# The Rise and Fall of Technocratic Democracies: Unstable Majorities and Delegation to Technocrats

Gabriele Gratton  
UNSW Business School

Jacob Edenhofer*  
University of Oxford

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## Abstract

We study a stylized model of the rise and fall of technocratic democracies: democracies that delegate policymaking to unelected technocrats. In our model, technocratic democracies arise when majorities fear losing power in the future while expecting their preferred policies to be maintained by technocrats. Such institutional arrangements can be stable, but shocks that increase the persistence of majorities or of the policies implemented by technocrats can plunge democracies into cycles of reforms, oscillating between more technocratic and more majoritarian institutions. Drawing on three case studies—central bank independence, fiscal rules, and climate policy—we illustrate how our model helps explain recent trends in industrialized democracies and how technocratic-majoritarian cycles can heighten the risk of democratic backsliding.

# 1 Introduction

In modern liberal democracies, the tension between majority rule and minority rights (Holmes, 1997) has increasingly manifested itself in the form of a tension between *majoritarian* and *technocratic* government. The former refers to policymaking being decided by the majority of citizens (one-person, one-vote), whereas the latter refers to state bureaucrats, experts, and judges enforcing the rule of law, establishing protections of individual and minority rights, and implementing economic and social programs aimed at maximizing societal welfare. This tension emerged not least because the last two decades of the 20th century saw an increase in the prevalence and power of technocracies in advanced industrialized democracies. A sizeable literature, in political science and economics, documents that institutional and sometimes constitutional reforms, especially since the 1990s, have narrowed the purview of majoritarian policymaking, with the proliferation of independent central banks a prominent example (Dincer et al., 2024; Fernández-Albertos, 2015; Garriga, 2025; Romelli, 2022). Yet, the "technocratization" of liberal democracy is not confined to economic policymaking. It is also evident in what has been dubbed the "judicialization" of politics: the growing power of (sub-)national, international, and supra-national courts (Hirschl, 2011; Manow, 2024; Pavone, 2022; Voeten, 2020).

This wave of technocratization coincided with the breakthrough and consolidation of populist political forces in almost all advanced industrialized democracies (Berman, 2021; Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022; Mudde, 2007). That observation has provided the impetus for two bodies of work: one that points to technocracy as a cause of populism (Canovan, 2002; Caramani, 2017; Koch, 2024; Manow, 2020, 2024; Russell Hale and Patterson, 2025; Schäfer and Zürn, 2021; Zürn, 2022), and another one that examines the effects of populism on technocratic institutions, such as the independence of central banks, the judiciary, or the bureaucracy (Bellodi et al., 2024a; Funke et al., 2023; Gavin and Manger, 2023; Goodhart and Lastra, 2018; Gratton and Lee, 2024a; Monnet, 2024). This literature emphasizes that populism is, at least in part, characterized by the promise to rein in or eliminate technocratic institutions and, in doing so, to return power to what populist leaders argue is the "majority". That is, populists view technocratic structures as super- or even counter-majoritarian devices (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2023, 2025) established by a liberal elite to implement policies that the "real people" (that constitute the "majority") oppose.

Populists' rejection of technocracy contrasts sharply with prominent strands of the democratic theory and political economy literatures that highlight the importance of technocracy for *making representative democracy work*. A central reason—as political economists

have long argued ([Dixit, 1998](); [Drazen, 2002](); [Jacobs, 2011](); [Kydland and Prescott, 1977](); [Lindvall, 2010](); [Miller and Whitford, 2016](); [Persson and Tabellini, 2002]())—is that delegating decision-making authority to unelected technocrats helps democracies mitigate the problem of time-inconsistent policymaking, or the lack of credible commitment.[1] By removing decisions from the whims of myopic voters ([Bisin et al., 2015]()) and their representatives, delegation to technocrats allows democracies to realize the gains from policies with short-term costs and long-term benefits. Populists, by contrast, are willing to forgo credible commitment in exchange for returning greater power to voters. They advocate a majoritarian conception of democracy, where voters exert direct control over policymaking and constitutional protections.

In this paper, we propose a stylized theoretical framework to better understand the tension between technocratic and majoritarian elements of liberal democracy. This framework links the rise and fall of technocratic democracies to (changes in) two societal characteristics: the majority coalition and the relative importance of the most salient policy issues for the majority and minority groups, respectively. Examining the interplay between these two parameters allows us to identify the conditions under which majorities delegate policymaking to technocrats—which we conceptualize as agents implementing policies that maximize collective welfare (see Section [2]())—or choose to retain full control over policymaking themselves. Because technocrats maximize collective welfare, the stability of the relative importance of the most salient policies for majority and minority groups determines the stability of the policy implemented by technocrats.

In equilibrium, the parameters of the model determine which of three different long-term regimes emerges. At two extremes, the polity is either a *stable technocratic democracy* or a *stable majoritarian democracy*. When majorities are volatile and the policies chosen by technocrats have sufficiently differential effects over time so that in one period the majority is advantaged and in another period it is disadvantaged, all ephemeral majorities are lured into establishing a technocratic democracy, where technocracy serves as insurance against the loss of their majority status in the future. This induces a stable technocratic democracy. When majorities are more durable, on the contrary, all majorities prefer more majoritarian institutions, giving rise to a stable majoritarian democracy. When technocratic policymaking is sufficiently stable—the effects of these policies tend to favor the same group or interests in different periods—majorities favored by technocracy will delegate policymaking to technocrats as intertemporal insurance, whereas dis-

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[1]Time-consistency refers to governments' ability to stick to the promises made at a previous point in time, even when deviating from the promise would generate short-term benefits. Regular elections, combined with a myopic electorate, often entail incentives for governments to shift resources away from policies whose benefits accrue over the long haul toward policies whose benefits are smaller, but more immediate.

advantaged majorities will want to return to a majoritarian democracy. This gives rise to *technocratic-majoritarian cycles*, with majoritarian reforms followed by technocratic ones and vice versa.

In technocratic-majoritarian cycles, technocratic democracies rise when the majority is worried about losing its majority status, while believing that social welfare would be maximized by its preferred policy, even if it were to become a minority. For example, a majority or the coalition comprising it (a "majority coalition") may be in favor of protecting the rights of a minority or implementing climate mitigation policy. Such a majority may well be concerned about losing its majority status, but also be confident that technocratic cost-benefit calculations justify its favored policy. To protect future policy-making from the (welfaristically sub-optimal) choices of future majorities, it may prefer to delegate policymaking to technocrats. But such a technocratic democracy is bound to fall when new majority coalitions come to power that do not share the view of welfare-maximizing technocrats. Because their preferences are frustrated by technocrats, they will implement institutional reforms that will return more power to the legislative, thus re-establishing a majoritarian democracy.

Importantly, technocratic democracies do not fall because they fail to provide policies that maximize welfare. In fact, they are "victims of their own success"—precisely because they successfully maximize social welfare, their policies can be at odds with the preferences of majorities that will attempt to replace the technocratic democracy with a majoritarian one.

Our formal analysis enables us to examine how shocks to the two parameters that characterize society can trigger transitions between regimes, as well as which policies may lead to more or less frequent technocratic-majoritarian cycles. We show that, under some circumstances, stable technocratic democracies can plunge into cycles of technocratic and majoritarian reforms as a result of social shocks that moderately increase the stability of majority coalitions or shocks that increase the stability of welfare-enhancing policies—or, indeed, a combination of both. Somewhat counterintuitively, our model implies that more stable societies might exhibit more institutional instability. Such instability results when majorities disadvantaged by technocratic policymaking are more likely to remain disadvantaged—and thus prefer a majoritarian democracy—while those advantaged by technocracy are very likely to continue benefiting from technocracy, but are sufficiently likely to lose their majority status—and thus prefer a technocratic democracy. Once a society enters majoritarian-technocratic cycles, however, marginal increases in social stability reduce the frequency of such cycles, as—mechanically—the type of majority in power is more likely to remain the same across periods.

We extend our model to show that technocratic-majoritarian cycles can emerge even when majoritarian reforms entail a risk of democratic backsliding. When society is sufficiently stable—meaning that both majoritarian and technocratic policymaking are expected to remain stable—a majority that does not share the views of welfare-maximizing technocrats may still prefer pro-majoritarian reforms. Crucially, this is the case, even if these come with the risk of autocratization. Our model demonstrates that institutions designed to safeguard democratic institutions against backsliding in any given period may, in the long run, heighten the risk of autocratization by pushing a stable technocratic democracy into recurring technocratic-majoritarian cycles that each carry a small risk of backsliding.

We illustrate the empirical relevance of our theory with three brief "case-studies", viz central bank independence (Section 4.1), fiscal rules (Section 4.2), and climate policy (Section 4.3). These cases demonstrate different ways in which technocratic-majoritarian cycles can unfold. We argue that delegating authority to technocrats serves as intertemporal insurance for a majority coalition whose preferences align with those of technocrats but who fear losing power to groups with opposing preferences. In the case of central bank independence, the center-right and conservative parties that gained power in the late 1970s and early 1980s in many industrialized democracies represented a low-inflation majority dissatisfied with the center left's prioritization of low unemployment. Similarly, fiscal rules protect those harmed by deficit spending and debt accumulation, while climate technocrats enabled the pro-climate majority to advance decarbonization more effectively than would have been possible otherwise. In each case, we maintain that the recalibration toward majoritarianism occurred, in part, because technocratic decision-making persistently favored one group over another, rather than alternating between groups over time. The resulting backlash against technocracy is often driven by populist parties, though, as borne out by the debate over Germany's "debt brake", mainstream parties also sometimes push to dismantle technocratic structures.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we draw on the relevant literature to provide a justification for our formal analytical approach and the conceptualization of the technocracy that underlies our model. In Section 3, we present and study the formal model. In Section 4, we present the three case studies mentioned in the preceding paragraph. In Section 5, we conclude by highlighting the potential costs of frequent technocratic-majoritarian cycles for the stability and resilience of democratic institutions.

# 2 A roadmap towards formalizing our argument

Our central objective is to analyze how majorities trade off the costs and benefits of delegating decision-making authority to unelected technocrats. To that end, we next situate our work in the relevant literature by discussing the intuition underlying the key elements of our stylized formal model.

## 2.1 Generations, dynasties, and constitutions

In the model, in each period—or *generation*—a majority of citizens determines the future institutional setting of the polity. The majority can choose between a *majoritarian* democracy, in which future policy decisions are made solely by the prevailing majority coalition, or a *technocratic* democracy, where policy decisions are made by technocrats. To forestall semantic confusion, note that we refer to each of these two institutional settings as *constitutions*, regardless of the (legal) instrument that is, in practice, used to establish these institutions.

