 2020); signaling a more efficient approach to policy-making (Kaplan, 2017); a greater policy commitment (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019); and easier allocation of blame and quicker firing of ministers (Wratil and Pastorella 2017; Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán 2015). Most of these explanations tends to emphasize the specific technocratic nature of the non-partisans figures selected; in this perspective, it is not expertise *per se* that is considered, but only expertise provided by a professional figure with no link to political parties. Hence, according to this scholarship, the following expectation may be formulated: the appointment of technocratic ministers should increase in time of turbulence and crisis. To assess this expectation, we identify for the Italian case two major crisis situations - the 2008 financial and economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020) - which allow us to divide the last two decades into the following periods:

1. Pre-2008 crisis (2001-2008);
2. Recession period (2008-2013);
3. Post-economic depression phase (2013-2020);
4. Covid pandemic crisis (2020-2022);
5. Post-pandemic phase (2022-).

Strength of formateurs. A second scholarship has focused on the formateur's role, and the liaison between the formateur and its ministers (Amorim Neto and Samuels 2010; Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006; Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009; Costa Pinto et al. 2018; Camerlo and Martínez-Gallardo 2018; Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán 2015). This literature emphasizes the non-partisan nature of the ministers selected, as the central focus is not on their expertise but on their personal connection with the formateur. Hence, the selection of non-partisans, intended as a superset of technocrats, represents a mechanism implemented by strong formatuers to mitigate agency loss risks: formateurs with a certain degree of independence decide to appoint non-partisan ministers personally linked to them, very often in crucial portfolios, to ensure full loyalty. Based on this scholarship, we can formulate the following expectation: strong formateurs will select more non-partisans in core portfolios. A narrow list of core portfolios, including the ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, Treasury/Finance, Economy and Economic Development, is considered (Martocchia Diodati and Verzichelli 2017). Due to the magnitude of his electoral successes and his coalition's structure, only

Berlusconi (particularly in two moments: 2001 and 2008),[3] and to some extent Giorgia Meloni, may be considered «full formateurs». Most of the other prime ministers in our sample appear to be somehow constrained in selecting their ministers. Three leaders - Prodi (centre-left coalition leader in 2006), Renzi (secretary of Pd and PM in 2014), and Meloni (president of Fdi and PM in 2022) should be compared to Berlusconi, given their preminent position of leader. However, each of these leader had to face relevant constraints: Prodi guided a tiny parliamentary majority (at least in the Senate), leaving him little room of maneuver as a coalition leader without a party. Renzi had just conquered his party when he assumed the chief executive's seat, and had to cope with a parliamentary majority dominated mainly by other leaders (including the other factional leaders of his parties). Finally, Meloni had to assure both domestic and international actors, as her government was widely seen as the most right-wing Italian executive in decades - a populist, Eurosceptic government representing a danger for Italian democracy and the EU.

Long-term non-conjunctural factors. We can, in this context, refer to a number of non-conjunctural factors often indicated as determinants of the selection of experts (and technocrats) in Italy and other European countries (Costa Pinto et al. 2018; Bäck et al. 2009; Caramani 2017; Roberts 2017). In particular, we consider the following

- The organizational decline of parties, which is of course an *usual suspect* variable, especially in Italy where it has probably reached the most remarkable peak of the whole Western European scenario (Calossi et al. 2018).
- The *vincolo esterno* derived from European integration, which has been widely debated (Dyson and Featherstone 1996). We assume that supranational decisions have impacted not only policymaking content but also the selection of top-decision makers in key policy domains;
- the transformation from an era of *big government* (Rose 1984) to increasing policy demands under limited resources. This longitudinal process particularly affects the welfare sector, which absorbs a considerable amount of public spending. Italy had to reduce its universalistic (but costly and underperforming) welfare system, prompting an urgent need for complex reforms that required expertise and cost-benefits analyses (Ferrera 1993).

