

# TECHNICS IN POWER THE TECHNOCRATS' RISE TO GOVERNMENT IN EUROPE<sup>1</sup>

Pedro Silveira

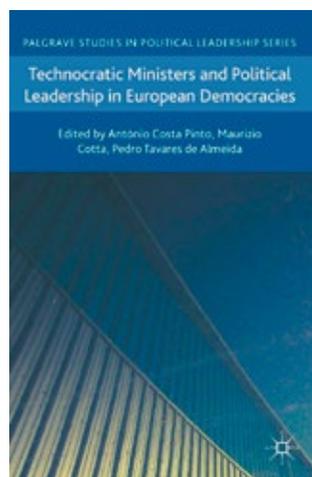
ANTÓNIO COSTA PINTO  
MAURIZIO COTTA  
E PEDRO TAVARES  
DE ALMEIDA (EDS.)

**Technocratic  
Ministers  
and Political  
Leadership  
in European  
Democracies**

London,  
Palgrave Macmillan,  
295 pages

When Max Weber<sup>2</sup> warned against the danger of ministers losing their fields of action to technicians – insofar as the latter are equipped with greater know-how –, he was far from guessing that they might also, *en masse*, get hold of ministerial offices. In fact, today, at the same table of the council of ministers sit side by side individuals with vast political experience and other whose sole political experience consists of their place at the said table. In many countries – including Portugal –, governments are no longer composed almost exclusively of career politicians, seeing that politically inexperienced ministers have ceased to be an exception arousing curiosity. However, little is still known about this phenomenon of technocrats rising to power. Has it become widespread in Europe? Which factors account for its occurrence? These are the two questions that guide the book *Technocratic Ministers and Political Leadership in European Democracies*. In each chapter, the authors aimed to provide answers to them, with one or more specific countries in mind – Slovakia, Spain, France, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Czech Republic, Romania,

Sweden and Turkey. The selection of a small number of cases made it possible to undertake a thorough analysis of each one of them, as well as a comparative discussion of the final results. Given that, as we shall expand on further ahead, a plurality of explanatory factors is contemplated, this option proved to be fruitful. Each author was able to take into account the domestic context and to compare the explanatory



weight of each factor, leaving for the editors the provision of a global overview. As such, it was up to António Costa Pinto, Maurizio Cotta and Pedro Tavares de Almeida, authors with an extensive body of published work on the recruitment of ruling elites in Europe, to use the first and last chapters to provide the reader with a theoretical framing and a comprehensive view of the results.

### **CURSUS HONORUM: THE END OF AN ERA?**

This work falls into the latest literary trend of (re)problematizing the results pertaining to ministerial recruitment. In fact, many of the authors have already given pioneering contributions to efforts in answering the question “Who rules?” in their own countries, and now have set out to delve deeper into those results and to understand their underlying causes. In this context, the focus on the study of the ministers’ technocratic profile is especially relevant. It made possible, on the one hand, to identify a specific dependent variable, and, on the other, to make connections with literature on government, public policies and the quality of democracy. It has enabled, moreover, a reassessment and updating of classical studies on political elites in Europe<sup>3</sup>.

Traditionally, these studies pointed to a valorisation of the *cursum honorum*, that is, of a gradual and predefined political trajectory as a requirement for being nominated for a government position. Ministers could only aspire to the office after a long political career, particularly within the party and in the parliament. However, if in some countries (such as the United Kingdom and Belgium) those political credentials remain

essential, in many others they have lost relevance. Thus, all over Europe a less politicised and more specialised ruling elite has emerged, including, besides celebrities, individuals possessed of differentiated technical competencies – the technocrats.

This book conceptualises technocrat ministers as those who, before their first nomination, had not been members of parliament or party leaders (pp. 19-20). Following this operationalisation, the authors verify that the generality of the analysed countries exhibits a very significant number of these ministers (reaching 58% in Turkey between 1950 and 2011). However, from this point onwards, results become not so linear. On the one hand, in France, Romania, Italy and Sweden, the proportion of technocrats is much lower, not exceeding 16% in France (between 1958 and 2014). On the other hand, there seems to be no univocal trend in the rising number of technocrats. Although this cannot be ascertained in the long run except in a small number of cases (France, Italy, Sweden, Turkey, Portugal and Spain), the growth trend is only clear in Italy and Portugal. The chief explanation that has been suggested for these differences stems from the fact that countries with fewer technocrats have older democracies (except for Romania), wherefore the data refer to a period during which participacy was higher following the implantation of the democratic regime.

### **PARTY GOVERNMENT WITH NO PARTISAN NOMINATIONS?**

In order to theoretically frame and problematise these results, the authors employ

the theory of democratic delegation, which sees democracy as a chain of delegation connecting electorate, parliament, government and public administration<sup>4</sup>. Even though this theory is not used systematically by all authors (take, for instance, the difference between the chapter on Sweden and the chapter on France), it is present as background in all the chapters and it is extremely useful in that it accounts for the relevance of the profile of ministerial agents in the concrete functioning of democracy. Furthermore, the notion of party government, which emphasises the crucial role of the party in the parliament and in the government, is used as a theoretical framework.<sup>5</sup> According to this model, in order to influence these institutions (and to ensure the link with the voters' choice), the party has three key mechanisms at its disposal: nominations, policies and sponsorship. As far as the first of these mechanisms is concerned – nominations –, the book makes it possible to empirically estimate to what extent (and why) are parties no longer decisive when it comes to choosing ministers.