We want to capture the idea that each generation of citizens is forward-looking in the sense that they care about the preferences of future citizens within the same social group. We call such a social group a *dynasty*. We can think of each dynasty as a group or identity.[2] Citizens belonging to or identifying with each dynasty have preferences over their period's policies and favor their dynasty in the future.

The essential element of our model is that the dynasties in each generation are uncertain about the future in two respects. First, they do not know for certain whether their dynasty will be a majority or a minority. Second, no dynasty knows for certain how important the salient policy issue will be for them in the future. Citizens in one generation have beliefs about the probability that, in the next generation, their group will remain the majority and that their preference intensity regarding the policy in the next period will be roughly similar to the current period—or if, instead, there will be a reshuffling generating a new majority coalition or a change in the policy dimensions that are salient in the future. Our focus is on how these two types of uncertainties drive constitutional choice.

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[2]For our formal analysis, it is immaterial whether one conceives of these groups as exogenously given (Achen and Bartels, 2017), potentially even manifestations of social cleavages (Bornschier et al., 2024; Kriesi et al., 2006), or the outcome of endogenous identity choice (Shayo, 2009).

## 2.2 Our conceptualization of technocracy

We model technocrats as experts who implement policies that maximize social welfare. In practice, we define social welfare in a Benthamite utilitarian sense: technocrats maximize the sum of individual utilities, with each individual being weighted equally. The essence of our theory would remain unchanged, however, if technocrats were to maximize other social welfare functions, such as Rawlsian or prioritarian ones (Adler and Norheim, eds, 2022). Our focus on Benthamite utilitarianism is both convenient analytically and consistent with its popularity among technocrats when they are obliged to conduct cost-benefit analyses.[3] Therefore, in our model, a technocratic democracy means that policymaking is delegated to unelected agents who are mandated to maximize social welfare, while the majority retains the authority to revoke technocrats' decision-making power.[4]

To further substantiate our conceptualization of technocrats, let us note that many of the arguably apolitical objectives that are used to justify delegation to unelected technocrats implicitly follow from some kind of welfare maximization or cost-benefit analysis. Such is the case, for instance, for the mandates of central banks, e.g., the *European Central Bank's* (ECB) mandate to achieve price stability or the Fed's dual mandate of price stability and full employment (Blinder, 2022). Another fitting example are U.S. regulatory agencies, which, since President Reagan's executive order 12291 in 1981, are explicitly required to perform cost-benefit analyses for their regulatory interventions (Sunstein, 2018, 2024). In these and other instances, the rationale for delegation is, at least partly, that technocrats are believed—for instance, because they are not subject to any (re-)election constraints—to be more adept at maximizing some objective or indicator that is deemed to be socially desirable.

Most importantly, we emphasize that our qualitative results do not hinge on the nature of technocrats' mandate. The key assumption is that technocrats do not simply implement the policy desired by the majority of citizens within a generation, instead also taking into account the preferences of "the" minority. Technocrats may well attach a greater weight to some minority's preferences (e.g. the highly educated) than to the majority. As a result, our political dynamics are consistent with other types of technocratic biases, including bureaucrats having more secure jobs than private-sector workers, different socio-economic backgrounds, policy priorities and values compared to voters, or being overconfident (Ashworth and Sasso, 2019; Backus and Little, 2020; Gratton and Lee,

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[3]This popularity may be partly to do with the simplicity of Benthamite utilitarianism implied by assigning each person the same weight. In addition, the equal-weighting assumption might also give the appearance of political neutrality in distributional struggles (Bueno de Mesquita, 2019; Popp Berman, 2022).

[4]This distinguishes a technocratic democracy from a full-blown technocracy in which voters *cannot* cannot change the technocratic structure.

2024a; Spenkuch et al., 2023). Overall, the social and political dynamics we describe below depend only on the idea that technocrats are more likely to choose policies that favor one coalition—which, because of the welfare-maximizing assumption, we identify with the "high-preference-intensity" coalition—than another.

Our conceptualization of technocratic democracy differs from other studies of political delegation (Aghion and Tirole, 1997; Gailmard and Patty, 2012; Halac and Yared, 2020; Huber and Shipan, 2011; Huber and McCarty, 2004; Ting, 2011; Turner, 2019). Most of these models point to technocrats' greater expertise,[5] relative to politicians and voters, as the central rationale for delegation. Delegation is then costly because it entails agency losses; the preferences of technocrats may differ from those of politicians and voters (their principals), allowing technocrats to exploit their informational advantage to implement policies that depart from what would be optimal for their principals. While these agency problems likely play an important role in the relation between our "majorities" and technocrats,[6] in the model we abstract from these agency problems by assuming that technocrats faithfully implement their mandate. This allows us to illuminate a rationale for delegation that has hitherto received much less attention: the trade-off between the majoritarian principle of democracy—where governing is expected to reflect the preferences of the majority—and a technocratic (or utilitarian) conception of liberal democracy—where policymakers are tasked with doing what is best for the electorate as a whole. Our model shows that such trade-offs may lead to backlash against technocrats, even in the absence of agency problems.

As emphasized by Gratton and Lee (2024a), informational asymmetries[7] can engender waves of populist reforms that lead to more majoritarian and less technocratic democracies. In their model, preference misalignment between the majority of voters and technocrats fuels voter demand for leaders who promise to "drain the swamp" by dismissing technocrats, even when such purges come at large efficiency costs for the voters.[8] Thus, our decision to abstract from informational asymmetries is best seen in conjunction with this work. We identify the conditions under which misalignment arises, leading to pro-majoritarian waves, and when, instead, greater alignment leads to pro-technocratic

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[5]A substantial body of work indicates that, on average, voters value expertise, though pro-technocratic attitudes tend to be more prevalent among highly educated individuals (Bertsou, 2022, 2025; Bertsou and Caramani, 2022; Ganuza et al., 2020; Lavezzolo et al., 2021, 2022; Marlier et al., 2024; Panel et al., 2024; Vittori et al., 2023). Yet, the appeal of technocrats declines as their preferences diverge more from those of voters (Beiser-McGrath et al., 2022), as agency models suggest.

[6]Another rationale for delegation, which is beyond the scope of our model, is to shift blame for contentious decisions to technocrats (Flinders et al., eds, 2024).

[7]See also Crutzen et al. (2024).

[8]See also Gailmard and Gailmard (2025).

reforms. In practice, when we identify the emergence of pro-majoritarian reforms, we implicitly assume that a process akin to that described in Gratton and Lee (2024a) is set in motion.

## 2.3 Technocratic democracies and populism

Our theory highlights one institutional dimension of liberal democracies that may cyclically cause tensions between different social groups. One group may want more majoritarian institutions, while the other may want more technocratic institutions. We noted that, in the context of the last decades, political movements promising majoritarian reforms have, more often than not, taken the form of populist parties and leaders. This is consistent with an anti-technocratic view of populism (e.g., Gratton and Lee, 2024a; Sasso and Morelli, 2021). As we discuss in Section 4.2, however, majoritarian reforms are not only associated with populist parties; they can also be advocated by mainstream parties.

Bellodi et al. (2024b) argue that what distinguishes populist movements is their commitment to simple—easily observable and comprehensible—policy platforms. In this sense, populists differ from technocrats because they commit to a specific policy rather than to a rule that, over time, ensures the implementation of welfare-maximizing policies. Yet, populists also differ from mainstream political parties. By committing to a single simple policy, populists can appeal to voters who distrust politicians' ability to devise policies—perhaps with the help of experts and bureaucrats—that adapt to changing and complex circumstances (see also Ghosh and Tripathi, 2012). In the majoritarian-technocratic dimension, populists are bound to occupy the majoritarian side, but they systematically differ from other democratic political movements in other dimensions, such as the simplicity of their policy platforms. Since our model abstracts from this and other relevant aspects of populist policymaking, focusing instead on its institutional dimension, it should be seen as complementary to other theories that shed light on the breakthrough and consolidation of populist forces.

## 2.4 Constitutional stability

Our work relates to (formal) democratic theory, especially the body of work that examines the stability (Barberà and Jackson, 2004; Gratton and Lee, 2024b; Lagunoff, 2009) and desirability of different types of constitutional arrangements (Ganghof, 2019, 2021; Ingham, 2019; McGann, 2006; Ober, 2017; Tsebelis, 2002, 2025). The fluidity of coalitions is typically seen as an important condition for the stability of majority rule: for minorities to abide by the rules and laws adopted by the majority today, they must believe that they

have a chance of being in power in the future (Dahl, 1989; Li, 2019).[9] The logic of our model is related, but different. Delegation to technocrats becomes attractive when the majority fears that it will be in the minority in the future. The stability of delegation, however, depends on technocratic decisions *not* (dis-)advantaging the same groups, viz. benefiting fluid majority coalitions.

Our analysis is also related to that of Maskin and Tirole (2004). They study the welfare implications of different decision-making arrangements, including representative democracy and delegating decision-making to unelected experts. In contrast, our focus is on the stability of different arrangements and the conditions that have to hold for a majority of voters to prefer one over the other for future decisions. In this sense, our work is closer in spirit to Gratton and Lee (2024b), who study the stability, or lack thereof, of constitutional constraints on the power of executives when voters may fear for their physical or economic security. Their focus is on the agency problem between voters and executives and the conditions under which voters prefer to give more or less power to executives, which crucially includes the ability to infringe upon established rights. We abstract from agency problems and focus on the conflict between different voting groups (or identities) as well as the conditions under which they prefer to delegate policymaking to experts to insure themselves against future changes of majorities. Finally, our model relates to analyses, particularly prominent in the U.S. context (Hill, 2022; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2023, 2025), that shed light on the conditions under which minorities can dominate majorities and the institutional arrangements that increase or decrease the probability of such a scenario.[10]

## 2.5 Why a formal model?

Combining our formal model with qualitative illustrations (Section 4) and therefore developing an "analytic narrative" (Bates et al., 1998), helps us address a shortcoming of many non-formal, qualitative analyses that trace the "technocratization" (and the backlash against it) of liberal democracies over the past four decades or so (Bickerton and Accetti, 2021; Manow, 2020; Pavone, 2022; Russell Hale and Patterson, 2025; Schäfer and Zürn, 2021). These analyses, albeit often illuminatingly rich in detail, rarely explicate the assumptions about actors' preferences and the nature of their interactions that give rise to either technocratic delegation or populist backlash. As a result, the causal mechanisms and conditions under which technocracy arises (and falls) and might lead to populism

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[9]This logic is illustrated by the divide-the-dollar game (Gehlbach, 2021).