Based on this brief description, we stress that this scholarship places greater emphasis on the expertise possessed by the selected minister, which may even be provided by a partisan figure: what is crucial is the possession of specific expertise to manage highly technical portfolios. Hence, the following expectation is formulated: the appointment

[3] See also Castaldo and Verzichelli (2020).

of expert ministers in portfolio areas where technical expertise is most needed should increase over time due to the incremental effect of long-term dynamics. Here, technocrats are considered a subset of experts, which also includes the specialist profile that combines both expertise and partisanship (see Figure 1 below). To identify technical portfolios, we rely on a classification of policy areas distinguishing portfolios in charge of economic policies (i.e., Economy, Economic Developments, Regional Affairs, Agriculture), social policies (i.e., Education, Health, Culture), macro policies (i.e., Defense, Interior, Justice, Foreign Affairs), and coordinating functions (i.e., Relations with the Parliament, Planning): we consider technical portfolios to be those in charge of economic and social policies.

A final note should be added regarding the various definitions of ministers without an intense link to a political party considered by the three strands of scholarship discussed above. Given the different emphases of the arguments proposed by the literature to explain the growing selection of this type of minister, we will partially differentiate our target in the empirical analysis. Hence, we will focus on: 1) technocrats, where the lack of party link is associated with technical expertise acquired outside the political arena (turbulence and crisis expectation); 2) non-partisans, where the emphasis is on the absence of any connection with a political party (strength of formateurs expectation); 3) experts, where the focus is only on expertise, regardless of its origin - whether acquired within or outside the political arena (long-term non-conjunctural factors expectation). However, while we make these distinction for analytical purposes and use them in the empirical analysis, we will follow recent literature in primarily using the technocratic label, which is also, to some extent, 'central,' as it is included in both of the other categories (see Figure 1 and the illustration of the taxonomy below).

Addressing the rise of technocratic ministers: the analysis of the Italian case

To assess the abovementioned arguments on the Italian case and account for the growing selection of technocratic ministers in Italy, we use two major tools. The first is a new dataset on Italian ministers profiles (2001-2023), which is part of a collective effort within the South European Government Project coordinated by Marcelo Camerlo (Institute of Social Science, University of Lisbon) and Juan Rodriguez Teruel (University of Valencia): it includes 12 governments comprising 252 ministers. The second tool is a new taxonomy of ministers profiles, presented in Figure 1, and based on two key dimensions: partisanship and expertise (Camerlo 2019; Castaldo and Verzichelli 2025). The former is not defined solely by simple party membership; the link with a political

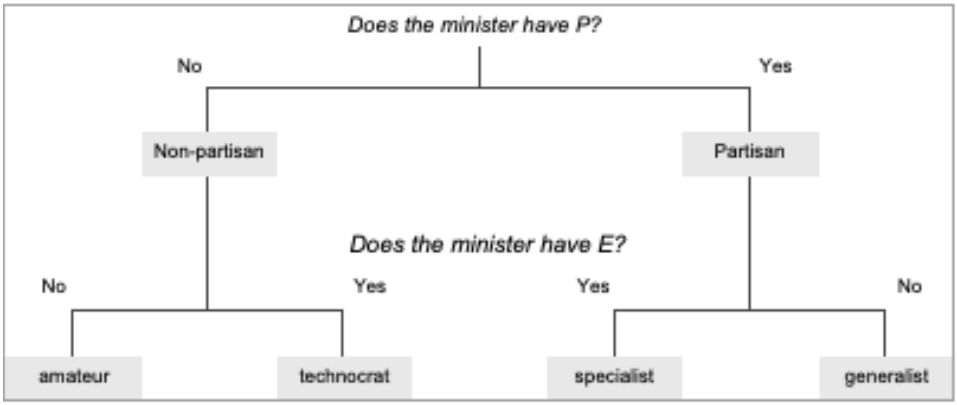
party must be continuous and exclusive, as the time spent in the same party (at least five years) constitutes a crucial prerequisite for acquiring the partisan skills/resources that bind a member to that party. Moreover, the notion of partisanship here also rests on the presence of a party that can assure and encourage party cohesion: it should be a well organized party (Cotta 2000: 58). A more precise distinction between partisans and non-partisans emerges from the operationalization of partisanship adopted in this study (membership of at least five years in a structured party).[4] Expertise refers to the technical skills related to the portfolio. Several aspects should be stressed here. For example, an expert minister must possess skills that are pertinent to the field of the portfolio: being an expert neurosurgeon does not qualify one as an expert finance minister. Moreover, expertise can be acquired through pertinent education and/or related public/private professional experience (at least 5 years). Based on the possession of one, both or neither of the two properties on which the taxonomy is built, we can clearly identify four distinct types of ministers:

- amateurs: ministers with neither a strong link to a political party nor relevant expertise in a given portfolio;
- technocrats: ministers who possess expertise directly related to the portfolio, which was acquired outside the political arena;
- specialists: ministers with a strong party link who, thanks to their careers within the party, have acquired specific expertise related to the portfolio;
- generalists: classic partymen selected for their party affiliation but lacking portfolio-specific expertise (see Figure 1 below).