In this context, a variety of factors is considered, which, both on the side of supply and that of demand in ministerial recruitment, may be detrimental to the logic of party government. On the side of supply, we can find the factors that generate the need for a specific kind of ministers. These factors are external to the government and have to do with the government system, the electoral system, the occurrence of economic crises, European integration and the age of the democracy. On the side of demand, we have the factors influencing

the existence (or nonexistence) of a certain type of minister. Among these are the type of government (colligation or minority and majority or minority), government and parliament fragmentation, personalisation of government and party decline. The relative importance of each one of them and its explanatory capacity differ from country to country. Of, for instance, the economic crises have proved to be decisive in increasing the number of technocrats in Italy, they have not had, however, the same impact in Portugal or in Spain.

#### **TECHNOCRATS IN EUROPE: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

A global look into the national results leads to the conclusion that personalisation of government and party decline are the most relevant explanatory factors. The former applies to the trend of empowering the chief executive at the expense of other ministers.<sup>6</sup> The latter reflects the parties' organisational and ideological decline, which has an impact on their ability to attract specialised cadres to their ranks.<sup>7</sup> These conclusions reveal that factors which are internal to the government (that is, on the side of supply) prevail, particularly those operating in the long run. However, results are admittedly not conclusive and a comprehensive explanation for this phenomenon remains outside our grasp (p. 285).

One fragility that may be at the origin of this conclusion concerns the typology employed. As recognised by the editors, the dichotomy between politically experienced and politically inexperienced ministers may be restrictive, insofar as

some individuals showing hybrid profile combine political and technical competencies. Moreover, each of these poles is composite: a technical profile does not necessarily equate to a specialised profile, and a political profile is not exhausted in partisan and parliamentary experience. The use of different typologies would have enabled a reassessment of the same data and perhaps more striking results.

As such, bearing in mind the two initial objectives – charting the phenomenon and its explanation –, the book is more successful in accomplishing the former. In any case, it offers many clues for the further development of the latter. Thanks to the wealth of available data – both nationally and comparatively –, besides providing a number of answers, it also raises a variety of questions. In this sense, like any other “instant classic”, this book surprises the reader time and again with innovative

or still under-developed lines of research. For instance, the differentiation of technocrats according to their post-government careers, the length of their stay in government, their status and the duties of their office are some of the issues addressed – in a number of chapters backed by data – which would merit specific studies. Moreover, if the technocratic profile of the ministerial elite is seen in the scope of this book as a dependent variable, its treatment as an independent variable is left open-ended. That is to say, the consequences of the growing number of technocrats in government is left unexplored. Has accountability been damaged? Has confidence in government institutions suffered changes? Has their performance been improved? This is, all this considered, one of the great accomplishments of the book at hand: it treads its path and points towards the horizon. **RI**

---

**Pedro Silveira** PhD in Political Science by Universidade Nova de Lisboa (2019), with a thesis on the secretaries of State of the Portuguese government. He is a researcher at IPRI-NOVA and teaches at Universidade da Beira Interior and

Universidade NOVA de Lisboa. His chief research interests include political elites, government and political leadership.

> IPRI-NOVA | Rua de D. Estefânia, 195, 5.º Dt.º, 1000-155 Lisboa | [pedro.silveira@fcsih.unl.pt](mailto:pedro.silveira@fcsih.unl.pt)

## ■ ■ ■ ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This book review was first published in *Relações Internacionais*, n. 63, September 2019.

<sup>2</sup> GERTH, Hans H.; MILL, C. Wright, eds. – *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Nova York: Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 232.

<sup>3</sup> Por todos, BLONDEL, Jean; THIÉBAULT, Jean-Louis, eds. – *The Profession of Government Minister in Western Europe*. London: Macmillan, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> STRØM, Kaare – «Delegation and accountability in parliamentary democracies». In *European Journal of Political Research*. Vol. 37, N.º 3, 2000, pp. 261-290.

<sup>5</sup> BLONDEL, Jean; COTTA, Maurizio, eds. – *The Nature of Party Government: A Comparative European Perspective*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> POGUNTKE, Thomas; WEBB, Paul, eds. – *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Compara-*

*tive Study of Modern Democracies*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> DALTON, Russell J.; WATTENBERG, Martin P. – *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

## ■ ■ ■ BIBLIOGRAPHY

BLONDEL, Jean; COTTA, Maurizio, eds. – *The Nature of Party Government: A Comparative European Perspective*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

BLONDEL, Jean; THIÉBAULT, Jean-Louis, eds. – *The Profession of Government Minister in Western Europe*. London: Macmillan, 1991.

DALTON, Russell J.; WATTENBERG, Martin P. – *Parties without Partisans: Political*

*Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

GERTH, Hans H.; MILL, C. Wright, eds. – *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Nova York: Oxford University Press, 1946.

POGUNTKE, Thomas; WEBB, Paul, eds. – *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

STRØM, Kaare – «Delegation and accountability in parliamentary democracies». In *European Journal of Political Research*. Vol. 37, N.º 3, 2000, pp. 261-290.