[10]In this way, a modified or extended version of our model might also speak to the literature on "elite-biased" transitions from autocracy to democracy (Albertus and Menaldo, 2018), where delegation to technocrats might serve as intertemporal insurance for autocratic elites.

remain rather opaque. Explicating these mechanisms via a formal model is particularly helpful. The key reason is that two potent tools for sharpening somewhat vague, informal theories—cross-nationally comparable descriptive data on technocracy across policy domains, which are lacking, and causally well-identified empirical analysis, which is exceedingly difficult when the theoretical object of interest are long-run cycles between different constitutional arrangements—cannot readily be deployed.

Our model is stylized, aimed at highlighting the essence of the trade-off between majority rule and technocratic delegation we describe. It is not, in other words, a complete model of the interaction between all the relevant forces determining the rise and fall of technocratic democracies. This does not, however, imply that the forces we identify lack robustness. For example, we make the idealized assumption that, in each generation, one dynasty has a higher preference intensity than the other. One may naturally wonder what happens when both have a high (or low) preference intensity. In such a case, welfare-maximizing technocrats always side with the majority, as when, in our model, the majority has high intensity. While we do not study all possible cases, our model captures all the relevant cases for the forces we describe, that is, all possible combinations of alliances between technocrats and either the current majority or the current minority. Similarly, we make the stark assumption that the policy space is binary, so that welfare-maximizing technocrats always side exactly with one or the other dynasty. In practice, welfare maximization would generically lead to policies in-between the two bliss points of each dynasty. Depending exactly on the same relevant parameters as in our model (the relative preference intensity and the relative size of the two dynasties), technocrats would choose a policy closer to one or the other dynasty, thus setting in place the same dynamics we describe (albeit with added nuances).

# 3   A model of technocratic democracy

In this section, we present the stylized formal model, which allows us to connect the stability of majority coalitions with the endogenous choice of a majoritarian or technocratic democracy.

## 3.1   Formal setup

**Policymaking and preferences.**   There are infinitely many periods, indexed by $t = 1, 2,$ $\ldots$, and two infinitely lived *dynasties* of citizens: $0$ and $1$. We think of each period as

representing a *generation*. The policy implemented in period $t$ is denoted by $p_t \in \{0,1\}$.[11] As detailed below, in each period $t$, dynasty $d \in \{0,1\}$ prefers policy $p_t = d$.

Each period $t$ is characterized by three parameters: $\mu_t$, $\iota_t$, and $\mathcal{C}_t$. The size of dynasty $1$ in period $t$ is given by $\mu_t \in \{m, M\}$, with $0 < m < 1/2 < M < 1$. The size of dynasty $0$ is $1 - \mu_t$. Therefore, whenever $\mu_t = M$, we say that dynasty $1$ is a *majority* and dynasty $0$ is a *minority*. Conversely, when $\mu_t = m$, dynasty $1$ is a minority and dynasty $0$ is the majority. It will be convenient to assume that the size of each of the two possible majorities is the same: $M = 1 - m$.

The parameter $\iota_t \in \{\ell, h\}$, with $0 < \ell < h$ captures dynasty $1$'s preference *intensity* relative to dynasty $0$. In particular, as we shall specify below, when $\iota_t = \ell$, dynasty $1$'s preferences over $p_t$ exhibit low *intensity* relative to dynasty $0$, with the reverse being the case when $\iota_t = h$. We emphasize that $\iota_t = h$ can be thought of as the policy issue, $p_t$, that is most salient in period $t$ disproportionately affecting the welfare of citizens in dynasty $1$. For instance, $p_t$ might refer to a policy that seeks to restrict the rights of citizens with a specific sexual or gender orientation, captured by identity $1$; or to some climate policy measure that is particularly valuable for citizens with children, all of whom belong to dynasty $1$ in period $t$.

Finally, each period $t$ is characterized by an inherited constitution $\mathcal{C}_t \in \{\mathcal{T}, \mathcal{M}\}$, where $\mathcal{C}_t = \mathcal{T}$ (respectively, $\mathcal{C}_t = \mathcal{M}$) indicates that the polity has inherited a *technocratic democracy* (respectively, a *majoritarian democracy*). In a technocratic democracy, policymaking is delegated to experts who maximize *social welfare*. In a majoritarian democracy, policymaking is determined by the majority. We assume that technocrats are Benthamite utilitarians in that maximizing social welfare means maximizing the sum of individual utilities.

We assume that each generation of citizens in a dynasty is myopic, only maximizing their utility in the current period and the next one.[12] That is, citizens in dynasty $1$ in period $t$ maximize

$$u_t^1 = \iota_t p_t + \delta \mathbb{E}\left[\iota_{t+1} p_{t+1} \mid \mu_t, \iota_t, \mathcal{C}_t\right] \tag{1}$$

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[11]In each period, the policy space is uni-dimensional. Our main insights do not depend on this assumption, but on the idea that the relevant issue(s) in a period may differ from those in the next, so that new majority coalitions and new preference alignments between social groups and technocrats can form. One possible substantive justification is that voters are constrained—by time, their cognitive limitations, or interest in politics—in such a way that they care about only one issue (or a few issues) in a given period.

[12]Myopia greatly simplifies our calculation, but the logic of our qualitative results only depends on citizens in each dynasty caring about the future payoff of members of the same dynasty. In particular, all our results continue to hold if the citizens in dynasty $d$ in period $t$ maximize the expected present discounted value of the sum of all future dynasty $d$ policy payoffs.

where $\delta \in (0,1)$ represents a common discount factor. Citizens in dynasty $0$ in period $t$ maximize

$$u_t^0 = \bar{\iota}_t \left(1 - p_t\right) + \delta \mathbb{E}\left[\bar{\iota}_{t+1}\left(1 - p_{t+1}\right) \mid \mu_t, \iota_t, \mathcal{C}_t\right] \tag{2}$$

where $\bar{\iota}_t$ is a variable that takes value $h$ if $\iota_t = \ell$ and value $\ell$ if $\iota_t = h$. That is, we make the simplifying assumption that the relative importance of period-$t$ policymaking for the group with higher relative intensity is always the same.

Upon observing the state $(\mu_t, \iota_t)$ in period $t$, social welfare in period $t$ is simply given by

$$SW_t = \mu_t \iota_t p_t + \left(1 - \mu_t\right) \bar{\iota}_t \left(1 - p_t\right). \tag{3}$$

**Majority and intensity persistence.** We are interested in understanding how the *persistence* of preferences within society can affect the stability of democratic institutions (or lack thereof). Therefore, we study steady-state equilibrium behavior in a society in which $\mu_t$ and $\iota_t$ follow these laws of motion, respectively:

$$\mu_{t+1} \begin{cases} = \mu_t & \text{with probability } \pi_\mu > 1/2 \\ \neq \mu_t & \text{with probability } 1 - \pi_\mu; \end{cases}$$

$$\iota_{t+1} \begin{cases} = \iota_t & \text{with probability } \pi_\iota > 1/2 \\ \neq \iota_t & \text{with probability } 1 - \pi_\iota. \end{cases}$$

The parameter $\pi_\mu > 1/2$ measures the persistence of majorities in society so that, with probability $\pi_\mu$, the majority remains the same across periods. A large $\pi_\mu$ captures scenarios in which the political coalitions in a given society are rather stable —for example, when the number of safe electoral seats is large and its demographic composition changes slowly. Similarly, $\pi_\iota > 1/2$ measures the persistence of (relative) preference intensities in society. A large $\pi_\iota$ captures the idea of a society facing similar issues across generations; so those affected by the most salient political issue in period $t$ are also those most affected by the most salient political issue in period $t+1$. In contrast, a small $\pi_\iota$ captures the idea of a society facing new, different issues across periods, so that the citizens most affected by salient political choices in period $t$ may be different than those affected by salient political choices in period $t + 1$.

**Constitutional reforms and timing.** We think of a technocratic democracy as an institutional arrangement that delegates policymaking to technocrats—such as judges, independent bureaucratic authorities, doctors, or economists—but in which citizens retain the residual power to change institutions. Therefore, in our model, both constitutional arrangements allow for democratic means of reform. For simplicity, we assume that constitutional reforms are not costly.

To capture the idea that the majority can change the constitution, we assume that, if the majority prefers to do so, the constitution is changed from the inherited constitution to the opposite constitution. That is, in each period $t$, if $\mu_t = M$ (respectively, if $\mu_t = m$), then citizens in dynasty $1$ (respectively, dynasty $0$) choose whether to keep the current constitution or change it to $\mathcal{C}_{t+1} \neq \mathcal{C}_t$. To deal with instances of indifference, we assume that citizens do not pursue constitutional change whenever they are indifferent between a technocratic and a majoritarian arrangement.

To summarize, in each period $t$, the polity inherits a constitution $\mathcal{C}_t$. If $\mathcal{C}_t = \mathcal{T}$, then technocrats set $p_t$ to maximize welfare in period $t$. If $\mathcal{C}_t = M$, then $p_t$ is set by the majority. It is easy to see that this means that if $\mu_t = M$, then $p_t = 1$ since dynasty $1$ is the majority and prefers $p_t = 1$. By the same token, if $\mu_t = m$, then $p_t = 0$. At time $t$, the majority dynasty then chooses whether to keep the current constitution or change it to $\mathcal{C}_{t+1} \neq \mathcal{C}_t$.

Finally, note that all proofs are presented in Appendix A.

## 3.2 Policymaking under technocratic and majoritarian democracy

We begin by characterizing policymaking in a technocratic democracy. Lemma 1 says that a technocratic democracy results in policy $1$ being chosen in period $t$ whenever the total welfare this policy choice would generate for dynasty-1 citizens in period $t$ exceeds the total welfare that policy $0$ would generate for dynasty-0 citizens in the same period.

**Lemma 1** (Technocratic policymaking). *If a technocratic constitution is in place in period $t$, i.e., $\mathcal{C}_t = \mathcal{T}$, then policy $p_t$ is set to $1$ if and only if $\mu_t > \frac{\bar{\iota}_t}{\iota_t}(1 - \mu_t)$.*

The principle governing technocratic policymaking is different from the idea that underpins majoritarian policymaking. Lemma 2 says that a majoritarian democracy chooses policy $1$ whenever dynasty $1$ is the majority.

**Lemma 2** (Majoritarian policymaking). *If a majoritarian constitution is in place in period $t$, i.e., $\mathcal{C}_t = M$, then policy $p_t$ is set to $1$ if and only if $\mu_t = M$.*

It is straightforward to see that the two principles do not necessarily lead to contrasting results. For example, the majority's preference intensity may be relatively high compared

to the minority, implying that technocrats would naturally pick the policy preferred by the majority (Lemma 1). Even if the majority has relatively low preference intensity, majoritarian and technocratic democracy can lead to the same policy outcome. Corollary 1 says that this is the case when the size of the majority $M$ is sufficiently large so that $M\ell$—the total benefit derives from its preferred policy being chosen—is greater than $(1 - M)h$—the total benefit that would accrue to the minority if its preferred policy were chosen.