Beyond these four profiles, we will also consider two aggregate or hybrid profiles needed to address the issues emerged in this research: the expert profile, which includes all ministers possessing expertise (technocrats and specialists); and the non-partisan profile, which includes those ministers with no intense link to a political party (technocrats and amateurs).

[4] See also Camerlo and Castaldo (2024).

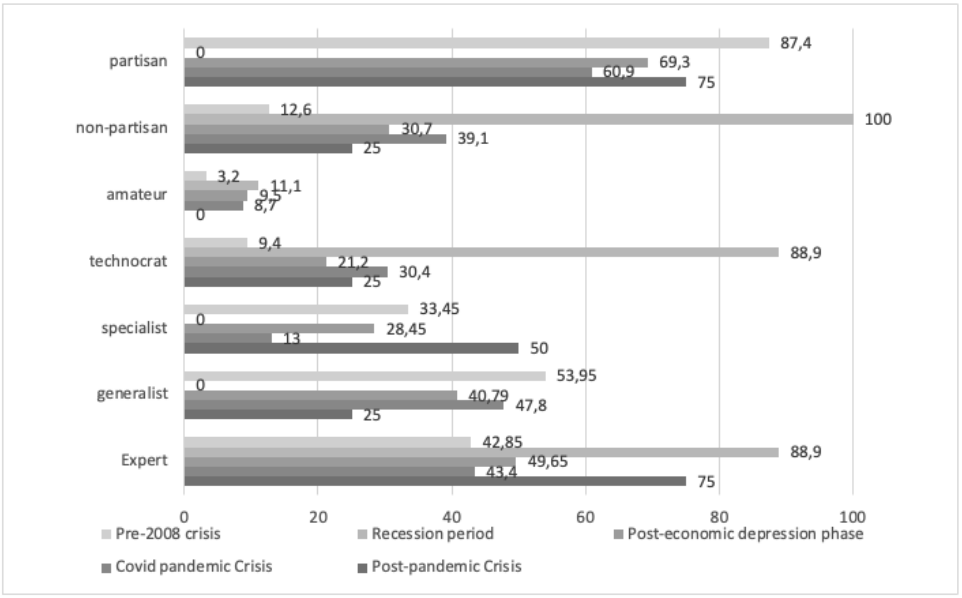
Figure 1. Minister profile taxonomy.



Source: Camerlo (2019).
Note: P indicates Partisanship; E indicates Expertise.

Figure 2 allows us to address the expectations of the first strand of literature discussed in the previous section, which examines the causal link between periods of turbulence and crisis and the selection of technocratic ministers. The consolidated idea (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Costa Pinto et al. 2018; Bertsou and Caramani 2020) that critical junctures, such as economic and/or political crises, trigger the selection of technocrats seems to apply to the Italian case. The consequences of the 2008 financial and economic crisis and the Berlusconi IV government's inability led to the fully technocratic Monti government (2011-2013). Similar processes occurred after the turbulences of the 1990s, when the Dini (technocratic) and Ciampi (technocratic-led) governments were formed. The Draghi (technocratic-led) government (2021-2022), generated by the COVID-19 crisis, follows the same path, though with an important peculiarity: while technocratic governments are usually intended to shield political parties from the political risk associated with implementing retrenchment policies, the Draghi government focused mainly on redistributive policies generated by the EU recovery plan.

Figure 2. Minister profiles in five sub-periods (%).