**Corollary 1.** *Suppose $M\ell > h(1 - M)$, then policymaking is identical under both technocratic and majoritarian democracy.*

When $M\ell < h(1 - M)$, however, policymaking under a technocratic democracy may differ from that under a majoritarian one.

## 3.3 Constitutional choice and the lure of technocracy

We now turn to the question of the endogenous choice of constitution. In our model, what is essential for determining this choice is the majority's expectation over future policymaking under the two possible constitutional arrangements. With some abuse of notation, let $\mathbb{E}\left[u^d\left(p^{\mathcal{C}}\right) \mid \mu_t, \iota_t\right]$ denote the expected utility for dynasty $d$ citizens in period $t$ from policymaking in period $t + 1$ under constitution $\mathcal{C}_{t+1} = \mathcal{C}$, conditional on society being characterized by $\mu_t$ and $\iota_t$.

To build some intuition, first consider the choice of a majority with high relative preference intensity. From Corollary 1, we know that future policymaking under technocratic and majoritarian democracy is identical if $M\ell > h(1 - M)$. Therefore, when this condition holds, citizens are indifferent between the two constitutions—so that, by assumption, any constitution is stable and whatever constitution is inherited in period $t = 1$ remains in place forever.

We now turn to the more interesting case in which technocratic and majoritarian democracy may be in conflict: $M\ell < h(1 - M)$. Without loss of generality, we can focus on dynasty 1 being the majority, in which case we have $(\mu_t, \iota_t) = (M, h)$. When thinking of future payoffs under a majoritarian democracy, dynasty-1 citizens in period $t$ must take into account that, while they are in the majority today, things may change in the future: with probability $1 - \pi_\mu$, they will be in the minority tomorrow. This means that choosing a majoritarian constitutional arrangement for period $t + 1$ will yield their preferred policy, $p_{t=1} = 1$, only with probability $\pi_\mu$. How much citizens in the same dynasty in period $t + 1$ will benefit from such a policy will depend on their future relative preference intensities. The latter will remain high with probability $\pi_\iota$, but will change to being low with

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probability $1 - \pi_\iota$:

$$\mathbb{E}\left[u^1\left(p^\mathcal{M}\right) \mid M, h\right] = \pi_\mu\left(\pi_\iota h + \left(1 - \pi_\iota\right)\ell\right). \tag{4}$$

Their other option is to delegate policymaking to technocrats who value total welfare. Because $M\ell < h\left(1 - M\right)$, these technocrats will choose to implement policy 1 only when dynasty-1 citizens in period $t + 1$ have a relatively high preference intensity. That is:

$$\mathbb{E}\left[u^1\left(p^\mathcal{T}\right) \mid M, h\right] = \pi_\iota h. \tag{5}$$

Which of the two options is best for period-$t$ dynasty 1 citizens depends on what they believe is most likely. If they believe a change in majority status to be very unlikely— i.e., $\pi_\mu$ is large—then $\mathbb{E}\left[u^1\left(p^\mathcal{M}\right) \mid M, \ell\right]$ is larger. If, however, a change in majority status is seen as likely, so that $\pi_\mu$ is close to $1/2$, but they expect preference intensities to be stable—$\pi_\iota$ large—then they may prefer a technocratic constitution.

**Lemma 3** (The constitutional preferences of high-intensity majorities.)**.** *A majority with high (relative) preference intensity prefers a majoritarian democracy if*

$$\pi_\mu \geq \frac{h}{h + \frac{1 - \pi_\iota}{\pi_\iota}\ell}.$$

The choice for a majority with low preference intensities, i.e., $\left(\mu_t, \iota_t\right) = \left(M, \ell\right)$, is similar, albeit not identical. As before, a majoritarian democracy yields the preferred policy whenever the majority remains the same. This policy, however, is less likely to substantially benefit period $t+1$ members of the dynasty because their future preference intensity remains low with probability $\pi_\iota$:

$$\mathbb{E}\left[u^1\left(p^\mathcal{M}\right) \mid M, \ell\right] = \pi_\mu\left(\left(1 - \pi_\iota\right)h + \pi_\iota\ell\right). \tag{6}$$

Similarly, a technocratic democracy will sometimes also yield their preferred policy, though only if future preference intensities are reversed so that period-$t + 1$ members of the dynasty have high preference intensity:

$$\mathbb{E}\left[u^1\left(p^\mathcal{T}\right) \mid M, \ell\right] = \left(1 - \pi_\iota\right)h. \tag{7}$$

**Lemma 4** (The constitutional preferences of low-intensity majorities.)**.** *A majority with low*

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*preference intensity prefers a majoritarian democracy if*

$$\pi_\mu \geq \frac{h}{h + \frac{\pi_\iota}{1-\pi_\iota}\ell}.$$

It is evident that a majority with low preference intensity prefers a majoritarian democracy relatively more, compared to a majority with high preference intensity. Intuitively, all else equal, both majorities are similarly likely to remain in the majority, but technocratic democracy offers the lure of protection to the high-preference-intensity majority: were it to lose its majority status, it would be unlikely to lose the high-preference status, so that future technocrats would protect its interest. The higher the persistence of preference intensities, $\pi_\iota$, the greater the expected value of this protection.

In contrast, a low-preference-intensity majority has more to lose from choosing a technocratic democracy because, most likely, the technocrats will choose their least preferred policy. Technocracy, however, remains appealing even for such a majority: when the majority is very unstable ($\pi_\mu$ close to $1/2$), the majority knows it is very likely to lose its status while also knowing that the cost of losing its status in a majoritarian democracy is greatest when its future citizens have high preference intensities. Because of this, if the persistence of preference intensities, $\pi_\iota$, is sufficiently low, even a majority with low preference intensity prefers a technocratic democracy as the latter best protects its interests.

## 3.4 Constitutional stability

Our focus is on the conditions that make technocratic or majoritarian constitutions stable, in the sense that the majority in a given period would preserve these institutions. Conversely, when these constitutions are not stable, we would expect to see political conflict arising between promoters of more technocratic or more majoritarian views of democracy. We now show that, depending on the parameters of the model, three types of regime emerge in equilibrium.

**Stable technocratic democracy.** In this regime, constitutional reforms happen at most once in period $1$, when the majority chooses to establish a technocratic democracy.

**Stable majoritarian democracy.** In this regime, constitutional reforms happen at most once in period $1$, when the majority chooses to establish a majoritarian democracy.
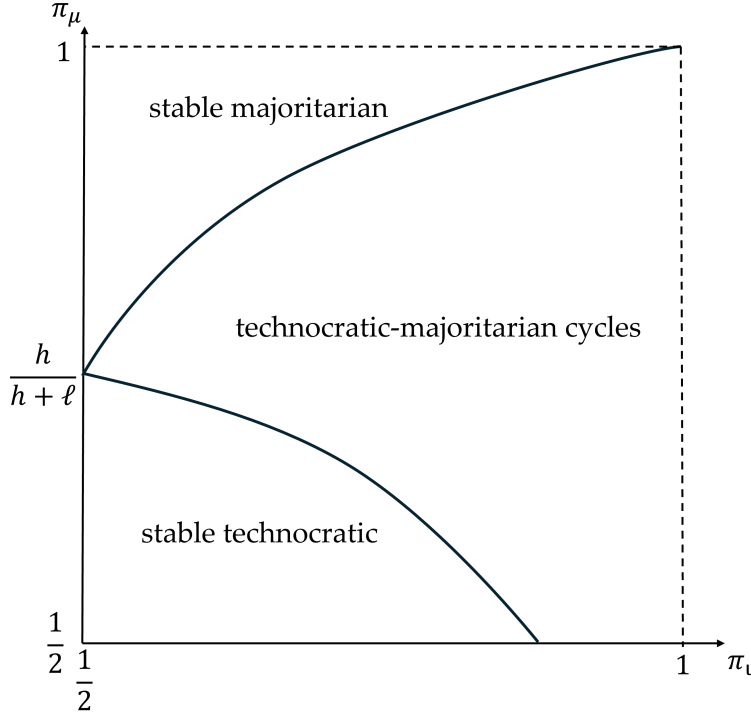
Figure 1: Typology of regimes when $M\ell < \frac{h}{\ell}(1-M)$.

**Technocratic-majoritarian cycles.** In this regime, in every period $t$, the majority chooses to establish a technocratic democracy if it has relatively high preference intensity; it chooses a majoritarian democracy if it has relatively low preference intensity. Constitutional reforms happen whenever there is a change of majority or a change of relative preference intensity, but not when both changes happen simultaneously. I.e., in the steady state, constitutional reforms happen with probability $(1-\pi_\mu)\pi_\iota + \pi_\mu(1-\pi_\iota)$ in each period.

Proposition 5, illustrated in Figure 1, describes when each of these regimes arises.

**Proposition 5** (Constitutional stability and cycles.). *Suppose $M\ell > \frac{h}{\ell}(1-M)$, then all constitutions are stable. Otherwise,*

1. $\pi_\mu \leq \frac{h}{h+\frac{\pi_\iota}{1-\pi_\iota}\ell}$ *induces a stable technocratic democracy;*

2. $\frac{h}{h+\frac{\pi_\iota}{1-\pi_\iota}\ell} < \pi_\mu < \frac{h}{h+\frac{1-\pi_\iota}{\pi_\iota}\ell}$ *induces technocratic-majoritarian cycles;*

3. $\pi_\mu \geq \frac{h}{h+\frac{1-\pi_\iota}{\pi_\iota}\ell}$ *induces a stable majoritarian democracy.*

Intuitively, a technocratic democracy is stable only if the lure of technocracy is strong enough, even for a majority with relatively low preference intensity. For this to be the case, this majority must both believe that its status as a majority is likely to change ($\pi_\mu$

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sufficiently small) *and* that it is sufficiently likely that its future citizens will have relatively high preference intensity ($\pi_\iota$ sufficiently small). For a majoritarian democracy to be stable, in contrast, even a majority with high preference intensity must prefer majority rule to the reassurance that technocrats will protect it from a change in majority status. Such a majority must therefore believe that a change in majority is unlikely ($\pi_\mu$ sufficiently large), while it is sufficiently likely that its future citizens will have low preference intensity ($\pi_\iota$ sufficiently small) so that the protection of technocrats is of sufficiently low value.

In between these two stable regimes lies a hybrid regime, featuring cycles of technocratic and majoritarian democracies. Such a regime is most likely to arise when changes in preference intensities occur relatively infrequently. In fact, infrequent changes in preference intensities both exacerbate the lure of technocracy for a majority with high preference intensity *and* increase the desire for direct majoritarian power of a majority with low preference intensity.

## 3.5 Persistence shocks and regime changes

The comparative statics results in the previous section can be best appreciated if we extend the model as follows. Suppose that $\pi_\mu$ and $\pi_\iota$ are subject to shocks over time. Because the decision-making agents in our model only choose variables for the current and next periods, it is immaterial whether or not such shocks are anticipated. Therefore, a shock regarding one of the two persistence parameters can effectively change which regime arises in equilibrium from the time of the shock onward. The following two corollaries summarize the comparative statics results above in light of this extension.

**Corollary 2.** *In a stable technocratic democracy, a sufficiently large shock in the persistence of majority status $\pi_\mu$ to $\pi'_\mu > \pi_\mu$ induces either technocratic-majoritarian cycles or a stable majoritarian democracy. In a society characterized by technocratic-majoritarian cycles, the same shock can only give rise to a stable majoritarian democracy. Conversely, in a majoritarian democracy, a shock in the persistence of majority status $\pi_\mu$ to $\pi'_\mu < \pi_\mu$ induces either technocratic-majoritarian cycles or a stable technocratic democracy.*

**Corollary 3.** *A sufficiently large shock in the persistence of (relative) preference intensities $\pi_\iota$ to $\pi'_\iota > \pi_\iota$ can only give rise to technocratic-majoritarian cycles, irrespective of the prior constitutional arrangement. Conversely, a shock in the persistence of preference intensities $\pi_\iota$ to $\pi'_\iota < \pi_\iota$ moves a society characterized by technocratic-majoritarian cycles into a stable majoritarian democracy if $\pi_\mu$ is sufficiently large, and, otherwise, into a stable technocratic democracy.*

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## 3.6 Governing technocratic-majoritarian cycles

So far we have studied how changes in the parameters of the model may affect the prevalent regime. For example, increasing the stability of majorities, $\pi_\mu$, may induce a stable majoritarian democracy and end technocratic-majoritarian cycles. This does not, however, necessarily mean that any increase in $\pi_\mu$ will reduce the frequency of such cycles. We therefore now turn to the question as to what type of small changes in a society's persistence parameters may affect the frequency of technocratic-majoritarian cycles. We also interpret these results through a normative lens. Institutional tweaking and policy changes are unlikely to generate large shocks in persistence parameters, but may induce small changes. Therefore, the following proposition can be interpreted as indicating the likely effect of policy changes that affect $\pi_\mu$ and $\pi_\iota$ on the frequency with which we should expect constitutional reforms.

**Proposition 6** (Social persistence and the frequency of constitutional reforms.). *All else equal, the frequency of constitutional reforms:*

1. *equals* 0 *for* $\pi_\mu \leq \frac{h}{h + \frac{\pi_\iota}{1-\pi_\iota}\ell}$ *and* $\pi_\mu \geq \frac{h}{h + \frac{1-\pi_\iota}{\pi_\iota}\ell}$. *It is decreasing in* $\pi_\mu$ *for* $\pi_\mu \in \left( \frac{h}{h + \frac{1-\pi_\iota}{\pi_\iota}\ell}, \frac{h}{h + \frac{\pi_\iota}{1-\pi_\iota}\ell} \right)$;

2. *if* $\pi_\mu > h/(h+\ell)$, *it equals* 0 *for* $\pi_\iota \leq \frac{\ell}{\ell + \frac{1-\pi_\mu}{\pi_\mu}h}$ *and is decreasing in* $\pi_\iota$ *for* $\pi_\iota > \frac{\ell}{\ell + \frac{1-\pi_\mu}{\pi_\mu}h}$;

3. *if* $\pi_\mu < h/(h+\ell)$, *it equals* 0 *for* $\pi_\iota \leq \frac{h}{h + \frac{\pi_\mu}{1-\pi_\mu}\ell}$ *and is decreasing in* $\pi_\iota$ *for* $\pi_\iota > \frac{h}{h + \frac{\pi_\mu}{1-\pi_\mu}\ell}$.

Intuitively, small changes in $\pi_\mu$ and $\pi_\iota$ have no effect on the frequency of constitutional reforms in stable technocratic or majoritarian democracies. Instead, when technocratic-majoritarian cycles arise in equilibrium, marginal increases in $\pi_\mu$ and $\pi_\iota$ affect the frequency with which cycles arise because they directly affect the probability that there is a change in majority status, or a change in relative preference intensity. While greater (relative) preference intensity may cause cycles (Proposition 5)—because the current majority is worried about a future in which it is in the minority, but with high preference intensity—marginal increases in this parameter reduce the frequency with which cycles arise. The reason is that these increases reduce the frequency with which the majority changes intensity and reforms the constitution towards a majoritarian (if it becomes low-intensity) or technocratic (if it becomes high-intensity) democracy.

## 3.7 Constitutional crises and democratic backsliding

Institutional, or even constitutional, reforms that attempt to dismantle independent authorities or limit judicial power are often accompanied by concerns about executive overreach and democratic backsliding (Grillo et al., 2024).[13] That is, while some governments may *only* wish to rein in the power of technocrats, others may pursue such reforms to concentrate power in their own hands and, in the process, undermine democratic norms like that of forbearance (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018)—the deliberate underutilization of executive power.[14] These concerns have a long lineage in democratic theory and normative institutional analysis; from Polybius to Montesquieu, scholars have argued that centers of power independent of the will of the current majority are essential for the survival of democratic institutions (Ryan, 2013). Crucially, this process can be further exacerbated by the attempts of technocrats and their supporters to resist these "majoritarian" reforms, thus leading to institutional crises, legal confrontations, and—in extreme cases—political violence.

Given the potential for "majoritarian" reforms to set in motion a process of democratic backsliding, we may wonder whether a majority worried about backsliding will still support such reforms. To analyze this, consider the problem for a dynasty-$1$ majority with low preference intensity who considers whether to replace a technocratic constitution with a majoritarian one. Maintaining the status quo will yield their preferred policy next period only if future preference intensities are reversed:

$$\mathbb{E}\left[u^1\left(p^{\mathcal{T}}\right) \mid M, \ell\right] = (1 - \pi_\iota) h. \tag{8}$$

Instead, adopting a majoritarian constitution yields the preferred policy whenever the majority remains the same, while carrying the risk of the polity becoming an autocracy that will implement policies which, in expectation, are not equal to the majority's desired policy. Let $\beta$ denote the probability of democratic backsliding and $A < h$ dynasty $1$'s expected payoff under autocracy. Then, the expected payoff of attempting to reform the

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[13]The conditions under which citizens support (competitive) autocrats or autocratically-minded candidates in democratic elections is a central focus of the demand-side literature on democratic backsliding (Ahlquist et al., 2018; Graham and Svolik, 2020; Gratton and Lee, 2024b; Grossman et al., 2022; Helmke et al., 2022; Jacob, 2024a,b; Jacob et al., 2024; Luo et al., 2024; Luo and Przeworski, 2023; Mazepus and Toshkov, 2022; Miller, 2021). This section of the paper sketches an avenue for future research: examining whether greater institutional checks in the form of technocratic delegation increase the willingness of voters to countenance the anti-democratic transgressions of populists.

[14]In principle, autocratization can also be driven by technocrats, pushing the polity into some kind of epistocracy. While important, analyzing technocrat-led autocratization is beyond the scope of this paper.

constitutions is given by

$$\mathbb{E}\left[u^1\left(p^{\mathcal{M}}\right) \mid M, \ell\right] = \beta A + (1 - \beta)\pi_\mu\left((1 - \pi_\iota)h + \pi_\iota\ell\right). \tag{9}$$

Hence, such a majority will attempt to reform the constitution whenever

$$\pi_\mu > \frac{(1 - \pi_\iota)h - \beta A}{(1 - \beta)\left((1 - \pi_\iota)h + \pi_\iota\ell\right)}. \tag{10}$$

It follows straightforwardly that, even in the extreme case in which an autocracy yields the least preferred policy for dynasty 1 with certainty ($A = 0$), for any risk of backsliding $\beta$, a dynasty 1 majority with low preference intensities would still prefer to reform the constitution so long as the persistence of majorities $\pi_\mu$ and the persistence of preference intensities $\pi_\iota$ are sufficiently large:

$$\pi_\mu > \frac{1}{1 - \beta}\frac{h}{h + \frac{\pi_\iota}{1 - \pi_\iota}\ell}. \tag{11}$$

Thus, technocratic-majoritarian cycles can be a feature of democracies, even when the majority is concerned about democratic backsliding. This naturally leads to the question as to how constitutional or institutional reforms affect the probability of such backsliding.

By way of addressing this question, suppose institutional checks on the majority are strengthened, e.g., in the form of greater delegation to technocrats. These checks lower, though do not completely eliminate, the risk of backsliding, $\beta$: for any given cycle of reforms, the probability of backsliding is lower. In fact, expression (11) implies that a lower $\beta$ can move a democracy from a stable technocratic democracy into the parameter space where technocratic-majoritarian cycles arise. In the steady state, technocratic-majoritarian cycles produce a majoritarian reform with strictly positive probability in each period. Thus, stronger institutions aimed at protecting democracy from backsliding increase the long-run ($t \to \infty$) probability of backsliding from $0$ (in a stable technocratic democracy) to $1$ (in technocratic-majoritarian cycles),[15] despite decreasing the probability of backsliding for any given generation.

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[15]This result is reminiscent of Gratton and Lee (2024b), whose formal model implies that stronger checks and balances—aimed at slowing democratic backsliding—can, in fact, induce autocratization with certainty in the long-run.

# 4 Illustrating the model qualitatively

We now discuss how our model can help explain real-world shifts in the balance between the *technocratic* and *majoritarian* components of liberal democracy. To do so, we examine three brief case studies, each highlighting policy dimensions that illustrate different manifestations of technocratic-majoritarian cycles.[16] As a final preliminary remark, we note that our case studies not only span different realms of policymaking, but also involve different forms of delegation. In the first case, delegation takes the conventional form of rule changes that expand technocrats' decision-making authority. In the second, compliance with fiscal rules is delegated to judges. In the third, delegation involves expert advisory bodies being granted authority to propose emissions reduction targets and courts seeking to enforce the rights of future generations. While we readily acknowledge that these different types of delegation are subject to different political dynamics, such nuances are too specific to be captured by a model as general as ours. Indeed, we believe that these different kinds of delegation highlight the broad applicability of the logic we set out above.

## 4.1 Central bank independence

Central bank independence (CBI) is widely believed to be a prime example of successful technocratic delegation. It has, however, increasingly come under attack in recent years, particularly from populist leaders.