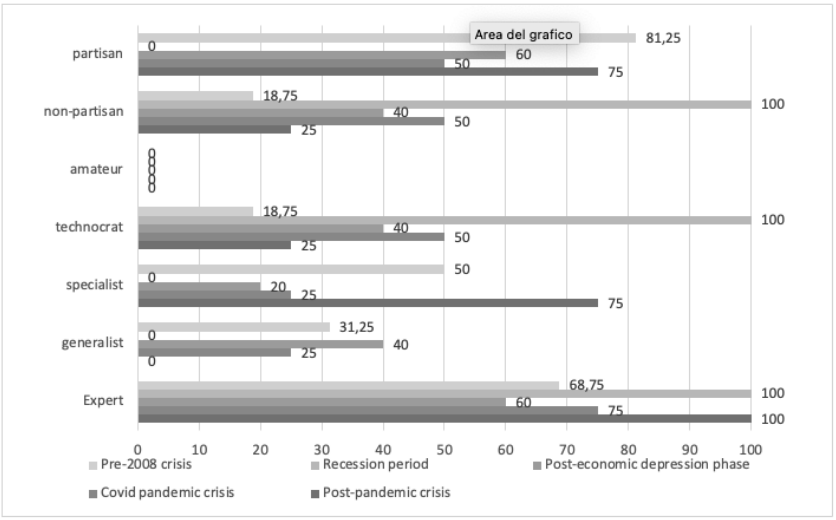
Source: adapted from Castaldo and Verzichelli (2025).

Several relevant points should be stressed. First, the technocratic profile shows an astonishing increase from the pre-2008 crisis to the post-economic depression phase, passing from an average of 9,4% to 21,2%. Before the 2008 financial and economic crisis, their presence was episodic, with the Berlusconi IV government selecting no technocrats at all. In the post-economic depression phase, however, this profile consolidated, constituting on average over one-fifth of all ministers. A further distinction in the post-economic depression phase can be observed: oversized coalition governments (Letta, Renzi, Gentiloni, 2013-2018) composed of traditional mainstream parties show an average of 16,4% of technocratic ministers, whereas 'populist' governments including the Five Star Movement (Conte I and II, 2018-2021) reach an astonishing average of 28,55%. The percentage of technocrats selected by the pandemic crisis government (Draghi 2021-2022), at 30.4%, is consistent with its technocratic-led nature. Finally, the 'back to politics' government formed by the center-right coalition led by Giorgia Meloni (2022-), includes, counterintuitively, a consistent number of technocratic ministers (25%). Second, the expert profile, which aggregates both technocrats and specialists, has become the largest group of ministers in the post-economic depression phase. The pandemic and post-pandemic governments present counterintuitive outcomes in this regard: in the technocratic-led

Draghi governmnet, generalists (partisans without related expertise) are the most numerous group, whereas in the back-to-politics Meloni government experts dominate. However, we should also highlight the opposite tendency within the expert profile. The dominance of specialists before the 2008 crisis (three-to-one ratio) disappeared after the crisis, yielding a more balanced distribution between specialists (28.45%) and technocrats (21.2%). This tendency to substitute the expertise provided by party members with non-partisan experts – a powerful sign of party decline – is coherently present in the Draghi government (13% to 30.4%) and absent in the back-to-politics Meloni government (50% to 25%). These processes highlight, on the one hand, a gradually but constantly growing demand of expert ministers in Italy over the last two decades and, on the other hand, a shift from experts with an intense party link (specialists) to those with no party affiliation (technocrats), both of which indicate party decline. Finally, amateur ministers have gradually become a small but consolidated reality in Italy.

Through Figure 3 we assess the expectation of the second selected argument regarding the causal connection between formateurs' strength and the greater selection of non-partisans in core portfolios (Amorim Neto and Samuels 2010; Amorim Neto and Strøm 2006; Costa Pinto et al. 2018). Regarding this perspective, despite Italy may provide only a weak assessment, since in the period under examination only Berlusconi may be considered a strong formateur, our analysis allows us to stress interesting points. In fact, two counterarguments emerge. First, in his governments, Berlusconi selects only one non-partisan among core-executives. Second, when considering all ministers, Berlusconi did select several non-partisans personally connected to him. However, both among core-executives and in our full sample, almost all the other, comparatively weaker, formateurs selected more non-partisans. Hence, despite the limitations of our analysis, the Italian case does not appear to support to the argument proposed by this strand of literature.

Figure 3. Core-executive ministers in five sub-periods (%).



Source: adapted from Castaldo and Verzichelli (2025).
Note: core-executive includes Ministers of the Interior, Foreign Affairs, Treasury/Finance, Economy and Economic Development.

Regarding the longitudinal perspective, most tendencies emerged in the full sample appear to be confirmed; however, several relevant points can be highlighted. First, expertise is crucial for the selection of core-executive ministers in all phases considered (see the expert profile in figure 3). However, there is a radical change in the kind of expertise between the pre-2008 crisis, where specialists dominate, and the subsequent phases, which show the exponential rise of technocrats. The only exception is the Meloni government (2022-), which selected twice as many specialists as technocrats and may signal the beginning of a new political cycle.

The longitudinal evolution of minister profiles in different portfolio areas (Table 2) allows us to assess the expectations of the third argument presented in the previous section regarding the link between the growing selection of expert ministers in technical portfolios and long-term non-conjunctural factors. As mentioned in the previous section, this strand of literature emphasize the need for expertise directly related to portfolios where technical expertise is more needed. It is less relevant if this expertise is acquired through a professional career outside the political arena or provided by a minister with an intense link to a political party who has developed that specific expertise within the political arena.

The first row of Table 2 presents the figures for technical ministries including economic and social portfolios. The data reveal a rising trend in the appointment of technocrats to these portfolios during our period of analysis, supporting the expectations of the scholarship considered here.

Table 2 - Minister profiles by portfolio areas in five sub-periods (%)

		Amateur	Technocrat	Specialist	Generalist	Expert (tech+spec)	Non-partisan (tech+ama)
Technical portfolios (eco+soc)	Pre-2008 crisis	3.6	12.5	32.1	51.8	44.6	16.1
	Recession period	10	90	0	0	90	100
	Post-eco. depr. phase	8.5	25.4	18.6	47.4	44	33.9
	Covid pandemic crisis	12.5	25	12.5	50	37.5	37.5
	Post-pandemic phase	0	26,7	53.3	20	80	26.7
Economy	Pre-2008 crisis	3,6	14,3	39.3	42.9	53.6	17.9
	Recession period	16.7	83.3	0	0	83.3	100
	Post-eco. depr. phase	1.8	22.6	21.5	54	44.1	24.4
	Covid pandemic crisis	12.5	25	12.5	50	37.5	37.5
	Post-pandemic phase	0	0	57.1	42.9	57.1	0
Social	Pre-2008 crisis	3.6	10.7	25	60.7	35.7	14.3
	Recession period	0	100	0	0	100	100
	Post-eco. depr. phase	15.6	28.6	22.1	33.6	50.7	44.2
	Covid pandemic crisis	12.5	25	12.5	50	37.5	37.5
	Post-pandemic phase	0	50	50	0	100	50
Macro	Pre-2008 crisis	0	6.6	33.4	60	40	6.6
	Recession period	0	100	0	0	100	100
	Post-eco. depr. phase	8.8	22.1	36.6	32.4	58.7	30.9
	Covid pandemic crisis	0	50	0	50	50	50
	Post-pandemic phase	0	28.6	42.9	28.6	71.5	28.6
Coordination	Pre-2008 crisis	14.2	0	42.9	42.9	42.9	14.2
	Recession period	100	0	0	0	0	100
	Post-eco. depr. phase	0	0	85.7	14.3	85.7	0
	Covid pandemic crisis	0	0	100	0	100	0
	Post-pandemic phase	0	0	100	0	100	0
Finance Minister	Pre-2008 crisis	0	25	75	0	100	25
	Recession period	0	100	0	0	100	100
	Post-eco. depr. phase	0	71.4	14.3	14.3	85.7	71.4
	Covid pandemic crisis	0	100	0	0	100	100
	Post-pandemic phase	0	0	100	0	100	0

Source: adapted from Castaldo and Verzichelli (2025).
Note: *Pre-2008 crisis* includes ministers appointed before 2008; *Recession period* includes the ministers between 2008 and 2013; *Post-eco. depr. phase* includes ministers appointed between 2013 and 2020; *Covid pandemic crisis* includes those appointed between 2020 and 2022; *Post-pandemic phase* includes those appointed in 2022.