Proponents of CBI contend that democratically elected governments have incentives to manipulate the business cycle to boost their electoral fortunes, even at the cost of lower long-run average growth.[17] More than the largely academic debate over the inflationary effects of political business cycles, it was the stagflation of the 1970s that underscored to both policymakers and voters the importance of combating inflation and the central bank's critical role in that effort. Stagflation led center-right and conservative parties in many industrialized democracies to become increasingly wary of unions. These parties viewed union wage demands as excessive, arguing that they triggered wage-price spirals and exacerbated inflationary pressures from the oil price shocks of the 1970s (Alt, 1979;

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[16]Other policy dimensions have historically fallen more squarely within either the majoritarian (e.g., the definition of crimes) or technocratic (e.g., judicial decisions on individual cases) components of liberal democracy.

[17]There continues to be debate about the empirical evidence for such politically engineered business cycles (Alesina et al., 1997; Canes-Wrone and Park, 2012; Drazen, 2002; Golden and Poterba, 1980; Nordhaus, 1975; Rogoff, 1990; Rossel Flores et al., 2024; Schultz, 1995), but notorious examples exist. Chief among them is the loose monetary policy pursued by Federal Reserve Chair Arthur B. Burns, which, as later transpired (Blinder, 2022), was explicitly aimed at helping Richard Nixon win the 1968 presidential election.

Olson, 1984). In essence, there was growing dissatisfaction with the center left prioritizing low unemployment over low inflation.

Against this backdrop, economists and financial experts in many industrialized countries embraced economic ideas that saw the curbing of inflation, to wit price stability, as the principal responsibility of central banks. These ideas quickly became dominant in technocratic circles and gained broader political acceptance when conservative parties came to power in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Increasingly open capital markets in the post-Cold-War period provided additional incentives for stable, predictable, and credible monetary policy (Daunton, 2023), broadening the low-inflation majority coalition to include third-way social democratic leaders, such as Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder (Boix, 2019; Polacko, 2022). But the political forces willing to tolerate relatively high inflation to avoid increases in unemployment were only weakened, not dead. As a result, the inflation-averse majority remained concerned about losing power. Yet, it could count on economists and bankers to faithfully implement a low-inflation mandate, if given one. These are precisely the conditions that our model predicts are conducive to technocratic delegation: a majority that aligns with the views of technocratic policymaking circles, anticipates potential electoral defeat in the future, but remains confident that technocrats will uphold their policy preferences.

In fact, central banks became more independent in the 1980s and 1990s in many industrialized democracies, as Figure 2 shows. Delegating monetary policy to independent central bankers largely worked.[18] Most industrialized democracies saw their inflation rates decline, even if the process was often painful.[19] In our model, such a constitutional arrangement would be stable when, even governments preferring higher inflation, nevertheless trust that central bankers would allow inflation to increase if the economic and social cost of price stability become too high. That is, the 1990s may represent a stable technocratic democracy, with both unstable majorities (low $\pi_\mu$) and (in expectation) volatile technocratic policymaking (low $\pi_\iota$).

This period of uncontested CBI, we next argue, ended with the 2007-2008 financial crisis and the subsequent financial turmoil in the Eurozone. Our argument is that the effects of the crisis exacerbated the divergence between the high(er)-inflation camp and

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[18]The evidence for the salubrious effects of CBI was fairly weak methodologically for a long time, i.e., is based mainly on 1990s-style cross-country regressions (Alesina and Summers, 1993), and more mixed (see, e.g., Acemoglu et al., 2008, on reverse causality) than widely believed. Despite that, the *International Monetary Fund* has strongly recommended strengthening CBI to emerging economies (Dincer et al., 2024).

[19]The consequences of the "Volcker disinflation" in the 1980s—implemented via rather stark interest rate increases—gave rise to two enormous, if brief, recessions in the U.S. (Blinder, 2022), whilst also contributing to the sovereign debt crises many Latin American, Asian, African, and Eastern European countries experienced during that decade (Bates et al., 1998).
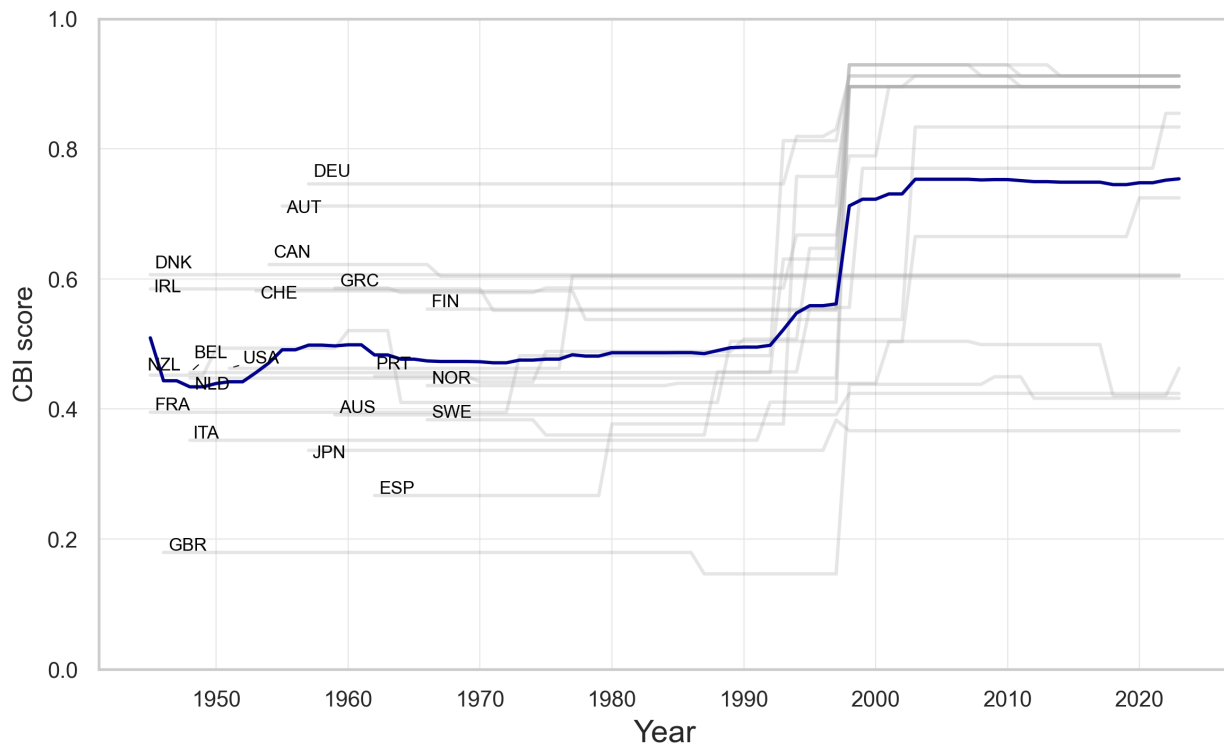
Figure 2: Central bank independence score by Romelli (2022) for selected advanced industrialized democracies, 1945–2023. The theoretical scale of the variable is the closed unit interval. The dark blue line indicates the average value across all countries.

technocratic views, thus increasing the expectation that the alliance between technocrats and the low-inflation camp (a higher $\pi_\iota$) would be cemented.

In the nearly two decades following the financial crisis, populist leaders have increasingly targeted CBI with invective, vowing to restore power to the "people" (Goodhart and Lastra, 2018; Monnet, 2024). A notable example is U.S. President Trump, who openly toyed with the idea of curtailing the Fed's independence during the 2024 presidential campaign and the early days of his second presidency (Smith, 2024). Using a synthetic control approach on a global sample of populist leaders, Funke et al. (2023) show that, on average, inflation increases by just under ten percentage points in the first five years after the election of populists. This reinforces the quantitative and comparative relevance of the Trump example. Furthermore, Gavin and Manger (2023) explicitly examine whether populists exert greater public pressure on central bankers than their non-populist counterparts, though their sample is primarily limited to middle- and upper-middle-income countries between 1996 and 2016. Applying a supervised learning algorithm to *Economist Intelligence Unit* country reports to identify instances of public pressure, they find that the probability of public pressure on central bankers is approximately 3.7 times higher under

populist governments than under non-populist ones.

This populist backlash against the technocratization of monetary policy arises naturally in our model when citizens favoring higher inflation recognize that technocrats are unlikely to align with their preferences or interests in the near future. That is, they perceive $\pi_\iota$ as low, implying that technocratic policymaking is unlikely to change. The first two decades of the 21$^{\text{st}}$ century have provided an abundance of evidence that central banks' actions have engendered not only considerable distributional consequences, but have also constrained governments' wiggle room in more ways than originally envisaged. Andersen et al. (2023), for example, draw on Danish data between 1987 and 2014 to document that monetary policy has, on average, had consistently regressive effects: it has benefitted the rich more than the poor. Similarly, Fagereng et al. (2024) rely on Norwegian panel micro-data between 1994 and 2019 to document what they call "asset-price redistribution". Monetary policy led to redistribution from (i) the young to the old and (ii) the poor to the wealthy by increasing the values of assets disproportionately owned by the old and wealthy. Indeed, analyzing the corpus of ECB speeches between 1999 and 2019, Braun et al. (2024) show that the ECB, at least prior to 2015, consistently advocated labor market liberalization to improve the transmission of monetary policy, thus constraining governments. Put in terms of our model, an increasing share of the electorate has come to believe that its preferences have been frustrated by central banks, with populists' appeal in part deriving from their promise to rectify this imbalance by returning power over monetary policymaking to the "people".

## 4.2   Fiscal rules

Fiscal rules—constraints on the amount of debt a government can accumulate (or its growth rate) or limits on the budget deficit it can run—map into our model in ways similar to the CBI example, with one important exception. The push to abolish or relax fiscal rules is not always driven by populists, as in the case of the German "debt" brake.

The rationale for establishing fiscal rules—and, when enshrined in the constitution in countries with judicial review, potentially delegating disputes over fiscal policy to judges—is to mitigate the negative fiscal externalities of electoral politics, notably wasteful spending and excessive public debt accumulation (Alesina and Passalacqua, 2016; Azzimonti et al., 2016; Battaglini, 2011; Battaglini et al., 2020).[20]  In particular, in two-party systems, governments might have incentives to fiscally tie the hands of future gov-

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[20]There is a substantial body of work that examines the design of fiscal rules (Halac and Yared, 2018, 2022).

ernments, led by the opposition party, by accumulating debt in the present (Alesina, 1989; Persson and Tabellini, 2002). One potential drawback of fiscal rules, depending on their exact design, is that they may hinder governments' ability to pursue countercyclical fiscal policy during recessions, which is why they are looked askance at by some macroeconomists (Bachmann, 2024).