In terms of governments, it is worth noticing two opposite and counterintuitive cases: the technocratic-led Draghi government, which selected only the 37,5% expert ministers in technical portfolios, and the 'back to politics' Meloni government, which significantly exceeded the post-economic depression phase average in this regard (75%). In terms of profiles, we observe opposite tendencies - already noted in core-executive portfolios - between technocrats and specialists: the former shows an impressive increase, rising from 12,5% to 25,3%, while the latter experience a sharp decline (from 32,1% to 18,6%). Regarding policy areas, another noteworthy point emerges: surprisingly, the economic area is the only area in which expert ministers decrease and generalist increase from the pre-2008 crisis to the following phase. Moreover, table 2 demonstrates that expert ministers are not limited to technical portfolios; rather, they are broadly distributed across all policy areas and often represent the first profile. This suggests that expertise has become crucial for ministers' selection in Italy, not only in portfolios requiring technical knowledge but also in other areas where such appointments may help address long-term challenges beyond the increasing complexity of policy-making – for example, as a coping mechanism to respond to the legitimacy crisis of political parties.

Conclusion

In this article, we have proposed a detailed descriptive analysis of the evolution of ministers' profiles in Italy during the first two decades of the 21st century, focusing on technocrats intended as a sub-set of both non-partisan and expert ministers.

Through a longitudinal analysis of ministers profiles based on a new taxonomy and a fresh dataset, we assessed three of the major explanations provided by the literature to explain the growing presence of technocratic/non-partisan/expert ministers in contemporary governments, focusing on the Italian case. Based on a rich descriptive analysis, we argue that the first argument regarding critical junctures, according to which political parties select more 'technocrats' as a strategy to deal with critical scenarios, is, to a large extent, supported in the Italian case. The Monti technocratic government represents a reaction to the inability of the Berlusconi IV government to deal with the consequences of the 2008 financial and economic crisis. Similar explanations may be offered when analysing other technocratic and technocratic-led government of the 1990s, and even to interpret the formation of the Draghi executive, during the pandemic period.

The second argument – stressing that strong formateurs tend to select more 'non-partisans' (a superset of technocrats, including also amateurs) in core portfolios

to deal with agency loss risks – could only be partially assessed based on our descriptive analysis of the Italian case, as only Berlusconi can be considered a strong formateur during the period examined. However, our analysis highlights some noteworthy observations. For example, while Berlusconi did appoint a few non-partisan ministers with whom he had personal relations and friendship, he selected only one of them for a core portfolio, leaving the other crucial portfolios to partisan figures chosen through negotiation among coalition parties. Moreover, nearly all the other, comparatively weaker, formateurs in our sample a higher number of non-partisan ministers.

According to the third strand of literature considered in this article, long-term factors as the growing complexity of policy-making and the decline of political parties are expected to stimulate a gradual increase in the selection of 'experts' (a superset of technocrats, including specialists) for technical portfolios. Based on our descriptive analysis, we can conclude that the Italian case appears to support this expectation.

At least for the Italian case, long-term factors – particularly the decline of political parties – appear to possess a stronger explanatory power for the phenomenon at the core of our research. While critical junctures and the strength of formateurs may be considered more proximate causes of the increased selection of technocratic ministers in Italy, party decline and other long-term factors have had both a direct impact on the rise of technocrats and an indirect causal influence on the other two factors. Numerous pieces of evidence support this claim. First, the evolutive tendencies observed across all profiles can be linked to the decline of political parties in Italy. In fact, the decrease of partisans, the exponential rise of technocrats and amateurs, the dominant position of experts and the replacement of expert partisans (specialists) by experts without partisan linkages (technocrats) – especially in core-executive portfolios – are all factors that support the proposition grounded in the idea of party decline.

Second, critical junctures are a phenomenon that may lead - and in Italy did lead - to a greater selection of technocratic ministers. However, this is neither the only nor the 'natural' coping mechanism adopted by political elites to deal with critical scenarios, which usually rely on other institutionalized mechanisms, such as calling new elections or forming grand-coalition governments, aimed at increasing the legitimacy of the body tasked with making difficult decisions. To oversimplify, we could say that the stronger political parties are, the more they will rely on institutionalized coping mechanisms, whereas the weaker they are, the more they will abdicate and delegate responsibility to technocrats to resolve the crisis. Italy provides both examples: during the 1970s, to deal with domestic terrorism, strong Italian political parties came together in the 'national solidarity' governments, while all technocratic governments that have emerged since the 1990s have been the result of party abdication in the face of critical events.

The formateur's strength in the Italian case is linked to another factor that is connected both to the growing selection of technocrats and to party decline: the rise of new parties. Berlusconi's Forza Italia emerged as a reaction to the crisis of the Italian party system and selected the higher percentage of technocrats in 2001 (17,8%) if compared with the non-technocratic governments of the 1990s formed by established parties. However, the more Forza Italia underwent into a process of party institutionalization, the fewer technocrats were selected (0% in Berlusconi's last government). The rise of the 5SM, which represents the more emblematic symbol of party decline in Italy during the last decade, led to the same outcome: all the governments that included this new party featured an astonishingly high percentage of technocrats.

In conclusion, our findings emphasize the role of a critical factor that may have driven the selection of technocratic ministers in Italy: the need for greater legitimacy in a context of party decline. Since the 1990s - and to a lesser extent in the 1970s and 1980s - Italian political parties have suffered from chronic delegitimization, reaching a peak during the last decade. Parties have repeatedly turned to technocratic appointments as a coping mechanism to address their diminished legitimacy with domestic actors (e.g., the President, interest groups, and the electorate) as well as international ones (e.g., the EU and global markets). This pattern is evident in the formation of technocratic governments since the early 1990s, which represent cases of party abdication in response to acute crises. The Monti government, for instance, emerged as a response to the inability of weak political parties to manage the 2008 financial and economic crisis, prompting a reliance on technocrats. Moreover, the significant technocratic presence in post-2013 governments (Letta, Renzi, Gentiloni) may reflect parties' efforts to regain legitimacy following their abdication during the Monti government. Similarly, the high number of technocrats in 5SM-led governments (Conte I and II) served as a strategy to bolster legitimacy amid inexperience. Finally, party decline and the need for greater legitimacy came together in the formation of the Draghi technocratic-led government. For the first time, political parties (partially) abdicated their role as ministerial selectorate, allowing for the formation of a technocratic-led government to implement redistributive rather than retrenchment policies. Moreover, the solution of a technocratic-led executive, led by such a broadly acclaimed figure, can be seen as a tool used by weak parties to reassure the EU that Italy would properly manage the EU recovery fund.

A final note regards the most recent Italian government formed by Giorgia Meloni (2022), which may have interesting consequences. After a long list of grand and/or heterogeneous coalition governments, and a technocratic-led executive, several features allow identification of this as a 'back to politics' government and, perhaps, the beginning of a new cycle in which political parties regain some of the space lost during the

last decade. In fact, as during the 1990s and the 2000s, the Meloni government is based on a pre-electoral, homogeneous centre-right coalition with a common programmatic platform and is led by a professional politician who selected three-quarters of her cabinet among long-time members of the ruling parties. Our analysis further strengthen this perspective and highlights several interesting peculiarities. For example, the distribution within the expert profile shows a clear dominance of specialists (50%) over technocrats (25%), which goes against the trend of substituting the expertise provided by partymen with that of technocrats as stressed by our analysis. Moreover, most of the selected technocrats were very close to ruling parties. However, another set of interesting, and to some extent contradictory, peculiarities should be stressed. For example, the Meloni government still selects a good number of technocrats, ranking second in our sample (behind the Conte I government) if the technocratic executives are excluded. Moreover, and more importantly, in terms of the selection of expert ministers, it ranks second in our sample, behind only to the fully technocratic Monti government, and selects almost double the number of expert ministers compared with the Draghi technocratic-led executive. In conclusion, if the Meloni government can be rightfully considered as a 'back to politics' executive, it has yet to be seen if it will represent the beginning of a new 'political' cycle, given the presence of similar, though more limited, features connected with the decline of political parties and the party government model.

Future research based on the findings of our exploratory analysis could follow several directions. One promising avenue is to conduct cross-national comparative studies that apply the taxonomy adopted in this article to other democracies facing similar crises and party decline. Such research could examine whether similar patterns of technocratic appointments emerge in countries with different institutional frameworks or electoral systems. Another suggestion is to deepen the analysis by employing mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative data with qualitative case studies. This could provide richer insights into the decision-making processes behind ministerial selections, particularly during critical junctures. Additionally, scholars might investigate the long-term implications of technocratic governance on policy outcomes and democratic legitimacy. Finally, it would also be valuable to explore the interplay between public perception of expertise and political accountability, assessing whether technocratic appointments enhance or undermine trust in government.

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