Combining this political economy justification for fiscal rules with our model yields one potential reason why (constitutionally enshrined) fiscal rules are established. They allow a majority coalition that (i) is harmed by, for instance, the accumulation of public debt, (ii) is concerned about losing power to forces that benefit from deficit spending, and (iii) expects the judges upholding these rules to side with them to insure against future "fiscal excesses". While acknowledging the contingencies shaping the adoption of such rules, we believe this logic helps explain why so many different advanced economies introduced fiscal rules, particularly in the period from 1995 to 2005, as shown in Figure 3. More importantly, Figure 3 also indicates that fiscal rules tend to be persistent once implemented, suggesting that even left-wing governments adhere to rules that constrain their fiscal wiggle room, despite these constraints conflicting with the (new-)Keynesian macroeconomic paradigm they often implicitly embrace. Our theoretical framework helps resolve this puzzle. Institutional stability arises when different majorities benefit from technocratic decision-making (low $\pi_\mu$ and $\pi_\iota$).[21]

Despite that period of technocratic stability, fiscal rules have come under pressure over the past five years, particularly from center-left parties, even in cases where they supported the introduction of these rules. The German Social Democrats (SPD) are a case in point: together with the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) they introduced the so-called "debt brake" in 2009. The debt brake (roughly speaking) limits annual federal borrowing to 0.35% of GDP (Grimm et al., 2024). What explains this majoritarian push against the debt brake by the German mainstream parties? This push was evident in the manifestos of center-left parties during the 2025 federal election campaign and, ultimately, the constitutional amendment, adopted in a "lame-duck" session of the *Bundestag*[22] and supported by the SPD, CDU/CSU, and Greens, that relaxes the fiscal constraints entailed by

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[21]Financial globalization and European monetary integration may well explain the genesis of these rules. But their stability during the 2010s can be partly attributed to the benefits they conferred on left-wing governing coalitions in the aftermath of the financial crisis. These coalitions, often lacking a reputation for fiscal prudence, were concerned about spooking financial and bond markets. Fiscal rules enabled them to send a costly signal to creditors that they were willing to make what were deemed necessary fiscal adjustments. This argument is consistent with empirical analyses showing that left-wing governments engaged more willingly in austerity policies than their center-right counterparts (Armingeon et al., 2016), although this might have hurt them electorally (Horn, 2021; Jacques and Haffert, 2021).

[22]The amendment was adopted after the 2025 federal election, but before the newly elected *Bundestag* (the lower house of Germany's bicameral system) had been sworn in.
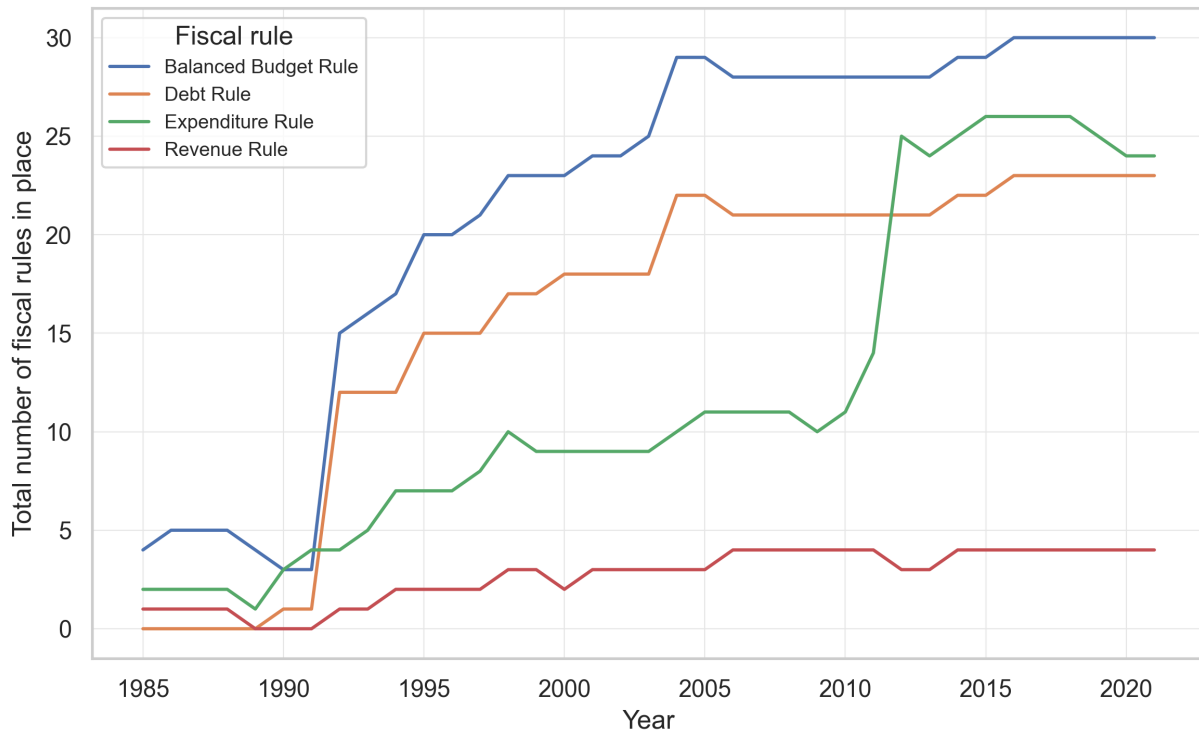
Figure 3: Number of advanced economies with fiscal rules, 1985–2021. The data are taken from the *International Monetary Fund's* Fiscal Rules Dataset (Medas et al., 2022), which also provides further information on the definition of the different types of fiscal rules.

the "debt brake" (The Economist, 2025).[23]

While explaining the specifics of this reform, both its drivers and content,[24] lies beyond the scope of our model, it nonetheless helps clarify why support for the debt brake had been eroding for some time—by lending credence to a conventional explanation for an unconventional reason. The German Constitutional Court, in a ruling in late 2023, adopted what many regarded as a strict, fiscally constraining interpretation of the debt

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[23]The two central planks of the reform are: (i) defense spending exceeding 1% of GDP will be exempt from the fiscal rule; and (ii) a €500 billion *Sondervermögen* (an extra-budgetary fund or special-purpose vehicle that has to be spent over 12 years) has been established for additional infrastructure investment, with one-fifth earmarked for climate-related spending (Zettelmeyer, 2025).

[24]Three factors stand out in that regard. First, Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted German political elites to acknowledge Russia, albeit grudgingly, as a geopolitical threat to European security. Second, the approach of the second Trump administration toward Europe—illustrated by Vice President Vance's address at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025—eliminated any lingering illusions that Europe could outsource its defense to the United States. Third, the 2025 election produced a configuration in the Bundestag in which the two-thirds majority required for constitutional amendments depended on support from *Die Linke* (The Left). The latter not only holds markedly different spending priorities from the CDU/CSU but has also consistently opposed both military support for Ukraine and increases in domestic defense expenditure.

brake (Feld, 2023), which left the traffic-light (SPD, Greens, and FDP) coalition's budget in tatters and contributed to the premature end of the coalition. This ruling, we submit, served as a clear signal for the bloc of mainstream left parties (the Greens and SPD) that the debt brake, as interpreted by the Constitutional Court, would persistently[25] favor the "other group", viz. the fiscal hawks represented by the liberals, FDP, and, to some extent, the CDU/CSU. That is, in the language of our model, this increases the probability that technocratic policymaking would be stable in favor of more extreme fiscal rules: a greater $\pi_\iota$. With the financial crisis over and Germany in a stable fiscal position, there was also no longer much to be gained for left parties from relying on the debt brake as a costly signal of fiscal prudence. Hence, the ruling, undermined, for better or worse, the stability of the debt brake, as borne out by the 2025 federal election campaign and the subsequent relaxation of this fiscal rule.

## 4.3   Climate policy

Our final case, climate policy, illustrates two key points. First, delegation to technocrats can be stable and successful when there exists broad, but shallow public support and when the costs of policies can be spread widely across the population. Second, the risk of a majoritarian backlash against the "climate technocracy", including the judicialization of climate policy, increases when more ambitious emissions reduction targets require policies whose costs are not only relatively concentrated, but concentrated on the same segment of the population.

The starting point of this brief case study is the observation that climate policy—particularly in Europe, the region with the highest level of policy ambition (Nachtigall et al., 2024)—has involved a great deal of technocratic delegation over the past three decades at both the national and EU levels. At the EU level, perhaps the most notable example of delegation is the EU Emissions Trading Scheme I (EU ETS I), a carbon pricing mechanism, whose design and administration were and still are delegated to EU bureaucrats, that primarily covers the industry and energy sectors. Since the late 2000s, climate-related technocratic structures have also proliferated at the national level. Figure 4, taken from Zwar et al. (2024), visualizes the increase in climate advisory bodies since 2000. In some cases, these bodies meaningfully constrain governments. The UK Climate Change Committee (UK CCC), for instance, is tasked with proposing carbon budgets—five-year emission reduction targets that governments have to set twelve years in advance. Although

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[25]This is not least because the German Constitutional Court's judicial review powers rank among the greatest in the democratic world (Vanberg, 2004)—which citizens with "populist" attitudes tend to be rather sceptical of (Peffley and Rohrschneider, 2024).

not legally binding, it is widely recognized that deviating from the UK CCC's advice on these climate targets carries significant reputational costs (Zwar et al., 2024). Indeed, the Cameron-led coalition government coalition government, consisting of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, considered ignoring the UK CCC's advice on the fourth carbon budget at the height of the austerity period in 2011, but ultimately refrained from doing so. The final example is the increase in climate litigation, especially at the national level (Lee and Park, 2025; Setzer and Higham, 2024; Voeten, 2024).[26] In a 2021 ruling, the German Constitutional Court, for instance, determined that, given its own stated objectives, the government was legally obliged to increase the ambition of its climate policy in the present to safeguard the "intertemporal freedom rights" of future generations, that is, to prevent an excessive burden from being shifted onto them (Groß, 2023).
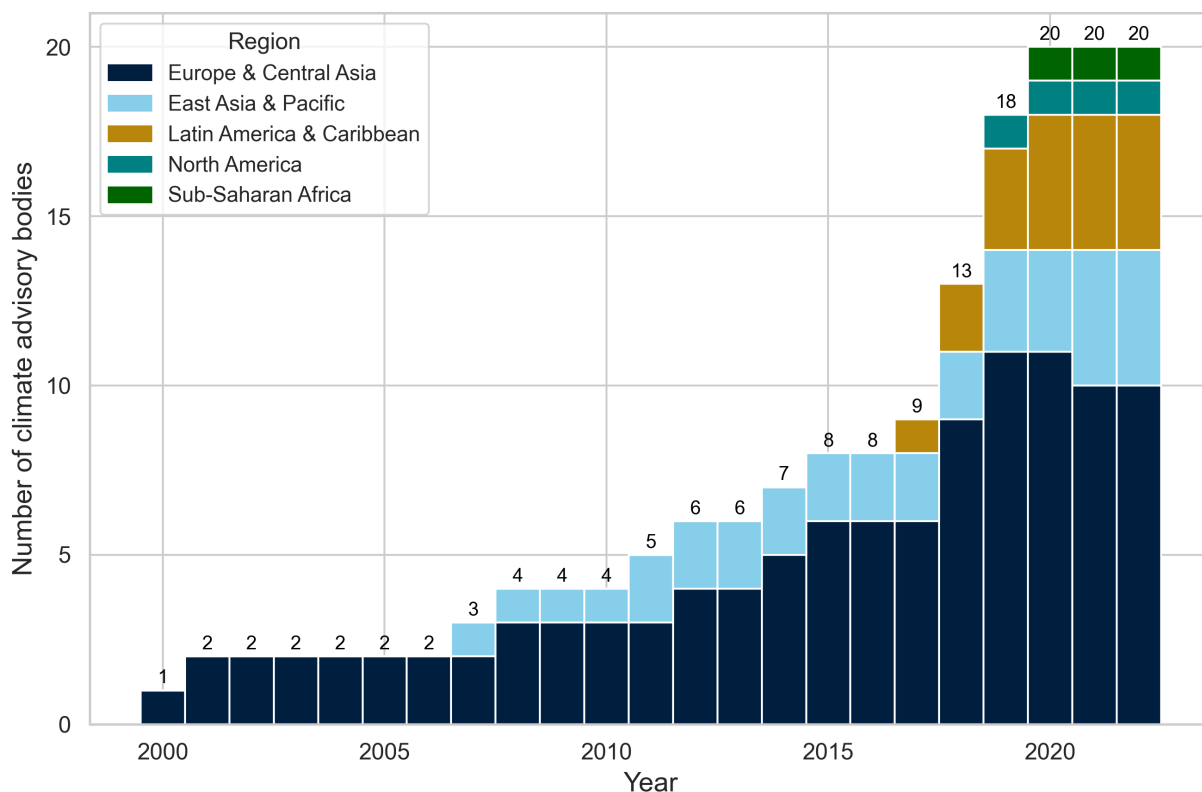


Figure 4: Number of climate advisory bodies in OECD countries, 2000–2022 (Nachtigall et al., 2024; Zwar et al., 2024)

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[26]The failure to "constitutionalize" climate policy in France (Cepparulo and Giuriato, 2024) provides an interesting comparative foil to notable instances of successful constitutionalization—for example, in Germany, South Korea, and the Netherlands. Explaining this variation represents a promising avenue for future research.

Whilst these instances of delegation were pursued for multiple reasons,[27] our model highlights a key commonality. Because climate policy was contested from the get-go (e.g., by climate skeptics), delegation allowed the majority coalition favoring more stringent climate policy to insure against the possibility of political forces coming to power that view climate policy as "'green crap"' in the words of former UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (MacPherson, 2023) or reject climate science altogether. Pro-climate forces had every reason to expect that technocrats would act in line with their preferences. A case in point is the *Stern Review*, which explicitly argued that the cost of climate inaction exceeded the cost of action (Stern, 2007), while providing part of the intellectual justification for the *UK Climate Change Act* in 2008 (McGregor et al., 2012; McLean, 2008). The success of EU ETS I in reducing emissions further reinforces the soundness of this logic from the perspective of the pro-climate majority (Colmer et al., 2024).

This success notwithstanding, the stability of climate technocracy, we suggest, depended on technocrats' ability to distribute costs widely across the population.[28] Doing so allowed them, in the language of our model, to ensure that shifting majorities would bear the costs of climate policies. This was also important because, while there was relatively widespread support for some climate action in the 2000s and 2010s in Europe, citizens' willingness to bear high personal costs was limited (Levi et al., 2021; Neligan and Diermeier, 2025). In line with our model—which predicts institutional stability when majorities are volatile and the effects of technocratic policymaking are distributed unevenly—climate delegation largely resulted in policies that generated concentrated benefits for a relatively small group of producers, while dispersing costs widely across consumers, as illustrated by the German Renewable Feed-in Tariff, *Energieeinspeisegesetz* (Edenhofer and Flachsland, 2025).

Drawing on our theoretical results, we argue that the backlash against the "climate technocracy"—evident in calls to weaken or repeal the EU Green Deal and dismantle national climate legislation (Weise and Camut, 2025)—in part reflects growing fears among certain segments of the population that they may become the perennial losers of the green transition. In most industrialized countries, the power sector accounts for the bulk of emissions reductions, whereas emissions in the transport and building sectors have declined only very slowly, if at all. Reducing emissions in these sectors is not only essential for achieving these countries' (ambitious) climate targets, but also imposes highly visible costs on consumers, unlike most of climate action to date. These costs tend to be concen-

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[27]See Section 3.6 in Edenhofer and Flachsland (2025) and Pichler and Sorger (2018).

[28]To be sure, the ability of technocrats and governments to create particularistic benefits via, for instance, the allocation of free allowances to producers also contributed to stability (Genovese and Tvinnereim, 2019; Sato et al., 2022).

trated on rural and poorer households ([Missbach and Steckel](#), 2024). While plans exist for compensating climate losers (e.g., *Just Transition* plans in EU countries), the failure to mitigate past economic shocks (e.g., from trade liberalization) may cause these households to doubt whether they will be adequately protected. This, in turn, may explain the appeal of majoritarian, populist promises to rein in climate technocrats.

# 5 Conclusion

In this paper, we proposed a stylized theory of the rise and fall of technocratic democracies. Our central argument is that majorities who fear losing power but believe that their preferred policies align with those promoted by technocrats are most likely to support reforms that delegate policymaking to independent authorities. Using a formal model, we established conditions under which such a constitutional arrangement is stable in the sense that all majorities support it. Stable technocratic democracies may not survive, however, when societies become more stable—that is, when either majority coalitions or the alignment of preferences between a social group and technocrats persist over time. Such social shocks can trigger frequent cycles of constitutional reforms, causing democracies to oscillate between more technocratic and more majoritarian forms of government.

We illustrated how such dynamics may have played out in industrialized democracies in the past decades, especially in the realms of monetary, fiscal, and climate policies. Our framework, we believe, is also useful for studying contentious political debates over "rights" such as women's rights. For example, in the U.S., more progressive majorities have favored an expansionary view of the rights. To protect these rights and in some instances enshrine them constitutionally, they have therefore delegated authority to judges—with the right to abortion being perhaps the most prominent example—while more conservative majorities have advocated for the return of decisions on women's right and abortion to elected majoritarian institutions, such as state legislatures.

We conclude by remarking that, beyond our model, technocratic-majoritarian cycles can pose a threat to the stability and resilience of democratic institutions. In particular, heated political debates over constitutional or institutional reforms may heighten social tensions between different groups and foster demand for strongmen-leaders capable of imposing the preferences of one group over those of the other. Consequently, more frequent cycles can erode democratic institutions and create repeated opportunities for democratic backsliding. As we argued in Section 3.7, strengthening checks and balances to slow or prevent democratic backsliding, while effective in the short run, can increase the likelihood of technocratic-majoritarian cycles, thus increasing the risk of backslid-

ing in the long run. Somewhat paradoxically, perhaps, our theory suggests that democratic backsliding is particularly likely in societies with stable majorities and enduring alliances between the ruling majority and technocrats. Precisely because of this stability, a newly empowered majority opposed to technocrats has the strongest incentives to implement sweeping reforms—such as those promised by U.S. President Trump for his second term—that dismantle technocratic structures while concentrating more power in the hands of elected politicians.

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# Appendix

## A  Omitted proofs

*Proof of Lemma 1.* Follows immediately from the maximization of (3) with respect to $p_t \in \{0,1\}$. □

*Proof of Lemma 2.* Follows immediately from the maximization of (1) and (2) with respect to $p_t \in \{0,1\}$. □

*Proof of Lemma 3.* Set (4) greater than (5) and solve for $\pi_\mu$. □

*Proof of Lemma 4.* Set (6) greater than (7) and solve for $\pi_\mu$. □

*Proof of Proposition 5.* First, notice that by Corollary 1, when $M\ell > h(1-M)$ then the majority in every period is indifferent between the two constitutions. Hence, all constitutions are stable. Assume $M\ell \le h(1-M)$.

1. Suppose $\pi_\mu \le \frac{h}{h + \frac{\pi_\iota}{1-\pi_\iota}\ell}$. Then, by Lemmas 3 and 4, both high and low-intensity majorities prefer a technocratic democracy. Hence, technocratic democracy is stable.

2. Suppose $\frac{h}{h + \frac{\pi_\iota}{1-\pi_\iota}\ell} < \pi_\mu < \frac{h}{h + \frac{1-\pi_\iota}{\pi_\iota}\ell}$. Then, by Lemma 3, a high-intensity majority prefers a technocratic democracy; by Lemma 4, a low-intensity majority prefers a majoritarian democracy. Therefore, the polity goes through technocratic-majoritarian cycles.

3. Suppose $\pi_\mu \ge \frac{h}{h + \frac{1-\pi_\iota}{\pi_\iota}\ell}$. Then, by Lemmas 3 and 4, both high and low-intensity majorities prefer a majoritarian democracy. Hence, majoritarian democracy is stable.

□

*Proof of Proposition 6.* <u>Part 1:</u> The first statement follows directly from Proposition 5, Points 1 and 3. From Proposition 5, Point 2, and the characterization of technocratic-majoritarian cycles, for intermediate values of $\pi_\mu$ the frequency of constitutional reforms is given by $(1-\pi_\mu)\pi_\iota + \pi_\mu(1-\pi_\iota)$, which is decreasing in $\pi_\mu$.

<u>Part 2:</u> Assume $\pi_\mu > h/(h+\ell)$. Then, by Proposition 5, Point 3, $\pi_\iota \le \frac{\ell}{\ell + \frac{1-\pi_\mu}{\pi_\mu}h}$ induces a stable majoritarian democracy and the frequency of constitutional reforms equals $0$. Otherwise, the frequency of constitutional reforms is given by $(1-\pi_\mu)\pi_\iota + \pi_\mu(1-\pi_\iota)$, which is decreasing in $\pi_\iota$.

<u>Part 3:</u> Assume $\pi_\mu < h/(h+\ell)$. Then, by Proposition 5, Point 1, $\pi_\iota \leq \frac{h}{h+\frac{\pi_\mu}{1-\pi_\mu}\ell}$ induces a stable technocratic democracy and the frequency of constitutional reforms equal $0$. Otherwise, the frequency of constitutional reforms is given by $(1-\pi_\mu)\pi_\iota + \pi_\mu(1-\pi_\iota)$, which is decreasing in $\pi_\iota$.

$\square$